



Making progress beyond labels

Mike Gershon continues his series of practical guides to big teaching topics.

This week: *assessment for learning*

ASSESSMENT FOR learning is one of the cheapest and most effective ways of boosting pupil achievement. I particularly like the approach because it focuses on the most important place in every school – the classroom.

It is here that teachers do the job they applied to do in the first place – helping young people to learn. And it is here that the “stuff” of education takes place, in the minds of pupils and in the space between pupils and teachers.

I have come across numerous attempts to communicate assessment for learning – both what it is and how it works. These have varied from the succinct to the verbose, with the general trend being towards the latter. This is a shame, because assessment for learning (AFL) is really very simple, and I think a lot of schools and teachers have pushed it to one side for no better reason than lack of clarity.

Let's redress the balance. First I'll give a brief, simple explanation of AFL, and then I'll present ways in which you might put it into practice.

What is AFL?

Assessment for learning involves three things: eliciting information from pupils; opening up success criteria; and providing formative feedback. Doing these three things week in and week out will improve your teaching and lead your pupils to make significant progress. That's it. It's that simple.

Eliciting information

Pupils know things and can do things. But what exactly do they know and what exactly can they do? By eliciting information the teacher can find this out. They can then use this information to inform their teaching. As a result, the teaching more closely reflects the needs of their pupils. This means that it is more effective and that pupils make better progress. Knowledge is power, especially in the hands of the teacher.

Opening up success criteria

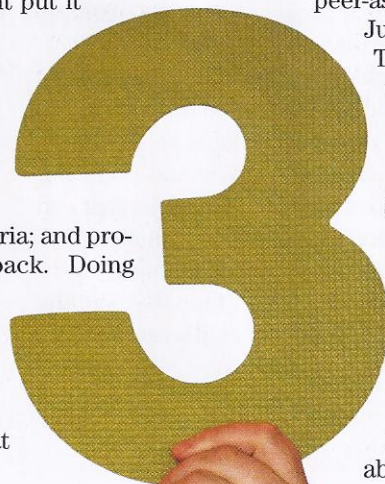
If you know what you are being judged against, it is much easier to do your best. All your energies can be directed towards that which is being asked of you. This is as true of pupils as it is of anybody else. You can open up success criteria by:

- Showing them to pupils;
- Talking to pupils about them; and
- Getting pupils to use them (through self- and peer-assessment).

Just think about your own experience. The more work you marked at the beginning of your career, the more you came to understand what “good” looked like in your subject. This is because you became increasingly au fait with the success criteria.

Formative feedback

This means giving pupils information about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve. It does not involve grades. It does not involve marks. It does not involve levels. These three things tell pupils absolutely nothing about how to make



Giving a grade will cause pupils to pay less attention to information about their learning

progress. They are therefore almost pointless in most classroom contexts.

Imagine if at the end of a driving lesson the instructor looked at you and said: "Well done. C+. See you next week." It would be ludicrous.

Formative feedback involves the teacher using their knowledge of their subject to explain to pupils why certain things they have done are good and how they might get better. It is like the driving instructor explaining the reasons why your three-point turn was good and what you need to do to improve your parallel parking.

So, that is AfL. Three things. Nothing more. All easy to do. All guaranteed to improve teaching and learning. Here are some ways you might make them happen in your classroom.

Eliciting information – techniques

There are three ways in which you might elicit information: from the whole class, from groups and from individuals. We will look at each one in turn.

The whole class

In most classrooms there is one teacher and between 12 and 30 pupils. The teacher is always outnumbered. This means they have to be creative in coming up with ways to find out what all their pupils are thinking, what they all know, or what they can all do.

The teacher must focus on the one sense through which they can absorb information from many sources at once: sight.

- Ask your pupils to show you their thumbs. If they feel they understand the learning, they give a "thumbs up". If they are a little unsure about it, they show their thumbs pointing to the side. If they are really uncertain, they give a "thumbs down".
- Ask your pupils to show their fingers. Display five possible options on the board. Pupils hold up the number of fingers that correlates to the option they favour.
- Give pupils mini-whiteboards and pens. They can write and draw on these, before holding up their answers for everyone to see.
- Give pupils three laminated cards – one red, one orange and one green. Ask them to display the card that matches where they are at with the learning. Red means "I am stuck and would like help". Orange means "I am OK but might need to ask a question". Green means "I am fine and do not need help".
- Print the numbers 1 to 4 in a large font. Stick each of these in a different corner of your room. Display four possible options on the board and invite pupils to go to the number that matches the option they favour.

In each of these examples, the teacher is creating a visual display of information in which pupils are communicating their understanding or knowledge. This information can then be used by the teacher to inform what they do in the classroom.

Groups

Eliciting information from groups is slightly easier than from the whole class. Here are five methods you might use:

- While pupils are engaged in group work, walk around the room. As you do, listen to their conversations, look at their work and observe their body language. All this is information you can act upon.
- Ask each group to nominate a leader. This person is responsible for coming to the front of the class and relaying to the teacher information about how the group is working and what help they might need.
- Give each group a number. Write the same set of numbers on slips of paper. Place these in a small bag. Pull a slip out at random. Ask the group with that number to come and talk to you about their work and their understanding of the topic.
- Set a task that will involve groups creating something physical, such as a poster or a leaflet. Collect these at the end of the lesson and look through them to see how the groups are working and thinking.
- Ask groups to create a presentation or drama piece centred on the topic. When they perform their work, it will give you an opportunity to see how they have understood and interpreted the learning.

Individuals

The easiest way to elicit information is on an individual basis from pupils. Here are five approaches:

- Read their books. Each book will contain a lot of information about that particular pupil's understanding of the subject.
- Ask them a question, either verbally or in writing. The response will probably contain a good deal of information.
- Ask them a follow-up question. This will allow you to explore their thinking in certain areas and in certain directions.
- Get them to draw or model (for example, using Play-Doh) an idea or concept. The translating of abstract knowledge into a physical



form reveals a great deal about an individual's thinking.

- Watch how a pupil goes about their work and interacts with their classmates. This is often revealing and can tell you things about their understanding that they may find hard to articulate.

Opening up success criteria – techniques

Success criteria are those things that pupils' work is assessed against. Examples include:

- External mark-schemes or level indicators (from exam boards or the government);
- Internal mark-schemes or level indicators (from you, your school or your department);
- General criteria in Western education (for example, reasoning); and
- General criteria specific to the subject (for example, accurate use of the scientific method in physics).

If pupils understand what constitutes the success criteria, it will be easier for them to be successful. Here are some ways to achieve this.

What the teacher can do

- Share learning objectives. This could involve a written learning objective that pupils copy down, or the teacher explaining verbally what the lesson is about. Doing either of these things

will help make it clear to pupils what they are being asked to do and why. They can then direct their efforts toward achieving the goal.

- Share success criteria. For example, before setting pupils off on an extended piece of work, display a set of criteria against which that work will be judged. Talk pupils through each criterion and ask them to give examples of what they think successful work might entail.
- Involve pupils in the development of success criteria. Come up with a list of criteria with your class. The thinking and discussion this involves will lead pupils to reflect on what good work ought to look like.

Peer-assessment

Peer-assessment opens up success criteria for pupils. This is because it involves them using the criteria in order to make judgements. Two things result from this.

First, pupils spend time manipulating the criteria. They have to apply them in the context of the work they are marking and use them in order to make their assessments (which, in turn, must be explained). Therefore, they come to understand them better.

Second, pupils look at work that is similar to, yet different from, their own, and they do this through the prism of the criteria. As a result,



they gain an understanding of how the success criteria might be met (and how someone might not meet them) differently from how they themselves have chosen to meet them.

Here are five ways to conduct peer-assessment:

- Pupils swap their work with the person sitting next to them. They assess what they are given and provide a piece of written feedback in which three strengths and one target are identified.
- As above, except pupils discuss the feedback they have given each other and then have an opportunity to change it if they wish.
- The teacher collects pupils' work. This is then shuffled and redistributed. Pupils peer-assess the work they are given.
- The teacher provides pupils with a pro forma to structure their peer-assessment. This works well when non-written work is being peer-assessed.
- Pupils display their work, either at the front of the class or on their desks. The class walks around and each member peer-assesses three pieces of work. This means every pupil gets a range of feedback.

Self-assessment

The principles behind self-assessment are the same as those behind peer-assessment. One important point to note – and it applies to both activities – is that the best self- and peer-assessment will involve pupils giving feedback that focuses on learning (and not, for example, presentation or the choice of colours), which is clearly explained (why is it good? How can it be improved?) and which links closely to the success criteria.

Here are five approaches to self-assessment:

- Give pupils a target-tracker sheet that they stick in the front of their books and where they record the targets that the teacher, their peers or they themselves set. Every time they do a self-assessment they refer to this sheet and judge whether or not they have met their present target.
- The teacher gives pupils a pro forma that they use to structure their self-assessment. For example, this might contain a number of skills that needed to be used during the lesson, with pupils then going through the list and judging how they performed in relation to each one.
- Ask pupils to come up with three stars and a wish (three stars = three good things about your work; a wish = one thing you could do better next time).
- At the beginning of the lesson, or at the beginning of a piece of work, pupils select one thing that they want to focus on. Their self-assessment then centres on this particular item.
- Pupils are given a mark-scheme and invited to go through their work methodically before identifying three strengths and one target.

Each of these should be tied to something within the mark-scheme.

Formative feedback – techniques

Formative feedback tells pupils:

- What they have done well and why;
- What they need to do to improve; and
- How they can make this improvement.

It does not include a grade, level or mark. Giving one of these will detract from the written (or verbal) feedback. It will cause pupils to pay less attention to the rich information provided to them by their teacher about their learning.

Give grades, levels or marks at certain, pre-defined points in the year (three is enough). The rest of the time, only give formative feedback.

Make sure the ratio of positive to developmental comments is at least 3:1. Always. Never give more than one developmental comment at a time. If you do, you will be asking your pupils to pull on both ends of a rope at once. This is not particularly useful (nor is it edifying).

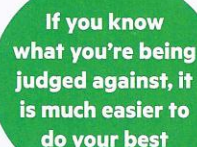
The key to ensuring that pupils make progress from formative feedback is providing them with opportunities to meet the targets for improvement you set them. Here are five ways to do this:

- When pupils do their next piece of work, ask them to write their target at the top of the page. When they have finished their work, ask them to write a paragraph explaining where and how they have met their target.
- Record pupils' targets at the front of their books. Ask them to refer to these at the beginning of each lesson.
- When you return work that has been formatively marked, set aside a period of time during which pupils can redo a part or all of that work, so as to take account of the target that you have set.
- As a starter, ask pupils to look through their books and to identify where they have met their present target. They should then write down where the teacher needs to look to find the appropriate evidence.
- When pupils do peer- and self-assessments, ask them to use their present targets as the success criteria. Doing this consistently will result in pupils focusing their attention on these, whatever the work they are doing.

So there you have it. AfL: three letters that are easily implemented and guaranteed to improve standards.

Mike Gershon is an author and sociology teacher at King Edward VI School in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. His extensive sets of free teaching resources can be downloaded from the TES Resources site: www.tes.co.uk/MikeGershon.

Watch out for his forthcoming book, How to use AfL in the Classroom: The complete guide, which offers more practical advice and ideas



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