

Josephine Smith



Lessons in assessment

Interview **Dorothy Lepkowska** Photographs **Jim Varney**

Josephine Smith explains how she guides pupils of all abilities to gauge their work



My name is Josephine Smith and I work at Casterton, an 800-pupil Business and Enterprise College in Stamford, Lincolnshire. I have a variety of roles, most importantly perhaps as Head of English, but I am also the school's Gifted and Talented co-ordinator, and the school's initial teacher training co-ordinator. I am a member of the extended senior management team at the school, as well as an examiner in English GCSE for **ACA**.

I arrive at Casterton at around 8am, when I prepare for the school day and check that I have the necessary teaching resources.

School begins at 8.25am, when I see my year 11 tutor group for registration. They have just completed their mock GCSEs, so we go through their marks. They review their marks in the mock exams comparing them to the target grades they were set at the beginning of the year. They use this information to set themselves Smart targets that, in turn, will inform the revision timetable they will write themselves over the next few tutor time sessions.

We review their progress and set targets. I remind them of the importance of having targets that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-related and perhaps model the phrasing of some suitable targets. Then I help those who will struggle to compose their own targets write theirs while other pupils complete the task more independently in preparation for the real thing in the summer. This is a truly comprehensive school, with some pupils

hoping to get into Oxbridge and others who cannot wait to leave education.

A couple of days a week at this time, someone else will take my form group and I will see pupils who are part of the Gifted and Talented programme. Like all students, they need to be encouraged so we have a conversation about the different subjects, looking at targets they have recorded in their planner, set earlier in the year by each of their subject teachers.

Predicted results

We look at predictions set by the data we have available in school, predictions from Fischer Family Trust information and the analysis service provided by their sitting of the Nelson tests to see if they are on track. We talk about their extracurricular opportunities too, along with subject progress. We talk about their ambitions for the future. The idea is that the conversation encourages aspirations and lets pupils know that their potential is supported.

The first lesson begins at 8.50am. Today, I have a year 11 group and our lesson will focus primarily on assessment, and wind



Test of ability

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy tests (known as the Alan tests) are functional exams that test basic ability at different levels, such as whether someone can read a menu or knows how much a 10 per cent tip would be on a restaurant bill.

We are introducing them this year for our less able GCSE pupils, as the level 2 Alan is the equivalent of half a GCSE. We are aiming this at the pupils who will leave school to get a job, to show employers what skills they have.

At the same time, we are planning to introduce these tests for our high-achieving year 9 children as a motivational tool.

The few weeks after they take their National Curriculum Tests can be a bit of a lull before they start their GCSE work, so this gives them something to aim for.

up with some poetry from their GCSE anthology. I will return last week's essay assignment so we can look at their grades and discuss. The formative marking will make explicit in their written feedback what they need to do as individuals. Pupils have a chance to ask individual questions but I will also highlight common errors or successes. We have a checklist of things they need

to look at to make this process quick and easy, which is a printed form with common weaknesses listed and boxes next to them for the teacher to tick. It encourages speed of marking for teachers but also a focused and consistent approach for the pupils

At 9.40am lesson two begins; today it is a year 10 English class. We are focusing on a speaking and listening assessment and I am killing two birds with one stone here, because while I am assessing the pupils I will also be training my NQTs in assessment skills. Last week we taught our classes different poems, and now we are pairing up our pupils to read and discuss the poems with each other, teaching each other what they need to know. Our classrooms are opposite each other, making it easy for us to move across classes listening to their discussions, and assessing their analytical skills and understanding. We can then standardise our marking.

Before the assessment part of this activity takes place we share the grade criteria with pupils. We translate "exam board teacher speak" into "pupil speak" and share the criteria for each grade in a clear and explicit way. Pupils see this too at the start of the

year when we set them targets for reading, writing, and speaking and listening, so when they do get their assessment result they are able to connect their success to the criteria and to their target. Pupils have regular chances to assess each other during the course. I often use past pupils' work too to show pupils what success looks like at different grade boundaries.

Fine line on guidance

By 10.30am, I am ready for the morning break, but rarely have a spare minute. Break time is 20 minutes and usually there will be pupils looking for me to get advice on an assignment or piece of coursework. There is a fine line between being there to guide and helping too much.

I work very closely with the head of media studies so we meet at break time most days to discuss the pupils and plan a new course we are setting up. Hopefully, I will also find a few minutes to check my e-mails.

Lesson three begins at 10.50am, but today I have a free period, which I use to contact Edexcel because I am bringing Adult Literacy and Numeracy (Alan) tests to the school (see above).

I e-mail my contact at Edexcel to make sure the school is prepared and has the right resources to deliver the tests. I will also speak to our IT support people to find out whether the school system is geared up for it. The test is a relatively new thing in schools so we're spearheading it in a way and it will be interesting to see how it works.

At 11.40am I'm teaching a mixed ability class of year 7s and we're doing a writing task, with the aim of writing to persuade a target audience. One very effective part of Assessment for Learning is to get the pupils to assess themselves and each other – within this age group we call it being a

CV

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Reason for becoming a teacher/ assessor: I love my subject and wanted to pass this on to young people.

“critical friend”. The pupils have been given some written work to do, which they are swapping with a classmate. Using clear and structured guidance we have asked them to suggest what aspects of work have been done well and what could be improved. Peer assessment is very effective because pupils learn skills such as feedback and editing. Their homework from this lesson will be to review their work and improve it from class discussions.

Lunchtime begins at 12.30pm. I try to find time to catch up with my colleagues in the English department. One of them is putting together some statistics on year 9 results and looking at how these might inform our next faculty training day. I'll also have my playground duties or detention supervision.

Hungry learners

My first lesson of the afternoon is top set year 9, at 1.15pm. This class is always hungry for knowledge, so I have to make sure that my lesson is well prepared and there is plenty of it to maintain their enthusiasm. We are using some new software and revision materials for Key Stage 3 tests and GCSEs. It allows the pupils to work independently, while teaching them learning and revision skills that will be vital in the coming years.

It is report time at the moment, so we are going through the individual profiles informed by teacher assessments and monitoring their progress. The information will be used in reports to parents, so while pupils are working on their revision, I will make sure all their marks are up to date. Pupils have regular chances to assess themselves and each other and to record their opinions on their annual profile but the individual subject profiles are teacher assessments.

At 2.05pm is my year 8 mixed ability group. We have an English scheme of work at Casterton called the “argument kit”, which focuses on writing and oral discussion. At the moment, we are preparing the pupils for a formal debate, and after considering a number of motions they have curiously chosen: “This house believes that boarding schools offer the best means of education.”

One of my colleagues has already worked with the proposer and opposer, and their seconders, on how to present the motion, while I have been discussing with the rest of the group – the house – some of the issues that might arise out of the debate. When we hold the debate for real in a few weeks' time, we will assess pupils on how fluently they speak and put forward their arguments.

We make the learners aware of the criteria on which they will be assessed. As with the year 10 English group, we share



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the grade criteria – here, for each level at Key Stage 3 and grade at Key Stage 4 – with pupils before the assessment part of this activity takes place. When pupils get their result they can connect their success to the criteria and to their target, as well as their participation in the debate. These are skills that the pupils need to know as part of the national curriculum, though their scores in this will be recorded for internal purposes. These assessment levels then inform our reports to parents and enable us to give feedback to pupils on their progress. They enable us to measure pupil progress too.

Remains of the day

The school day ends for pupils at 2.55pm, and as duty leader I have to make sure the pupils get on the buses and leave the premises safely.

Then the staff meetings usually begin. High on the agenda today is how to raise achievement among year 11s. A colleague with responsibility for raising teaching standards is giving us a presentation on Assessment for Learning and we will talk about how to integrate its various aspects into our day-to-day teaching. Occasionally,

there is also a heads of department meeting, and we are planning a revision workshop for year 11s called the Revision S'cool (sic) conference, where we take the GCSE year off the timetable for the day to attend subject workshops. These will look at weaknesses and how they can be remedied. These workshop sessions provide advice on study and revision skills, focus on what the examiners will be looking for at each grade, prepare pupils to tackle the exams they are about to sit with a high degree of confidence. Other workshops are revision sessions focusing on acquiring knowledge or skills pupils need to demonstrate in the exams.

I tend to leave school some time after 5pm and, after helping my two children with homework and preparing dinner, it's time to work again. I prepare for the following day, but I try to finish by 9pm.

