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# Responding not marking

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*Leadership is, after all, a struggle – a quest to do the right thing.*

(Sergiovanni, 2001, p.ix)

There has been a lot of research in recent years into the characteristics of effective departments, but very little of it covers the nature of effective subject leadership. Bennett et al (2003), in their investigation into the role and purpose of school middle leaders, came to the conclusion that we need to know more about the details of how effective departments are created.

A fundamental aspect of effective subject leadership is the question of how to bring about radical change. As part of my Masters in Educational Leadership, I investigated the impact of a new marking strategy, ‘Responding not Marking’, on my department where I am head of English. Influenced by the principles of Assessment for Learning on which the strategy is based, the research was carried out to determine to what extent this new approach to marking was embedded in the department, thereby enabling me to reflect on how successfully my leadership skills had shaped these outcomes.

I first introduced ‘Responding not Marking’ at a department meeting by outlining the disadvantages of ‘blanket marking’ – in other words, marking that tends to assess every aspect of a student’s writing, including punctuation, spelling and grammar. It was emphasised that this kind of marking overwhelms students and can actually lead to regression. The department was then introduced to the idea of ‘Closing the Gap’ (Sadler, 1989) which stresses the need for students to know the purpose of a task, how far they have achieved it, and how they can close the gap between

what they have done and what they could do.

Different ways of responding were then discussed to signify strengths and weaknesses relating specifically to the learning objective. In other words, praise is given in response to the highlighted strength and suggestions for improvement are given in response to the weaker aspect of the writing. The most important stage is when the students’ work is returned to them – they use the teacher’s comments to make a ‘focused improvement’ on the weaker area identified. We discussed some examples of this at primary level. Finally, I outlined the impact that such an approach would have on both students and staff. The deputy head of department also contributed to the presentation by outlining strategies for self- and peer-assessment. I was keen to encompass the whole range of Assessment for Learning strategies. At the follow-up meeting two months later, we agreed on a common approach involving the use of highlighters to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

To successfully bring about change, a leader must first have vision. A vision needs to be shared in order for subject leaders to be able to secure commitment from all members of the team. Field et al (2000) argue that successful subject leaders act strategically in that they work systematically over a period of time to achieve long-term goals that are shared with all subject staff and are congruent with the overall aims of the school. They emphasise the need for subject leaders to create a “group vision” which accurately describes what things will be like in the classroom when the job is completed. A vision is best achieved “by encouraging and empowering the team members to think big, to have faith in the power of the team to achieve their goals by finding creative ways that they might not have thought of to date” (Field et al 2000, p.97).

My vision for assessment in the department was informed by widespread educational research and was also congruent with the whole-school vision for

assessment as defined by the headteacher at a whole-school meeting devoted to teaching and learning. Furthermore, more effective use of formative assessment was identified as an area for improvement in the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis I asked the team to carry out on first taking up my position as head of English. There was also an awareness of Assessment for Learning strategies in the department as the deputy head of English had devised a new approach to peer assessment in the classroom which was already familiar although not embedded within the department. Therefore, the seeds of a shared vision had already been sown.

These shared values are essential for implementing meaningful change as they lead to what Sergiovanni (2001, p.29) calls “an evolving idea framework”. Sergiovanni argues that this ultimately motivates teachers to respond by feeling a sense of obligation to embody these ideas in their behaviour. I believe he is right in pointing out that the moral authority of shared ideas is more powerful than purely personal authority. Ideas based leadership is arguably the best way to bring about positive change. I felt strongly that the idea of Assessment for Learning carried the moral authority needed to bring about the change in marking practices I was seeking.

In researching how successfully I had brought about his change, I carried out interviews with staff, observations of teachers in the department and student questionnaires. The positive perceptions of both the English teachers and the overwhelming majority of those students who responded to the questionnaire proved that ‘Responding not Marking’ had been a success. The research revealed two key areas for improvement that will help to strengthen this approach to impact more directly on students’ progress. One key area that required further discussion and exploration was how teachers can best support and challenge their students through their written comments, enabling them to make real progress through the focused improvement. The other was how teachers can best organise the focused improvement so that all students are fully engaged, supportive of each other and making tangible improvements. It worked most effectively, in my observations of teachers, as a direct result of good planning, well organised opportunities for reflection and sharing ideas, careful monitoring and positive encouragement. Such techniques enabled students to take responsibility for their own learning – the principal aim of Assessment for Learning.

Cultural change needs to be sustained. I have already taken these two areas for improvement back to the department to discuss the way forward. This will be likely to involve close scrutiny of a range of students’ written work, further observations and the

filming of lessons for departmental discussion – in other words, regular opportunities for collaborative critical reflective practice (Terrell and Powell, 2004). Our aim as teachers is to hone continuously strategies for maximising the learning of all our students. I believe this can only be fully realised if those who teach are learners too: “The teachers themselves need to the learners as well as being knowledgeable about what they are teaching” (MacGilchrist et al, 2004, p.69). Those who lead departments need to strive to be model learners because we must always question and seek new ways of improving our current practices. It is only by doing this that we can create a truly “learning department” (Terrell and Terrell, 2004, p.85) and by helping all stakeholders to learn, we can make a real difference to the lives of young people. There is clearly a strong ethical dimension to the role of the middle leader. Through changing the culture of assessment in my department for the better, as I believe I have, I hope I have gone some way towards developing the skills of ‘authentic leadership’:

*Authentic leadership is centrally concerned with ethics and morality and with deciding what is significant, what is right and what is ‘worthwhile’.*

(Bhindi and Duignan, 1997, p.120)

It is this kind of leadership that I believe impacts most positively on those stakeholders in the learning process – both the students and teachers. It is leadership that helps to build and to sustain strong visions within an organisation.

Middle leaders have a responsibility to share these visions with the whole school. Responding has already been shared with the whole staff at a teaching and learning meeting and my deputy and I have been asked by senior management to deliver another session during the next term to help other departments to embed Assessment for Learning strategies. This will serve to further strengthen the moral authority of the approach and will hopefully impact on students’ progress across the whole curriculum. An interesting area for further consideration and study would be the role that parents and governors play in bringing about cultural change. They are also stakeholders in the learning process and there is clearly a need for leaders to involve them more in this. Powerful change for the better can be fully realised when all members of the school community see themselves as stakeholders

Changing marking habits that have been ingrained for years is certainly no easy task, but it was realised through a combination of ideas-based leadership, shared goals that were congruent with the overall aims of the school and regular monitoring. These are the essentials for leading cultural change. It is my firm belief that strong leadership and Assessment for

- Learning are both driven by the same idea – you get the best out of people when you empower them.

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