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. (Assessment Reform Group, 2002 – see Resources and useful weblinks)

Developing assessment for learning in your school

The ethos of the school is an important contributor in promoting effective assessment practices. Assessment for learning (AFL) takes considerable time to develop and become effective, and to do so it must be practised throughout the school and supported by the leadership team. One way to begin is for the school to carry out an audit of current assessment practice in order to build on good practice that already exists.

Characteristics of effective assessment for learning classroom practice

Underlying the AFL approach is the recognition that every teaching and learning task or activity offers assessment opportunities.

Key features of assessment for learning are:

- being clear about the learning goals and the success criteria by which learning will be judged, sharing them with pupils using pupil-friendly language (i.e. demystifying learning)
- using effective questioning techniques that provide opportunities for assessing pupils' knowledge and understanding
- showing pupils that all responses, views and opinions are valued and encouraging them to view errors as learning opportunities
- giving specific, constructive feedback, which indicates how pupils can improve and the steps they need to take in order to do so
- giving time for learning to be absorbed
- encouraging pupils to reflect upon their learning and to monitor their own progress, for example, by means of self and peer assessment (see Self and peer assessment).

It is advisable for teachers new to AFL not to try to introduce everything at once but to focus on developing one aspect and monitoring its impact on learning before moving on. The starting point for developing effective AFL classroom practice is for teachers to model the various processes to pupils (for example giving good-quality feedback). It is also important that the focus is on improvement – that pupils understand what they need to learn or the skills they need to develop in order to improve and reach certain goals – rather than simply reaching 'level X'. Teachers should therefore provide pupils with opportunities to discuss learning objectives and success criteria and to reflect and talk about their learning and progress.
Communication

Two-way communication with pupils and parents is essential to explain what assessment for learning is, why it is being used, and to respond to questions or concerns. For example, it is important to explain how AfL practice may impact on marking. In order to be of benefit, marking has to be specific, thorough and detailed. As this takes more time than simply grading work, teachers have to be selective about what is marked. Parents and pupils need to understand that not everything will be marked and why. The emphasis is on the style of marking – quality rather than quantity.

It is also important to ensure that other adults working with your pupils are aware of the learning objectives and the success criteria, and follow AfL practice in the support that they are providing.

Advice from practitioners

- Be aware of the potential for confusion between learning objectives and the context or activity in which the learning is taking place. Objectives should be skills based – linked to the skills being developed in the lesson – not a description of the activity.
- Ensure that the success criteria match the learning objectives. Pupils should understand not only the learning objectives (often expressed as ‘I can…’ statements) but also how they are going to get there.
- Success criteria should be broken down into a series of small clearly defined progression steps to enable pupils to demonstrate progress.
- Spend time finding out what pupils already know in order to decide where to go next. Allow them time to respond to comments and to improve.
- Encourage pupil voice. Response partners work extremely well (pupils work in pairs to generate or test out ideas, clarify their understanding, create a joint response, or assess and evaluate work).
- Consolidating understanding and skills is important. Resist the pressure to rush on to the next topic if more consolidation is needed.
- Provide support for newly-qualified teachers in planning how they will move pupils’ learning forward.
- Remember that assessment evidence does not always need to be written and that verbal feedback can be more effective than written.
- The monitoring of marking across the school by subject coordinators can be used to promote consistency, to ensure meaningful feedback is being given and to evaluate its success.

Monitoring impact

The involvement of pupils in the learning process is generally a sign that AfL is working well. Good AfL classrooms are less teacher directed, pupils are more proactive and there is an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition.

When observing teaching colleagues, consider whether they are directing learning effectively (sometimes referred to as regulating learning). Look for assessment strategies that promote learning, such as the use of rich questioning, effective feedback and marking, peer and self assessment. Observational schedules for this purpose can be obtained from organisations such as AAIA (access is for members only).

Effective AfL implementation should result in improvements in learning and attainment as well as an enthusiasm for learning amongst pupils.