FORUM
Volume 59, Number 3, 2017
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2017.59.3.433

FORUM

Checklists for Learning: when, why and how to pay attention

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ABSTRACT This article gives an overview of the author's book *Inside Teaching: how to make a difference for every learner and teacher* (Routledge, 2017), and focuses on how checklist processes can be used to help clarify and guide purposes and ways of working. The intention is to be systematic and explicit without being bureaucratic and moribund. Effective decision-making in learning and teaching is seen to be associated with choosing when and how to pay attention to what matters most. Underpinning the discussion is a twin assumption: teachers also learn and learners teach. What applies to learners usually applies to teachers too, and vice versa.

Terminology

I hope readers who prefer the term 'students' will not mind my calling them 'pupils', the term used in many UK special and primary schools. I opt for 'checklists' and 'frameworks', which might be called statements of principle, protocols, standard procedures, or key things to do.

Overview

Lazy, dishonest and oppressive practices have given checklists a bad name. Having to 'prove' we do certain things by ticking off items we have no proper part in deciding undermines our commitment and authority. 'Targets' too are easily tarnished. Targets and checklists are worse than worthless when they are treated in ways that rob teachers and learners of responsibility. They are valuable only if they promote autonomy through dialogue about key matters.

Inside Teaching draws on my teaching, advisory and consultancy work in special, primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities. The materials presented were developed with teachers and sometimes with their pupils. Pupils are centre stage in Part 1, which explores among other things pupils'

backgrounds, their motivations, and their participation in decision-making. Part 2 covers qualities and skills of teaching, referring to formative and summative assessments, planning sequences of lessons, and developing pupils' portfolios. Part 3 surveys wider aspects of being a teacher, including collaboration in meetings, lesson observation, and appraisal, concluding with 10 checklists.

The book is addressed to prospective, trainee, newly qualified and experienced teachers, and offers these main messages:

- Though your work is bound and led by laws, statutes and policies, you are responsible for how you teach your pupils.
- It helps if you can share your successes with colleagues and speak to them when you have concerns and difficulties. The more of a team you and your colleagues become, the more satisfying and effective your work is likely to be.
- Watching and working alongside teachers are probably the most effective ways to learn about teaching.
- What you achieve depends on what your pupils want to achieve.
- Much of what you want your pupils to do is complex and demands persistent effort. The more positive you are about your pupils' prospects and progress, and the better you deconstruct the skills and understandings you want your pupils to develop, the more your pupils are likely to flourish.
- You enable your pupils to develop physically, cognitively and emotionally by valuing what they notice and understand as they explore, practise and create things.

Paying Attention and Making Decisions

The younger learners are, the less likely they are to elaborate goals and judgements. As they mature, they may negotiate and pursue intentions that bring public recognition as well as personal satisfaction. Self-conscious concentration has a part to play in endeavours that bring extrinsic as well as intrinsic rewards. When learners plan, monitor and reflect on their activities, they have a chance to develop self-control along with constructive social roles. They benefit from strategies which invite them to consider factors that affect how well they do. Assessing themselves and one another, as well as being assessed by others, enables them to take stock and look ahead.

Royce Sadler (1989) explained how self-assessment can help learners develop insight and competence. His analysis was that for learners to get better at using complex skills and concepts, they have to check how well they do over the course of their activity. Self-aware effort plays a part in this, and it is generated and sustained by dialogue (Alexander, 2008). Sadler's subsequent research (Sadler, 2010) found that capability is developed through 'intensive use of purposeful peer assessment as a pedagogical strategy, not just for assessment but also for teaching the substantive content of the course' (p. 548). Peer assessment builds on self-assessment, enabling learners to use their own vernaculars as they share judgements and decide how to improve their efforts.

Learning can be involuntary and spontaneous as well as deliberate and self-conscious. Absorbed in what we do, we can learn incidentally by taking for granted what we want to achieve, instinctively setting standards for ourselves, hence implicitly grasping criteria that might apply to what we do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Teachers can set up activities that promote such learning, not so much instructing learners as providing them with environments and interventions that stimulate and support their commitment to and authority in what they do.

When we learn during voluntary activity, we may concentrate tacitly and with little apparent effort (Polanyi, 1958). Relaxed, unarticulated concentration can be promoted in subjects which learners are entitled or obliged to be taught. As part of their curriculum in some schools, for example, pupils have time and support to organise activities for themselves, choosing to work solo, in pairs or in small teams. They can start by stating:

- *What do I want to learn about or learn to do?*
- *What help do I need?*
- *How do I want what I do to be commented on?*

Then they get on with it. Designing tasks for themselves can help them answer introspective questions when they work on assignments their teachers set them:

- *What am I trying to do?*
- *What am I getting better at?*
- *What can I do now?*

Margaret Donaldson (1978) explained a vital aspect of this:

> required for success in our educational system is that [we] should learn to turn language and thought in upon themselves. [We] must become able to direct [our] own thought process in a thoughtful manner.… [Our] conceptual system must expand in the direction of increasing ability to represent itself. (p. 90)

Learning to Do Things and Learning to Learn

When we decide what to concentrate on and discuss what we notice, we open ourselves to tolerating ambiguity and appreciating complexity, thereby strengthening our autonomy as learners and agents or actors in our world (Abercrombie, 1960). Interrupting our mundane, quick, unreflective thinking (Kahneman, 2011; Ramachandran, 2011) enables us to engage with more process-conscious work.

Concentrating on what we *do* can lead to our concentrating on what we *learn*. When we concentrate on what we learn, we can notice how our understanding and skill change as a result of our own efforts and in response to collaboration and teaching. High-quality teaching fosters this. Carol Dweck's research (2000) showed that we learn to learn, and so learn more successfully, when we see that achievement comes from effort and resourcefulness, which we

can control, rather than from innate ability or reliance on others, which we cannot control: 'If [we] believe in the potential to grow, then wrongdoing simply becomes a problem to be solved' (p. 128).

A substantial part of learners' achievement is the progress they make and how they cope with difficulties. Yet traditional assessments and qualifications reflect what learners are judged capable of *doing* on single occasions rather than what they *learn*. Subtler processes are required to record and report how learners' capabilities change. Educational records might, but rarely do, include portfolios of learners' work, illustrating differences between what they used to be capable of and what they can now do (Harlen et al, 1992).

Learning and teaching are meta-capabilities; they entail attending to and acting on behaviour. Patricia Ashton, Pamela Hunt, Stephanie Jones and Gillian Watson (1980) devised a powerful way of enabling teachers to engage with this in self-chosen, self-directing groups. The method involves teachers stepping back at least once a week from what is happening in a lesson, and noting:

About their pupils:
What are my pupils actually doing?
What are they learning?
How worthwhile is it?

About themselves:
What was I doing before I stopped to make notes?
What was I learning?
What do I intend to do now?

Colleagues share their observations and pursue implications at monthly or half-termly meetings. Those who have this kind of experience report that it makes a significant difference to their day-to-day work and morale.

Moving To and Fro between Intuitive, Reflexive Activity and Deliberate, Self-conscious Activity

Using checklists is a way of refreshing understanding and energy: pause-points allow us to bring to mind and implement the best of what we know. The process should not be allowed to become overbearing or demeaning. Individuals' and teams' effectiveness is diminished every time anyone is overruled, ignored or belittled. Every person who has a role in the work must have an equal voice.

We act and learn, learn and act by constructing and reconstructing neural patterns, making and remaking mental and muscular maps. Our thinking and action are schematic and evolve with every iteration (Frith, 2007). Whenever we use what we know, we remake it, and so are in a position to experience and learn new things. It can easily happen in school that we are not expected to use what we know; at worst, we are asked merely to be compliant and repeat what we are told or shown. How well we do and how well we learn are tied up with what we are required to do and how hard we try. If we are permitted and

expected to frame intentions, choose processes and evaluate results, how we do those things influences how well we direct our efforts.

Stuart Hampshire (1989) explained that our growing self-awareness and autonomy depend on our alternating becoming immersed in activity with standing back to reflect:

> We could not ever be observers unless we were sometimes active experimenters, and we could not ever be experimenters unless we were sometimes observers. To observe is to learn what obstructions, instructions and constructions there are in the environment; and to experiment is to act with a view to perceiving what happens when we act in a certain way. (p. 53)
>
> … it is through the various degrees of self-consciousness in action, through more and more clear and explicit knowledge of what I am doing, that in the first place I become comparatively free. (p. 174)

We can be helped to observe as we prepare activity, as we monitor progress, and as we review results. Using a checklist process is one way of focusing attention in those moments, helping us learn to:

- choose and design challenging, rewarding activities;
- analyse how success can be achieved;
- rehearse steps and routines;
- get started on things we do not immediately find interesting;
- gauge progress;
- overcome being hesitant, getting stuck, going wrong, being interrupted or put off;
- work on improving what we do;
- teach others.

Checklists, intelligently used, enable learners' and teachers' needs, intentions and reflections to surface and be acted on. What has to be guarded against is treating a stimulus to achieve high standards as though it could dictate what must be done. At their best, checklists are developed through dialogue between learners, teachers and others about what they do, why they do it, and how they can enhance what they do. They are beneficial only if they are used as prompts that require critical adaptation. Their efficacy hinges on individuals and teams using them willingly and knowingly, without being constrained or controlled by them.

We can use checklists to help us prepare for regular eventualities *and* be resourceful when we need to be. As is the case with many occupations that involve human interaction and fast-changing technology, teaching presents a mix of simple, complicated and complex situations. Simple situations can be responded to with non-negotiable instructions and prescribed methods, because mastering a few basic techniques guarantees success. Complicated situations throw up unanticipated challenges and depend on many people and areas of

expertise working responsively together; and complex situations have unpredictable outcomes, so that expertise is valuable but not sufficient. In unforeseen circumstances we can expect to have to act on our own judgement and deviate from routines that have previously served us well (Gawande, 2009; and Chesley Sullenberger's story (Sullenberger, 2009) is a vivid example).

A command-and-control paradigm may rescue an operation or organisation from an emergency, and didactic instruction may issue information and advice, but those methods cannot address individuals' and groups' unique, dynamic needs, abilities and interests. Complexity makes it necessary to 'push the power of decision-making out to the periphery and away from the centre. [People need] room to adapt, based on their experience and expertise. [They need to] talk to one another and take responsibility' (Gawande, 2009, p. 73).

Industrial-scale, bureaucratic and micro-managed forms of organisation fail to cater for local and exceptional circumstances. In common with other community services, education relies on treating all things human on a case-by-case basis, paying attention to what is particular about people and their contexts. This was the perspective developed by the American school of pragmatists. Louis Menand (2001) gave a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the group which included William James and John Dewey. Kurt Lewin was a pioneer in action research which can be seen to derive from pragmatism; his contribution to human and social sciences has been well summarised by Clem Adelman (1993).

Examples of Teachers' Checklists

Teachers can enable pupils to design and run lessons and school events. In some schools pupils work with teachers to prepare lessons, observe and give feedback to trainee and newly qualified teachers, and carry out projects, revising break-time arrangements, improving anti-bullying policy and practice, providing school radio at lunchtimes… (Fielding & Bragg, 2003). The following checklist shows how teams and schools may set about this.

To make good use of our pupils' views and ideas

– we try to involve all our pupils in giving their views and ideas;
– we tell our pupils why we value what they feel and suggest. We tell them what we plan to do with what they tell us. We keep them informed about developments;
– when we consult them in relatively formal ways, we keep the promise that all statements remain anonymous;
– we use a mix of methods to explore our pupils' views and ideas – for example, one-to-one conversation, group discussions, established forms of representation such as our school council, working parties and research projects.

Preparation for teaching and learning is guided by colleagues' articulation of how they want their pupils to develop their thinking and skills. The clearer

colleagues are, the better they adapt to changing events. The following framework for planning pupils' independent and cooperative learning with feedback can be critiqued and amended according to teams' and schools' understanding of their pupils and priorities.

Topic/Unit Title

Learning Objectives
What do we want our pupils to think about, and what do we want them to be able to do with their thinking?

Terminology
What key words will our pupils meet and be helped to use?

Questions
What key questions will our pupils be helped to ask and answer?

Concepts
What key concepts will our pupils be helped to understand and use?

Ways of presenting ideas
What key schemas will our pupils meet and be helped to use to frame their thinking?

Strengths to build on
What capabilities and qualities do our pupils already have as a basis for this learning?

Main activities and assignments
To advance their learning, what will our pupils be doing?

Interest and relevance
How will our pupils' activities and learning connect with their interests and lives outside school?

Materials, resources, support and guidance
What will our pupils have access to? For example, environments, equipment and technology; interactions with teachers, assistants, one another, and other people; sources of information; models and examples of performance to emulate and study; additional or special help.

Working with others
What activities will be cooperative, in pairs or threes, small groups and/or a large group?

Individual working
What activities will be individual, in lesson time and at home or out of main school hours?

Feedback
What feedback will our pupils get? How will they be expected to respond to and use their feedback?

Recording progress
How will they record what they achieve and learn?

Teams and schools can use frameworks that define and support continuing professional development and appraisal. Here is a related checklist concerned with colleagues observing one another teach. This example was developed for training materials in collaboration with Kibworth Primary School, Leicestershire (Blanchard, 2012).

To benefit from lesson observations and visits:

- We all help develop our school's policy and protocol for lesson observations and visits.
- We develop our role as observers of one another's work, e.g. by means of joint visiting, possibly supported by experienced colleagues and/or external consultants.
- Visits are long enough to give insight into the hosts' ways of working.
- Both visiting and host colleagues agree aims, focuses and a timeline for the process.
- Provided it is agreed before the visit, and if it occurs naturally and does not rob the host colleague of overview and initiative, a visitor may join in part of the lesson or session.
- Both the host colleague and the visitor have copies of all paperwork and agreements.

Examples of Pupils' Checklists

Pupils can be prompted to think about how they deal with difficulties and disappointments. Some classrooms have tips displayed. When pupils say or show they are lost, the response can be: *Have you checked our list of the things to do when you're stuck?* For example:

- *Ask a friend.*
- *Check what it is you are trying to do.*
- *Look at examples you have of what to do and how to do it.*

Teaching can offer pupils schemas to guide and support their efforts and learning. For example:

Asked to perform in a dance ensemble, learners might be guided to make choices about how they use their bodies in terms of:

- the characters they project;
- the shapes they make, varying their height and span;
- the pathways they take;
- their speed of movement and rhythm.

Asked to give an account of the aftermath of a geographical event, learners might explain:

- the context for the event, including the topography and level of development in the region;
- the impact of the event on natural and built environments;
- consequences for infrastructure and social, economic aspects of people's lives.

Asked to create and evaluate computer-assisted advertising, learners might analyse:

- how well it addresses its target audience;
- how fit for purpose it is.

Teachers Prompting Pupils' Action – Evolving Checklists

This example concerns how pupils might be helped to learn from written feedback. Senior leaders at Saint Osmund's Middle School, Dorset used a conference for staff members to debate their contrasting and conflicting approaches to marking. The aim was to resolve obdurate differences. Teaching teams were invited to spend an hour improving a draft policy and preparing their recommendations. The first team made a flip-chart presentation; as the second team spoke, amendments were negotiated and made to the first team's version, and so on, giving each team its turn, allowing everyone to suggest and monitor changes. By the end of the session a new policy had been agreed and was ready to be typed up. Since then a good number of schools have created their policies by deciding what to omit, what to change and what to add.

- Written feedback, like spoken feedback, focuses as often as possible on what our pupils are doing better and, when follow-up is feasible, on what they can do next to develop further.
- Our pupils know the purpose of their activities, and look for feedback on that.
- Our pupils assess their own and one another's work.
- When we mark their work, they know when they can expect it to be returned and the kinds of things they will have to do as follow-up.
- Comments are linked to what our pupils are trying to do, to lesson objectives, to individual pupils' targets, and to public assessment

criteria, especially when preparing for formal tests or qualifications.
- Comments are personalised, e.g. addressing the individual or group members by name, are positive in overall tone, focus on progress, and, when appropriate, constructively indicate next steps.
- We sometimes correct single errors, but we routinely look for opportunities to teach patterns, key skills and schematic thinking.
- Our pupils understand the meaning and purpose of symbols, codes, scores, levels or grades, if there are good reasons for using them.
- More often than not, our pupils have time, and help if they need it, to do something with the marking they receive. They follow up their feedback: e.g. finishing off, making corrections, looking at someone else's work, producing an improved version, practising certain skills, developing the work in certain directions…
- Our pupils use special notebooks or pages in their exercise books to collect word families or concepts, information webs, algorithms, reminders, revision notes, and so on.
- Correction or proofreading looks like this:
  in the margin means That's right or interesting or to the point.

➔ in the margin means Look along this line to find something to put right.

__ (underlining of pupil's work) means This needs improving.

Words in the margin mean Here is something for you to learn from.

Comments at the end lead our pupils to take action by way of follow-up, always with the purpose of developing their learning.

To Sum Up

Checklists can be used to exemplify values and inform and review practices. The following list is one way of framing how to do this. How might you describe your preferred practice?

To use checklists well:
- We work hard as a team on defining key processes.
- We work hard to ensure that every person has an equal voice in making and using our checklists: everyone's contribution is essential.
- We use checklists not as prescriptions or recipes, but as a means of improving job satisfaction and effectiveness.
- We make wording straightforward and precise.
- We agree when to use checklists.
- We systematically revise checklists, e.g. briefly reviewing them when we use them.
- We apply what we learn about using checklists to help our pupils clarify their planning, actions and reflections.

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