

Assessment for Learning

“Assessment for Learning” is very much a focus of attention at the moment. For Ofsted and the National Strategies, it's seen as the key to school improvement. It's not always done well, though. In October 2008, Ofsted published a report (“Assessment for Learning: The Impact of National Strategy Support”) which says that of 43 schools surveyed, AfL was good or better in 16, but inadequate in 7. Primaries do better than secondary, but always the key to success lay in positive leadership, with AfL high on the school improvement agenda. Here, Gerald Haigh reflects on AfL – what it is and, importantly, what it isn't, and talks to heads and teachers who are working to ensure that AfL supports effective learning.

In his book, “Propellerhead”, Antony Woodward describes how, having bought a share in a little aeroplane, he embarks on learning to fly. Like most learner pilots he finds the bit where you take off and tool around the sky to be very easy. However, Antony just cannot get the knack of landing. Time and again he slams into the ground and bounces so high the instructor has to take over. Once he writes the undercarriage off. Despair sets in. He begins to think he just isn't cut out for it. And what advice is the instructor giving? Very little, other than to tell him to do it again – and again and again.

Then he gets a new instructor who quickly sees the problem and puts it right. The key, Antony discovers (and it works for all aircraft from microlights to Jumbos) is to fly down the runway, reducing power, inches above the ground, with the aircraft going slower all the time – “No, don't try to land...keep her flying” – until when it runs out of flying speed, the plane just plops itself down. Antony is overjoyed.

“The secret, the key piece of information that had eluded me for so long was as follows – *Make no attempt to land*. The bit that nobody tells you is that the plane lands itself.”

Antony's key learning objective – to land the aircraft smoothly, under full control, every time -- was eluding him because he didn't understand the principle involved, and so couldn't take the right action. And although his instructor presumably did know the principle, he failed to engage with Antony's learning problem other than by saying the always futile, “Just try it again.”

How often, as teachers, have we said that – “Just try it again”, sometimes with a bit of menace, as in, “You need to try a bit harder”? It seems to me that if we want a quick definition of Assessment for Learning, we could say that it's “Going beyond ‘try again’.” It's looking at what the learner's actually doing, in detail, and seeking out the bits that need putting right. Ideally, of course, you don't just tell the learner, you engage in a dialogue from which you both tease out what's needed for the next step – a process that's akin to coaching.

For a good teacher, that's a built-in part of the job, something that he or she does almost without thinking. Claire Purcell, Deputy Head at Dulwich Hamlet Junior School, recently (September 2008) designated “Outstanding” by Ofsted, says, “It's what any teacher does on a day to day basis. I don't think there's any mystery about it.”

She goes on to give an example, from a music lesson (Claire's the music co-ordinator). "The children were playing a short phrase on the glockenspiel, working in pairs. The success criteria were to do with holding the beater correctly, and playing the right notes in the right order. "

Because the children were working in pairs, she explained, they were able to assess each other's progress. It's important, she says, that children know just what counts as success in the task that they're being asked to do – "And that," says Claire, "Requires confidence on the part of the teacher and excellent subject knowledge."

All too often, she says, teachers haven't been specific about what they're asking.

"We don't unpick it for them. We just stick a learning objective on the board and to be honest that's not what the children want."

There's lots more to it, of course – peer assessment, self assessment, quality questioning. And above all, it's necessary to be consistent and to build, within the classroom and the school, a culture of assessment for learning.

Another teacher (I met her on the train. She didn't seem to mind being questioned. Or maybe she was too polite to complain) gave the example of a classroom where the children are using the now ubiquitous "traffic lights" to signal their grasp of the task in hand (a red circle – I don't understand, amber – I think I partly understand, green – I fully understand).

"Often the teacher follows them up, but I get the children involved – so I put an "amber" child with a "green" child, realising that each of them will strengthen their learning, and both will be clearer about what is the next step."

Where the approach is well embedded, the children will identify their own success criteria, perhaps working in pairs or groups, and perhaps with some coaching by the teacher. And the step further than that is for the children to identify the overall aims of the lesson. Here, for example, is Deena Moorey, Deputy Head of Graiseley Primary in Wolverhampton, describing how she and her children moved to that point.

"Instead of sitting at home and planning a unit of work I started to ask my children what they wanted to learn. I remember, for example, asking the children what they wanted to know about 'Noah's Ark', as this was part of an RE topic I was teaching with Year 1. One child asked what it was like inside the ark, another if it was dark inside. I had never considered looking at this....It's such an obvious question, and I'd never considered it. But how can you possibly learn about Noah's Ark without knowing that? I was hooked on children leading their own learning."

That approach to project-based learning – in effect, beginning with "What do we want to learn about this topic?" -- obviously clears the ground for children then to identify for themselves the success criteria for individual tasks within lessons. And that, in turn, makes self and peer assessment much more achievable.

It's not done overnight, and it calls for leadership and good CPD.

"But when assessment for learning is working well," says Claire Purcell, "the children will be totally involved and responsible for their learning."

Dulwich Hamlet Junior, Claire's school, having developed expertise in assessment for learning, has been piloting the government's "Assessing Pupil Progress" (APP) materials. Claire's enthusiastic about them, but adds a caution.

"APP is not assessment for learning. You'll hear it talked about as that, but it's not. APP's about making summative assessments – snapshots of what children have learned at a particular point."

The distinction is often made by contrasting "Assessment for learning" with "Assessment of learning" – which is what APP is intended for.

That said. Claire believes that APP is to be welcomed by teachers.

"It's going to increase our understanding of levels, so that we can have consistency, and that's a good thing."

Another pilot school head, Jeremy Bird, at Greswold Primary in Solihull, agrees. His school is also piloting "Making Good Progress" (MGP) which includes "Single Level Testing" – a form of "Test when ready", which assumes good practice in assessment for learning. Jeremy, too, feels that once the approach has been absorbed into staff working routines and priorities, it will start to pay dividends.

"It dovetails with the renewed frameworks, and by encouraging people not to put lids on children's learning it will benefit the more able. We'll have a much better insight into where children are."

Key points.

In the opinion of experienced teachers APP and Assessment for learning are not the same thing – nor, when you study them, are they intended to be.

AfL is already a strong feature of every good teacher's classroom practice. It can be refined, and children brought much more into the process, through self and peer assessment.

AfL sits well with independent, enquiry-based learning.

AfL requires confident teachers with deep subject knowledge – because the teacher needs to know, through the lesson, what counts as success and what is the logical next step.

APP is a refined summative assessment tool that irons out a number of existing uncertainties. It increases the school's understanding of its pupils' progress and makes planning more effective.