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Varying the forms of assessment to unleash the multiple talents of our students and help them become self-directed learners:

A CASE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Tsang Hoi Chi Rosy

Under the new normal, with both teachers and students being equipped and well-adapted to the use of technology for education purposes (like e-platforms and e-learning apps), opportunities for experimenting with various forms of assessment as well as multiple forms of feedback continue to proliferate. As an external change agent, I have the privilege to work with enthusiastic and skilled teachers who, instead of merely duplicating what they have been doing in face-to-face teaching, endeavour to reflect on the merits brought about by the new normal and devise new forms of assessment that tap into the interests and talents of different students. Many teachers also grasp the opportunity to nurture self-directed learners. As Marzano (2012) suggested, instead of merely teaching content knowledge, teachers should teach students how to find and evaluate content, connect what they are learning with prior knowledge, and use what they have learned to solve authentic problems. In this article, I would like to share an example of an English assessment task that breaks away from the convention of pen-and-paper testing, and equips students with the essential skills in becoming a self-directed learner.

Background

This is a case about guiding junior secondary students to create an infographic to introduce the basic information, achievements and admirable qualities of a role model. The learning objectives are as follows:

By the end of this learning activity, students will be able to:

1. do web searches in English to collect information from reliable sources,

2. make sense of the information collected by studying the language features and the organization of information,

3. select the information that meets the needs of the task,

4. use the information collected to create an infographic with considerations in content, language and design using the app, Canva,

5. introduce the role model, explain the concept(s) behind the design and why the role model is admirable, and

6. do reflections and make corrections based on teacher's feedback
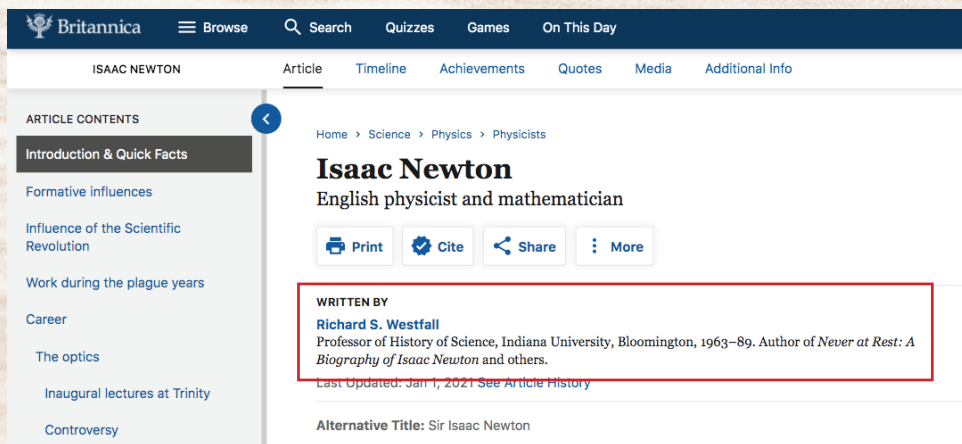
Enhancing students' information literacy

Very often teachers ask students to make use of information on the web. However, we find that the learning effectiveness could be enhanced if teachers guide students on what to search and how to search. This case demonstrates how students may be guided.
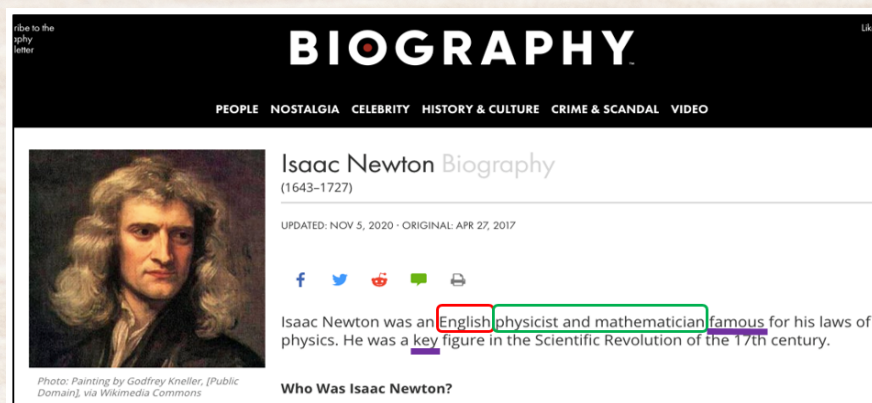
- **Conducting web searches**

Having learned about the qualities a role model may possess and read about some famous role models, students were assigned a task to train their web searching skills as well as the ability to analyse and select information to create an infographic that gives an easy-to-digest, graphic visual representation of an assigned role model. In order to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability, the students were guided to locate and select the appropriate resources that best fit the needs of the task at hand. Instead of providing everyone with adapted materials generated from the teacher's own web searches, the teacher demonstrated to the students how web searches could be done. Of course, with learner diversity in mind, teachers still provided adapted materials for the weaker students to analyse since having to look up and read a tremendous amount of information on the Internet can be overwhelming for them. It is hoped that with practices, students can move from guided learning to more autonomous learning.

Fig.1 Guiding students to locate and understand the source of information from their web searches

Fig.2 Guiding students to make sense of the information

• **Checking if an information source is reliable**

In this age of information explosion, being able to extract information from a reliable source is as important as the ability to search. Without training, it is likely that students would click on the first search result that pops up instead of exploring sources that may be more credible. The teacher demonstrated and practised with students on identifying the source of the information on different websites and discussed their credibility (Fig. 1).

• **Making sense of the information –**
  highlighting the language features

Teachers highlighted and discussed with students the types of information and their language features to help students build language awareness when decoding information. For example, some common nationality suffixes (e.g. the -ish in 'English'), common job title suffixes (e.g. the -ist in 'physicist') as well as adjectives describing role models (as highlighted in purple in Fig.2) were specified to help students identify the basic information of the role model.

• **Selecting suitable information for the task**

With the huge amount of information available, it is crucial to teach students to select suitable information that aligns with the purpose(s) of the text to avoid committing verbatim copying. The teacher set guided questions to help students identify and then structure the relevant information so that it would achieve the communicative purpose of an infographic.

Here are three examples of guided questions that prompted the students to give their design more thoughts:

Q1. Which of the following would you present first? Why?
• Nationality
• Date of Birth
• Name
• Occupation / Profession

Q2. Which achievement(s) is/are the role model's most important achievement(s)? If you have picked more than one, which one would you mention first? Why?

Q3. What kind of graphics and photographs have you used to create the infographic? What are the reasons for choosing them?

Making good use of mixed-ability grouping and various forms of feedback to cater for learner diversity

• **Utilizing diverse talents – facilitating peer**
  learning through co-creation

When implementing 'homogeneous grouping', we were bearing in mind students' English language proficiency levels as well as their diverse talents. While the artistic students could be responsible for the graphics and the design of the infographic, the tech-savvy ones could explore the different functions of

the app to enhance the quality of their work. Since the students could co-edit the same file on a cloud drive, they could work together or individually on their own parts without the limitations of space and time. To facilitate peer learning, the teacher let the students know that they would be randomly assigned to report on the content, the language and the design right before the presentation. This created a need for students to share the ideas behind their contributions with their groupmates, and more importantly, prevented one smart groupmate from dominating the collaborative process.

• **Giving various forms of feedback**

Feedback was given based on students' selection of information, use of language, design of the infographic and their oral presentation skills. While marks or grades inform students how well they are doing on a spectrum, comments and suggestions help students reflect on how they are performing in specific aspects and shed light on how they may improve. The students were assigned to upload the infographic and videos of their oral presentation onto an e-platform so that they could view each other's work and learn from each other. They were also encouraged to send 'likes' and comment on each other's videos.

The beauty of assessment for learning

What is more frustrating than knowing your deficiencies without being granted the opportunity to correct them? Therefore, along with feedback, the teacher invited the students to refine their work based on the comments they received and re-submit an improved version. By so doing, both the teacher and students could see the beauty of assessment for learning. Whenever possible, a task testing the transferrable knowledge and skills under a new topic should be assigned to enhance knowledge recycling and retention.

Closing Remarks

The "new normal" has undoubtedly brought educators a lot of challenges and frustration. However, it has also inspired many enthusiastic teachers to make even better use of online resources for both teaching and assessment purposes. Although the case presented above is not limited to the new normal, some of the strategies discussed can still serve as examples for teachers hoping to vary their assessment practices under the blended learning mode. More importantly, the mentality of seeing the silver lining and taking the initiative to make the best out of a difficult situation is also what we as educators can impart to our students.

Reference:
Marzano, R., & Heflebower, T. (2012). *Teaching & assessing 21st century skills: The Classroom Strategies Series.* Marzano Research Laboratory.

Source of adapted images:
Fig 1: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-Newton
Fig.2: https://www.biography.com/search?query=Issac+Newton

Ms. TSANG Hoi Chi Rosy

School Development Officer of Quality School Improvement Project, CUHK. Former Deputy Head of English Language Panel in secondary school, responsible for leading the subject panel in development of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Solid experience in designing teaching materials for English learning and language across the curriculum (LAC). Concrete experience in supporting English panel improvement in primary and secondary schools of various backgrounds.

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