John Holt said in 1964, the year Harold Wilson opined that Britain would be forged in the ‘white heat’ of technological revolution:

“Since we cannot know what knowledge will be most useful in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead we should try to turn out people who love learning so well that they will be able learn whatever needs to be learned”.

Nearly 50 years ago the idea of learning to learn was heralded and education experts such as Dylan Wiliam believe that formative assessment or assessment for learning, AfL as it is commonly known, is at the heart of teaching and learning. Wiliam answered his own rhetorical question at a recent Cambridge conference: why should assessment for learning should be the focus of investment?

“If you are serious about raising student achievement, you have to change what happens in the classroom”.

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“I would argue that there are five key strategies that encompass the terrain of assessment for learning or formative assessment. And I would say that if you’re not doing one of these five strategies you’re not doing assessment for learning, and if you are doing assessment for learning, you’re doing one of these five things. The five key strategies are:

• clarifying and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success

• engineering effective classroom discussions, questions and tasks that elicit evidence of learning

• providing feedback that moves learners forward

• activating students as instructional resources for each other, and

• activating students as owners of their own learning

The “big idea” that ties these together is that we use evidence of student learning to adapt teaching and learning, or instruction, to meet student needs”.

“‘There are two ways to improve your teaching’:

1. You can self-assess to find your areas of strength and weakness and work on these.

2. You can work on the main factors that make the biggest difference to student learning”.

– Geoff Petty

Dylan Wiliam further argues that “if you are serious about improving teacher quality, you have to improve the effectiveness of existing teachers” and there is evidence that this can be done. He prefaced this contention by arguing that the ‘quick fixes’ that governments are inclined to introduce – organisational, curriculum, qualification changes – have little or no impact on student achievement.

His idea that if you are serious about raising student achievement, you have to change what happens in the classroom is echoed by another education theorist Gert Biesta. He refers (2005) to the “rise of the concept of ‘learning’ and the subsequent decline in the concept of education.” He indicates that the rise in the language of learning has impacted on the way “we understand and speak about education”. It has led to education being seen as a commodity and the learner as a customer. It has also led to the market model in FE, one which has influenced policy decisions, funding and created an audit driven culture (James and Biesta 2007, Hodgkinson 2008), all at odds with the professional practitioner the sector needs.

“The factors that make students learn best are student activity towards a challenging goal, and informative feedback on this activity”.

And one expert who has a strong FE and skills following, Geoff Petty, carries the following message on his webpage:

“There are two ways to improve your teaching”:

1. You can self-assess to find your areas of strength and weakness and work on these.

2. You can work on the main factors that make the biggest difference to student learning.

Research shows that the two factors making the biggest difference are:

• Active Learning - set students challenging activities so they apply, and check their learning.

• Feedback - learners need information on what they do well, and how to improve, then they need to act on this. Teachers can give feedback, but students can too, with self-assessment and peer assessment. The best feedback (or formative assessment) uses student’s work to diagnose strengths and weaknesses, and to set individual targets for improvement.

“How do we know that active learning and feedback have the greatest effect on student achievement? Professor John Hattie has synthesized over half a million of the most effective research studies on teaching methods, and the other variables that affect achievement. This is the biggest and most authoritative review of classroom-based educational research ever undertaken. He concludes that the factors that make students learn best are student activity towards a challenging goal, and informative feedback on this activity.

“The challenge is to attract the attention of teachers and trainers to Assessment for Learning as a way of improving their own skills and those of their learners”.
And just in case we are still unsure, the Campaign for Learning has published a piece of American research, which interprets what Confucian philosophy taught the World 1,980 years ago about hearing, seeing and doing!

The Learning Pyramid*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Retention Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passive Teaching Methods</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Audio-Visual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participatory Teaching Methods</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Group Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Teaching Others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adapted from National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine

So it seems absolutely clear that the goal is to persuade teachers and trainers and their institutions to adopt as common practice, the knowledge and skills that are encapsulated in ‘Learning to Learn’ methodology in order to improve teaching and learning performances.

The real issue seems to be that although we ‘know’ about AfL and ‘Learning to Learn’ methodology in the sector, ‘knowing’ doesn’t seem to equate to doing enough about it in some institutions, otherwise we wouldn’t have witnessed a number of action research projects being carried by individual teachers into the use of AfL as though it was a new idea. The challenge is to attract the attention of teachers and trainers to Assessment for Learning as a way of improving their own skills and those of their learners.

References