

Assessment for learning

Assessment is more than just exams...

Assessment is so much a part of teaching that we sometimes don't even recognise it as such and tend to think of it only in terms of formal examinations and tests. The fact is that we spend much of our time on the kind of assessment that helps our students to understand things more clearly, be more purposeful and organised in their work, and become more effective learners.

These activities are all important components of *Assessment for Learning* (AfL). An NCCA initiative in AfL, which has involved teachers in Cork and Sligo over the past two years, offers practical advice and support in this important part of their teaching.

Why is assessment for learning important?

Assessment is about measuring what someone has achieved and it usually involves giving feedback of some kind to the person whose work is being assessed. In examination terms that feedback is normally given in the shape of a mark or a grade. But what does the person being assessed learn from that?

Imagine you are taking a driving lesson (or getting advice on solving SU DOKU puzzles) and your instructor can give you advice only in the form of grades and marks. At the end of the first session you get the feedback - Starting and stopping 46%, Signalling 28%, Awareness of other road users 17%, Use of the handbrake 83%, and so on. What might you learn about your driving from this kind of feedback? 'Apart from the handbrake, it seems I wasn't very good. What was so wrong about my awareness of other road users? Maybe I should just stick with the public transport, or even stay at home and get to work on those SU DOKU puzzles.'

In any learning situation, the learner needs clear direction about a number of things:

- What I am learning, or trying to learn? (**Learning Intention**)
- How I will know when I have succeeded? (**Criteria for Success**)
- How I can judge the extent of the progress I have made and make further progress towards the learning goal? (**Feedback linked to the Learning Intention and the Criteria for Success**)

Assessment for learning is important because it uses these elements to support learning. It is, therefore, at the heart of the teaching and learning cycle.



Try out AfL

The initial phase in the implementation of AfL approaches involves teachers in making small but significant changes in their everyday teaching. The most important of these changes are the ones signalled above, and which you can try with any class group in any subject area.

Simply follow this step-by-step guide:

1. Choose any topic or section of the course you are teaching, or just today's lesson.
2. Decide on the key idea/s for that topic or lesson...the most important thing/s you want the students to learn. This will be your **Learning Intention**. (Keep it pretty simple for starters.)
3. At the start of the lesson tell the students what the learning intention is. Try to make it clear to them in language they can understand. You can do this in any number of ways - directly 'today's learning intention is...' or indirectly 'what we are going to learn today is...'.
 4. Give your students a quick opportunity to **re-state the learning intention in their own words**. This can take the form of getting them to discuss it or write it down very briefly. Don't spend too long on this.
 5. Now move on to **sharing the criteria for success**. This might sound a bit remote at first but it is, in fact, something every teacher does by showing students what good work 'looks like', or what to aim for when they are working alone, say on a homework assignment. Again, there are numerous ways of doing this but what is important here is actually the **sharing** of the criteria so that when you move on to the **feedback** stage the students know what they had been aiming for. A simple illustration:
 - **Learning Intention** - how to draw a good labelled diagram
 - **Criteria for success** - the different elements appear in the right order, the labels are clear, the technical terms are correct
 6. Having set up those first two steps, work through the rest of the lesson and when the students are doing an in-class or homework assignment and you want to give them feedback on their work (either individually or as a group, either oral or written feedback) make sure to re-visit briefly the criteria for success and most importantly **give your feedback by reference to those shared criteria**. It is important not to deviate from the shared criteria.
 7. When you are giving further feedback, especially written feedback, follow this pattern. Point out:
 - what the student got right
 - where the student went wrong
 - what the student needs to do to improve, in other words to get closer to the learning intention.
 8. This kind of feedback is genuinely supportive of learning and is far more valuable than giving marks or grades for work done.

What are the benefits?

The most obvious benefit for the students is the additional clarity that this approach brings to teaching and learning. Students receive feedback on their work which makes more sense to them because they understand the criteria against which their teacher was judging the work.

In recent research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute for the NCCA students were strongly of the opinion that the best teachers were the ones who 'explained things clearly.' AfL in the classroom really makes teaching and learning clearer, and when students have this clear sense of where they are going their motivation increases.

All the teachers involved in the NCCA initiative to date agree that AfL improves the student-teacher relationship and that it enhances learner motivation. Findings in international studies go further and quantify the benefit to learners as a 12% improvement in examination grades, especially for those students who might have been labelled as 'reluctant learners.'

Is that all there is?

No. Sharing the learning intention and the criteria for success, and giving feedback related to those criteria are the lynchpins of AfL but they are not the only recommended approaches associated with it. Many other approaches have been tried out by teachers involved in the initiative, including:

- comment-only marking
- teachers thinking about their (and their students') use of questions
- student self-assessment
- peer assessment for students
- using learning logs and other ways of having students monitor and review their own learning.
- drawing on AfL when reporting to parents
- using exemplars of standard to inform student learning.

How can I find out more?

→ Log on to the NCCA website, at www.ncca.ie, where you will find a link to the Assessment for Learning pages.

→ Contact a member of the AfL Team

Hal O'Neill hal.oneill@ncca.ie

Peter Johnson peter.johnson@ncca.ie

John Halbert john.halbert@ncca.ie

Want to read more?

info@ncca is an NCCA publication designed to keep teachers in primary and post primary schools up to date about developments in curriculum and assessment.

All back issues are available on our website to download and read, or to save on your hard drive to read later.

You can access the magazine by clicking on the image on the home page www.ncca.ie or if you are reading online, just click [here](#).

Subscribe to info@ncca

This April, **info@ncca** goes electronic. To subscribe for your very own copy, simply visit our website www.ncca.ie, click on the banner titled 'Subscribe to Newsletter, fill in your details on the form and click on the subscribe button. .

Or if you are reading online just click [here](#).