

Position Paper on Assessment for Learning
from the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning

Dunedin, New Zealand, March 2009

‘Assessment for Learning’ and ‘formative assessment’ are phrases that are widely used in educational discourse in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and Europeⁱ. A number of definitions, some originally generated by members of this Conferenceⁱⁱ, are often referred to. However, 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. Some of these misunderstandings and challenges derive from residual ambiguity in the definitions. Others have stemmed from a desire to be seen to be embracing the concept – but in reality implementing a set of practices that are mechanical or superficial without the teacher’s, and, most importantly, the students’, active engagement with learning as the focal point. While observing the letter of AfL, this does violence to its spirit. Yet others have arisen from deliberate appropriation, for political ends, of principles that have won significant support from educators.

For example, ‘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. In this scenario, scores, which are intended to be indicators of, or proxies for, learning, become the goals themselves. Real and sustained learning is sacrificed to performance on a test.

In contrast, the primary aim of Assessment for Learning (AFL) is to contribute to learning itself. This follows from the logic that when true learning has occurred, it will manifest itself in performance. The converse does not hold: mere performance on a test does not necessarily mean that learning has occurred. Learners can be taught how to score well on tests without much underlying learning.

Assessment for Learning is the process of identifying aspects of learning as it is developing, using whatever informal and formal processes best help that identification, primarily so that learning itself can be enhanced. This focuses

directly on the learner's developing capabilities, while these are in the process of being developed. Assessment for learning seeks out, analyses and reflects on information from students themselves, teachers and the learner's peers as it is expressed in dialogue, learner responses to tasks and questions, and observation. Assessment for learning is part of everyday teaching, in everyday classrooms. A great deal of it occurs in real time, but some of it is derived through more formal assessment events or episodes. What is distinctive about assessment for learning is not the form of the information or the circumstances in which it is generated, but the positive effect it has for the learner. Properly embedded into teaching-learning contexts, assessment for learning sets learners up for wide, lifelong learning.

These ideas are summed up in a short second-generation definition of Assessment for Learning generated by the Conference in March 2009. This is intended to make clear the central focus on learning by students. The definition is followed by some elaboration of it.

DEFINITION

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.

ELABORATION

1. 'everyday practice' – this refers to teaching and learning, pedagogy and instruction (different terms are used in different regions of the world but the emphasis is on the interactive, dialogic, contingent relationships of teaching and learning).
2. 'by students, teachers and peers' – students are deliberately listed first because only learners can learn. Assessment for learning should be student centred. All AFL practices carried out by teachers (such as giving feedback, clarifying criteria, rich questioning) can eventually be 'given away' to students so that they take on these practices to help themselves, and one another, become autonomous learners. This should be a prime objective.
3. 'seeks, reflects upon and responds to' – these words emphasize the nature of AFL as an enquiry process involving the active search for evidence of capability and understanding, making sense of such evidence, and exercising judgement for wise decision-making about next steps for students and teachers.
4. 'information from dialogue, demonstration and observation' – verbal (oral and written) and non-verbal behaviours during both planned and unplanned events can be sources of evidence. Observation of these during on-going teaching and learning activity is an important basis for AFL. Special assessment tasks and tests can be used formatively but

are not essential; there is a risk of them becoming frequent mini-summative assessments. Everyday learning tasks and activities, as well as routine observation and dialogue are equally, if not more, appropriate for the formative purpose.

5. 'in ways that enhance ongoing learning' – Sources of evidence are formative if, and only if, students and teachers use the information they provide to enhance learning. Providing students with the help they need to know what to do next is vital; it is not sufficient to tell them only that they need to do better. However, such help does not need to provide a complete solution. Research suggests that what works best is an indication of how to improve, so that students engage in mindful problem solving.

ⁱ All of these regions were represented at the Conference:

- Australia
 - Val Klenowski – Queensland University of Technology
 - Juliette Mendelovits – Australian Council for Educational Research
 - Royce Sadler – Griffith University
 - Claire Wyatt-Smith – Griffith University
- Canada
 - Geoff Cainen – Halifax Regional School Board
 - Anne Davies – educational consultant, British Columbia
 - Lorna Earl – OISE University of Toronto
 - Dany Laveault – University of Ottawa
 - Anne Longston – Province of Manitoba
 - Ken O'Connor – educational consultant
- Europe
 - Linda Allal – University of Geneva
 - Menucha Birenbaum – Tel Aviv University
 - Filip Dochy – University of Leuven
 - Mien Segers – University of Leiden and University of Maastricht
 - Kari Smith – University of Bergen
- New Zealand
 - Sandie Aikin – New Zealand Educational Institute
 - Mary Chamberlain – New Zealand Ministry of Education
 - Terry Crooks – University of Otago
 - Lester Flockton – University of Otago
 - Alison Gilmore – University of Canterbury
 - Peter Johnson – University at Albany – SUNY
 - Jeff Smith – University of Otago
- United Kingdom
 - Richard Daugherty – Cardiff University
 - Carolyn Hutchinson – Learning and Teaching Scotland
 - Mary James – University of Cambridge
 - Gordon Stobart, Institute of Education, University of London

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- Ruth Sutton – education consultant
 - United States of America
 - Susan Brookhart – education consultant, Montana
 - Frank Philip – Council of Chief State School Officers
 - W. James (Jim) Popham – University of California, Los Angeles
 - Rick Stiggins – ETS Assessment Training Institute, Oregon
- ii For Example:
1. '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'. In Assessment Reform Group (2002) *Assessment is for Learning: 10 principles*. Downloadable from <http://www.assessment-reform-group.org>
 2. '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'. In Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (2009) *Developing the theory of formative assessment, Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* (in press).
 3. 'Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes.' State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards, Council of Chief State School Officers, USA . (Source: J.Popham (2008) *Transformative Assessment*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development)
 4. 'Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics.' In J.Popham (2008) *Transformative Assessment*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.