In distinguishing assessment for learning from its commonly used synonym formative assessment, Sue Swaffield draws attention to some key features of AfL. These include its focus and prime beneficiaries, its timing, the role of learners, and the fact that AfL is in itself a learning process.

Are you clear about the principles underlying authentic AfL?


The focus of Assessment for Learning (AfL) is on the enhancement of student learning.

The prime concern is with the here and now of learning, as it occurs in the flow of activity and transactions occurring in the classroom. This is what Perrenaud (1998) refers to as the regulation of learning, and what Wiliam (2008) 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 Thompson and Wiliam (2007, p. 6) as:
‘Students and teachers,

... using evidence of learning,

... to adapt teaching and learning,

... to their immediate learning needs,

... minute-by-minute and day-by-day.’

The emphasis is thus on everyday practice. Indeed, teachers are concerned with the learning of the pupils they are responsible for at the present, as well as for those they will teach 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. The information can also be used for longer-term curriculum improvement. Black et al. (2003, p. 122) point out that in this scenario, assessment is ‘formative for the teacher’.

**Assessment ‘as’ learning**

AfL is, in itself, a learning process. Definitions often talk of seeking or eliciting evidence that is then used to enhance teaching and learning, but they don’t always capture the constructivist, metacognitive and social learning elements of more sophisticated elaborations.
The strategies which are established as being central to assessment for learning have been presented in slightly different formulations by various authors but, in essence, the practices identified by Black and William in their 1998 review (see Reading 13.2) have been repeatedly 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. Indeed, introductions to AfL often give less prominence to the learning aspects of these practices than their to their formative potential.

- Sharing criteria enables learners 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 very good methods for teachers to elicit evidence of pupils’ understanding and misunderstandings in order to inform the next steps in learning and teaching.

- Engaging in dialogue and listening to the flow of arguments enable students to 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. More importantly, they learn that they can in effect ‘become smarter’ through judiciously focused effort.

Distinguishing assessment for learning from formative assessment

The terms ‘assessment for learning’ and ‘formative assessment’ are often used 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 goals, 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. An influential example of this was the English National Assessment for Learning Strategy introduced in 2008. For example, a list of adjectives used to describe ‘good assessment for learning’ was revealing, including as it did emphases on ‘accuracy’ and ‘reliability’ (DCSF, 2008, p. 5). But these are properties of summative rather than formative assessment. Although the strategy states that AfL ‘focuses on how pupils learn’ (DCSF, 2008, p. 5), its approach belies this by emphasising more formal and regular testing. Research has shown that frequent testing and assessment against national standards is detrimental to students’ learning and motivation, especially for the lower attaining students.

Any misrepresentation of assessment for learning matters because of its power to affect people’s view of the practice. 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.
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.