

**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 Europe<sup>i</sup>. A number of definitions, some originally generated by members of this Conference<sup>ii</sup>, 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 -- distortion of the practices -- that the original ideals sought to promote. Some of these misunderstandings and challenges derive from residual ambiguity in the definitions, but 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 and enhance 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 process 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 event 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 the central focus on learning by students clear and unambiguous. The definition is followed by more elaboration of it, and an example

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 are 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.

## EXAMPLE

There are dangers in providing exemplars if they are taken as exemplary. There are worse dangers in providing only one. However, an example adapted from a recent implementation and dissemination project may explain how 'surface' AFL practice may be improved and 'deepened' to become more authentic – moving from the 'letter' of AFL to the 'spirit'<sup>iii</sup>.

Two classes of 12 year-old students were studying literature in their national language. In both cases their teachers planned to enhance children's learning by incorporating AFL practices into the lessons. In both cases they wanted to share criteria for high quality (e.g. what good writing looks like), provide feedback to the students on their understanding, and provide opportunities for peer-assessment.

Teacher A provided the students with a checklist of criteria of quality (structure, use of language, characterisation etc) and showed how she would apply them to some examples picked from the text they were reading. She then asked the students to, individually, find examples of each of the criteria on the checklist. When they had done this she checked the answers with the whole class and then asked the students, in pairs, to correct each other's work.

Teacher B started the lesson by guiding the students to draw up and agree a list of criteria based on their earlier experience of poems in performance. She then performed a new poem and asked the students to critique her performance using the criteria they had agreed. On the basis of their critique, they were then asked, in groups, to rehearse a better performance themselves and to apply the criteria to their own efforts. When they were satisfied they performed the poems to the whole class.

The key characteristic that distinguishes these two lessons is the extent to which Teacher B created activities throughout the lesson that would encourage the students to engage with the notion of quality in performance: how it might be expressed, how recognised and how enhanced. In contrast, Teacher A merely attempted to transfer her own understanding to her students; their task was to acquire the 'correct' answers. Yet in both cases these teachers thought they were using AFL practices.

These examples demonstrate the importance of going beyond surface practice, which can become mechanistic, to implement an approach that is informed by deeper principles based on an understanding of the importance of the role of students in learning and how teaching can best support it. 'Knowing How' needs to be underpinned by 'Knowing Why'; if the latter is lacking, the former risks distortion. Teachers appreciate practical techniques to try out in their classrooms but they also need to understand the basis on which they 'work' to enhance learning. Their practices and beliefs about learning need to be developed in tandem so that they can be faithful to the 'spirit' of AFL whilst being more flexible in its implementation<sup>iv</sup>. This is a considerable, but worthwhile, challenge for professional development and those who support it.

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<sup>i</sup> All of these regions were represented at the conference. The participants pictured in this photograph taken on the last day of the conference are (left to right from back to front): Sandie Aitkin, New Zealand; Mary James, England; Mien Seger, Netherlands; Lorna Earl, Canada; Susan Brookhart, United States; Menucha Birenbaum, Israel; Carolyn Hutchison, Scotland; Ruth Sutton, England; Claire Wyatt-Smith, Australia; Alison Gilmore, New Zealand; Lester Flockhart, New Zealand; Mary Chamberlain, New Zealand; Filip Dochy, Belgium/Netherlands; Jim Popham, United States; Royce Sadler, Australia; Frank Philips, United States; Dany Laveault, Canada; Geoff Cainen, Canada; Richard Daugherty, Wales; Val Klenowski,; Australia; Ann Longston, Canada; Jeffrey Smith, New Zealand; Peter Johnston, United States; Terry Crooks, New Zealand; Anne Davies, Canada; Gordon Stobart, England; Ken O'Connor, Canada; Rick Stiggins, United States; Kari Smith, Norway. Team members not in photograph: Linda Allal, Switzerland; Linda Darling Hammond, United States; John Hattie, New Zealand; Juliette Mendelovits, Australia; Lisa Smith, New Zealand



<sup>ii</sup> 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

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was elicited'. In Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (2009) Developing the theory of formative assessment, *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* (in press).

3. [Gordon to add]

4. [Gordon to add]

<sup>iii</sup> See James, M., McCormick, R., Black, P., Carmichael, P., Drummond, M-J., Fox, A., MacBeath, J., Marshall, B., Pedder, D., Procter, R., Swaffield, S., Swann, J., and Wiliam, D. (2007) *Improving Learning How to Learn - classrooms, schools and networks*. London: Routledge.

<sup>iv</sup> See also Wiliam, D. and Thompson, M. (2007) Integrating assessment with instruction: what will it take to make it work" In C.A. Dwyer (Ed.) *The future of assessment: shaping teaching and learning* (pp.53-82). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.