



How time-poor teachers could become more confident at Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques

Naomi Adams

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About CfEM

Centres for Excellence in Maths (CfEM) is a five-year national improvement programme aimed at delivering sustained improvements in maths outcomes for 16–19-year-olds, up to Level 2, in post-16 settings.

Funded by the Department for Education and delivered by the Education and Training Foundation, the programme is exploring what works for teachers and students, embedding related CPD and good practice, and building networks of maths professionals in colleges.

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1. Introduction

Action research teachers at Greater Brighton Metropolitan College (GBMC) chose to focus on the question of how time-poor teachers could become more confident at Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques during a pandemic because of the unique position we found ourselves in at the start of the new academic year in 2020.

Teachers were extremely stressed due to the pandemic. On top of the existential concerns that plagued the entire world population at that point in time, teachers were also facing incertitude with regards how they would be delivering lessons, how their students would be assessed and whether they would continue to be employed at all due to college restructuring. Suffice to say, when planning the action research, we had to prioritise teacher wellbeing.

Teachers are known to be time-poor, but the particular circumstances of the year 2020/21 meant that teachers were even shorter on time for reflection, innovation and professional learning than usual. Smaller classes, higher staff absence and a constantly changing delivery model meant that the demands on teacher time were even higher than in an 'average' school year.

When action research teachers from GBMC and our local network came together at the start of the academic year to discuss recent and upcoming challenges, a common theme that emerged was the difficulty that teachers were having with checking for understanding and Assessment for Learning (AfL) more broadly. This was true in both the online setting and in the socially distanced classroom. In light of the fact that we knew we were likely to be changing delivery models throughout the year, we chose to focus on addressing AfL challenge, as it would benefit teachers no matter what delivery model they would be using.

2. Methods

What did we do?

Training opportunities were provided for teachers, with the aim of making low or no demand on teacher time.

- **Bite-sized training videos**

10 bite-sized training videos were created that teachers could access asynchronously, so in their own time. They were between 2 and 10 minutes in length and had very specific learning outcomes. These were shared between maths staff in GBMC and in our local network.

- **Weekly drop in sessions**

There were virtual drop-in sessions lasting 30 minutes during lunchtime with the aim of allowing teachers to share good practice and providing a space for teachers to trial new techniques, especially new technology or online approaches.

- **External trainers**

4 training sessions were provided by external experts throughout the academic year, focusing on AfL and online teaching approaches, one with MEI and three with Craig Barton.

- **Sharing practice and reflection sessions**

Sharing and reflection sessions were organized at three points during the academic year, for teachers to reflect and share their own practice.

What data did we collect?

We interviewed 8 teachers, conducted 4 focus groups each with 3 or 4 students, surveyed a total of 126 students and collected feedback from all teachers who had attended training sessions and 17 viewers and non-viewers of video training. Data was analysed and overall findings are presented in the next section of this report.

3. Findings and Discussion

What did we find?

- **Teachers responded well to training – even in familiar topics**

Teachers told us that they benefited from training, even when it was something that they were already familiar with. When we interviewed teachers, many told us that they appreciated things being refreshed or revisited in training. The following quote was typical:

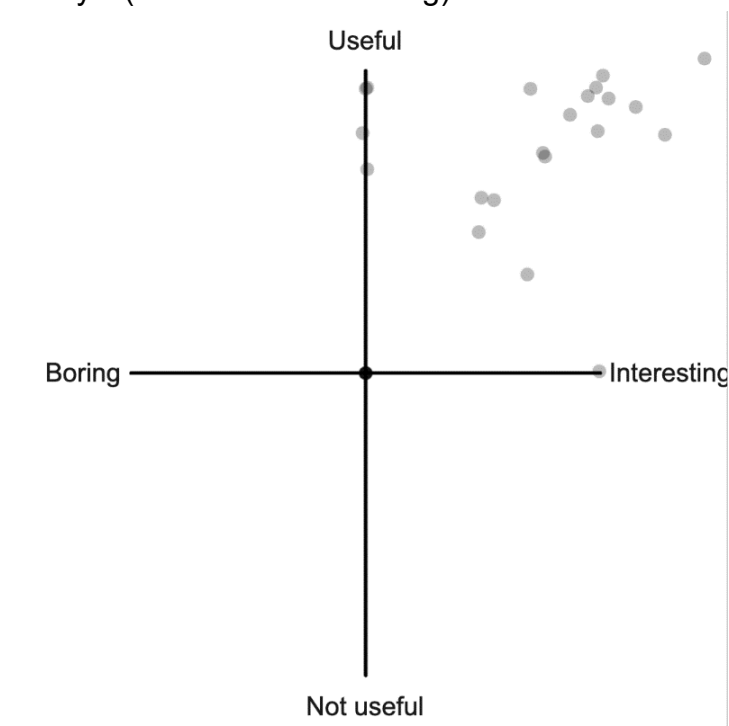
“You come out of a session and you think, great I’m going to try that, but then you get back in the classroom and you carry on as normal. When you get a similar piece of training again [...] you’re more likely to try it out, rather than just forgetting about it.” (Teacher A, GBMC)

- **Teachers appreciated the opportunity to share practice and reflect**

In the 2020-21 academic year, there were very few organic opportunities for teachers to discuss their practice. Even when teachers were in college, they were required to stay in their classrooms, so many of the incidental conversations that would usually occur in the staffroom were lacking this year, so it seemed that teachers responded even more positively to opportunities to convene.

As shown by the graph below, all teachers responded positively to the opportunity to get together and share practice,

How did you find today’s (reflection and sharing) session?



Teachers' responses to sharing and reflection sessions are exemplified by the comment from one attendee:

"It is [very] important to get together on CPD day as a team and share best practice."

Not only did sharing events like these provide much-needed succour in what can only be described as *annus horribilis*, they also allowed teachers to upskill, as in the case of Teacher B in GBMC. Teacher B seems to lack confidence, despite being a very strong practitioner and having much to share with the team. This teacher was asked to share at a teach-meet, where they did a short presentation about the maths software package Geogebra, after some persuasion and reluctance. They later wrote in an email:

"Thank you for [persuading me to do that]. It was good to have the platform and I was [extremely worried/nervous] myself beforehand so it was a good confidence booster."

This helps demonstrate that facilitating sharing events can help team members feel more valued and improve their confidence.

- **Part-time staff especially benefited from asynchronous training opportunities**

At GBMC this year, we had very few full-time staff members, with the majority of the maths teams across all sites working part time. When scheduled outside of part-timers' working hours, synchronous CPD events tend to be poorly attended by part-time staff.

Part time teachers interviewed for this study said that they ended up feeling resentful about this, which came across strongly:

"Why are all the training events on Fridays?" (Part-time teacher who doesn't work Fridays)

"It is not my fault I can't come [to CPD events], I want to but they're always on days when I don't work"

"Can't they mix it up more? Just because I don't work on Fridays, why do I have to miss out on training?"

In previous years, we had been able to record training sessions, which were subsequently made available to staff who could not attend. Since training moved online at the start of the pandemic, we found that trainers were reticent to make their materials freely available to asynchronous attendees, creating a problem for part-time staff.

While accessing synchronous-only CPD is still an issue and something that requires further consideration in the future, those staff did respond positively to asynchronous training opportunities, such as the bite-sized videos:

“I like [the bite-sized videos] because I can just watch them on my break or whatever. It’s not like a whole big thing, it’s just a quick thing that I can use and if I forget it, I just watch it again”

Again, this comment speaks to the idea that whatever training teachers receive, it needs to be refreshed. Providing video training gives teachers agency to refresh the training for themselves, if and when it is required.

- **Training videos were used across the college by support staff as well as maths staff and created impetus amongst other teams to share practice similarly**

Some of the videos that were produced for maths teachers ended up being shared more widely than anticipated, with, for example, with Access teams. Because of this, staff in other areas of GBMC were inspired to produce similar videos for their teams. Although creating a video is time-consuming, the video can then be used and re-used as needed, so the investment of time was seen as worthwhile.

- **Drop-in sessions were poorly attended, despite a will to attend**

The prospect of drop-in sessions was met with enthusiasm, but the reality was that they were poorly attended. When asked in interview about it, teachers cited needing to get away from their computers and not wanting to prolong their screen time as a reason for not attending drop in sessions, though they all said they thought it was a good idea. For this reason, it may be sensible to revisit the idea of a drop-in once teachers are fully back to face-to-face delivery.

- **Teachers spoke positively about the external training they received, but put very little of it into practice**

The enthusing effect of having an inspiring expert come to speak to teachers cannot be understated. After Craig Barton’s sessions, everybody was invigorated, as evidenced by all teachers positive reviews and effusive comments in feedback forms. However, in the end-of-year interviews that we conducted with teachers, many talked about how much they liked the training but only one teacher was able to say that they had tried something from the training in their own practice, explaining that it was not his first exposure to the technique. Again, this speaks to the importance of refresher sessions, over new material.

So if the aim of putting on inspirational externally facilitated training was to change teacher practice immediately, it was unsuccessful. However, if the aim was to provide a bit of excitement, and make teachers feel valued, it was a roaring success.

Every teacher who was interviewed, who had attended those sessions, had something positive to say about them.

4. Conclusions and what next?

The idea that has come through the various data sources again and again, is that teachers do not change their practice after a single training session. They require multiple sessions, refreshers and follow up, rather than endlessly being exposed to new techniques in the hope that something will stick.

What seems to be indicated here is that taking a more focused approach is the way to achieve a long-term change in practice. For example, we looked at AfL in general, whereas it might have been more sensible to focus on the use of Diagnostic Questions. We could have incorporated some inspiring training from Craig Barton, then revisited the idea through home-made video training sessions, then reflected on our use of them in teach-meet sharing/reflection sessions. In this way, teachers are exposed to the same idea over and over again, but in different ways.

We know from working as teachers that this is what we try to achieve when we teach our students. No teacher would expect a student to change the way they think about something after a single exposure to that particular idea, we used spaced practice and retrieval to support students, so it seems stupid not to apply these same principles to CPD for teachers.

By taking this kind of approach, part-time staff would not be excluded by virtue of missing one session, as the same ideas would be revisited throughout a given period. Videos would be produced by staff, which would help them to digest the training/reading to which they had been exposed, and would help staff who missed any sessions to keep abreast of the learning. Although the time involved in producing videos is very lengthy, their shareability and longevity is unlimited, so if the content is of high-quality, this is a worthy time investment and can also be used to refresh ideas for not only the viewer, but the producer too.

This was a very difficult year but it drove the message home that teachers do not change their practice after a single exposure to a new technique or idea. If we expect teachers to change what they are doing, we need to take a structured approach, focus on the change we want teachers to make, and revisit it, refresh it and expose teachers to it again and again through different mediums.