

## **I am a 5b: Keeping Rigour but Removing Judgements using REAL Projects.**

### **What do we actually mean when we say 'rigour'?**

When I first started to develop REAL projects in my classroom a big concern of mine was rigour. I started to ask myself the question, what *is* rigour? Traditionally the sign of learning in a lesson would be the amount of work produced. If students produced a lot, it was seen as a visible sign of hard work in a particular lesson. However, what about the conversations the students were having? Isn't working through a range of ideas to come up with a solution to a difficult problem also a form of rigour? Could we even go a whole lesson without writing in books and it still be a rigorous session? I still haven't come up with a satisfactory answer to these questions, but it is something I am constantly thinking about.

Another point which got me thinking a lot was how my teaching used to be. I would select the event from the vast history of the world and decide it was worthy of focus. Then I would select certain events or people from within that time period based on my view of which were the significant events. I would form the assessment based around what I had provided for them. When I look back I really do question the rigour of what I was doing. There was a lot of work in books. Generally students did well in assessments, perhaps partly because they already knew a lot of what we were studying before I had even started teaching. But, were my students really engaged in rigorous and exciting inquiry based research? Were they actually developing a deep knowledge and understanding of a period in history? The answer has to be a resounding no. They were going through the motions which I had developed for them in order to prove their learning in a summative assessment - not the kind of 21st Century learners I want my students to become.

### **How I used to assess learning**

Linked to rigour is assessment. Previous to engaging with REAL projects my formative assessment would be my questioning but mostly my taking in of student books and marking their work. This would be followed by my summative assessment which would sum up all of the students learning (or lack of!) in a number, for example Level 4a, which was inputted into the school system and placed on a student report - that's it, a number. This number really did not mean a great deal to me because of course this number was not a true reflection of a student's learning over the course of a half term - but crucially, it meant a lot to the students, who would often declare themselves to actually *be* that number in any given lesson; 'I like English because *I am* a 4b', 'I am not good at Maths, *I am* a 3c' and more worryingly '*I am* stupid because *I am* a...'.

### **Making assessment more useful**

After beginning to implement REAL Projects in my classroom I began to view assessment very differently. Because my students were engaged in genuinely rigorous self-directed research leading to a real world outcome, I was able to move from the front of the classroom to work in depth with individuals and groups. Each lesson, I aim to work with each group in the class and have a conversation with them about their learning and assess any misconceptions or gaps right away. I also use Harkness Debates as a form to assess a student's deep understanding of an event - I want to see if my students can take the content they have learnt and apply it to different scenarios or questions and link it to other events they know about. In a recent example of this, my

year nine students had a rich discussion about whether or not the Enlightenment was the main cause of the French Revolution. I had not 'taught' them in the traditional sense but I was astounded by their knowledge and their ability to respond on the spot in a discussion. This was a way for me to assess how well they had carried out research and how well they could apply what they had learnt.

I also try to get through a set number of 1:1 sessions with students each session. This means each lesson I will speak to between 5-8 students in depth about their learning and mark their work with them sat with me. They then immediately act upon the feedback I have given and redraft it there and then. Not only do I have a lot more of my weekend free, I can actually see students progressing with their work and more importantly, so can they. This form of assessment also develops a sense of accountability in the classroom. As a teacher I am able to pull them up if they have not completed enough work or it is a poor standard. Teachers often wonder how to develop a level of independence in the classroom and I believe holding students to account with them in front of you in a relatively formal 1:1 session is one way to do this.

### **Moving away from NC Levels**

As for summative assessment I still think it is useful for teachers and students to evaluate their learning over the course of a project however, I have started to include a lot more depth to their feedback and invited students and others into the summative assessment process - assessment is done *with* the student and students can clearly see their strengths and weaknesses across a whole project and reflect on how to address these weaknesses independently. We are trialing a system whereby each project is assessed out of 100%. 30% on 'project skills' such as organisation, collaboration and oracy - this is done at regular intervals as teachers but also students are asked to reflect on these areas. The conversations happens when a student's reflection is very different to the teacher's reflection. 60% of the assessment is more traditional and is led by the subjects involved in the project. In my current project that means that 15% is awarded for a historical essay, 15% for a formal exam at the end, 15% for a creative journal in drama and 15% for their final drama piece. The final 10% is awarded for effort across the project. Crucially, at many different assessment points it is not *just* the teacher doing the assessment but other stakeholders also. Drama experts will have a say in the assessment of the final drama piece and parents will join the conversation about effort. Students are still awarded a final percentage, but the process is entirely transparent and is more of a discussion rather than a judgement.

### **Next steps**

The next step on our assessment journey is to look at how our students can create work which has real value to the world in the way Ron Berger describes in his books. We have already taken steps to do this at School 21 with our WWI Exhibition which we opened to the public but we are looking at ways we can embed this to a greater extent in our curriculum. We are still experimenting with this and we still have a lot to do. What I am convinced about is that my teaching has become genuinely more rigorous and my assessment more useful through engaging with REAL Projects.

Berger, Ron, *Ethic of Excellence*, (2003)

Berger, Ron, *Leaders of their own learning*, (2014)