

Assessment for Learning for Key Stages 1&2

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Acknowledgements

The Partnership Management Board would like to thank the many people who contributed to the development and production of the contents of this pack. They include colleagues from:

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
The Education and Library Boards
Regional Training Unit (RTU)
Classroom 2000 (C2K)

The Partnership Management Board would also like to thank all the schools who so generously allowed us to take photographs. Their participation celebrates pupils enjoying learning. Their involvement makes the materials real.

Introduction

When we hear the term 'assessment', we often think of exams, tests, marks, stress and pass or fail. It is easy to view it as an end product that is separate from the learning and teaching process. This, however, is only one type of assessment: assessment of learning (summative assessment). It takes place after the learning and tells us what has been achieved.

Assessment for Learning (AfL), on the other hand, focuses on the learning process (rather than the end product) and attempts not to prove learning, but rather improve it. It is formative assessment. It is a way for us to take stock during the learning process and can help inform us of how the learning is progressing.

Summative assessment and AfL (formative assessment) are not opposing or contradictory practices. That is, the use of AfL in the classroom does not mean you will suddenly stop marking pupils' work; summative assessment will always have a place in educational practice. Instead, they are complementary approaches, as the use of AfL can help pupils perform better on summative assessment tasks and summative assessment can reflect the impact of AfL.

While the Revised Curriculum does not require you to integrate AfL practices into your classroom(s), we strongly recommend the use of AfL as best practice. The introduction and regular use of AfL in the classroom can help you to fulfil other statutory components of the revised curriculum (like *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities*, *Learning for Life and Work* (at Key Stage 3), and *Personal Development and Mutual Understanding* (at Key Stages 1 and 2)). In addition, AfL offers significant advantages for pupils.

This document will:

- explain what AfL is;
- introduce its elements; and
- introduce some practical strategies to plan and promote AfL in your school/classroom.

'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 next, and **how** best to get them there.'

Assessment for Learning: 10 Principles
The Assessment Reform Group, 2002

Rationale and Overview

Assessment for Learning is based on extensive research conducted by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam. In their 1998 study *Inside the Black Box*, they refined the term 'formative assessment' by emphasising that assessment is only formative when:

- it is an integral part of the learning and teaching process; and
- assessment evidence is actually *used* to:
 - modify teaching to meet the needs of pupils; and
 - improve learning.

Unlike summative assessment, AfL is conducted during day-to-day classroom practice and takes place *during* learning. It also gives pupils an active role in the assessment process. Pupils work with the teacher to determine what is being learned and to identify what the next steps should be. Both parties then use the feedback (which includes information on how the pupils are learning, their progress, the nature of their understanding and the difficulties they are having) to improve the learning.

This emphasis on the pupils' role in the learning process is founded upon the constructivist view of learning, which says: however neatly we may design, package and deliver learning experiences, in the end learning is a process that is instigated and managed by the *learner*. It's the learner who constructs the learning.

No matter what artistry we employ as teachers, learning is still something that learners have to do for themselves.

In Assessment for Learning:

- there is a high emphasis on *transferable learning*;
- assessment becomes a much more *transparent process* because it is based on critical information that is shared with learners; and
- learners are able to *take responsibility* for their own learning and, eventually, for their own assessment, too.

It is not something extra or 'bolted on' that you have to do. Rather, it neatly integrates with your existing classroom practice.

AfL involves the following key actions:

- sharing *learning intentions*;
- sharing and negotiating *success criteria*;
- giving *feedback* to pupils;
- effective *questioning*; and
- encouraging pupils to *assess and evaluate their own and others' work*.

Why Introduce AfL to Your Classroom(s)?

Adopting strategies that support Assessment for Learning can transform learning and teaching and take away the stigma that haunts assessment. In fact, research has shown that Assessment for Learning can have a significant effect on how well pupils achieve in terms of their attainment, behaviour, motivation, engagement and their ability to work independently.

It Improves Performance

Black and Wiliam's 1998 literature review examined 250 research articles from 160 journals published over a nine-year period. From this, they documented significant, and often substantial, quantifiable learning gains due to AfL practices. Their review of over 20 studies on classroom assessment showed increases in primary and post-primary performance ranging from 15 to 30 percent compared to control groups. In post-primary, differential effects were measured at approximately half a level at Key Stage 3, over half a grade at GCSE, and two full grades at GCSE after two to three years. They concluded that no other single improvement initiative improved performance levels to the extent that formative assessment did. Subsequent research in UK schools has substantiated these figures. For instance, research conducted in primary schools through the Gillingham Partnership's Formative Assessment Project 2002 indicated improved standardised test scores in reading and numeracy as well as improvements in writing levels.

It Increases Learning Independence

The impact of AfL on learning independence is as important as its benefits to performance. AfL practices make clear what is being learned, why, and how success will be measured. Pupils who understand their own goals and their role in learning are more independent in managing their learning; they know what to do, how they have to work and take more responsibility for their own learning and assessment. Assessment for Learning helps cultivate these valuable skills by giving pupils a role in determining these components of the learning as well as experience in providing feedback and assessing themselves and their peers. The learning is no longer something they receive; it becomes something they pursue and have a hand in shaping. This benefits learners later in life as well as in the classroom.

It Improves Morale, Motivation and Risk-Taking

Knowing the goals and success indicators may help pupils to gain learning independence, but they are not the only influencing factors. Morale and motivation are also pivotal components, and here, too, AfL plays an important role.

Black and Wiliam found that many assessment approaches used in classrooms compare pupils with one another – particularly those that focus on marks and grades. Evidence shows that pupils interpret the prime purpose of these assessments to be competition rather than personal improvement. As a result, feedback from these types of assessment actually reduces pupil morale. It teaches them, particularly low-attaining pupils, that they lack ability, leading them to believe they are unable to learn.

These findings correlate with those of Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University. For over 20 years Dweck has been researching students' motivations for learning. Her research concludes that conventional assessment approaches produce students who purposely avoid risk and difficult tasks.

Dweck found that practices that focus on rewards like gold stars, grades or place-in-class ranking encourage learners to focus on and prize their performance over their learning. In turn, pupils (especially high-achievers) avoid risk-taking or extending themselves, which is part and parcel of new learning, because risk means decreased likelihood of reward.

AfL practices, in contrast, emphasise the learning over the performance (grading or ranking). In some cases, it omits grades altogether. In this atmosphere, pupils are more free to experiment, take risks and extend themselves; there isn't necessarily a performance reward to secure or a prize to compete for with their classmates. This places a value on learning for learning's sake and promotes a 'you can do' ethos, because pupils discover first-hand that getting into difficulties and making mistakes is all part of effective learning. Every pupil's confidence is improved because the expectation is that they can achieve.

It Enhances Relationships and Reflection

AfL also helps foster a more positive classroom environment. It strengthens teacher-pupil relationships by increasing two-way communication. These high-quality interactions between you and your pupils can make them more motivated to learn and more aware of their learning.

And finally, Assessment for Learning can also improve planning and delivery of learning. This is because AfL practices lead you to analyse and make the underpinning rationale for learning explicit to both yourself and pupils. It creates an opportunity to quality assure and amend activities to ensure they meet the learning needs.

But to realise these advantages, AfL must be embedded as part of normal classroom practice.

Ties to the Revised Curriculum

Although AfL stands on its own merits, it is also an extremely valuable tool for implementing the revised curriculum. The aim of the Northern Ireland curriculum is:

to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible choices throughout their lives.

Assessment for Learning practices contribute strongly to this aim by:

- giving pupils a framework that empowers them to take charge of their learning;
- emphasising that everyone has the potential to succeed; and
- encouraging pupils to accept responsibility for their own development.

What's more, AfL supports the revised curriculum's statutory elements: *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, and Learning for Life and Work.*

Like AfL, these cornerstones of the curriculum seek to promote learning as active, meaningful and collaborative. These areas also emphasise pupil choices, challenging tasks, developing a shared language of learning and reflection on learning, all of which are fundamental aspects of AfL.

Assessment for Learning is directly linked to *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities*, as both promote the concepts of:

- setting open-ended challenges;
- making thinking important;
- making thinking and learning explicit;
- effective questioning;
- enabling collaborative learning;
- promoting independent learning; and
- making connections.

Adopting AfL practices in your classroom, therefore, allows you to fulfil many aspects of the revised curriculum through a single initiative.

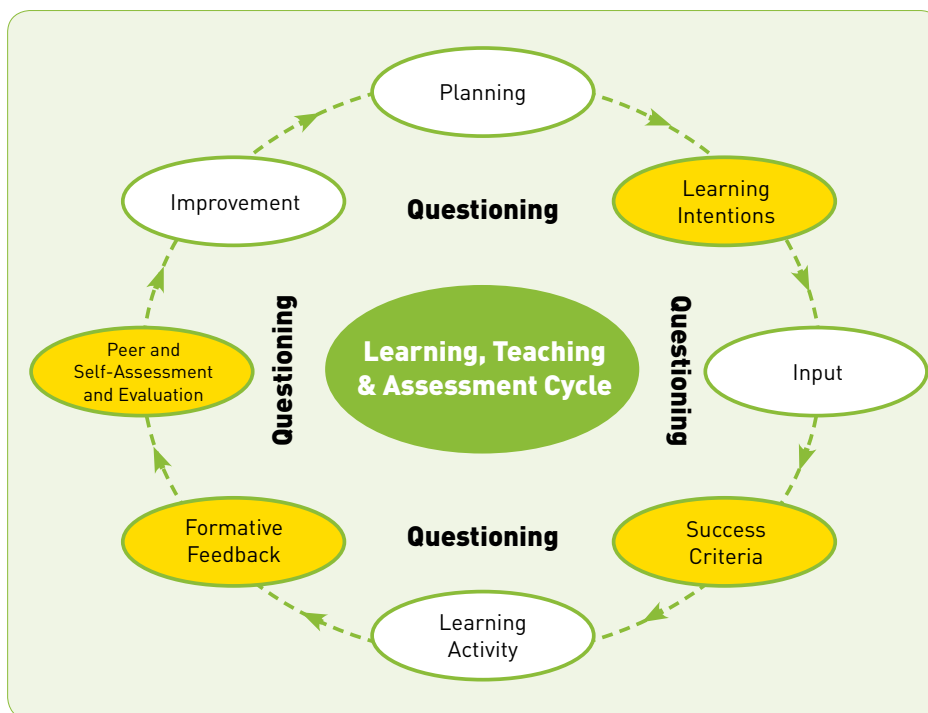
Putting AfL Into Practice

Assessment for Learning is not a revolutionary concept. You probably already use learner-centred approaches and a range of formative assessment strategies in your classroom. However, AfL requires the application of specific elements to produce the desired results. As stated earlier, these are:

- **learning intentions and success criteria** – so that pupils understand what they are trying to learn, why and what is expected of them;

- **feedback** – about the quality of their work and what they can do to make it better;
- **questioning** – to create a classroom climate where pupils come up with their own ideas, think aloud and explore their understanding; and
- **peer and self-assessment and self-evaluation** – to enable them to recognise success in their own and others' work and to focus on *how* they are learning as well as *what* they are learning.

These elements have most value when they are seen as integrated and mutually supportive of the process of learning rather than having discrete effects. The diagram below illustrates how these elements can be an integral, embedded part of the learning-teaching-assessment cycle.



When integrating AfL into your classroom practice, we recommend that you take one area at a time and allow for its development rather than rush into a succession of rapid changes.

Also, do not underestimate the time, effort and planning required to effect real improvements. It can be very easy to engage with the suggested strategies at a superficial level. It is important for you to take time to understand the rationale underpinning each element and to make sense of it in your own classroom context.

Advice on the whole-school planning of AfL is available in the planning booklet provided with your *Curriculum Support and Implementation Box*.

Key Elements of AfL

Sharing Learning Intentions

A learning intention is simply a description of what you want your pupils to know, understand or be able to do by the end of a lesson. It tells pupils what the focus for learning is going to be.

The concept of learning intentions is not new – as a teacher you devise learning intentions regularly. However, you may, instead, call them ‘learning objectives’, ‘learning goals’ or ‘learning aims’. In AfL, the word ‘intention’ is used purposely because it puts greater emphasis on the process of learning rather than the end product.

Why Use Learning Intentions?

Firstly, discussing learning intentions helps focus you and the pupils on the learning rather than the activity.

Informing pupils about what they are going to learn and why they should learn it gives pupils the tools they need to take more responsibility for their own learning and achieve learning independence. Practice shows that pupils who regularly receive this information in the classroom are:

- more focused for longer periods of time;
- more motivated;
- more involved in their learning; and
- better able to take responsibility for their own learning.

This step also immediately and actively involves pupils with their own learning, even before the activity or lesson has begun, and it offers opportunities for key interactions between you and your pupils.

‘The first ‘active’ element of formative assessment in the classroom is the sharing of learning intentions with children... Without the learning intention, children are merely victims of the teacher’s whim.’

Shirley Clarke, 2002

Framing and Delivering Learning Intentions

Learning intentions need to be shared with pupils before they begin an activity or lesson. For best effect, you should follow these five steps when using learning intentions to introduce a new activity:

- Identify what pupils will be learning (We are learning to ...).
- Explain the reason for the learning (We are learning this because ...).

- Share (and sometimes negotiate) the learning and the reason with pupils.
- Present the information in language that they can understand.
- Revisit the learning intention throughout the activity or lesson.

It's very easy for both you and your pupils to confuse what they are **doing** with what they are **learning**. Remember, learning intentions are most effective when they **focus on the learning** rather than the learning activity.

When writing learning intentions it is best to:

- separate the task instructions from the learning intention; and
- be clear about what you want pupils to **learn**.

Defining the Learning

To frame learning intentions, you need to define the learning. We are all familiar with learning being described in terms of what pupils know, understand and are able to do. You can, therefore, express the learning in terms of:

- knowledge;
- understanding; and
- skills.

Knowledge is factual information, for instance the parts of a plant, key events of World War One, etc. Understanding typically concerns concepts, reasons or processes (the need for a healthy diet, the difference between convection, conduction and radiation, etc.). Skills are proficiencies, dexterities or abilities acquired through training or experience (for example applying techniques, drawing conclusions based on evidence, using a multiplication grid, collaboration, etc.).

What Makes a Good Learning Intention?

The most useful learning intentions are those that focus on generic, transferable skills. This means that pupils can take these skills away with them to use and apply in other contexts. It also encourages them to make connections across the curriculum and recognise where they are using the same or similar skills in unfamiliar contexts.

For example, some quality learning intentions are as follows:

- We are learning to work effectively in groups.
- We are learning to use evidence to support an opinion.
- We are learning to carry out a fair test.
- We are learning to interpret data.

Another advantage of generic learning intentions is that pupils of all abilities are able to achieve them; the differentiation is in the way the pupils achieve or demonstrate the intention, not by creating different learning intentions for pupils of different abilities.

Putting Learning Intentions Into Practice

Here are some tips for using learning intentions effectively.

1. Start small.

You don't need to have a learning intention for every lesson. You could start with one aspect of the curriculum, like narrative writing within Literacy, and highlight its respective learning intentions. If you do want to use learning intentions on an ongoing basis, you will probably only need to create learning intentions two or three times per week, as that is approximately how often new learning is introduced in classrooms.

2. Separate the learning from the task/activity.

This helps pupils (and you) to focus not on the activity, but on what they will have learned by doing it.

3. Tell them why they are learning something.

This can motivate pupils and also help them to see connections in the curriculum. When possible, give a real-life rationale for the learning.

4. Use appropriate language.

Remember to use the language of learning: better to say 'we are learning to' rather than 'we are doing'.

5. Display the learning intention.

This helps pupils to maintain focus while they are working – you could use an interactive whiteboard/flip chart/WALT board, etc. A display will also help remind you to refer back to the learning intention throughout the lesson, and the pupils can take a role in designing the display, if you choose.

6. Discuss the learning intention with pupils.

This allows the pupils to internalise and explore what is required of them. You can also use the learning intention as a focus for evaluation during plenary sessions. Encourage your pupils to use the language of thinking and learning when they reflect on whether they have achieved a learning intention.

Sharing Success Criteria

If learning intentions describe what pupils will learn during an activity or lesson, then success criteria are the statements that help pupils recognise if they have been successful in their learning. They summarise the main teaching points (key ingredients) or processes (key steps), and they always link directly to the learning intention. They essentially spell out the steps required to achieve the learning intention, offering explicit guidance on how to be successful. By referring to the success criteria, pupils know if they have achieved the learning intention.

In AfL, success criteria:

- are linked to the learning intention;
- are specific to an activity;
- are discussed and agreed with the pupils prior to beginning the learning activity;
- scaffold and focus pupils while they are engaged in the activity; and
- are used as the basis for feedback and peer and self-assessment.

Why Use Success Criteria?

Sharing and agreeing success criteria are important part of AfL for a number of reasons. The most significant benefits are that success criteria can help to cultivate independent learners, provide effective feedback and create confident pupils who contribute to activities.

First of all, sharing success criteria encourages an independent approach to learning. When pupils have success criteria at hand, they are more informed about how they will be assessed. Consequently, they are better able to assess their own work to identify success and areas for improvement. This involves them in their own performance and learning. In time, pupils who have experience of working to success criteria and contributing to the development of success criteria are more likely to use these to assess their own achievements, address their own concerns and identify areas for improvement without relying upon others for guidance. This learning independence is a quality and skill that benefits pupils both in the classroom as well as in life beyond the classroom.

‘...success criteria summarise the **key steps** or **ingredients** the student needs in order to fulfil the learning intention – the main things to do, include or focus on.’

Shirley Clarke

Success criteria also allow you and the pupils to give accurate feedback – they keep you both focused on the criteria that the work will be assessed against.

Also, best practice suggests that you discuss and agree success criteria with the pupils in advance of lessons and activities. This discussion aspect is particularly important in the classroom because:

- it helps foster a positive classroom environment;
- it encourages pupils to be involved in the learning and upcoming activity even before it's begun;
- it can help build pupil self-esteem by offering them opportunities to contribute; and
- its collaborative aspect is a useful tool to strengthen the teacher-pupil relationship.

Creating Success Criteria

When creating the success criteria, it is important to focus on process and characteristics rather than the final effect. Take a look at the example provided below:

| | |
|--|---|
| Learning Intention: We are learning to write a narrative. | |
| Activity: Write a ghost story. | |
| <p>I will be successful if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people enjoy reading my story; and • it frightens them. | <p>I will be successful if I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set the scene in the opening paragraph; • build up tension/suspense; • use spooky adjectives and powerful verbs; and • end with a cliffhanger. |

In this example, there are two sets of suggested success criteria. Which set is more helpful to pupils?

The criteria on the left are not success criteria because they focus on reaction rather than guidance on how to achieve the effect.

You can see that the success criteria listed on the right, however, provide pupils with the key ingredients needed to show that they fulfil the learning intention. If they can do these things, then they have shown they understand how to write a narrative.

How to Share Success Criteria

As a teacher, generating quality success criteria will come to you quite easily. However, pupils can't be expected to recognise success immediately or understand how to use success criteria. The process takes time and needs to be developed. However, you can help your pupils along by:

- modelling the process for them;
- putting the criteria into child-friendly language;
- allowing time to discuss the criteria; and
- letting the pupils work in groups to practise creating and using the criteria.

Modelling the process is particularly important for helping pupils understand the value and purpose of success criteria. You may initially want to create success criteria yourself and then simply discuss them with your pupils. Using a sample work is another good way to help pupils recognise success. By taking a piece of work (perhaps from another class), you and your pupils can use it to draw out essential features, qualities and aspects that meet its success criteria.

Success criteria should also be in child-friendly language to ensure they understand exactly what is expected. However, success criteria needn't always be in written form. You can use images (for example digital pictures or different stages of an experiment/practical activity) to illustrate the process.

Planning time to discuss and negotiate success criteria with your pupils will provide them with a clear understanding of what is required prior to undertaking the activity. Allowing pupils to work in groups to prioritise and agree success criteria will give them an opportunity to contribute and gain experience with the process while benefiting from a sense of safety in numbers.