

Assessment for Learning - a return to the principles

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In the third article in our series on research for the classroom, we turn to the evergreen issue of Assessment for Learning. Arguably this is an area of practice that suffers from practitioners having a superficial grasp of the principles discovered from the research. The result of this is that numerous 'AfL' strategies are used - no grades, traffic lights, no hands up etc – often to relatively little effect. This article looks at what the research has shown about formative assessment and considers some issues of implementation for practitioners.

The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) provide the most commonly used definition of AfL:

“Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils’ learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence.

An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback by teachers, and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes ‘formative assessment’ when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.”

Black et al (2004, pp 2-3)

Thus, the focus of AfL is on improving learning rather than assessing, quantifying or proving current levels of knowledge. In a sense, this definition of AfL sums up the central task that teachers are attempting to achieve when teaching, i.e. the effective advancement of pupils’ learning.

The ARG then distil from the research, ten principles of AfL, which can be grouped into four key areas (see below):

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. AfL is part of effective planning 2. AfL is central to classroom practice 3. AfL promotes understanding of goals and criteria 	<p>These first three principles can be understood as a whole. In brief, they refer to the need to recognise assessment not as a mere accessory to pedagogical practice, but as an integral part of it. Assessment must be intertwined with all the moments of a learning process and, thus, must be considered when planning. For this to happen, teachers must define clear learning goals or criteria and be able to share them with students in an understandable way. Along with this, students should be constantly reminded of these criteria or learning goals during the learning process, their learning evaluated and feedback given to analyse the progress of students and take decisions according to this evidence.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. AfL is sensitive and constructive 5. AfL fosters motivation 6. AfL recognises all educational achievement 	<p>This second set of principles is related to the impact of assessment in shaping students' motivation, especially in terms of the nature of the feedback they receive. Teachers should be careful in what they say to students and try to give descriptive feedback exclusively centred on the quality and content of each student's work rather than use value-laden terms such as 'good' or 'poor'. They should also suggest ways for students to improve their work. In the context of AfL, there is not only an excellence level which all must achieve in order to have recognition; any learning progress made by the student in relation to his or her previous state deserves recognition and positive feedback.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. AfL focuses on how pupils learn 8. AfL helps learners know how to improve 9. AfL develops the capacity for peer and self-assessment 	<p>The process through which students learn must be a focus of attention in classroom practice, both for teachers and students. This involves developing awareness in the student about his or her learning processes, and increasing autonomy through practices of peer and self-assessment in order to support students in developing their own responsibility for their learning. Giving feedback to students on how to improve, and not just on their mistakes, also contributes to the development of autonomous thinking and learning.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. AfL is a key professional skill 	<p>This principle highlights the complexity involved in taking assessment for learning into practice, as it requires teachers to learn how to work from this perspective and to develop the necessary skills for doing so. The ARG recognises here the need for good quality professional development programmes as a fundamental requirement for the successful implementation of assessment for learning in classroom practice.</p>

source: Flórez, M. T. and P. Sammons (2013)

An analysis of the four areas (ten principles) reveals links with other important areas in educational and pedagogical research:

For principles 1-3, there is a clear link with research on achievement orientation. Students can be motivated to compare their achievements with others – a Performance Orientation (PO) or to develop and master skills and competences – a mastery or learning orientation (LO). Much research shows that learning oriented pupils are more motivated, resilient in the face of failure and achieve better results than students with a performance orientation.

Principles 4-6 link to Dweck's work on mindsets, in which she suggests that praise should be limited to students efforts and strategies rather than be evaluative of their abilities. The former encourages a growth mindset (a belief that ability can be much enhanced through one's own efforts) and the latter encourages a fixed mindset (the belief that ability is a fixed and unchangeable characteristic of the person).

Principles 7-9 are resonant with much research on meta-cognition, meta-learning and learning oriented classrooms. The focus of this research is that learning and classrooms are much more effective when students are encouraged to reflect on and develop their skills of learning, i.e. they learn how to learn.

The last principle highlights a key concern of AfL research, which is that assessment practices must be seen as embedded within teaching and learning processes overall. Learning strategies is not enough; for implementation to be effective and lead to improved student learning (and therefore achievement), teachers must have a deep and reflective understanding of AfL principles.

Successful implementation of assessment for learning:

A 2008 Ofsted report stated that only 5 out of 43 schools they inspected had outstanding AfL practices. In those that did the following features were deemed necessary:

- clarity about what and how they wanted students to learn
- careful, but also flexible, planning with objectives based on assessment evidence
- regular revisiting and reinforcement of objectives during lessons
- clear notion of what students could and could not do in order to help them to progress
- good questioning, including moments of the class for drawing learning together
- constructive feedback on students' work.

Source: Flórez, M. T. and P. Sammons (2013)

Schools are advised to conduct an audit of their current practices too look at how the school currently promotes learning among its students and how to build on this. Careful thought should go into how to find out what is currently happening and how to plan to build on this, respecting the current 'distance' between imagined, ideal impact and current practices of staff. How much does the school currently prioritise and value such objectives and how are these communicated?

For AfL to be introduced successfully, the following conditions need to apply:

1. Whole school commitment to the policy, including support from senior leadership
2. Support should include concrete ways to allow time and space for teachers to reflect on practices and discuss with colleagues
3. Whole school shift in assessment culture
4. Clear guidelines on how the new AfL practices should work in tandem with marking and summative feedback policies
5. Clear message about the benefits to teacher of a change in practices to classroom interactions
6. Clear communication about changes to all stakeholders: teacher, parents, pupils. Certain beliefs about assessment can be barriers to change
7. High quality professional development of teachers which encourages deep understanding of the principles of AfL rather than just the adoption of a series of techniques and tips
8. Studying and learning from observations of students in relation to these practices to fine tune techniques
9. Further research and enquiry into the effects of various AfL techniques on a variety of student outcomes

Flórez and Sammons' last point is that, while the overall strength of evidence for the effectiveness of AfL is strong, the same cannot be said for specific practices, such as 'no-hands-up' strategies.

From the perspective of teachers, a key message about implementation comes from Dylan Wiliam, one of the most influential researchers in this field. He states that:

"The general principles emerging from the research underdetermine action – put simply, they do not tell you what to do"

The key message appears to be that AfL cannot be boiled down to a series of strategies, rather it encompasses a set of deep seated principles that underlie effective pedagogy.

Questions for your practice

- How much does assessment enable you to adapt your teaching to meet the needs of your learners?
- How strong is the culture of formative assessment throughout the school?
- Does your school's marking and assessment policy integrate formative and summative assessment effectively?

Further reading

- Black, P., et al. (2003). "The nature of value of formative assessment for learning." Improving schools 6: 7-22.
- Flórez, M. T. and P. Sammons (2013). "Assessment for learning: effects and impact." London: CfBT.
- Watkins, C. (2010) Learning, Performance and Improvement, Research Matters, 34, pp.1-16. ISEIC: Institute of Education
- Wiliam*, D., Lee, C., Harrison, C. and Black, P. (2004). 'Teachers developing assessment for learning: Impact on student achievement'. *Assessment in Education*, 11 (1), 49-65.