The controversial classroom:
Making understanding visible with no hands up.

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About the Author

Amanda Eastman commenced her career teaching History and currently works in Learning Support. From 2012 — 2014 she was the Assistant to the Director of Studies, overseeing the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. In 2017, she began working as the Assistant to the Director of the Barker Institute, contributing to initiatives such as the 'Barker Journey' longitudinal research project and the editing of the Barker Institute journal. She has also enjoyed participating in a variety of Barker's cocurricular activities such as Softball, Touch Football, Hockey, Snowsports, Boarding, Crusaders and Focus On.

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Abstract

In Term 3, a large portion of Barker staff from the Junior and Senior Schools attended a day-long workshop by Dylan Wiliam, Emeritus Professor of Educational Assessment at University College London. Wiliam used both research and experience to prove that formative assessment strategies have a bigger impact on student improvement than any other pedagogical intervention. Having used Wiliam's strategies for over five years in both the History classroom and in my Learning Support role, I can attest to the fact that these strategies are indeed, transformative. This article reflects on the author's experience of using a 'no hands up' strategy in order to engage more students in the learning process and make understanding more visible. Through their Professional Learning strands and coaching partnerships, the Barker staff will continue to explore how formative assessment methods can become more ubiquitous across the School.

What is the most effective thing educators can do to engender effective learning? This question has been asked by many researchers over many years, with varied results. A clear and consistent suggestion from contemporary literature is formative assessment (Black & Wiliam 1998; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison & Black 2004). It is commonly assumed that this means administering traditional-style tests at various points in the learning journey (rather than just at the conclusion). However, formative assessment actually means regularly gauging the level of understanding amongst students in order to inform how teaching and learning should proceed. Contrary to popular misconceptions, it does not have to take the form of written tests. Rather, it involves rethinking teaching strategies to quickly gather a snapshot of understanding from all students in the class. The effectiveness of Wiliam's strategies is partly due to the fact that they allow data to be captured immediately, they require all students to engage, and they are an efficient use of the teacher's time.

Asking students to raise their hand to give an answer is one of the most ubiquitous strategies in the history of teaching. A few years ago I would have struggled to imagine a classroom functioning any other way. To my surprise, engaging a 'no hands up' policy has transformed my classroom. When taken at face value, the idea of minimising hands up may appear controversial, and even counterproductive. Contrarily, it can be used to great effect to ascertain, and therefore deepen, understanding amongst all students. Using hands up means that decisions about the learning direction are based on a small number of confident responses rather than evidence gathered from the whole class. Rather, Wiliam recommends gathering evidence from the whole class every twenty minutes of instruction.

The strategy first came to my attention in a departmental professional development session by Greg Longney, who was Head of History at the time. Initially, a range of objections raced through my mind: students will hate being put on the spot; the quality of their responses will decline; they will be afraid to come to class; there will be chaos! However, as I began to watch clips of Dylan William applying this strategy, my scepticism began to dissolve. As

I came to understand effective alternatives to asking for hands up, I was amazed by the results. My students appeared to follow a similar journey. My announcement of the change was met by gasps of horror, but within weeks student surveys showed that even the most reluctant members of my classroom had been converted.

What is wrong with asking for 'hands up?' In so many classrooms, it is the same small handful of students who answer every question. The teacher then assumes that all students comprehend and moves onto the next point. When I began observing my own students more closely, I realised that I was often guilty of this misconception. In my Learning Support role, I attended a range of classes and realised just how common it can be for students to be quietly lost or disengaged while the teaching strategies catered for those with their hands up. Alternatively, in his workshop at Barker, Wiliam referred to formative assessment as a 'pedagogy of engagement and a pedagogy of responsiveness'. Removing hands up forces all students to take ownership for their own learning and this allows the teacher to make more informed decisions about how the lesson should progress.

What are the alternatives? Initially for me, it meant writing each student's name on a paddle pop stick and choosing randomly who would give an answer. I was wary of putting students on the spot, so I preceded questions with thinking time and discussions, then crafted questions requiring opinions rather than facts.

I have since come to understand a variety of other ways to illicit student responses without asking for hands up. Ideally, integrate key checkpoints in lessons to gauge the understanding of every student in the class and determine whether or not to move on. They can then use 'show me boards', flip cards, exit cards or even just their fingers to indicate their preferred response to a question and thus give the teacher immediate feedback about their understanding or misconceptions. Regardless of the methods used, the following considerations are crucial for the success of no hands up:

- Give students time to think about their response. For example, ask them to discuss in pairs, or allow them to brainstorm in their books.

- Make sure they know it is alright to be wrong. In fact, being wrong and working towards understanding should be celebrated as it results in very effective learning (Metcalf 2017)

- If a student doesn't know, they are not off the hook. Ask them if they can eliminate any possibilities, or consider coming back to them for an analysis or summary of the other responses.

'No hands up' marked the beginning of my journey in using Dylan Wiliam techniques. The staff workshop with Dylan Wiliam in Term 3 2019 demonstrated a whole range of transformative strategies that will be outlined briefly below. Some of these included:

- Eliciting discussion through the use of observations and statements that encourage students to elaborate on their thinking, rather than using direct questions. Examples could include 'I'm curious about your choice', 'I'm interested in hearing more' or 'You chose option A...'

- Increasing thinking time before asking for responses (Rowe 1986; Stahl 1994)

- Removing grades from tasks to elevate the status of feedback and help students become self-regulating learners

- Making feedback more effective by ensuring that it engenders future improvement rather than reflecting on past performance

- Making feedback more work for the students than the teacher

- Delaying answers to questions in order to increase engagement and retention of knowledge

- Minimising simple tasks, as a certain amount of struggling actually enhances deep learning

- Co-constructing rubrics with students so they understand what success looks like

- Ensuring that rubrics focus on outcomes rather than context or processes

- Differentiating success criteria so that the learning goals are accessible for all students

- Activating students as learning resources for one another through cooperative learning where all students make a visible and quantifiable contribution (Slavin, Hurley and Chamberlain 2003)

- Explicitly teaching students to give valuable peer feedback through methods such as 'two stars and a wish' or 'choose-swap-choose'

Each of the staff who attended Dylan Wiliam's workshop committed to trying at least one strategy in the classroom and will continue to meet to discuss their progress. At a strategic level, the assessment program continues to be reviewed and transformed to ensure that it reflects research about best practice. Overall, it is hoped that a greater focus on formative assessment across the School will increase students' understanding, wellbeing and preparedness for life-long learning.

References

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Notes