

Why AfL is not a passing fad

Assessment for Learning is here to stay, and teachers overlook – or, worse, misunderstand – it at their peril

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WHEN A TEACHING method works it does not matter whether or not it is politically fashionable. A prime example today is Assessment for Learning (AfL). The current batch of education ministers seem to ignore it, failing to give it a single mention in *The Importance of Teaching* white paper that has defined their approach to schools. Yet teachers continue to recognise its potential. And, perhaps more pressingly, so have inspectors.

Ofsted plans to introduce its new inspection framework in January 2012 and says that use of AfL will continue to be of the “utmost importance” in its judgment about quality of teaching.

So teachers who have made great inroads in the practice will be relieved to hear that AfL will not be going anywhere soon. But many others still struggle to understand what is expected of them. The big question remains: how can AfL be used most effectively in schools?

As most teachers recognise, AfL is, in its simplest sense, what it says it is: assessment “for” learning, rather than just “of” learning. Although good teachers have practised a form of it for centuries, the term did not gain popular currency until it was used in the 1998 book *Inside the Black Box*, by academics Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam.

“AfL is not a set of tricks,” Professor Black says. “It’s a set of ideas that teachers need to collaborate on and work on to make it their own practice.”

In essence, AfL encompasses the strategies a teacher uses to ensure that their learners are “on board” throughout the lesson. There is no need to wait until the end of the lesson. Instead, teachers can use strategies – for example, questioning and diagnostic discussion – to check understanding each step of the way, enabling them to keep to the lesson plan or divert to ensure each aspect of the learning objective is being covered.

It also encompasses the process of ongoing formative marking whereby marking becomes useful, not finite: guiding the learner on their

next steps and informing the teacher’s planning. In AfL, students are part of the learning process – being made aware by the teacher what their learning outcomes should be and showing what they should look like – for example, through sharing the success criteria. *Inside the Black Box* proved for many that “when carried out effectively, informal assessment with constructive feedback to the student will raise levels of assessment” (Assessment Reform Group, 1999).

Assessment specialist Dr Tina Isaacs of London University’s Institute of Education works with a team of AfL experts, including Professor Wiliam, and says there are many challenges facing the classroom teacher in embedding the approach into their practice: “large classes; large demands from Ofsted; and resistance from children who do not want to be active in the lesson – it takes a talented teacher to stand up and do all this”.

The last Labour government provided millions of pounds for AfL training. But academics, including Professor Wiliam, complained that ministers had “hijacked” the phrase to promote test-data systems that were the opposite of AfL.

“Because AfL became political, in many teachers’ minds it was the flavour of the month,” Dr Isaacs says. “And with so many other requirements to juggle, they have now gone on to another flavour of the month.”

She urges teachers to be aware that they must persistently embed AfL into their practice. “It’s not a matter of going through the motions but having a deeply rooted understanding of where their students’ learning is at,” she says.

Dr Christine Harrison, a senior lecturer in science education, is a lead researcher in assessment at King’s College London and agrees that teachers have been preoccupied with so many data-driven targets that AfL has been neglected.

She says teachers have been taking their eye off AfL because of other initiatives and pressures, but that the approach could actually help them to deal with those challenges,

Resources

● A list of AfL techniques along with preparation intensity and evaluation effect

● 70 different activities, ideas or tools based around AfL. The toolkit is easy to navigate and the ideas are transferable across key stages and subjects

● A teacher’s AfL mat, reminding you of AfL strategies and learning outcomes

Link at:
www.tes.co.uk/pro001
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for links to resources and research in the article

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and help the learning process.

Commenting on the recent white paper's failure to refer to AfL, Dr Harrison says: "Minister Gove missed the point on the value of assessment – the paper focused too much on behaviour. But in spite of the omission, I hope the Government will continue to support teacher development in areas such as AfL."

She says research at King's College London has shown that leaps forward have been made in the classroom by hardworking teachers since *Inside the Black Box*. But there are still two key areas for improvement: creating "dialogic classrooms" and using formative marking.

Dialogic classrooms

Dr Harrison says there is still a great need to create dialogic classrooms, where teachers listen to what students are saying and then act on it. She believes schools should allow teachers the freedom to encourage students to do more group work in their lessons. "This would encourage the child to be more proactive in discussion and help students to strengthen their self-esteem and self and peer-assessment abilities," she says. "In the meantime, the teacher can eavesdrop and ascertain where their learners are."

Teachers often feel afraid to allow group work to take place among low-ability sets, but it is here that Dr Harrison says group work pays the highest dividends.

Professor Black supports this idea. "Teachers are still finding it a risk to open up their classroom to allow more group work, fearing the loss of control over their students," he says. "But subtly you will actually have more control by knowing how they are learning and making that information influence your teaching."

Professor Black also says teachers misperceive how much time they are spending talking in class compared to their students: "Teachers

think it's only 50/50, but it can be more like 80/20, and that needs to be reversed; students need to be doing the majority of the talking."

Formative marking

Ultimately, the biggest weakness lies in written feedback and formative marking, Dr Harrison says. "Teachers are falling into the trap of leaving comments that make sense to parents and moderators, not to the students themselves. It needs to be geared to the kids. Too often there's a shortcut comment: 'If you do this you'll get a level 4' when actually that doesn't help the student build towards the skill they need."

Instead, teachers should be marking less but more thoroughly, and ensure that their comments specifically instruct the student on what their learning target is. "Schools, teachers and parents need to get out of the trap of thinking that books need to be marked every week," Dr Harrison adds.

She argues that formative marking could be improved school by school and department by department if mini-groups of teachers came together to demonstrate their marking and peer-assess themselves and how effectively their comments are benefiting their students.

She says secondary teachers could also develop strategies on marking by collaborating with primaries where formative marking appears to be stronger. She says: "Collaboration is ongoing between outstanding primaries and secondaries in Hammersmith [in west London] and it's working really well."

What happens next

The Scottish government has developed its own two-year national project to invigorate the AfL practice of its teachers to ensure a rise in attainment. There are no plans to do so in England. However, a Department for Education spokesman says that "the principles of AfL – rigorous

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Impact of AfL on 43 schools visited by Ofsted

Schools do not always implement AfL in a way which has impact. In an analysis Ofsted carried out three years ago, inspectors visited 43 schools to examine its impact.

They found it was good or outstanding in 16, but inadequate in seven.

It was better developed and more effective in primary than secondary schools. Effective practice in AfL was seen to be derived

from very strong direction from senior leaders whose continued drive filtered through to other key leaders in school to set clear expectations for teaching and learning.

In those schools it led to a rise in achievement,

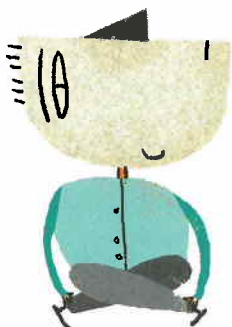
sometimes a significant one.

Where schools failed to implement AfL properly, teachers "used key aspects for assessment for learning, such as identifying and explaining objectives, questioning, reviewing

pupils' progress and providing feedback without enough precision and skill".

Link at: [Assessment for Learning: the impact of National Strategy support www.tes.co.uk/pro001](http://www.tes.co.uk/pro001)

	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Overall	5	11	20	7
On achievement	4	11	20	8
On teaching and learning	3	13	19	8
On the curriculum	3	13	21	6
On inclusion	5	17	18	3
On leadership and management	6	13	16	8



assessment, tracking of pupil performance and using these to inform next steps – are key features of the Government's education policy".

Meanwhile, Ofsted will continue to emphasise the approach. It recently asked schools to: "focus on persistent weaknesses in teachers' classroom skills, including assessment for learning", by supporting their teachers and encouraging collaboration of good practice in our schools (Ofsted's National Strategies Review 2010).

Professor Black argues it is important that innovative heads develop their own programmes, as they can no longer rely on the DfE to produce the resources to back schools' development in AFL. "Several local authorities are taking it seriously but more need to do so," he says. "And Inset will only be effective if teachers produce action plans, work out what they're going to do and then follow up."

Dr Harrison and Dr Isaacs worked with Camden education authority in north London on a project of this type, which involved around three quarters of its secondary schools.

Each one set up its own "teaching and learning communities" – ideally, but not necessarily, subject by subject – which held monthly meetings. Then the whole borough came together annually to share best practice.

"With the Camden project, feedback from the schools and teachers was incredibly positive; teachers said they were able to monitor their students' understanding much more acutely," says Dr Isaacs. "Where the teaching and learning communities were not successful it was generally down to personality, time or not having enough internal leadership."

Time to experiment is the crucial element in embedding AFL, according to Dr Isaacs. "Schools need to allow teachers to have time to work together – to go into each others' classrooms in a non-judgmental way and work with each other," she says.

"They need time to work together to share what's happening for the good, and even more importantly to look at what's not working and why."

Professor Black says schools or departments hoping to start an AFL working group should aim to give their teachers the opportunities to meet regularly every few weeks so they can reflect on what they have learned in previous weeks and what to do next.

Schools and senior leadership teams may still feel they need an incentive to make this time available.

Professor Black believes the attraction should be knowing that when there has been sustained engagement with AFL, it results in better performance. "But schools must realise it's an investment – not a quick pay-off," he says.

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For full references, visit www.tes.co.uk/pro001

TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

Ways to develop independent learning

Application cards

After teaching about an important theory, principle or procedure, ask students to write down at least one real-world application for what they have just learned to determine how well they can transfer their learning.

Group brainstorming

Get students to assess one another's ideas in groups, thereby providing a visual opportunity for teachers to assess learning.

Muddiest point

Ask students to write down what they have learned on a post-it note mid-lesson as a mini-plenary, or as the plenary activity, to see what is least understood so the teacher can intervene.

Gallery walk

Here, teams rotate around the classroom, composing answers to different questions at

different points in the room as well as reflecting on the answers given by other groups. Each chart or "station" has its own question that relates to an important class concept. The technique closes with an oral presentation or "report out" in which each group synthesises comments to a particular question.

Think/pair/share

Get pupils to think in pairs on a topic and feed back while the teacher assesses understanding.

Think/pair/square

Get students to think in pairs and then groups of four, at every stage peer-assessing what each has said.

Self assessment and peer assessment

Ask students to assess themselves and one another using success criteria. *TESpro* will examine peer-to-peer learning in detail in a forthcoming issue.

Classroom environment

The atmosphere in the classroom is a particularly important factor in allowing AFL, according to a recent study. The report by Clare Hodgson and Katie Pyle, senior research officers at the National Foundation for Educational Research, said: "It is crucial that a co-constructivist, non-threatening environment is established in order for

pupils to feel able to express their ideas and allow the teacher to establish what the pupils know, what they don't know and what they partly know – their misconceptions – and to develop teaching that will move their understanding on." Hodgson, C. and Pyle, K. (2010). *A Literature Review of Assessment for Learning in Science* Slough: NFER