

# AfL

## Assessment for learning: capturing the spirit or following it to the letter?

The researchers in this study set out to analyse how far tutors of adult literacy and numeracy classes (working in a college and an adult education centre) were able to capture the spirit of Assessment for Learning (AfL) and promote deep engagement with both subject content and learning processes. Research in schools has shown that the same assessment for learning activities can lead to very different kinds of learning. Whilst school teachers working in the spirit of AfL encourage learners to become more independent, critical learners, others only use AfL activities to transmit knowledge and skills.

The three college tutors followed by the researchers had a natural empathy for the spirit of AfL approaches. During the project the tutors worked on the AfL approaches of questioning and oral feedback. They aimed to reduce the amount they talked in lessons, encourage more engagement and promote learner independence. They felt that carrying out research inquiries could help them to improve their practice. One tutor reflected: ‘before I would ask a question that was really wide and general and then we’d go totally off, digress, because I’d left the question too open [now] I would think ... how could I have rephrased this question and I would ... jot a note down, so that I could think about it after the class’.

The tutors’ approach stemmed from the belief that whatever the learners’ starting points, they had the ability to progress. They made addressing learners’ needs and interests a priority over following a predetermined scheme of work. All three tutors organised collaborative working and peer and self-assessment activities to great effect. Learners in one of the groups were observed to spontaneously check and mark each other’s work.

They had developed the habit of looking at each other’s work and commenting on it, and making suggestions for improvements.

On the face of it, the learning cultures of the three other tutors working in an adult education centre were very similar to the three college tutors. Good personal relationships between tutor and learners and between the learners were important to them, as was continued dialogue between the learners and between the tutor and learners. But the content of their interactions varied greatly: sometimes it was concerned with questions about how to learn more effectively (for example through talking to others), but often it was simply concerned with subject knowledge (such as the correct use of apostrophes or ways of calculating percentages) or about assessment (such as the assessment criteria of one of the national tests).

Although all three of the adult education centre tutors increased the amount of group activity during the project, individual working predominated. Barriers to the use of more challenging approaches such as group discussion included the tutors’ concern about not undermining their learners’ confidence. As with the college tutors, these tutors had an intuitive affinity with some AfL principles and practices, but they did not always translate them into effective approaches in the ‘spirit’ of AfL. For instance, although they offered more group work activities in response to the learners, they

saw it primarily as a superficial change to their existing practices rather than a fundamental change in approach.

### Evidence source

Derrick, J., Gawn, J., & Ecclestone, K. (2009) Evaluating the ‘spirit’ and ‘letter’ of formative assessment in the learning cultures of part-time adult literacy and numeracy classes. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13 (2), pp. 173-184.

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*The researchers observed and talked to three tutors working at a college in a medium-sized London Borough and three tutors who worked in an adult education centre in a small Midland town. All six tutors were part-time and taught adult numeracy and literacy.*

## Take action

Would you find it helpful to:

- investigate how you might improve the AfL techniques you use in your classroom? You could, for example, record a lesson, transcribe some of your interactions and reflect on how you could have promoted deeper engagement through the kind of questions you asked and feedback you gave, or
- conduct a classroom inquiry to help you to develop AfL practices that lead to independent learning and reflect on what you have learned? (You may find the article on page 5 a useful starting point).