



This article is one that I wrote with [Bronwen Cowie](#) (Waikato University) and [Chris Harrison](#) (Kings College, London) in 2016. We had been invited by the wonderful and canny [Margaret Heritage](#) to put our heads together and identify some provocations about [Assessment for Learning](#) (AfL). AfL is a set of teaching and learning strategies that has had global interest for a while. The assessment gurus in the USA [FastSCASS of CCSSO](#) were keen to go deep. Margaret's challenge made us think of all of the amazing teachers we have seen in AfL action, and what our research told us about what was going on. The questions to ponder are still relevant, and like good thinking questions, the answers are still being sought.

~Jill Willis

# **What is AFL? Who is it for? Who decides? Who is doing the learning?**

Assessment for Learning (AfL) is occurring when the processes of learning are made visible and audible so that students and teachers can engage in learning conversations and activities about moving learning forward. Active student participation is key. Often this active participation is called 'learner agency', that is, the opportunity for learners to make choices and to take action.

AfL was first promoted in the 1980s (Crooks,1988; ARG,1999; Gipps, 1999;Sadler,1989) as a way of connecting the assessment activities of evaluating, making judgements and giving feedback to students on their Learning. Since then AfL strategies of sharing learning intentions and success criteria, self-assessment and timely peer and teacher feedback have been embedded worldwide into policy and the Language of quality teacher practices (OECD,2013). These teaching practices are widely recognized, yet the active role of students is often not.

## **Aren't we already doing AfL?**

Like any innovation, AfL can quickly congeal into a set of routine set of procedures to be followed – “everyone copy down this learning intention” – and so lose much of its power to promote student and teacher agency within learning. To identify the potential for AfL to enhance learning, an agreed view of what “learning’ entails is needed. This is a challenging definition of learning that lifts our ideas from a process of remembering, to be one of creative problem solving;

“the ability and disposition to use the meta-products of having experienced education to engage and solve quotidian (everyday), as well as novel, problems intentionally”  
(<http://www.gordoncommission.org/>).

AfL can make the nuances of these meta-learning purposes and processes visible and valued in everyday classroom conversations. AfL can be powerful when all the participants understand and take responsibility for supporting learning. To do this, AfL participants require different types of information at different times to fulfill their different purposes and responsibilities (Stiggins, 2008). This idea of teachers and students having shared power, and there being varied purposes and responsibilities at different times in AfL, is in stark contrast to a technical and standardized implementation of prescribed AfL practices. The idea of shared power and variable purposes also stands in contrast to the increasingly standardized approaches to assessment in many schooling systems.

## **AfL for teachers**

Teacher ideas of learning- what it looks like, how it can be supported and what counts as evidence of learning- are central to how they understand and seek to enact AfL. Sociocultural views of learning and assessment (Gipps, 1999) indicate that rather than trying to see inside a student's head to find out what a student is thinking, teachers can note and seek to understand what students do and do not do with the opportunities and resources to which they have access. In a sociocultural view, learning is understood as inextricably entwined with identity- how students see themselves and are seen

by others as knowledgeable and effective learners and knowers. For teachers this understanding of learning and its assessment involves a particular way of working with students, one that includes getting to know their students- their students' interests, strengths and needs- so that they can build on and help students extend what they know. At the same time, it demands that teachers consider how student learning and its expression through assessment is linked to and entangled with the ideas, interactions and resources to which students have access.

When there is a determined focus on “everyone learns here” coupled with an understanding that learning is a joint and shared responsibility, traditional power relationships within the classroom can be challenged. It takes time for teachers to flip the classroom from a traditional focus on the teacher as a deliverer of knowledge towards a classroom typified by dialogue, for students to adopt new habits and ways of interacting, and teachers and students to develop a shared language for learning. Teachers' responsibilities extend beyond content delivery to include supporting their students to develop the capacity to regulate their own learning and manage their own assessment and to contribute to the co-regulation of learning amongst peers within the classroom.

*Question to ponder:*

*What are the underpinning theories of learning in AfL policy in your context?*

*How do these theories accord with learner agency and meta-competencies for lifelong learning?*

*What is valued as evidence about how students learn? What evidence would you see if AfL practices positively impacted student learning?*

## **AfL for students**

Once we consider it is essential for students to monitor and manage their own learning, they need access to the information needed to do this, and opportunities to take action on this information. For students AfL involves the exercise of agency within a system of accountabilities. These accountabilities are to peers within the class and learning community; to the norms and practices of the learning area/ discipline that proscribe valid and appropriate ways of generating and representing this knowledge. In line with the focus on lifelong and life wide learning, the development and exercise of student assessment capability also needs to extend to these meta-competencies (The Gordon Commission, 2013). Students need to know the rules of many games! These games include the social expectations of learning and achievement within the classroom, the assessment system, the discipline and wider society as well as the expectations and aspirations of their family. Each of these groups through their histories and aspirations shape the possibilities for student action.

### ***Questions to ponder:***

*What rules to what 'games' do students need to navigate in the various contexts that are integral to their daily lives that impact on their democratic participation in formal education?*

*How do norms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment frame the space of possibilities for student access and agency? Which norms might need to be developed? Challenged?*

## **AfL for families**

It is increasingly recognized that families play an important role in children's educational expectations, achievements and aspirations. Governments worldwide are moving to include explicit mention of family and community involvement in policy documents e.g. Sweden, New Zealand. At the same time the rise in the use of achievement data for accountability purposes means it is important that schools, and the system as whole, take steps to develop public understanding of assessment- its various and varied forms, functions and consequences. While there is evidence that children's family 'capital' in a particular curriculum Learning area is influential in students continuing and succeeding (see for example the ASPIRE study of student engagement and success in science) school-home communication tends to be one-way from school to home. However, families can make a valuable contribution to curriculum learning and assessment, especially within formative assessment that encompasses student and family funds of knowledge. Families can extend teacher understanding of children's interests and the various contexts in which children demonstrate a disposition or capacity. At this time, information and communication technologies hold great potential for the productive exchange of information and feedback.

***Questions to ponder:***

*What opportunities are there for parents to positively mediate formative assessment in your contexts? How is public understanding of assessment in its varied forms created and re-created?*

## **AfL for school-wide systems**

Schools and schooling systems are dynamic, multilayered hubs of activity that change every day. Formal assessment data generation and analysis in recent years has prompted strategic conversations about continual improvement, yet this data is often published and analyzed well after the learning events have happened. Changes are made for the next group of learners and teachers. On the other hand, AfL practices are feedback loops that occur in classrooms, homes and staff rooms while the learning events are unfolding, or soon after them. When teachers deliberately inquire with their students about their experiences and ponder how the shared learning might be improved, the potential for immediate improvement is greater. Learning that occurs during the interactions in the classroom is often too finely focused and dynamic to be caught in a net of whole school procedures. It can often only be noticed by teachers or peers when they are engaged in collaborative inquiry. An AfL process of seeking evidence in collaborative critical inquiry is recognized as part of the culture of an innovative system (Timperley & Earl, 2012).

Collaborative inquiry can feed feedback loops by which leaders are able to “chronicle, map and monitor the progress, successes, failures and roadblocks in the innovation as it unfolds” (p. 5). Collaborative, evaluative thinking is essential to build knowledge and innovation within a networked system. Networks that are highly adaptive assume that learning underpins all of the

activities of students, adults, schools and systems, and that working together builds high levels of relational trust.

*Questions to ponder:*

*What systems are in place to learn from teachers who are innovating within a distributed systemic learning? What are the implications for knowledge-power relationships?*

*What new possibilities does the evolving multimodal digital landscape provide for the development of formative assessment democratic participation?*