

PERFECT ASSESSMENT



for
Learning

Claire Gadsby Edited by Jackie Beere

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 Independent Thinking Press

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Chapter 1

Beware the AfL ‘Buffet’

Although I am not a gambling woman, I would wager that, if we were to question 100 randomly selected teachers, all of them would at least have heard of Assessment for Learning or AfL. Furthermore, I would bet that the vast majority would be happily using several of the more common AfL strategies such as traffic lighting or peer assessment.

Whilst this is encouraging to those of us passionate about how Assessment for Learning can genuinely transform outcomes for young people, it also alludes to what is one of the great paradoxes: that many well-intentioned teachers are engaging with the letter of AfL rather than the spirit of it. Or, to put it another way, many teachers are grazing at the buffet of AfL without necessarily perceiving how the various morsels come together to form a well-balanced and satisfying educational philosophy.

What is AfL and why does it matter?

Assessment for Learning should not be confused with assessment in its traditional sense; that is, the objective gathering and measuring of progress evidence. Assessment for Learning is much broader and is defined as:

... the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.¹

Further exemplification was added in this definition proposed in 2009:

Assessment for Learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning.²

Finally, Dylan Wiliam identifies the key elements of AfL as a set of activities which can empower learners to become independent through:

- Sharing learning intentions and success criteria.
- Engineering effective classroom discussions.
- Formative feedback.
- Activating learners as resources for each other.

1 Assessment Reform Group, *Assessment for Learning: 10 Principles. Research-Based Principles to Guide Classroom Practice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge School of Education, 2002).

2 Position Paper on Assessment for Learning, *Paper presented at the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning*, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2009.

■ Activating learners as owners of their own learning.³

Assessment for Learning involves asking questions about the quality of learning and being prepared to adapt and enrich the curriculum in response to what we learn. It is important to remember that AfL embodies effective assessment practice which is applicable to all ages, groups and key stages. It has the unique potential not just to measure learning but to promote and further improve learning.

As teachers begin to implement the various practical strategies commonly associated with AfL, such as ‘think, pair, share’, traffic lighting and peer and self assessment, it is important that they also understand the general principles underpinning AfL. Even busy teachers need to spend time exploring the philosophy behind AfL and constantly ask the question: What does this mean for me and my practice?

AfL is based on constructivism – a view of teaching and learning predicated upon the simple but profound principle that learning is something which can only happen inside the heads of learners. This is why monitoring the ‘progress’ much sought after by Ofsted can be a challenge – it is often invisible! Also, despite our best efforts as teachers, we cannot make learning happen for our learners – there is a gulf between the teaching and the learning that only the learners

3 Leahy, S., Lyon, C., Thompson, M. and Wiliam, D. Classroom assessment: Minute by minute, day by day. *Educational Leadership*. 63(3): 9-24. Available at www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership-nov05/vol63/num03/Classroom-Assessment@-Minute-by-Minute,-Day-by-Day.aspx

6. **Consistency of practice.** Ensure that staff in all subject areas follow the same policies and procedures in terms of marking and feedback to avoid confusion on the part of parents.
7. **Use success criteria effectively within lessons.** Then make sure that pupils have copies of these in their books, making it easy for parents to see exactly what their child has been learning and how and why feedback is being attributed.
8. **Design a feedback key.** This helps consistency and should outline the range of different types of feedback and how often they might be used. For example:
 - OF = Oral Feedback given
 - PA = Peer Assessed
 - SA = Self Assessed
 - TA = Teacher Assessed
 - TAA = Teaching Assistant Assessed
 - GF = Group Feedback given
 - PTF = Pupil Transcribed Feedback (teacher feedback which has been transcribed by the pupil)
9. **Be upfront.** Research shows that parental involvement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continues to do so into adolescence and adulthood.¹ Tell this to parents – it is a powerful incentive for them to get more involved.

¹ The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education, 2008. Ref DCSF - 00924-2008BKT-EN.

10. **The right tools for the job.** Inform parents about their unique potential to develop their child's learning but be crystal clear about exactly how they can do this. Provide the questions you would like them to ask their children, such as 'What do you need to do to improve in subject X?' or 'Do you have success criteria you can show me?'" Most powerfully, get parents to ask their children to 'show me where you did it best'. Try to encourage a regular engagement with parents in the assessment process, perhaps by identifying a feedback margin/section of the pupil planner or exercise book where parents are invited to provide comments and/or questions related to the work. Tell them it is OK to write their own comments and questions in pupils' books.
11. **Develop assessment literate parents.** Post copies of mark schemes, success criteria and annotated model answers online so that you create assessment literate parents as well as pupils.
12. **Parent assessment.** Encourage not only self and peer assessment but parent assessment as well. Experiment by providing parents with a list of effective feedback comments in the same way that you might for pupils (see Chapter 6) and encourage them to make use of these when working with their children.
13. **Use the 'purple pen of progress'.** (See Chapter 5.) This provides powerful visual evidence that feedback from pupils, teachers and parents is actually contributing to pupils' progress.

14. **Make it personal.** The best way to get parents involved is to extend a personal invitation. General letters or flyers home tend not to be overly successful – try to create ways to communicate with parents one to one.
15. **V is for visibility.** Try to ensure that you are communicating your ethos and expectations around assessment using the fabric of the school. For example, make sure that displays around the building, and especially in the foyer, celebrate work in progress as well as finished pieces, and that they feature AfL strategies and success criteria.
16. **Drip feed.** Continuously reiterate the importance of AfL using all the means at your disposal. Pepper your leaflets, newsletters and other publications with key quotes about AfL research and the power of effective feedback and parental involvement. Similarly, capture photos or film footage of pupils engaged in peer assessment and use these to enhance your website/ learning platform.
17. **Pupils' annotation of own work.** This provides even the most sceptical of parents with powerful evidence that assessment for learning really does empower their children to take control of their own learning and to make progress.
18. **Parent View.** Once they are all onside, encourage them to say how brilliant your school is on Ofsted's Parent View.

Moving forward ... Consider the use of motivational ‘progress bites’ (see page 88) to enable pupils to demonstrate their learning and progress in the short term rather than just at the end of lessons/unit tasks.

Chapter 9 – How to work effectively with parents

Education in general, and assessment in particular, has changed considerably since most parents were pupils themselves. Many parents will still expect to see marks and grades but implementing AfL involves comment-only marking. Work will be necessary to ensure that parents understand not just what has changed in marking but *why* it has. Parents’ attitudes about learning and assessment have a direct impact upon the views of their children and so it is worth investing time to make sure they are fully informed. A feedback key is a powerful way of communicating to parents the rich variety of feedback their children will experience as part of AfL.

Just as Hattie argues for the need to have ‘assessment literate pupils’, we also need to ensure that we have ‘assessment literate parents’ who are conversant with the relationship between success criteria, formative feedback and feed-forward tasks, as well as the importance of resilience and motivation on the part of the learner. This is fundamentally important as parents are uniquely placed to help their children learn if given the tools and opportunities to do so.

Moving forward ... Help parents to help their children learn more effectively. (See ‘the right tools for the job’ and other practical strategies on page 95.) Run regular workshops for parents to show them how to support their children’s learning. Publish a handbook for all parents to be distributed for each key stage.

Chapter 10 – Winning hearts and minds: how to successfully embed AfL across the whole school

Successfully embedding AfL across a whole school is dependent upon effective change management and the acknowledgement that each teacher has their own unique set of values and beliefs about education. Busy staff need support and encouragement to try out new approaches in their classrooms and cannot be expected to embrace novel ideas merely on somebody else’s recommendation.

As a school, focus on embedding one aspect of AfL at a time. There is a lot of terminology associated with AfL and it is not uncommon to encounter confusion around terms such as *objectives* versus *intentions*. Use less terminology but ensure that staff have a genuine and shared understanding of any terms that are introduced.

Too many initiatives wither and die in schools due to lack of sustained attention and commitment. It is estimated that any whole-school initiative takes approximately five years to become fully embedded: quick wins simply don’t exist if we

want real change. Teaching and learning communities which meet regularly have been found to be one of the most effective ways of embedding AfL across a whole school.

Moving forward with AfL is an ideal opportunity to revamp how continuing professional development and training looks and feels in your school. Link AfL initiatives to the new teacher standards and to performance management strategies; formative assessment is clearly identified as central to improving teaching and learning.

Moving forward ... Experiment with new ways of refreshing AfL in your own school, perhaps using ‘incidental CPD’ or one of the other practical strategies on page 106.

In conclusion

Assessment for Learning has a massive potential to improve outcomes for learners. When teachers use minute-by-minute and day-by-day assessment to adapt their teaching more precisely to learners’ needs, achievement and engagement are maximised. To embed this requires more than just the introduction of a few new teaching strategies. In the words of Christine Harrison, ‘assessment disappears into teaching and learning when it is done well’.³

3 C. Harrison, keynote address at the Optimus Assessment for Learning conference, June 2012, London.

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Mo Laycock OBE, Former Head Teacher

Claire Gadsby is a freelance education consultant, trainer and keynote speaker. She has more than 15 years of teaching experience and was head of English at her last school. She prides herself on being very close to the realities of life in the classroom and regularly team-teaches or delivers demonstration lessons for teachers to observe and critique.

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