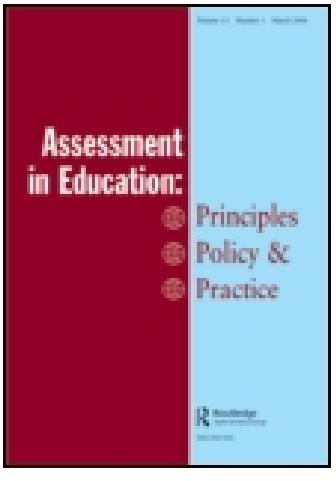

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Getting to the heart of authentic Assessment for Learning

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Getting to the heart of authentic Assessment for Learning

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Assessment for Learning (AfL) has gained increasing international prominence in both policy and practice but some of its proliferation, notably the national strategy in England, has been accompanied by distortion of essential features. This paper presents an understanding of authentic (in the sense of genuine) AfL informed by literature and particularly by two major research projects. Assessment for learning is characterised by information being used to inform learning and teaching, its focus on learning conceived broadly, and actively engage progressively more autonomous students. It is distinctive in its timescale, protagonists, beneficiaries, the role of students, the relationship between student and teacher, and the centrality of learning to the process – all of which can but may not necessarily be features of formative assessment. An examination of the document setting out the National Assessment for Learning Strategy in England reveals the ways that it is at odds with authentic assessment for learning.

Keywords: authentic assessment for learning; assessment for learning; formative assessment; assessment for learning strategy

Assessment for Learning (AfL) has gained increasing international prominence in both policy and practice, particularly since the publication of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's influential review of literature on classroom formative assessment (Black and Wiliam 1998a, 1998b). As an academic and formally as a school teacher and local authority adviser I have for many years been involved with assessment for learning and with what was in some ways its precursor – Records of Achievement. (The policy for Records of Achievement in England and Wales was set out in DES/Welsh Office [1984], reported on in DES/Welsh Office [1989] and commented on by Patricia Broadfoot [1986] and Steve Munby [1989] among others.) I am convinced of the potential of AfL to improve learning in a broad sense as well as narrower attainment as measured by tests, having been persuaded by my observations and the testimony of students and teachers with whom I have worked, as well as by research evidence. I am alert to criticisms of the evidence base such as have been put forward by Randy Bennett (2009), and am aware of researchers who have found the impact of putative AfL to be limited, for example Emma Smith and Stephen Gorard (2005), although discussion of these and a critique of the latter (Black et al. 2005) are beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I remain an advocate of assessment for learning, but AfL as I understand it, not the distorted practices that are erroneously termed AfL and particularly not as it has been appropriated

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and promoted by the national strategy for assessment for learning in England (DCSF 2008).

In this article I set out my understanding of assessment for learning, referring to definitions and depicting what I see as its essential features and characteristics. I suggest that, contrary to common usage, assessment for learning and formative assessment are not synonymous, and draw six distinctions. I then illustrate how the essential features of assessment for learning can be distorted and subverted by referring to its misrepresentation in a major policy initiative in England. Finally I propose elements that are at the heart of authentic assessment for learning.

Firstly though, a clarification of my employment of the word 'authentic'. I am using 'authentic' in the sense of 'genuine', rather than any close association with the term 'authentic assessment' which has its own particular meaning and use. 'Authentic assessment' refers to the assessment of learning that is conducted through 'real world' tasks requiring students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts. According to Grant Wiggins, authentic measures are: 'engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively. The tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field' (Wiggins 1993, 229). The authenticity of 'authentic assessment' therefore rests on the nature and context of the tasks the students are required to perform. The purpose of 'authentic assessment' is essentially summative, even though the involvement of a real task means that there are opportunities for the student to learn whilst undertaking the assessment. By contrast the meaning I attribute to 'authentic assessment for learning' is unambiguously formative, and is focused on the direct participants (the students and their teacher) in the present or immediate future – points that are expanded in later sections.

I accept that claiming that my current understanding of assessment for learning is the authentic or genuine version is essentially subjective, and susceptible to challenge not least by myself when my thinking has developed or changed in the future. Nonetheless I hope to contribute to and stimulate the debate about what is and what is not assessment for learning, so that authentic AfL can be practised with fidelity and promoted as policy. The potential of authentic assessment for learning to support students' learning and contribute to school improvement more generally makes this quest worthwhile and arguably essential.

Assessment for Learning – background

Etymology: 'sitting beside'

The word 'assessment' has its roots in the Latin verb *assidere* meaning 'to sit beside', a notion somewhat removed from conceptions of assessment that give prominence to examination and testing. The picture of someone sitting besides a learner, perhaps in dialogue over a piece of work, represents much more accurately assessment as a support for learning rather than assessment as a test of performance. It resonates with Mary Jane Drummond's definition of assessment as a process of teachers looking at pupils' learning, striving to understand it, and using that knowledge in the interests of the pupils (Drummond 2003). It is compatible with Carlina Rinaldi's challenging definition of the process of assessment as 'deciding what to

give value to' (Rinaldi 2006, 70) – a perspective Rinaldi developed through her work with young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

The 'sitting beside' form of assessment is a natural part of many teachers' practice. In supporting students' learning, teachers take a close interest in what pupils say, write and do, as these give indications of how young people think about and understand what they are learning. Teachers can then judge the appropriate next steps and how best to guide future learning. By sitting beside, literally or metaphorically, teachers gather evidence which they interpret to provide information about what the students have learnt, how successful their teaching has been, and what to do next. Teachers provide feedback to the students that highlights quality in their work, points out where the work could be improved and, crucially, gives clear and explicit guidance on how to make the improvement. They also, and perhaps even more importantly, enable and encourage students themselves to develop an understanding of what and how they are learning, to recognise and value achievement, and to take responsibility for directing and regulating their own learning. In so doing the traditional roles of teachers and pupils and the relationships between them are transformed, and in turn the culture of the classroom undergoes fundamental change – issues that are returned to later.

Developments in understanding AfL

Knowledge and understanding of AfL have developed considerably over the last decade since the publication of Black and Wiliam's influential review of literature on classroom formative assessment (1998a, 1998b). The review was commissioned by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG), a UK-based group of academics who worked together for two decades from 1990. Black and Wiliam not only drew together the evidence that formative assessment practices result in measured learning gains, but also identified the main features of such practice. The authors categorised these as: sharing criteria with learners; developing classroom talk and questioning; giving appropriate feedback; and peer and self assessment.

Two major research projects explicitly built on the 1998 review, the first of which was the King's Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP). In this project Black, Wiliam, and colleagues took the findings from their review and worked intensively with a small number of teachers from six schools to see how the ideas from research converted into practice (Black et al. 2002, 2003). They found that individual teachers adopted and adapted different aspects of formative assessment practice, and that it was important for them to develop a sense of ownership by finding context specific ways of putting general ideas into practice. Teachers developed not only their practice, but also insights into, 'the nature of learning and the role of the teacher in the cognitive and affective development of the learner' (Black et al. 2003, 121).

A second project, Learning How to Learn (LHTL), was led by Mary James and the research team included a number of people who had been involved with KMOFAP (James et al. 2007). LHTL was much larger in size and scope than KMOFAP and extended the previous research in a number of ways. It widened consideration of assessment for learning into ideas about learning how to learn; it gathered data from many more schools and teachers (40 and approximately 1500 respectively) in a much more 'light touch' manner than KMOFAP; and it expanded the focus to include not only the classroom but also the school and wider networks,

incorporating research and expertise in school improvement and networking along with assessment.

Findings and insights from these three pivotal pieces of research have contributed enormously to developing understanding of AfL and are referred to throughout the discussion, along with other relevant research.

Definitions

The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) formulated a definition of AfL that has been widely adopted and often quoted:

> Assessment for Learning is 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. (ARG 2002a, 2–3)

This reasonably concise yet richly dense definition is congruent with many of the elements of assessment conceived as 'sitting beside'. It also alludes to assessment as a process rather than an event, to planning for gathering information, to interpretation and reflection, to the agency of learners, and to the appropriate adjustment of future learning and teaching. The definition was published alongside a set of research-based principles to guide assessment for learning practice, each of which was elaborated but whose headlines are:

- AfL should be part of effective planning of teaching and learning
- AfL should focus on how students learn
- AfL should be recognised as central to classroom practice
- AfL should be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers
- AfL should be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact
- AfL should take account of the importance of learner motivation
- AfL should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed
- Learners should receive constructive guidance about how to improve
- AfL develops learners' capacity for self-assessment so they can become reflective and self-managing
- AfL should recognise the full range of achievements for all learners. (ARG 2002a, 2–3)

These principles extend the understanding of assessment for learning by locating AfL as integral to teaching and learning and indeed a powerful form of learning itself, by recognising the affective facets of assessment, and by adopting a broad notion of learning and achievement, as well as stating key features of AfL.

The 2002 Assessment Reform Group's definition has been used widely, but: 'the ways in which the words are interpreted and made manifest in educational policy and practice often reveal misunderstanding of the principles, and distortion of the practices, that the original ideals sought to promote' (Klenowski 2009, 263). This quotation is from a position paper on assessment for learning published in the editorial of an Asian-Pacific special issue of the journal *Assessment in Education*. The paper was generated at the Third International Conference on Assessment for

Learning held in Dunedin, New Zealand in March 2009, an invitational conference attended by 31 assessment 'experts' (predominantly academics and consultants) from New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, Europe, and the United Kingdom. The position paper drew attention to the fact that:

> 'deciding where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there', has sometimes been (mis)interpreted as an exhortation to teachers to (summatively) test their students frequently to assess the levels they attain on prescribed national/state scales in order to fix their failings and target the next level. (Klenowski 2009, 263)

It went on to explicate an understanding of AfL that emphasises the centrality of learning by students. What was termed a 'second-generation' definition of assessment for learning captured the key ideas:

> 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. (Klenowski 2009, 264)

Also in 2009 Black and Wiliam published a definition that they said drew on and was consistent with their own (Black and Wiliam 1998b) and ARG's (2002a) earlier definitions. They stated that:

> Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (Black and Wiliam 2009, 10)

In order to appreciate the nuances of these definitions and to consider their individual and collective contributions it is helpful to examine the essential features and characteristics of assessment for learning.

Assessment for Learning – characteristics

Focusing on learning

Assessment that claims to be 'for learning' must have at its core practices that support learning. Black and colleagues claim that their findings through KMOFAP are 'entirely consistent with a broad range of research in education and psychology' (Black et al. 2003, 77), saying that their research emphasises important principles such as the need for starting from learners' present position and actively involving them in the learning process, and the importance of metacognition and social interaction.

The Learning How to Learn team generated 12 key messages from their empirical research and theoretical deliberations. Of particular significance was the identification of three factors or principles at the classroom level – making learning explicit, promoting learning autonomy, and focusing on learning as opposed to performance (James et al. 2007). Assessment for learning practices, individually and together, can support these principles, while the principles themselves provide a useful gauge for checking on the actual effect of practices. 'If practices fail to serve

the underlying principles such as making learning explicit and promoting learning autonomy, then they cease to be assessment for learning' (James et al. 2007, 215). Practices can fall short of being assessment for learning if, for instance, they are enacted in a procedural, ritualistic manner that belies their pedagogical essence. To avoid this, teachers need to be aware of and think about what underlies the practices, and to check constantly for the actual (as opposed to the intended) effects of practices. The teachers in the LHTL project who were most successful in implementing AfL were those who took responsibility for what happened in their classrooms, did not blame external circumstances or pupil characteristics, and applied AfL principles throughout their lessons rather than employing specific techniques at various points. Many teachers found difficulties in bringing their practice into line with their beliefs and learning-orientated values, and 'felt constrained by a policy context that encouraged rushed curriculum coverage, teaching to the test and a tick-box culture' (James et al. 2007, 216). Teachers' capacity to implement AfL can be enhanced by opportunities to work together planning, trying out and evaluating new ideas, these opportunities in turn dependent on schools' structures, cultures and leadership. The LHTL evidence showed that those exercising leadership of AfL development need to have a clear understanding of what is being aimed for, be able to recognise expertise in colleagues, and nurture and spread this expertise.

Whilst the ARG, Black and Wiliam's review, and the KMOFAP and LHTL projects have added a great deal to the understanding and development of AfL, other researchers and practitioners have also made contributions, providing alternative perspectives, testing assumptions or drawing attention to aspects insufficiently explored. For example, Philippe Perrenoud (1998) reflected on the work of French-language researchers and conceptualised 'formative evaluation' as 'the regulation of an ongoing learning process' (85). Teachers can regulate opportunities for learning, but it is only the learner who can actually regulate learning. Viewing the regulation of learning as the central characteristic of AfL helps keep the focus on learning and the learner, as opposed to teaching activities.

Focusing on learning calls into question assumptions about the nature of learning, and whether it is essentially a process or a product (Sadler 2007). Seeing learning as a continually developing capacity, rather than the acquisition of commodities, resonates with John Dewey's conception of learning as growth – development, both intellectual and moral, in a form that creates the conditions for future growth (Dewey 1938).

There are also links here with the focus on learning, as opposed to performance, advocated by Mary James and her colleagues (2007), and with the work of Carol Dweck who contrasts performance goals with learning goals (Dweck 2000). Performance, or 'ego-involving' goals are about 'winning positive judgements of your competence and avoiding negative ones' (15) and relate to a fixed entity theory of intelligence, while learning or 'task-orientated' goals are about mastering new tasks or understanding new things. They are associated with a desire to get smarter through effort, and are underpinned by an incremental theory of intelligence. However, learning and performance are not always viewed as being diametrically opposed; for example, Royce Sadler's definition of learning has performance at its core, but it is the conditions of that performance that are crucial. Sadler states that learners can be said to have learned something if they are able to do something they could not do before *on demand*, *independently* and *well* (paraphrased from Sadler 2007, 390, italics in original). He uses these conditions in contrast to what

Harry Torrance refers to as 'criteria compliance' (Torrance 2007, 282), seen in the atomistic assessment of highly specified tasks completed with the aid of strongly supportive coaching, repeated practice and redrafting, leading questions and the directed identification of evidence.

The ways in which learning is conceived and interpreted have important implications for AfL for as James (2008) argues, 'assessments need to be congruent with our views of learning' (20). She adapts Chris Watkins' (2003) three views of learning and discusses the implications for assessment of a behaviourist view, a cognitive constructivist view, and a socio-cultural view of learning. James argues for striving for alignment among teaching, learning, and assessment and advocates fitness for purpose as the overarching principle. Just as how we think about learning should influence approaches to assessment, so too does studying an assessment regime reveal much about the interpretation of learning that is in operation. Assessment reflects our understanding of learning, as well as what is valued (Drummond 2008). This is explicit in New Zealand where Denise Newfield and colleagues say: 'In thinking about assessment in the multimodal classroom, we have placed human agency and resourcefulness at the centre of what is to be assessed' (Newfield et al. 2003, 79). When assessment concentrates on dispositions such as resourcefulness and agency, the classroom focus becomes a very particular type of learning.

By contrast in England the two decades since the introduction of the National Curriculum have seen a focus on the teaching and assessment of subject specific knowledge, skills and understanding. The curriculum has been operationalised through schemes of work and plans with tightly specified objectives linked to assessment.

Conceptualisation of objectives

A weakness in many interpretations and representations of assessment for learning is the assumption that it is about checking pupils' attainment of a pre-determined and tightly sequenced set of learning objectives. There is nothing in the definitions or principles of assessment for learning that dictates this limited view of learning, but taken alongside a highly specified and structured national curriculum with levels, objectives and accompanying schemes of work, the phrases 'where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how to get there' have very often be interpreted to mean 'at what level is the student, what is the next in the sequence and which learning objectives need to be targeted?'.

The first stage in this sequence is deciding *whether* a student has attained a particular objective. Harry Torrance and John Pryor (1998) refer to this as convergent assessment, and contrast it with divergent assessment which seeks to find out *what* a student can do and understands. A divergent approach encourages a broader view of learning, recognising it as a non-linear process, bringing to mind Margaret Carr's (2008) notion of 'fuzzy outcomes' (37), and a 'horizon of possibilities' (James 2008, 27).

Elliott Eisner's three-fold categorisation of objectives is helpful in encouraging a more open interpretation of 'what has been learned and where to go next'. He uses the term 'curriculum objectives' (Eisner 2002, 159) to describe objectives which specify what students are expected to learn in terms of outcomes. Curriculum objectives are linked to standards, and proliferate as finer and finer distinctions are made. One alternative way of thinking about objectives is in terms of open-ended or

'problemsolving *(sic)* objectives … in which the criteria to be met are specified, but the form the solution is to take is not' (Eisner 2002, 160). Eisner uses the example of the design specification for a house given to an architect – certain features or functions may be stipulated, but the end form is not, and indeed the architect may be expected to come up with several diverse solutions. The third perspective is 'expressive outcomes', often produced as a result of activities 'intentionally planned that are likely to yield an unpredictable and heterogeneous array of outcomes' (Eisner 2002, 161). The outcomes that students have produced are built on in future lessons through evaluation – not evaluation that matches the outcome with pre-specified intentions but evaluation that is rooted in a sense of quality and an appreciation of the unexpected.

Assessment for learning when the learner is centre stage is as much about fuzzy outcomes, horizons of possibilities, problem-solving, and evaluative objectives, as it is about tightly specified curriculum objectives matched to prescribed standards. It is the (mis)interpretation of AfL as a teacher driven mechanism for advancing students up a prescribed ladder of subject attainment that is the problem, not AfL itself. At the heart of this problem is the understanding of teachers' and learners' roles in AfL.

Roles and relationships

All the practices identified by Black and Wiliam in their review shared a common feature – the active involvement of students. Pupils are cast as partners in the learning process, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge transmitted or delivered by the teacher. Students come to understand quality and assessment criteria by scrutinising examples, applying marking schemes, comparing exemplars and formulating success criteria for themselves. They participate fully in classroom dialogue, initiating discussions and contributing to debates rather than occasionally replying to the teacher with a single word or phrase. Feedback is not passively received. Rather it stimulates reflection and is acted on, and students evaluate their own and others' work as a matter of course, identifying strengths and making suggestions for improvements. These practices not only support students' learning, but they also assist students in becoming better learners (Black et al. 2002).

Assessment seen as 'sitting beside' implies particular roles and relationships for learner and teacher, different from those associated with assessment as 'standing in front of', 'looking down on', or 'peering over the shoulder'. Teachers developing assessment for learning reported that they changed the way they thought about their teaching, from concentrating on covering the curriculum to consideration of how best to facilitate student learning (Black et al. 2003). The prime function of a teacher's subject expertise is not something to be passed on to the students, but the necessary knowledge for devising appropriate learning activities, interpreting students' responses and misconceptions, framing questions to support learning, and deciding how best to help students move their learning forward.

Teachers are in the position to create and shape the conditions to enable, encourage and facilitate pupils' learning, but it is the students who must actually do the learning. This does not mean absorbing and regurgitating facts, but becoming aware of how what they are learning fits into 'the bigger picture'. Students need to develop an appreciation of 'quality' in various fields and forms, be able to critique their work and respond to feedback from others in order to improve it, and take

responsibility for regulating their learning. Changes from what might be viewed as the traditional roles of teacher and student are at the heart of the principles and practices of AfL. Teachers in both KMOFAP and the LHTL project reported changes in their understanding of roles and responsibilities (Black et al. 2003; James et al. 2007).

As teachers' and learners' roles alter, so too do the relationships among them, transforming the culture of the classroom. The focus of the classroom becomes learning as a process – a joint supportive enterprise in which everyone has a part to play, and everyone contributes to taking collective responsibility for the activities and their outcomes. KMOFAP, LHTL and other projects developing AfL practice (for example, the '8 Schools Project' [DfES 2007]) have found that when teachers really embrace AfL, transformation is not restricted to the classroom. The principles of AfL apply to professional and organisational learning as well as to student learning, so teachers come to see themselves as learners, devise rich questions, and share both successes and dilemmas. The trend is towards everyone in school becoming more self-evaluative, seeing feedback as a valuable prop to learning and improvement, changing their views about what is important in learning, deciding how best to take forward developing insights and working together to realise them.

Assessment for learning/formative assessment

AfL for whom and when?

Clarification of AfL is assisted by considering the prime beneficiaries and the timing of action. Although as stated above teachers engaging in AfL also become learners, and indeed professional learning is a necessary condition for AfL (James et al. 2007), AfL is directed towards student learning. Assessment for learning's prime concern is with the here and now of learning. It occurs in the flow of activity and transactions occurring in the classroom, what Perrenaud (1998) refers to as the regulation of learning, and what Wiliam (2007) describes as 'keeping learning on track'. The focus is on the learning of these students now, although there is also consideration given to their learning in the near future. The immediacy and clear focus on learners and their teachers are captured in the depiction of formative assessment by Marnie Thompson and Dylan Wiliam (2007, 6) as:

> Students and teachers
> Using evidence of learning
> To adapt teaching and learning
> To meet immediate learning needs
> Minute-to-minute and day-by-day

This resonates with the 'second generation' definition of AfL quoted above (Klenowski 2009) with its emphasis on everyday practice.

Teachers are concerned with the learning of the pupils they are responsible for at the present, as well as those they will come into contact with in the future. When they review the results of periodic tests and assessments they use that information to evaluate and revise provision, perhaps in terms of schemes of work and lesson plans, teaching approaches or classroom organisation. Sometimes the information is used to benefit the pupils who were actually assessed, as is the case when plans are amended for the current group. However, the information can also be used for long-term

curriculum improvement, in which case the beneficiaries will be other pupils at some stage in the future. Black et al. (2003) point out that in this scenario, assessment is what they term 'formative for the teacher, but not for the students' (122).

Figure 1 shows a number of possible people and a range of timing for activity that could rightly be considered formative assessment, but suggests that assessment for learning is only concerned with the present and near future, and only with the learners and teacher directly involved with the present activity.

A similar distinction has been made by Wynne Harlen (2006) and the NfER (House of Commons 2008a). Harlen is a particular authority on the relationship between formative and summative assessment (see for example Harlen 2005, 2006, 2008; Harlen and James 1997). Harlen (2006) proposes a dimension of assessment purposes and practices extending from 'informal formative' at one end, through 'formal formative' and 'informal summative' to 'formal summative' at the other. These four categories were replicated by NfER in their submission to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on Testing and Assessment 2008 (House of Commons 2008a) although NfER presents them as a two-by-two grid. For both Harlen and NfER it is only 'informal formative' that is considered as assessment for learning.

Assessment 'for' and 'as' learning

An aspect of AfL lacking in the various definitions quoted above is that AfL is in itself a learning process. The definitions talk of seeking or eliciting information or evidence that is then used to enhance teaching and learning. They do not capture the constructivist thinking, metacognitive, and social learning elements hinted at in elaborations of assessment for learning. However, this element was made explicit in 'Assessment *as* learning', one of the three strands of the Scottish programme 'Assessment is for Learning'. The programme ran from 2002 until 2008 when it was incorporated into 'Curriculum for Excellence', although in the revised assessment system the formative aspects of assessment are given less prominence.

The strategies acknowledged as central to assessment for learning have been presented in slightly different formulations by various authors, but in essence the practices identified by Black and Wiliam in their 1998 review have been repeatedly

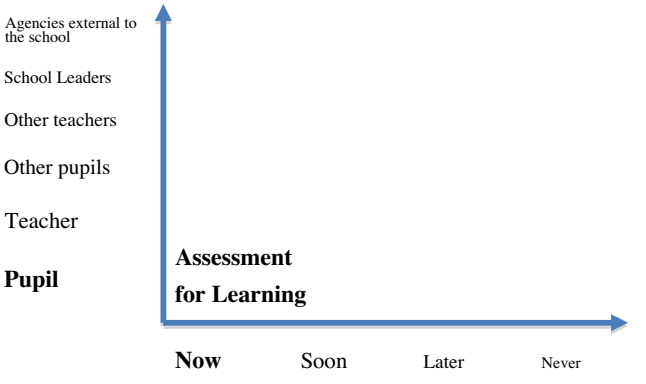

Figure 1. Assessment for Learning – beneficiaries and timing.

affirmed. Sharing criteria with learners, developing classroom talk and questioning, giving appropriate feedback, and peer and self assessment are accepted as being at the heart of assessment for learning, and yet they are not always made explicit in definitions of AfL. Moreover, definitions and elaborations of AfL often give less prominence to the learning aspects of these practices than their formative potential. Sharing criteria with learners enables them to develop a clear sense of what they are aiming at and the meaning of quality in any particular endeavour, which coupled with self and peer assessment helps students learn not only the matter in hand but also to develop metacognition. Classroom talk and questioning are not only very good methods for teachers to elicit evidence of pupils' understanding and misunderstandings in order to inform the next steps in learning and teaching, they are in themselves powerful learning activities. Engaging in dialogue and listening to the flow of arguments are learning activities for the students through which they construct their knowledge and understanding – irrespective of whether the teacher uses the information gleaned formatively. Dialogue and peer assessment help students learn socially, through and with others. When students are given appropriate feedback and the opportunity to apply it, they can learn through improving their work and probably more importantly learn that they can in effect 'become smarter' through judiciously focused effort.

Distinguishing assessment for learning from formative assessment

It is common and widely accepted practice to use the terms 'assessment for learning' and 'formative assessment' synonymously, but the discussion above suggests this is erroneous. Assessment for learning differs from formative assessment in a number of ways:

- Assessment for learning is a learning and teaching process, while formative assessment is a purpose and some argue a function of certain assessments;
- Assessment for learning is concerned with the immediate and near future, while formative assessment can have a very long time span;
- The protagonists and beneficiaries of assessment for learning are the particular pupils and teacher in the specific classroom (or learning environment), while formative assessment can involve and be of use to other teachers, pupils and other people in different settings;
- In assessment for learning pupils exercise agency and autonomy, while in formative assessment they can be passive recipients of teachers' decisions and actions;
- Assessment for learning is a learning process in itself, while formative assessment provides information to guide future learning; and
- Assessment for learning is concerned with learning how to learn as well as specific learning intentions, while formative assessment concentrates on curriculum objectives.

Making the distinction between formative assessment and assessment for learning clear is important particularly because the practice of using the terms synonymously has enabled assessment for learning to be misappropriated. A particular and influential example of this is the English National Assessment for Learning Strategy.

The National Assessment for Learning Strategy in England

The Assessment for Learning Strategy (AfLS) was published in 2008 and begins with a foreword by Jim Knight (the then Minister of State for Schools and 14–19 Learners) announcing that the government was supporting teachers' continuing professional development in assessment for learning. At almost exactly the same time as the Strategy was launched, Knight was giving evidence to the House of Commons select committee on Testing and Assessment. Very revealingly, in response to the chairman's first question the Minister said:

> In order to help those [teachers] who do not [use tests appropriately] and to improve best practice generally, we are investing £150 million over the next three years on assessment for learning to improve the way in which the tests are used. (House of Commons 2008b, 178: Q329)

So it is clear that assessment for learning was seen as being about the use of tests. This distortion of AfL is carried through the document, and is at the heart of the strategy's misrepresentation of assessment for learning.

AfL is not about testing and summative assessment

The strategy's introduction says that the AfLS builds on 'Assessing Pupils' Progress' (APP) and the 'Making Good Progress' (MGP) pilot, and both are referred to throughout the document. The APP materials are carefully devised materials that help teachers develop an understanding of levels and progression within the National Curriculum. They are designed to be used by teachers at regular intervals to review pupils' work so that each pupil can be assigned a National Curriculum level, be set curriculum targets linked to objectives in the teaching framework, and so that levels of attainment can be reported to parents (DfES 2005). APP guidance also suggests that subject leaders would want to look at the overall picture provided by the assessments to evaluate and, if necessary, revise schemes of work, teaching and pupil groupings. Within a standards based national curriculum framework these may be laudable practices, but they are not assessment for learning. Most of APP is about summative assessment, and the formative use of summative assessment. This view of APP is endorsed by the government education department as evidenced by their submission to the House of Commons Committee: 'Teachers can use a number of tools to support their summative assessment judgements, such as tasks provided through the Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) materials' (House of Commons 2008b, 159: Para 23).

A list of adjectives used by the AfL Strategy to describe 'good' assessment for learning is also very revealing, including as it does 'accurate' and 'reliable' (DCSF 2008, 5) – properties of summative rather than formative assessment. For an assessment for learning strategy to focus on testing and summative assessment is erroneous.

Principles not benefits

The most colourful graphic in the AfLS document is a three-by-three jigsaw under the subheading 'the benefits of assessment for learning' (DCSF 2008, 5). The statements on the nine jigsaw pieces are actually summaries of the headline principles

of assessment for learning from the Assessment Reform Group (ARG 2002a), although there is no acknowledgement. Two of the headlines are combined, presumably to fit all 10 neatly onto a nine-piece graphic. The Strategy's appropriation of the ARG's principles is misleading. They are not benefits or automatic outcomes of AfL, they are principles to guide action. The ARG's principles, listed earlier, describe what AfL should be like; AfL as represented in the AfL Strategy will not be like this nor have these 'benefits'. For example, the AfLS version of AfL with teachers rigorously monitoring pupils' progress will not develop students' capacity for self and peer assessment.

The AfLS's choice of a three-by-three graphic means that one principle (or in the strategy's terms, 'benefit') of AfL sits at the centre. In the AfLS it is given extra prominence by being coloured bright red. The headline afforded this prime position is 'recognises all educational achievement' (DCSF 2008, 5). Certainly one of the principles of AfL is that it 'should recognise the full range of achievements for all learners' (ARG 2002a), and this echoes the first of the four purposes of Records of Achievement published over a quarter of a century ago (DES 1984). However, the AfL Strategy blatantly contradicts this principle by concentrating on English and mathematics, and even more narrowly on those aspects of English and mathematics that are assessed through single level tests.

Another contradiction is that the strategy states that AfL 'focuses on how pupils learn' (DCSF 2008, 5), yet its approach belies this. A review of research (ARG 2002b) has shown that frequent testing and assessment against national standards is detrimental to students' learning and motivation, especially for the lower attaining students who are the ones particularly targeted by 'progression tutoring' (DCSF 2008, 4).

Representations of learning and assessment

In the first part of this paper I discussed the nature of learning that is at the heart of assessment for learning. By contrast the AfL Strategy presents a very different view of learning. Its narrow focus on English and mathematics has already been noted. Moreover, the emphasis is on everybody (senior leaders, teachers, pupils, parents) understanding the characteristics of each national curriculum level in English and mathematics, and how to progress through them. This is a very particular standards-based conception of learning, involving a prescribed hierarchy of learning objectives akin to Eisner's curriculum objectives as opposed to problem solving or expressive objectives (Eisner 2002). Assessment is convergent rather than divergent (Torrance and Pryor 1998), focusing very tightly on whether particular objectives have been met, not seeking to understand what and how learners are learning. The attendant model of learning is an impoverished one, far removed from the rich process conceived by Dewey (1938), Rinaldi (2006), Carr (2008) and many others.

Implied roles and relationships

The models of learning and assessment presented in the AfL Strategy imply very traditional roles for teachers and pupils. Teachers teach and subsequently assess pupils' attainment. Of the 14 objectives for the three years of the AfLS funding, only four mention children, and in three of these children are the objects of others' actions. Subject leaders are to understand 'how best to help children progress

through [National Curriculum levels]'; parents are to understand 'how they can help their children make progress'; and pupils are to be kept 'on ambitious trajectories' (DCSF 2008, 8). The one objective that places pupils in an active role reads: 'To ensure that all children understand what they need to do to progress through National Curriculum levels, and have a growing range of strategies for learning how to learn' (8). The last part of this objective is welcome, but all the other statements make it very clear that the role of pupils is seen as 'to make good progress' (4) through National Curriculum levels. This conceptualisation of pupils, especially when linked with 'a progression premium (to reward schools which help pupils who entered a key stage behind national expectations to make good progress)' (4), resonates with David Berliner's depiction of children as 'the new commodities' (Berliner 2006). It also relates to ethical and legal questions raised by Joy Cumming about students' rights to engage in assessment decisions and to control the use of data generated by them being assessed (Cumming 2008).

The predominant portrayal of pupils is of people to whom things are done, and whose progression through the National Curriculum levels is what matters. This is far removed from the 'sitting besides' image of assessment for learning, and does not match the statement that AfL 'recognises all educational achievement' (DCSF 2008, 5). Similarly, in the hierarchical model that infuses the whole document, teachers are cast as recipients of messages and materials handed down to them from national bodies via Local Authorities and school leaders. Teachers are at the end of a chain of command, receiving key messages and using prescribed materials in a predetermined way. They are seen as adopters and implementers, not professional, responsible, reflective learners collaborating on adapting principles to context, acting in accordance with sound educational values and beliefs in order to foster autonomous learning in their students.

These models of student and professional learning are called into question in the document itself in its annex 'School self-evaluation tables' (DCSF 2008, 14–17). Here much of the language is genuinely encouraging of a principled and informed approach to developing AfL. Examples include: 'developing a community of independent, deep learners'; 'a shared understanding of AfL continues to become ever more insightful'; 'reflect critically'; 'take intelligent informed risks'; 'sustained professional dialogue'; 'enquiry'; 'ongoing action research'; and 'learning buzz'. It is hard to reconcile the messages given in the school self-evaluation tables with much of the preceding document, until one realises that these tables were developed in another context and that a number of bodies contributed to the AfL Strategy document.

Conclusion

The misrepresentation of assessment for learning in the English national strategy matters because of its power to affect people's view of assessment for learning. Students, parents, teachers, school leaders, local authority personnel, and policy makers may be socialised into a flawed interpretation of AfL. It seems likely that this normalisation will be pervasive, self-reinforcing, and seen by the vast majority (if it is noticed at all) as unproblematic, even though enlightened teachers, school leaders and advisers undoubtedly mediate the strategy to remain as close as possible to authentic AfL.

When it was launched in 2008 the national strategy had a three-year lifespan, and even within this period its implementation is subject to changes at national and local government levels. Before long the AfL national strategy will probably become just another initiative that has had its day, but there is a real danger that its legacy will be a distorted view of assessment for learning leading to the notion being discredited and rejected. The tragedy is that it was so unnecessary, and could so simply have been averted. The £150 million could have been put to much better use supporting the development of understanding and practice of authentic AfL. There are many examples of such work that could have been replicated, extended, and widely disseminated, not least the English government's own '8 schools' project (DfES 2007).

We know from research and practice that authentic interpretations and enactments of assessment for learning improve pupils' learning – their engagement with learning, their attainment as measured by tests, and most importantly their growth in becoming more self-regulating, autonomous learners. Teachers' motivation and professional practice are enhanced. The relationships among pupils and teachers, and the culture of the classroom, are transformed. Unless we get to the heart of authentic assessment for learning these precious prizes will not be widely realised. Teachers' professional lives will be impoverished, and the biggest and ultimate losers will be students.

Everyone committed to enhancing learning needs to strengthen and develop further our understanding of authentic assessment of learning. We need to take every opportunity to assert and explain the fundamental principles and features of AfL, including clarifying the similarities and differences between authentic assessment for learning and formative assessment. Academics, teachers, school leaders, policy makers, pupils, and parents should all be involved.

Learners, who as essential actors as well as beneficiaries are the beating heart of authentic assessment, deserve nothing less.

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