

# What is the standard?

## Another chapter in the assessment for learning story

### How do students in the junior cycle of post-primary schools know what to aim for? How do we help them to see the bigger picture, especially what a finished piece of work looks like?

Many of us will answer that question in this way: I show them the examination paper because that's what sets the standard for them. And up to a point that seems a satisfactory answer. Students can and do learn a lot from the tests they do as part of their school work and from the sample and past examination papers for the courses they are following, that is for those courses for which there are examinations in the Junior Certificate. Examiners' reports produced by the State Examinations Commission can be a good source of information, too, especially when they contain exemplars of standard. This is how the examiners indicate the standards they have applied to the answers produced by our students in the exam halls around the country every June.

### Keeping examples of good work from year to year

Relying entirely on the examination to provide both the goal for students and the target standard for teachers is a bit limited, though. For junior cycle students the examination represents the standard they must have reached after three years, when all the learning and all the revision have already been done, as it were.

Equally, presenting the students with examination questions tells them very little about the criteria for

success that will be applied to their work when judgements are being made. That's why many teachers keep examples of good work from one year to the next, to show students who are new to a particular topic what good work 'looks like' in that area.

So, how and where do we pick up our sense of what is good work (not perfection, but work of a good standard) in our subject area? And more importantly, how do we share our sense of the standard with our students? Assessment for learning considers this to be a very important part of the guidance and direction we give to learners. We can encourage students to browse through websites to find tips and model answers but we, as teachers, sometimes find these to be of limited value because they don't exemplify what is crucially important - what real teachers say to real students about real pieces of work. That is what the NCCA is working to provide in the current phase of its assessment for learning initiative. How?

Drawing on the expertise of teachers involved in assessment for learning, the NCCA has put together a number of subject-specific teams to collect examples of work from students in junior cycle (1st, 2nd, and 3rd years). Compiling the first set of exemplars is currently underway in the following subject areas:

- art
- history
- physical education
- English
- geography
- home economics
- CSPE
- science
- technology.

All going to plan, we will have begun uploading the exemplars to the NCCA website by the time you read this article.

### How will the exemplars be presented on the website?

Each piece of student work will include the following details:

- the syllabus area or topic
- the learning intention



**“May I remind you that my core worth as a human being remains constant and isn't tied to external validation”**



- the task that arose from the learning intention
- the criteria for success in that task
- task conditions (whether it was done in class or as homework, the length of time allowed, whether it was produced individually or by students working in a group, and so on)
- the piece of work produced by the student/s
- feedback (commentary) related to the task and the criteria for success.

This last section, the feedback, is vital because it is the part where the student is shown what he/she has done right (what criteria for success have been met most fully), where he/she has been less successful, and what to focus on in order to improve. Most importantly, perhaps, this provides an over-the-shoulder glimpse of the work of teachers in classrooms very similar to our own. It gives an indication of what they value in the work produced by their students and

the kind of direction and advice they believe is worthwhile for learners. It represents an important opportunity for teachers to share their judgements with others and we would like to put on record our thanks to those teachers and students who are taking part. So...watch the space in the Assessment for Learning (AfL) section of our website: [www.ncca.ie/afl](http://www.ncca.ie/afl).



And the NCCA initiative in AfL continues, so if you have a query feel free to contact a member of the AfL team:

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For an overview of some of the fundamental approaches of Assessment for Learning (AfL), see [info@ncca](mailto:info@ncca.ie), Issue 1, September 2005.

## Primary assessment

Assessment can support the learning of pupils in the primary classroom too. With the benefit of insights gained from the assessment for learning initiatives in Ireland and elsewhere, the NCCA aims to support teachers in our primary schools in making use of formative assessment.

This is the kind of assessment that helps learners to

- set out learning intentions
- recognise what good work looks like
- share in the evaluation of work done, with the help of feedback
- understand how that work can be improved
- become involved in assessing their own work.

We will keep you posted here in [info@ncca](mailto:info@ncca.ie) about this work as it moves forward. To contact the Primary Assessment team:

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## Engaging parents

As teachers, we all know that when parents are actively engaged in their child's learning there are many obvious benefits for the child, the family, ourselves as teachers and the school community as a whole. That is why in recent years there has been a great deal of activity aimed at promoting and supporting parental engagement in the work of the school. In this respect, the NCCA will be launching a DVD for parents early in 2006. The central aims of the DVD are to inform parents about their child's learning through the curriculum in primary schools and to show them how they can support that learning in simple, effective and practical ways at home. It should prove useful also to teachers in terms of establishing a common base of knowledge that facilitates communication with parents.

In developing the DVD we talked to a broad spectrum of parents from different backgrounds about their needs in relation to supporting their child's learning in school. They told us that they would like information on:

- what their child is learning in each subject at each class level of primary school and in particular an emphasis on 'what has changed since my day.'
- how best to support their child's learning at home and in particular how to help with homework

The DVD seeks to address those needs in an informative and engaging way. We aim to give parents information about the curriculum and particularly about the changes in curriculum emphasis since they themselves were in school. Parents will learn about the different teaching approaches and methodologies used by teachers in schools and about the benefits of these for their child. Practical ways in which they can support their child's learning at home are also suggested. The DVD medium will allow for the inclusion of different languages so that newcomer families can also access the materials.

While parents are the main target audience for this attractive, interactive and user-friendly DVD, we would hope that it will also be useful to you the teacher in supporting communication with parents about what and how their children are learning in your own classroom and school. We look forward to receiving your feedback on how you have used the DVD.

## Want to read more?

**info@ncca** is an NCCA publication designed to keep teachers in primary and post primary schools up to date about developments in curriculum and assessment.

All back issues are available on our website to download and read, or to save on your hard drive to read later.

You can access the magazine by clicking on the image on the home page [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) or if you are reading online, just click [here](#).

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