

Quick start guide

Assessment for learning (AfL)

Openers

Effective openers allow learners to express their own initial ideas about a topic and to reflect on prior knowledge. They are a springboard for inductive learning and also free up the teacher to listen and observe, gathering information about existing knowledge and group dynamics, so that learning can be differentiated accordingly.

Peer review

Research has shown that learners at all levels can provide valid and accurate reviews of each other's work, providing they are given a structure to work to and are well supported by their teacher. Effective peer review helps learners to become familiar with success criteria and gain skills in assessing their own progress. Teachers can tap into the information generated by peer review to help plan future learning.

Instant feedback

Effective instant feedback techniques take very little time and effort. They provide the teacher with a quick snapshot of how learners are progressing, how effective they feel the learning is, or simply, whether they have mastered an important piece of knowledge.

Techniques that can provide instant feedback:

- voting or polling – using sticky notes, green-amber-red cards, and so on
- answers written on mini whiteboards.

Effective questioning

This underpins AfL. Effective questioning encourages learners to reveal **how** they are learning, as well as **what** they are learning. It can reveal deep learning, not just surface learning. Effective questioning is not the sole preserve of the teacher. Learners can learn to formulate their own effective questions, helping them to become expert learners who know where to focus their efforts in order to improve.

Reflection and self-assessment

This approach to AfL encourages learners to become experts in their own learning and to be evaluative. It can be built into activities and encouraged through learning conversations.

Activities with built-in feedback

The teacher cannot always be on hand to give every learner feedback at every step. Activities can be designed so that checks on learning are built in. For instance, a computer-based learning activity may confirm correct answers, give feedback or offer further practice. Learning activities can be constructed so that learners can see at each stage whether they are on the right track. Activities can build in peer review at key points.

Learning objectives, success criteria

Learners need to know what they are learning, why, and how they can be successful. Devise success criteria with learners by analysing what makes a piece of work 'excellent', 'good' or 'poor'. Create checklists, prompts or marking frameworks to aid self-assessment and 'medal and mission' feedback.

Medals and missions

'Medals' tell the learner what they have done well. 'Missions' are individual targets that help the learner focus on what they need to do to improve their work. Grades and marks alone do not provide this information. Feedback expressed in terms of medals and missions is more effective. Each new mission is an opportunity for the teacher to adjust the learning to meet the learner's needs.

Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning, also known as formative assessment, is about checking learning and giving constructive feedback that informs subsequent learning. The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) defines it as: "...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." (ARG, 2002).

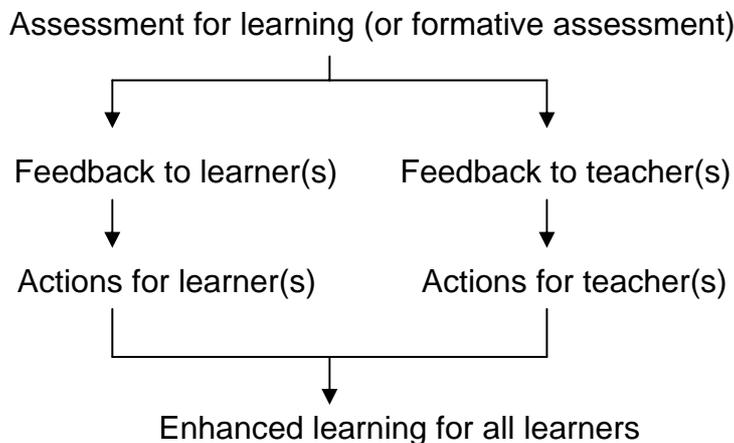
Research (Hattie, 2002) shows that giving learners feedback on their learning errors and omissions, and getting them to correct them or work towards improving future work, is one of the most significant methods of improving their performance. Constructive feedback also has a profound influence on learners' motivation and self-esteem (Black and Wiliam, 1999).

Assessment and feedback is built in to all successful teaching and learning activities. The process does not always have to be led by the teacher*, learning activities that include peer or self-assessment are powerful. Computer-based tasks, if carefully designed, can build in intrinsic feedback that encourages learner reflection and improvement (DfES Standards Unit, 2006).

* We use 'teaching and learning' and 'teacher' as generic terms to include:

- teaching, training and learning
- teachers, tutors, trainers, lecturers and instructors in the further education (FE) system.

Assessment for learning should involve both teacher and learners in review and reflection. Black and Wiliam (2002) point to the value of feedback, not only to learners but to teachers who can use it to adapt their approaches: "An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback by teachers, and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged." The overall process can be represented as follows:



Assessment for learning is **not** about:

- assessing quantity rather than quality
- marking and grading, rather than providing guidance for improvement
- comparing individual learners
- social and management purposes rather than support for learning.

References

Assessment Reform Group. (2002) *Research-based principles to guide classroom practice*.

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1999) *Assessment for learning: Beyond the black box*. University of Cambridge School of Education.

Black, P. et al. (2004) *Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom*. NFER Nelson.

Department for Education and Skills Standards Unit. (2006) *E-learning for business*. The continuing professional development (CPD) materials explore the use of intrinsic and extrinsic feedback.

Professor John Hattie's website is at: www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/staff/index.cfm?P=8650 where you can download copies of his papers: *Influences on student learning and Teachers make a difference*.

You will find links that exemplify assessment for learning in the National Teaching and Learning Change Programme resources.