

Stakes and Ladders

Tim Harris on a new model for assessing improvement in KS3 Geography

Before (very belatedly) training as a teacher, my main experiences of KS3 Geography assessment were at parents' evenings, watching as bleary-eyed teachers surveyed mark books crammed with perplexing and often questionable sub-level grades, before reeling off a series of numbers and letters and a few words of encouragement, reassurance or warning.

If this 'summative-heavy' regime was confusing for parents it could be a lot worse for students. For years, a long series of educational experts have warned of the dangers of encouraging rote learning over understanding, competition over improvement and grading over advice; demoralising those branded failures and flooring high fliers hit by a bad result. Most authors were equally clear that a better, more formative, assessment system could and should improve learning and understanding by offering clear targets, encouraging motivation, building confidence, giving ownership and control, providing detailed feedback and enhancing learners' strategic awareness of themselves.

At last, more as a reaction to parental bafflement than student misery, the DfE has removed the requirement to report attainment and progress through levels.

As Paul Weeden and John Hopkin noted (*Teaching Geography* Summer 2014) the search is on for systems that can combine constructive, formative assessment with the summative data needed to identify improvements in work, report back to parents and track progress through to end of stage assessments.

Where will this system come from? For now there is no official guidance on what should replace sub-leveling and, until a consensus emerges, it seems likely that many schools will continue to 'micro-grade', feeding big data systems and satisfying senior management more interested in 'weighing the cow than feeding it'.

For now, the DfE is promising consultation with experts and examples of good practice from 'outstanding schools' – a phrase that suggests those with an exceptionally selective intake, good political connections, active press officers or a recent upward performance blip.

An alternative might be to look at a real rarity - a non-selective school that has steadfastly opposed summative testing at KS3. As part of my PGCE, I was placed at the King Alfred School (KAS). The first progressive day school in Britain, KAS remains co-educational, non-denominational and non-selective; it has rejected high stakes testing ever since 1904, when the first national tests creamed off a chosen few into grammar schools and damned the rest. Better yet, the KAS Geography Department, under Head of Department Vicki Longhurst, has been pioneering a new system of strategic assessment intended help students visualise and achieve success. Having seen it in action and researched Year 9 students' reactions to it, I think it might provide a useful model for KS3 assessment in a 'post-sub-level' world.

The system's twin virtues are simplicity and flexibility. Instead of grades, pupils in years 7, 8 and 9 start each year with five different ladders to ascend. (*Below*) Each ladder identifies a series of skills or concepts that reflect the schools' own geography curriculum and begins simply enough for all pupils to start on the first rung. Progress is based on four major pieces of work per year, each of them integrated into the school's scheme of work and planned so that each ladder comes into play at least once.

For example, the current Year 9 ladders are Sustainability, Place, Processes, Skills and Human/ Physical Interaction and are based on the following projects:

- 1 A model UN Climate Change conference in which pairs of students research and represent different nations over a half-day debate staged with proper UN protocol. Students are assessed on their typed,

submitted speech, delivery and contribution to the debate and a follow-up summary report.

- 2 A written radio report on 'How to Make the World a Fairer Place'
3. A Sustainable Decision-Making Exercise based on a recent GSCE paper, to help develop exam technique.
4. A personal project covering research, enquiry and presentation skills.

As the example *below* shows, progress is measured through cloud marking. In each case, a first draft is marked in pencil so that the student can see what improvements are needed for their final draft. The aim is to identify a clear learning progression and keep them in the 'learning zone' between the too easy and too difficult.

After marking, students keep their ladders in their files as reference for future improvement; teachers can use their own copies to identify weaknesses that need addressing and convey meaningful information to parents rather than strings of figures.

The ladders themselves remain works in progress. New key words and concepts can be woven in and a balance struck between overfilling the 'rungs' with too many ideas and not giving students enough to work on. Looking ahead, the KAS Geography department plans to strike a balance between consistency and improvement, replacing one project per age group per year in a four-year rolling programme. In future, discussions of how to progress up a ladder may be taken away from the tasks themselves, with students spending ten minutes before a relevant lesson identifying the skills needed to progress.

When I researched the system anonymously among a Year 9 class, all agreed slightly or strongly with the statements 'Learning ladders are a useful way for me to keep track of my progress' and 'Give me targets for improvement next time'

(There was strong disagreement towards the statement 'I don't pay much attention to ladders.')

The strongest agreement of all was to 3. 'Being able to redraft work and refer to the ladders helps me improve it', and 5. 'Ladders give me a clear sense of how I am doing' - with no disagreement in either case. In terms of 'recommender scores', all but one student would recommend that other schools adopt the system.

As well as this strategic assessment there remains the question of how to handle more tactical end of unit tests; here too KAS has a different way of doing things. Classes compile their own tests from notes, agreeing and selecting questions so that this pre-test lesson becomes a group revision exercise. After the test itself, papers are copied and summatively marked by the teacher while the blank originals are returned for the students to self- or peer-mark. (In the Year 7 tectonics test I conducted, *below*, the final marks spread from 50-95% - so stronger and weaker students can still be identified without anyone being humiliated.)

Rather than comparing overall scores, students are encouraged to think about their own performance, noting what went well and what to do better next time. Completing a short self assessment form means that teachers can identify students ability to learn from experience and address any problem cases.

When asked 'What do you think of this way of doing a test?' thirteen out of fifteen Year 7 pupils scored it 'very good' or 'quite good' with one 'OK' and only one 'not very good'. 12 made reference to the method improving their understanding of the subject or making revising easier, while ten suggested that the test was easier or less stressful. Having control of the questions and managing their difficulty got five favourable mentions and being able to ask about questions they didn't understand in the revision class got three. Two students referred to feeling more involved but only one claimed to enjoy reviewing answers - suggesting that even in the most formative of tests no-one really enjoys discovering what they have got wrong...

While it consumes a little more lesson time, the quality of the revision, boost to student confidence and ability to identify those who are weak and/or lack self-critical thinking makes it a useful exercise. My suspicion is that the students' lack of stress about the test also produces better results. (In another school, an A/B split of two similar classes, one tested this way, another conventionally, might be revealing.)

Both KAS systems - tactical and strategic - are intended to encourage effort, and learning and to improve specific skills and knowledge rather than just summing up pupils with a number. The core idea seems flexible enough to apply to different skills and schemes of work and, in a different school to KAS, could culminate in an end of stage test.

Of course neither is a panacea. Some KAS students still do bad and shoddy work but at least they have to face up to this and the reasons why.

The greatest obstacle is the extra work involved in setting up ladders and portfolio tasks - although this is a one-off hit - and the time taken to mark, re-mark and feed back on results. On the other hand, by focussing on four projects a year, the 'gaps' between could be filled by peer or self-marking, making the task more manageable.

Overall the KAS system seems to me to exemplify Gordon Stobart's 'expert school', 'being brave and doing things differently' not to mention Dylan Wiliam's 'culture of success, backed by a belief that all can succeed' . At the very least it might provide a model for schools looking to 'feed the cow' as well as weigh it.

(1495 words)

What do you think of the following statements ?

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	OK	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly
Ladders are a useful way to keep track of progress	1	9	1	0	0

I don't pay much attention to the ladders	1	1	0	8	1
Being able to redraft work and refer to ladders helps improve it	6	5	0	0	0
The ladders give me targets for improvement next time.	3	6	2	0	0
Ladders give me a clear sense of how I am doing.	6	3	2	0	0
It would be better if we had a grade or percentage system instead of ladders	1	5	4	0	1

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