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Why use AfL? Dusting off the black box

Why use AfL?

Dusting off the black box

This article explains the benefits of engaging with theories when attempting to assess learning within the classroom. Using evidence from a PGCE action research project, it outlines how effective Assessment for Learning (AfL) can improve learning and motivation with subsequent affects on attainment levels. In a sequence of revision lessons, GCSE students were encouraged to define their own learning issues and outcomes, re-inventing the teacher's role as a facilitator of learning, in the spirit of AfL.

- Using Bloom's taxonomy in lesson objectives
- Sharing lesson objectives in the lesson as a question
- Explaining lesson progression as a series of 'steps to success' during the lesson
- Marking work against criteria, so students can identify progress

Figure 1: School X's AfL strategy.

Assessment for Learning (AfL), the focus of many INSET training sessions, swiftly established itself as a direct method of raising educational standards. But is it worth it? Since *Inside the Black Box* (Black and William, 1998), the role of AfL within the classroom has become diluted, with pressures from league tables and external examinations extensively changing the focus of AfL today. AfL is 'no better than satisfactory' in two-thirds of schools (Ofsted, 2008, p. 1), and as such is deemed to be having a limited impact on learning in the classroom. Is AfL relevant for today's classroom? When planning a sequence of revision lessons for a GCSE class during my PGCE course, I realised the huge impact that AfL could on my students' learning.

Through a range of social learning activities (from student-led self-evaluations to peer teaching) I planned a sequence of lessons that encouraged students to evaluate and develop their understanding of their examination topics, using AfL feedback from each lesson to define the next. While the school (a comprehensive girls' school in East London with a predominantly Asian intake) had an active advanced skills teacher who was responsible for AfL, he admitted that practice varied throughout the school. The bulk of the AfL strategy focused on the 'letter' of AfL (Stobart, 2008), with an emphasis on learning objectives and traffic-light plenaries (summarised in Figure 1).

While these mechanical elements of AfL were in place, they did not capture the spirit of AfL; nor did they impress students, who commented: 'All that lesson outcome stuff, they only do it for Ofsted!' and 'We just copy the objectives – they don't really mean anything; we know what we're doing from the title!'

In the light of these comments I decided to develop a new focus for AfL within the classroom. Building on the idea that learning is socially constructed (that is, that you learn by going through processes with others), this sequence of revision lessons focused on the students drawing out and developing each other's knowledge through a range of active learning tasks. Feedback from students at the end of each lesson enabled me to identify subject areas of least/most confidence so I could focus the next lesson on that particular area of the specification.

While this approach is not drastically different to writing a series of lessons on each element of the specification, I felt it was important for the students to have ownership of the lessons, for two reasons:

- to enable revision lessons to be relevant to students' learning, through a strong student-teacher dialogue

- to investigate the role that this approach to AfL would have on the students' learning, gauged by both their attainment in summative tests and their own feedback.

The intervention in practice

Over a fortnight's lessons, students were given a leading role in the development of their revision lessons. The class as a whole began by identifying areas where they felt they were weakest. This defined the learning objective of the lesson. Then, instead of teacher-led episodes during each lesson, a series of activities was used which focused on sharing information between students. One such activity was a carousel mind-mapping activity where students mapped the course content on flipchart paper and then stood by their strongest topic. The class then circulated around the room, explaining key points and issues to each other, targeting their own knowledge deficits. Subsequent lessons required students to work in groups on each topic and then feed back to the class on a wider level, sharing learning throughout the group. Peer feedback then led the development of further content coverage (Stobart, 2008). Figures 2 and 3 depict some examples of this student work. Group work then targeted areas of weakness, with students using their own knowledge and that of their peers to develop their understanding. In this case, the focus is the 'green revolution'.

Following the six-lesson sequence, the students sat a mock examination in exam conditions, assessing their understanding of the subject.

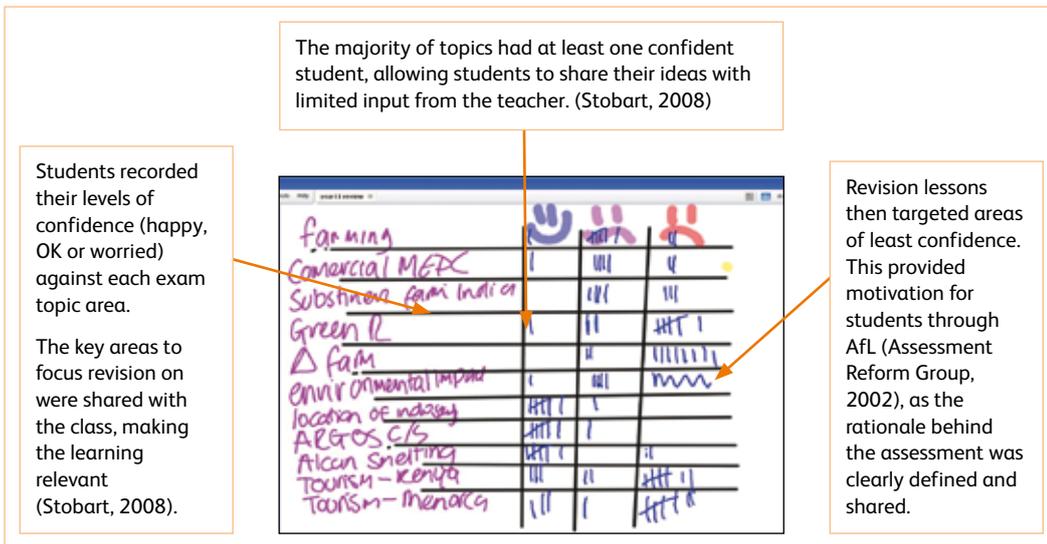
The risk of the black box – did the intervention work?

During the intervention, student focus group feedback, teacher feedback and comparisons with previous summative assessments were made, to assess the impact of this approach to AfL. This was used to determine the impact on student motivation and learning.

Motivation

Student focus groups revealed the extensive impact which this approach had on students' own motivation and learning. Students felt that 'the lessons were more relevant' with one particular girl commenting: 'I suddenly realised that I knew all this stuff, when I thought at the start I was going to fail.' A common feature within the feedback to the intervention was that students showed they had enjoyed and been motivated by the lesson sequence, because of their active input into the learning:

Figure 2: Effective communication with the students to plan revision.



Because the teacher didn't tell us any answers, he only guided us; we got to the right answers ourselves. It was like proving we actually knew the geography – and we did! It really helped me get stuck in with my revision.

This feedback shows the potential of good AfL, as this student is not only engaged with her subject, but her enthusiasm for learning has spread to her revision. Such engagement is a crucial sign of good AfL in the classroom, as learners are both empowered and enthralled by the learning experience (Stobart, 2008).

Staff observed a 100% increase in motivation, referring to a lesson the week before the intervention where the students 'all looked asleep' despite similar revision activities. From this, we can see that the spirit of AfL is key to successful motivation through assessment.

There was also a noticeable increase in how well-prepared students were during the course of the two weeks as they entered the classroom. As one student put it: 'We knew that Sir was expecting us all to contribute to the lesson, so we needed to be prepared to answer! That's why I was prepared for each lesson – I knew that I was going to teach and learn at the same time.' Creating an environment where all students felt able to contribute meant that students were motivated to come into lessons prepared to 'teach and learn at the same time'. This supports the notion that effective AfL can 'enhance motivation for learning' (Assessment Reform Group, 2002).



Figure 3: Learning as a social process – a carousel revision technique led by students.

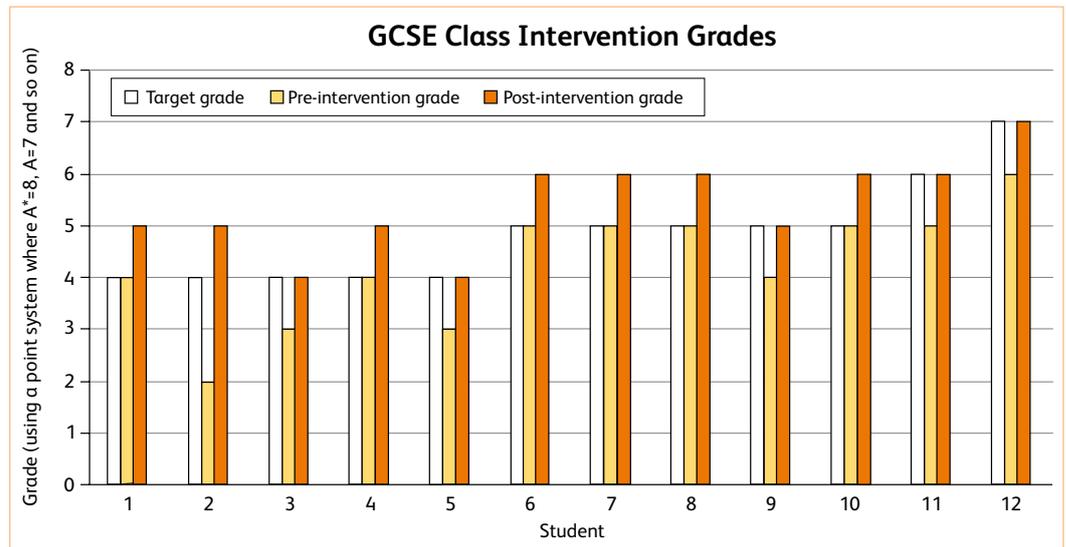
Learning

Staff comments also emphasised a vast improvement in the pace of learning within the classroom. One teacher commented that students were 'covering a wider range of new geographical learning in the same amount of lesson time'. Despite these being revision lessons, many topics were being learnt for the first time, as the content had originally been of no obvious relevance to the students: 'We didn't pay much attention to changes in farming, because it seemed boring and pointless the first time round.' However, due to the pressures of the GCSE exam, students noted that in the revision lessons 'we felt like we could be honest about what we knew, which meant that we learnt the topics we needed to know.' All students in the classroom felt that they had managed to learn more content per lesson in the intervention sequence than previously, again suggesting an improvement in lesson pace.

Summative assessment comparisons showed a strong positive relationship between student-focused AfL and increases in student attainment. As Figure 4 shows, all of the students improved from their previous grade by at least one grade boundary. The post-intervention grade results indicate that 60% of students exceeded their target grade (based on key stage 3 levels) by one grade boundary.

While this suggests that the intervention was successful, other factors could also explain this increase in attainment. The students were actively revising at home, and had been taught revision strategies as part of a whole school programme which would have impacted positively upon their attainment in these assessments. Similarly, revisiting early course content with skills developed later in the two-year GCSE course may have also enabled students to access the higher-order skills required for high-level responses. It is important to note though, that these alternative explanations complement the in-class interventions that the students were experiencing.

Figure 4: A graph depicting the attainment of students pre- and post- intervention.



Students related this increase in attainment to their increased engagement with the subject, and learning, because they were more focused in the lessons. As one student commented, 'Because we had worked together as a class to cover the content, I felt like I knew the topics inside out.' Weeden and Lambert (2006) note that 'students become involved in an active review of learning, enabling them to plan revision for high stakes tests more efficiently' when AfL is effective. The results of this intervention support this observation, as shown by the improvements in Figure 4.

As the class teacher noted, 'The girls were lost in their learning at many stages ... this is the most effective AfL I have seen.' Students who are fully engaged in their learning and who understand how to develop and in which direction they need to shape their knowledge, are the hallmarks of effective AfL (Stobart, 2008).

From this, we can see that effective AfL, where the focus is genuinely student-centred, can raise the motivation and achievement of students. This is due to an increase in the students' engagement with relevant learning in the classroom (Stobart, 2008) that enables them to develop a deeper understanding of key concepts through socially constructed learning.

Key ingredients for effective AfL

AfL is an effective tool for developing learning in the classroom. But no two classes are the same, making good practice difficult to share. However, this project identified some essential ingredients to help develop effective AfL.

Ensuring a strong, positive relationship with the students, with clear boundaries, to establish strong teacher–student dialogues was essential to this intervention. Fairgrieve (1949) is right in saying that: 'no one likes to be taught.' As such, the development of lesson sequences should focus upon students developing their own learning (be it independently, in pairs or in groups) while ensuring progression at the same time.

By making lessons relevant, fun and challenging, I found teaching more enjoyable, and learning became natural, making it seem more important to the students – all achieved through effective AfL. My experience showed how easily AfL can be incorporated into any scheme of work, with little effort, but maximum returns. | **TG**

- Do you have any successful AfL strategies? **Share your experiences using the 'Comment on this page' facility on this article's page on the GA website.**

Useful webpages

'GTIP Think Piece – Assessment for Learning' on the GA website: www.geography.org.uk/gtip/thinkpieces/assessmentforlearning/#top

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