

Black and Wiliam's Inside the Black Box

Category: Assessment, Feedback and Learning

Inside the Black Box is Black and Wiliam's influential account of how classroom assessment can improve learning. The 'black box' is the classroom: policy often specifies inputs and measures outputs while paying insufficient attention to the interactions through which teachers and learners use evidence to alter what happens next.

The work synthesised research rather than proposing a single technique. Its central claim is that learning improves when evidence of understanding is elicited, interpreted and acted upon within everyday teaching, with learners participating actively in the process ([Black & Wiliam, 1998](#)).

Central Propositions

1. **Elicit evidence:** Use dialogue, tasks and questioning that reveal learners' current thinking.
2. **Improve questioning:** Allow thinking time and invite explanations rather than rapid answer checking.
3. **Use feedback:** Focus comments on improvement and provide opportunities to act on them.
4. **Share responsibility:** Develop peer and self-assessment so learners understand goals and quality.
5. **Adapt teaching:** Change explanation, activity, grouping or support in response to evidence.

Examples in Practice

After an economics question exposes confusion between correlation and causation, a lecturer withholds the answer, asks groups to compare explanations, samples revised reasoning and changes the next activity. Evidence reshapes instruction rather than merely recording error.

Why It Matters

The publication shifted attention from tests as endpoints to assessment as part of pedagogy. It also warned that comparison, marks and comments about personal ability can damage motivation when they displace guidance about the task and feasible improvement. These moves require professional judgement; the pamphlet explicitly rejected a universal recipe detached from local context ([Black & Wiliam, 1998](#)).

Further Reading

6. Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). [Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment](#). King's College London.
7. Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). [Assessment and classroom learning](#). *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.
8. Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2009). [Developing the theory of formative assessment](#). *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5–31.

Related Terms: Formative Assessment | Assessment for Learning | Feedback | Peer and Self-Assessment