

Investigating theory and practice in Assessment for Learning: Four case studies Volume 1

Catherine Montgomery
Liz McDowell
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Major contributions to this publication were made by:

Mel Gibson

Alistair Sambell

Kay Sambell

Julie Scanlon

Nicola Reimann

Introduction: Assessment for Learning in context

This guide presents case studies of modules that students find challenging in some way and in which tutors have introduced AfL approaches as a means of supporting students through the grasp of difficult theory or its application. For the purposes of this guide, only brief snapshots of the approaches, the student response and the theoretical issues are possible. It is intended that this will give an overview that may encourage staff reading this to find out more about AfL approaches and their influence on learning, teaching and assessment and stimulate ideas that may influence their own practice.

Assessment for Learning (AfL) is an approach to teaching, learning and assessment in Higher Education that has been developed at Northumbria University over more than a decade (Sambell and McDowell, 1998; McDowell et al, 2005). AfL promotes a range of principles in approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, acknowledging that effective approaches to assessment can perform a powerful function in improving student learning. It is a broad concept that recasts assessment as learning rather than end-point testing and advocates a learning environment which:

- Encourages authenticity and complexity rather than only reproduction of knowledge in student learning and assessment
- Minimises the negative effects of summative assessment as the main driver for learning and teaching and promotes formative assessment
- Enables students to build confidence and capabilities
- Promotes both formal and informal effective feedback on learning
- Develop students' autonomy as learners and (future) professionals

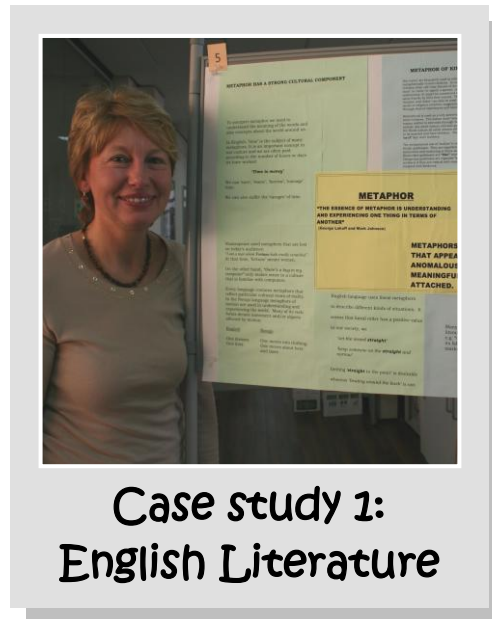
Student involvement and peer construction of learning play a crucial role in AfL and a key purpose of AfL is to foster student development through encouraging students to develop skills in evaluating, judging and improving their own performance. These skills as self-assessors are at the heart of autonomous learning and of students' future independence as professionals and life-long learners (Boud and Falchikov, 2006).

This report is based on research carried out in the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Assessment for Learning (CETL AfL) and it provides examples of how Assessment for Learning is continuing to have an impact on teaching, learning and assessment contexts at Northumbria University. The report aims to present a research and practice view of some of the current approaches in AfL, showing how these approaches are becoming embedded at Northumbria and how both students and staff are working with AfL. The focus is on a series of research case studies, carried out in the academic year 2006 – 2007, that chart the

introduction of specific AfL approaches. It is intended that the presentation of the current case studies will both exemplify the practices of AfL, showing how they are developing, and illuminate some of the theoretical issues that have arisen in their implementation.

The CETL research project as a whole employs a multi-site case study design with each case study site representing an activity which constitutes an implementation of AfL in a learning context. Data was collected through classroom observation, interviews with students, reflective conversations with staff and documentary analysis including analysis of students' assignments and the written feedback from staff at the end of the module. The aim was to obtain fine-grained insights into the introduction of AfL approaches in particular modules across a range of disciplines and establish the influence of the approaches on the local teaching, learning and assessment context.

The Case Studies: AfL observed in action



**Case study 1:
English Literature**

Context

- This module focuses on Literary Theory and is a compulsory core module on the first year of the BA English Literature. It generally has around 100 students each year.
- It is a one-semester module carrying 20 credits and is followed up by another module in the second semester where students are intended to use what they have learned on this module to apply to selected texts or 'canons'.
- The forerunner of this module focused more on texts and issues whereas this module brings in wider discussions of theory, relating the issues to culture and values.
- The module introduces students to current debates concerning the nature and value of culture in literary theory terms. It is designed to give students the opportunity to engage critically with a diverse range of cultural practices and texts, focusing on non-canonical forms of writing as well as visual media.
- The teaching approaches on the module consist of a lecture followed by a seminar where students discuss issues raised in the lecture. Students also read particular texts and in small groups present their ideas to their peers and tutor in the seminars.
- This is the first module in the first year in which students submitted assessed work in the form of an essay. The previous module's assessment consisted of smaller exercises in the first semester and a 1,500 word essay in semester 2. The approaches to assessment were changed when the module was adapted in the academic year 2005/6. This is explained in detail below.

Aims of AfL approaches

The overall aim of implementing AfL approaches in this module was to give students more support in becoming successful in writing their first academic essay of the programme and to help the students more fully develop their skills in close critical analysis. After an initial delivery of the module using AfL approaches in the academic year 2005/06 tutors noted a difference between the high quality nature of students' discussion in seminars and the quality of the written discussion in essays at the end of the module. Therefore further AfL approaches were introduced that aimed to enable students to transfer their high quality discussions into their written assignments. The approaches introduced over two academic years are explained in more detail below.

AfL approaches used

Academic year 2005/06

- Summative assessment was divided into two linked components. The first part was to be submitted early on in the semester (before reading week) and the second part was submitted at the end of the semester. This got students engaged in writing for assessment much earlier in the semester.
- The first part of the assessment involved students in writing a 1,000 word piece requiring close critical analysis of two given contrasting text extracts. Tutor feedback was given following this first task and the second part of that first assessment required students to write a reflective response to the feedback the tutor had given and attach it to the second part of the assignment. The purpose of this was to get students to engage with and respond to tutor feedback.
- The second part of the assessment for the module required students to write a more 'traditional' essay of 2,000 words choosing a title from a list of 10. One of the 10 titles had a predominantly reflective perspective.

Academic year 2006/07

- Tutors noted that the approaches introduced in 2005/06 improved student engagement with the ideas and theory during the module and they believed that the reflection task encouraged students to engage actively with written feedback. There was a marked improvement in the pass rates for the module. In 2004/05 10 students out of 97 failed and had to retake the module but in 2005/06 only one student failed.
- Despite this evident improvement in student learning, tutors felt that students were not associating their discussions in class with what they had to do in their written work and that the relationship of the assessed tasks to the theory was not clear to students. They therefore decided to make further changes to address this.

- Short developmental writing tasks were introduced into the seminar sessions. Seminar discussion was more closely linked with assessment tasks and the relationship between seminar discussion and assessment tasks was made explicit by the tutors.
- Detailed guidance was given in the module handbook as to what was expected in the essay, for example, a definition of what 'close critical analysis' entails was provided.
- More emphasis was placed on students preparing short presentations of their ideas to the group during seminars.

The case study was initiated in order to establish student responses to the introduction of AfL approaches over two years.

Research approach

The research focused on students' perceptions of the seminar discussions and the assessment tasks. One seminar group of 28 students was observed over the period of one academic year, throughout their literary theory module and also through the second module in the second semester that required students to apply their knowledge of literary theory to particular 'canons' of literature. Interviews were also carried out with students at the beginning and end of the literary theory module. Student seminar discussions were recorded as were discussions between the module tutor and the researcher. Students' essays and tutor feedback on those essays were also collected as data. Reflective discussions between the tutor and the researcher were also recorded and used as data.

Research findings

Variation in student perception of and approaches to the assessment task

The summative assessment of this module asked students to carry out a 'close critical analysis' of a series of text extracts and apply the literary theory approaches they had learned in the module to the texts. Students' approaches to writing their assignments showed that some recognised a 'pattern' between the texts they were analysing and the ideas and perspectives of the course (an approach that gained a high grade). Other students tended to foreground the task they had been set and this seemed to encourage a more text-focused answer that did not address the wider issues and concepts of the course (and thus received a lower grade). This is an example of variation in students' discernment of principles and concepts of a given assessment task.

The students who had done very well and received first class grades had developed a sense of their own views in relation to ideas of the accepted theorists and the tutors' views. One student who received a first class

grade described the process of integrating literary theory with ideas from text extracts and her own ideas as follows:

'I tried to relate my ideas to what I had, rather than what I had to my ideas. I read the extracts and thought of what was similar about them and what was different, Then I kind of found out why I thought that and related them to a different way of reading from Bennett and Royle [the core text] and why they had put it in that way, and then inter-related it.'

'Did that then somehow lead you to the theory?' [researcher]

'Yes, it was a way to get it in because I didn't know how to get it in. Once I'd managed to get one point in and related in one way it was easy to get from another point to the extracts [given as part of the assignment].'

Other students tended to foreground the task they had been set and this seemed to encourage a too text-focused answer that did not address the wider issues and concepts of the course (and thus received a lower grade). For example one student who received just a pass grade noted:

'The first thing, with anything, you have to know what the task is. So the first thing was I made sure I read the outline of what the task was, made a few notes on the extracts that we were given and trying to adhere to the description in the module guide of what the task was, and then once I had compiled my notes together I tried to form it into an essay. Once I understood what the question was it was just a question of getting onto it'

It seems ironic that this student's conscientious adherence to the task set was what misled him into omitting consideration of the wider theory. The tutor's view of student approach that produces a text-focused, narrow response is that this shows that the student has missed the point of the assessment and indeed of the purpose of the module:

'It's as though they've seen the assessment as completely separate from what they have done in seminars. What they are bringing to bear is what they already know - which is interpreting text, which many of them can do when forced, they can look at language, and they can look at the small-scale stuff, they've only got two short extracts here. We know they can already do that.'

Students' perceptions of what 'criticality' was in relation to the assessment task were also varied. Students appeared to have an understanding of the nature of what criticality requires although they expressed this understanding using an informal non-academic discourse, with some vivid metaphors. One student said of

criticality that *'it's like swapping heads with somebody'* and another student noted that *'critical thinking is not just one-way thinking'*. Some students used descriptions of criticality that appeared to combine their own informal perceptions of the idea with phrases they may have heard from their tutors. One student noted that criticality is:

'Being able to question the reasons why you see something ... the way you analyse it and say why do I think that, then proof from the text, and secondary sources to back it up.'

Against this variation in perceptions of the idea of criticality the tutor has her own perception of how the concept can be understood and she uses this in her assessment of students' work. The tutor noted:

'What I do try and get people to see is that it's the dialogue, the text, the theory and you, and it's [all of those] things going on and people can see that or not see it. Some people don't know what I'm on about, but Leona has got it, she got the text talking to the theories and she is in there as well.'

So there was variation in the way that students approached the tasks and also a variation in their understanding of concepts relating to the tasks. Whilst some students interviewed demonstrated an ability to explain what critical thinking was, they were not necessarily able to achieve this in their writing of their assignments at this stage of their academic experience.

Distinctiveness and impact of AfL

The first year students in this module had a sense that what they were doing in this module was distinctive from school approaches and that it was a pre-requisite for more independent learning and autonomous ways of thinking about the material. The tutor felt that the introduction of AfL approaches had definitely improved the standard of students' work, with work appearing more 'focused' than the previous year. The tutor said:

'Overall regarding the assessment - it was quite impressive, the people who try to do it really try to do it, there was a lot of effort and it was focused for the most part, really, on the requirements of the task, which is quite different from last year, which I was pleased to see that it was generally a lot more focused'.

However, the tutor felt that a small number of students had still failed to understand the fact that the aim of the assessment was to use what they had learned on the course and the tutor felt that some students were not making a significant link between what they were discussing in seminars and what they were supposed to write about in their assignment. The tutor noted:

'They've missed the fact that assessment assesses work done on the course. I have actually found myself putting that in some of the comments - what do they think we are assessing? I haven't put that but I said 'it is assessing what you've done on the course'. Maybe their concept of what they have done on the course is different to mine - it might be a gap'.

The AfL approaches introduced in this module fostered peer interaction and dialogue with peers and tutor. Students on the module placed significant value on peer feedback and peer discussions within their views of what was important in the seminars. They had a strong sense of respect for their peers and they attributed value to their classmates' comments. One student noted:

'Just like how something wouldn't make sense at the beginning and then we talked it all through and everybody would discuss it and then it would make more sense afterwards.'

Students fore-grounded the importance of dialogue with their peers and tutor for the development of their understanding of the content:

'What do you think it was about the seminars that helped you to understand?

Just other people, because other people can see it in different ways to you and being able to put forth your own view about something to her [the tutor], and her to be able to explain it more deeply.'

The tutor's view of the importance of the dialogue with the students placed importance on assessing progress informally, building confidence and developing understanding. It also noted the risk involved with this approach:

'These sessions where they are taking a lead, you are really getting to see who is doing what, and there are some really interesting things coming out. They are reading that stuff and finding examples from their own experiences and applying it. Sometimes it really shows you [and] it's showing them more than you telling them, that they can do it. I think it's a confidence building exercise as well; I've been pleased with it. And next week will be the same kind of format with people bringing stuff. I have to be on my toes because you don't know what's going to happen.'

Student comments suggest that the lecturer was right to emphasise the importance of confidence-building. For example, the student who received the highest mark in the group said the following about her classmates:

'I think a lot of people are really intelligent, they have got better ideas than me, so I think I just listen to them all'.

Thus the research has shown that the interactive AfL approach in the course also exposes the fragile sense of self and uncertainty of the value of their own views and abilities amongst students and the quote shows that students may feel silenced within the peer discourse (Baxter-Magolda, 1992).

Students also perceived a development in their own perspective and independence in working with the texts as a result of the approaches taken to literary theory in this module. Furthermore some considered that these interpretive skills could be applied to other modules:

'I like looking at the different ways of interpreting texts. It's also really good for my other modules as well, it makes you think differently rather than just looking at it straightaway and reading up on the author, blah-de-blah, there are a lot of different theories, and it's looking at your way of interpreting it rather than following the way your teachers in the past have told you what to do. It gives you more independence in looking at texts I think.'



Case study 2: Childhood Studies

Context

- This is a key theory module on the first year of a joint honours degree. It generally has around 100 students on the module and it is a year-long module that carries 20 credits.
- The module explores concepts of 'childhood' from personal, historical, cross-cultural and academic perspectives. Students' own understandings and experiences of childhood are extended through an analysis of assumptions, concepts and changing perspectives on childhood.
- The approaches to teaching involve a 2 hour interactive lecture which is team-taught by two lecturers and supported by a student assistant.
- A range of AfL approaches are used on the module and the lecturers have developed their particular approaches over number of years.

Aims

The longstanding aims of the lecturers further implemented in the academic year 2006/07 were that students should:

- begin to 'problematise' the concept of childhood and be able to see that there are a range of perspectives on childhood. This then enables students to develop a grasp of key questions, ideas and formal theories that arise from a range of perspectives on childhood
- develop confidence in the discourses and practices of their academic subject. This involves developing an awareness of a range of perspectives on theory and ideas, a range that includes their own views

and the views of their peers as recognised voices, without simply adopting a passive acceptance of published ideas and theory.

AfL approaches used

- Discussion and peer exchange were emphasised in order to develop students' awareness of their own views, the views of other students and the ideas presented by relevant theorists.
- Interactive lectures were used to promote dialogue and collective reasoning with a large group of students. Students' points were taken up by the tutors and represented as 'theory' on the screen. In this way a dialogue developed between students, tutors and the representation on the screen. Ideas and theories were thus constructed by the group. This dialogue developed into a model of a critical argument with the tutors giving a meta-analysis of why a particular point was important to the structure of the discussion. The student assistant typed as students talked and the screen showed a summary of their points which were later put on Blackboard, the e-learning portal.
- Team teaching in lectures was used to demonstrate the development of critical academic reasoning. The shared dialogues of the two staff teaching the module provided a model of the development of perspectives on theory, with questions being asked between the staff and different points of view presented.
- The approach in this module emphasised experience-based learning, with activities and tasks encouraging the students to gather material, make sense of subject material and work informally in small groups to share ideas and discuss
- The composition of small-group texts were built up through peer review of writing, placing value on students learning from one another's approaches to writing in a low-stakes situation. Students used these texts in various contexts; to produce posters for a student poster session; sharing notes made in lecture sessions and editing and adapting the texts for use in the summative assignment.
- Students kept a reflective log or diary throughout the semester and this was used to write a reflective review of the module which was submitted with the final summative assessment for the module.

Research approach

The large lecture group of 110 students present in 2006/07 was observed throughout one semester and a smaller group of students were interviewed at two different points in the semester. Reflective conversations with tutors and analysis of students' assignments for the module were also collected as data. Student conversations during interactive lecture tasks were also recorded and analysed.

Research findings

Building supportive learning communities through dialogue

In interviews students stressed the importance of dialogue with their peers and tutors. They noted that they found interaction with others both inside and outside the classroom was vital to their learning. One student noted:

'Other people's ideas [were important] as well, and when we were writing things down, and we talked about it afterwards to people, you know, and looked at their notes and they might have had a better example, and you noticed how they were linked together, it helped a lot seeing how other people viewed it.'

Observation on the module showed the development of student communities that focused on mutual support in building confidence with academic tasks. The small-group discussions that were established in the classroom also flourished outside of the formal learning environment with students meeting informally and talking about their work. The dialogue within the lecture was integral to the building of a learning community that crossed into the informal learning environment. Students developed a respect for the views of their peers and an awareness of the strengths of their peers' understandings of particular aspects of the course. If they had questions they then knew where they could find the answers amongst their peers. One student stated:

'I think the class as a whole, when they get started with the discussions - I don't join in much - but it's amazing. Hearing everybody bounce off everybody else is fascinating. Hearing all of the different viewpoints, you can think 'oh yeah, I should have known that', and seeing how things develop, and if somebody shows that they've got good knowledge on something you can go to them for help.'

Learning about the other students on the course appeared to become an important part of the learning experience in itself and the Assessment for Learning approaches encouraged this. These approaches promoted an integration of subject theory and development of trusting relationships with other students, where students began to appreciate the individuality of other students' backgrounds and experience. One student said:

'We brought our photographs in and you had to tell your friends, like they would describe it, and that was really interesting because you could find out more about the people you were sitting with as well as doing the task itself. And the thought shower was common ideas and then people had individual things, like they had a milestone in their life, which was really interesting as well.'

This appreciation of and interest in other students' backgrounds and their individuality appeared to develop students' engagement with the theory and ideas of the module. It enabled them to see the subject not as 'stale' theory but as 'fluid' and dynamic in its application to real people and also in relation to their own personal development:

'You thought it was just a stale, not a fluid subject. So I found the whole enlightenment thing really interesting when we had to interview somebody, I took my partner, and his answers were exactly what I would have said before doing the course, and it's fascinating to look back now on how you do actually change.'

Students on this module often appeared to test out their ideas on family members, demonstrating the wide-ranging effect of their development of understanding of the subject and embedding this development firmly in the social and cultural context of the student.

Distinctiveness and impact of AfL

Students appreciated the distinctiveness of the Assessment for Learning approaches. The students were aware of the aims of the approaches, saw them as different from those of other lectures and recognised what these approaches were trying to achieve. For example, the team-teaching approach in this module that modelled the collaborative development of theory and critique as described above was noticed by students. They saw their own role in the development of the ideas of the course and noted that they were more engaged by their involvement in this approach. One student stated:

'Hearing everybody else's answers you could see how differently people saw them [the ideas]. It was really interesting, and we don't do that in any other lecture. And our work went up on Blackboard, instead of just the lecturers. It's our thoughts and our ideas so it makes it more personal. So you are more inclined to read it and remember what it meant because you were more involved in making it.'

The lecturers' dialogue also enabled students to develop a different perspective on the theory of the module; identifying the significance of points helped students to grasp what was most important in their discussion and thus achieve a more concise presentation of it in their own work. Another student noted:

'Hearing [the tutors] talk about what we had seen in everybody else's work as a group, that helped me to get mine right down – squish it down, get it more concise, and get the point I wanted to make across in a different way.'

Through this process students began to ask themselves questions about their learning and developed an awareness of where their views were in relation to others'. There was a great deal in the student interviews relating to their acquisition of processes of self-checking, where they established whether they were 'on the right track', whether they had 'got the point' and had not 'gone off the rails'. Students who were interviewed appeared to have used their tutors' talk and their interaction with peers to carry out this self-checking, thus developing essential skills as self-assessors that could be useful in their future academic work and professional contexts after university.

Assessment for Learning approaches in this module also appeared to highlight the affective nature of the learning process. Students' heightened engagement with their peers and tutors built a supportive environment but it also required both students and tutors to invest more of their sense of themselves in the teaching, learning and assessment process. This posed risk because as well as underlining strengths this openness and collaborative atmosphere could also expose weakness. One student stated:

'The first semester the same insecurities are running through every single student: 'my work is not good enough'. Until you see somebody else's, that you're on the same track and you are all learning the same thing, that can really give you a big confidence boost and can make you think 'I'm right on the right track'. But also if your work is not really that good, if you read somebody else's it pushes you a bit more because you want yours to be just as good as theirs.'

The risk and the affective in the collaborative environment of Assessment for Learning can also highlight the transformative nature of the university experience as a whole. Students can gain a perspective on how their experience in Higher Education may affect their perception of themselves and their lives beyond university. One student noted:

'There is a whole load of stuff you have to come to terms with when you come to university.'

Thus this case study has underlined that against a national and institutional atmosphere of performativity and measurement in Higher Education (Ball, 2007; Mann, 2001), students are still constructing their learning experiences in an emotional way, investing a huge sense of self in their success or failure.



Case study 3: Engineering

Context

- This case study focuses on a BSc year 2 module in Communication Systems, part of the degree in Computer Networks.
- In this year-long module, students work in groups to design and present a key element of a communication system, with their summative assessment in the second semester being a group presentation.
- The group has approximately 35 students in it each year.
- The module is team-taught by two lecturers who work collaboratively on the teaching sessions, lecturing together as a team and jointly observing, marking and moderating the assessed presentations of the module.
- The AfL approaches in this module are part of an iterative process of improving implementation of group work assessment and have been used and evaluated over several years.

Aims

The aim of the assessment strategy on this module is to support the development of learner autonomy and to encourage collaborative activity amongst the students. Thus students are engaged in research and presenting that research reducing dependence on the lecturer as the only source of knowledge and aiming to foster independence and autonomy, competences that are important for professional and lifelong learning. They work in groups with the aim of developing their social learning. Peer evaluation and reflective elements of the module are intended to develop students' abilities as assessors both of their own work and the work of

others as this can enable students to monitor their own learning effectively rather than always relying on the lecturer to inform them of their progress.

AfL approaches used

- Students are engaged in 'authentic' tasks in the form of a 'real-world' engineering problems. In the first semester they work in groups to discuss high level issues and ideas relating to the design of communication systems. They are then required to design a particular element of a system, namely a Wi-Fi link, between two buildings of the university. They are asked to cost the project and plan how this communication system would be implemented in the specific context of the university and produce a report that describes the system and its implementation. In the second semester the students work in self-selected groups to research and present a topic relating to a particular communications system, such as a GPS or mobile telephone technology. Each student in the group presents on a particular aspect of the chosen system.
- Presentations are used to encourage students to engage with the subject matter which they have to present to tutors and fellow students. The majority of the second part of the second semester is used for student presentations and attendance at all of these presentations is compulsory. It is made explicit to students that the aim of the presentations is also for them to learn about the systems that their peers have researched and presented. The presentations are video recorded with copies given to students.
- Students are asked to reflect on their learning and progress. Reflective commentaries are required as part of their summative assessment.
- Students are involved in peer review. They participate in identifying criteria for a 'good' presentation. From this list of criteria for a good presentation a peer feedback form has been developed and students use this to provide written feedback to their peers on their presentations.
- The summative assessment is staged and integrated with the learning activities, namely a report on the system designed plus a reflective commentary in semester 1. In semester 2 there is individual summative assessment of the presentation given; handouts used and participation in the group task are both formally assessed components. Peer feedback is given on the presentation and students use this and their own reflections on the recording of the presentation to submit a written reflective commentary on their individual and group performance, outlining what they did well and what areas they could have improved upon.

Research approach

The research case study aimed to illuminate how and to what extent the approaches in the module contributed to students developing a wider understanding of the theory and practice of communications systems. Students' ability to position themselves to find out information for themselves, rather than relying on input from the lecturer, was also seen as significant. The aims of the lecturers were also that students' confidence with the subject matter would be enhanced so that they might be more likely to reason through issues that they may not initially have understood.

The data collection began prior to the students' group assessment work with observation of the whole class in the lecture. A group of students were then interviewed before the beginning of the group work and these students were followed through the second semester. This enabled a fine-grained picture to be built against the context of the class group and a picture of the module as a whole. Students' informal preparatory discussions and peer work both inside and outside of class was observed and some was recorded and this was considered alongside their final participation in their group presentation. In addition to this the students were interviewed again at the end of the semester to gain an insight into their experience of the group assessment process. In order to consider the detail of the marking processes at the end of the module audio recordings of the tutors' moderation meetings were made.

Research findings

Emphasis on the social context of learning promotes engagement and understanding

In the interviews students fore-grounded the social aspects of their experience of the assessment approaches in this module. The emphasis on collaboration and group work meant that students were engaged in their learning and assessment tasks outside of the classroom. Their learning thus became a more important part of their every day social lives and because of this they felt more engaged and more motivated by the task. This gave students more time to think about the issues around the subject and to consider the ideas more widely. One student said:

'It [understanding the ideas] happens in class, although I would say it happens much more informally. If we are out at lunch or when we are at home we'll chat over the Internet about the day's work or whatever. I think it's much more outside. Because you then think about it subconsciously, so it then becomes the main topic of discussion... because you've got time to mull over what you've learned on the material, all the different areas of that'

Another student's comment suggests that the social context of where learning takes place can make that learning easier. He said:

'On an evening you go to your mates and you are talking about something [academic]. I had some conversations and you are more receptive and you are more open to get the information that way.'

In addition to this students noted that the peer presentations helped them to understand the ideas covered by the module and to situate them into a 'real' context. Another student noted:

'Until I got to that point I was like in the middle of the sea and I didn't know in what direction to swim. [Then] a guy was asking what he has to do... and another student explained everything because he had huge knowledge of it. But before the student started to explain I didn't really catch the real meaning of that question.'

This suggests that the assessment for learning approaches employed in the module were encouraging students to build their own informal communities of learning outside of the classroom and this was promoting a more contextualised understanding of a wider aspect of the subject. This appeared to be spreading even beyond their formal meetings with other members of their group into their everyday conversations with their peers.

Integration of friendship groups and work groups

It was interesting to note that every student interviewed on this module said that they had an already established group with whom they worked every time they were asked to engage in group work. They had experience of group work tasks in other modules on their programme and they chose to stick with the group they had worked with before as they had an established way of working with each other. The members of this group were also their friends and thus establishing contact and meetings was less problematic. One student notes:

'Because we had a group from another module as well... We have had some experience of group work and sometimes it can be problematic, but I think it will be all right because I'm going to do it in a circle of friends, so we all have contact on a regular basis and we can all pull together because we've done it on more than one occasion, so I think it could work out well.'

It is also interesting that friendships had developed through group work early in the students' course and their friendship groups and their academic work groups had become one and the same. Another student indicates that this was a process that had occurred over time and says that his group in this module consisted of

'mostly people I knew beforehand, when we all started to get to know each other in the first year, that carried over, so we tend to maintain a group, so it's in that group of friends.'

However, students also noted that this integration of friendship group and academic group could create some tensions if issues arose within the group. In this situation students perceived the need to choose between keeping their friends and improving their chances of a good mark. One student expressed the view that the university environment is different from the 'real' business environment. He said:

'The thing that I have noticed is that for some people there isn't enough incentive. I know it's meant to promote group work and prepare you for the business environment. The basic comparison I would make there is that in the business environment you could be sacked! Whereas in university you can't... you get people who are just happy to get by because all they want is a bit of paper at the end. But you get those who want the best that they can do and try to push that, and you end up in a balance between trying to keep your friends and also that business approach of really wanting to get it done and it must be done.'

In addition to this aspect of their group work, students also noted a tension when they gave their presentations between the different parts of their audience. The students pointed out that it was difficult to give a presentation that was both interesting to their fellow students and also met the requirements of the assessment task, which they felt was to show what they understood about their topic. Both of these tensions underline the social complexity of the task facing students when they are asked to carry out collaborative work as part of their assessment.

Distinctiveness and impact of AfL

As with the other case studies, students were aware of the distinctiveness of the AfL approach. They responded very positively to the teaching, learning and assessment strategies and demonstrated a good understanding of what the approaches were aiming to achieve. The students also appeared to find the approach engaging and motivating.

One student said:

'I think it encourages life skills, because in work you will have to work in teams, be able to work seamlessly, so having to do a presentation where one guy does one bit and leads straight into the next, you communicate with your peers and sort out what you are doing and I think having those skills and encouraging them to grow and get better I think is a very good thing..... and I think as well as having those skills it encourages you to work hard yourself, because you know you're going to get marked on your performance.'

The students indicated that they understood the significance of the group work and the presentations approach for their development of their all-round skills as Engineers of the future. One student noted:

'As [the tutor] mentioned at the beginning of the semester, you can be very clever and design something very practical, new, and it could be the next hit in history, but if you can't present it properly it will never go out of your log books and your notes.'

It was also clear from what the students said in interviews that the assessment approaches in this module had contributed to students developing their confidence in themselves and improved their self-esteem in terms of their academic learning. All of the students talked (without being asked directly) about their own sense of their skills in dealing with people. One student said:

'I think I have a good way with people, I can express myself in a way that isn't forceful and implies arrogance on my part. Making someone feel equal and on a par with you in a social manner makes them want to work more with you. I think just being in communication, being friendly with people. I think that really helps with morale in the group generally.'

As well as describing their own confidence students also talked about their efforts in promoting confidence in their peers and the role of the peer feedback on the module in developing this.

'I'm often very honest, I speak my mind, regardless, and I will try to put forward how I understand people, and one thing I often do is, even if I don't know about a topic if I feel there is a common ground.... you can criticise people but you have to make sure that they know that they do have the ability to do it [carry out the task] themselves.'

Students also discovered areas in which they were confident and through this could recognise areas where other students may have more expertise and knowledge than them. This process of recognising when to listen to the ideas of someone else is an important part of developing realistic judgements about one's own knowledge and competence, developing skills as a self-assessor (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). One student noted:

'If it's something I feel very confident in, I can be in a position to give out knowledge, to say 'yes we can do it that way'. If I don't know the subject we are talking about I prefer to be in the second line, to see who is [knowledgeable] and give my work to the group.'

Students viewing themselves as being able to 'give out' as well as receive knowledge was one of the aims of the lecturers in this module.

Overall, as with the other case studies, the study of this module underlines that AfL can engage students in a social constructivist approach to learning, where problems are solved as a group and a wider and more contextualised understanding of the subject is gained from work with others. A student from this module said:

'We sit down and discuss things and go through ideas, and bounce things off each other, because then I find we can solve each other's problems a bit better. If you can discuss the subject area, because each person tends to have a strength in a different area, so if you come together, you get a much better general feel for the whole thing'



Case study 4: English Language

Context

- The module is a year long module on Language, Culture and Communication for first year undergraduate students of English Language.
- The module has approximately 65 students each year and is a core compulsory component of the first year. The module is delivered through a combination of lectures and seminars.
- Before 2006/07 assessment had been two 1,500 word summative essays at the end of each semester with one specific title given by the tutor for all students to answer. Students completed these essays individually outside of class time and the assessment tasks were not explicitly prepared in lecture and seminar time.

Aims

The aim of the lecturer was to enhance student learning by providing varied formative discussion and writing tasks integrated into the module. The intention was that students were able to gradually build their competence and confidence in the discipline by having opportunities to practice in a low stakes environment.

AfL approaches used

- Students and tutor together negotiated a list of titles for students to choose from for the final summative essay of 3,000 words. This project was built up through formative tasks over the academic year.

- In the first semester, students wrote three short pieces of text of 500 words that were put together in a non-graded formative essay that was submitted at the end of the first semester. The three pieces of text were reviewed by their peers in a peer writing seminar.
- Students also produced a poster in groups and a poster session was held as an informal and social event where students gave each other feedback on the presentation of their ideas in poster format.
- The students received oral feedback in group tutorials on their formative submission after the end of the first semester and 'traditional' written tutor feedback was also given on these formative pieces.
- In the second semester students were asked to bring in a short text source relating to a topic of the module and, in class, students worked on paraphrasing the text and in pairs they practised synthesising two written sources.
- Half way through the semester the titles for the summative essay were negotiated with the students and the tutor, beginning with lists of topics and moving towards forming titles and questions that reflected the module content

The module tutor noticed that the introduction of the AfL approaches had an impact on the quality of student engagement with learning and this is discussed in detail below. In addition to the perceived improvement in the quality of student engagement in the module, there was also some data relating to student grades that suggested that the AfL approaches had influenced students' achievement. In 2005-2006 before the changes to the module the average mark across the module was 61.2% and after the integration of AfL approaches the average mark rose to 72.6%. In addition to this the percentage of first class grades rose from 19% in 2006 to 36% in 2007.

Research approach

In this case study the data was collected by two co-researchers, the module tutor and a colleague, who collaboratively designed the study and collected, analysed and interpreted the data. Data included classroom observations, interviews with students and student written work. This case study also included tutor think-aloud protocols where the tutor recorded her reflections as she marked student essays as well as a series of recorded, reflective conversations between the two co-researchers, during which the module and the AfL activities were discussed as they unfolded. By engaging in this dialogue and including it as data, the case study emphasised the importance of talk for professional development and culture change in education and tried to mimic everyday conversations between teachers which have been shown to contribute to continuing professional development. One of the aims of this collaborative research was to highlight the evolving process of Assessment for Learning and underline the fact that it can be enhanced by a process of teacher reflection, thus developing links between teaching, research and learning (King, 2004; Brew, 2003).

Research findings

AfL operates in a complex social environment: many of the approaches in this module aim to promote informal student to student interaction that supports and improves student learning. However the findings of this case study emphasised that this is not a simple goal as the response is embedded in a complex social environment. The student experience of the poster session on this module illustrates this. The poster session aimed to develop students' perspectives on a chosen idea, issue or theory on the course. The students thus develop a sense of ownership of the theory and research further sources on the topic. The poster involves students in beginning to present their ideas and work in an academic context. Through this process the students are becoming initiated in their use of discourses of their subject and are attempting to 'use the right words' to explain the sometimes complex concepts. It is the first stage in 'going public' with their perspectives on the ideas of the course and it is done in a non-threatening environment where students are encouraged to be positive about each others' work but also to challenge ideas and the manner of their presentation. This task allows students to express their perspectives on the ideas using their own metaphors and language. The student poster gives prominence to the student view, encouraging them to see themselves as part of the academic community and as potential contributors to ideas in their chosen academic discipline.

The student response to the activity was very positive and the poster session was seen as a landmark on the course that has enabled students to understand the theory of the module. One student noted:

'The posters themselves helped me learn about other topics that I didn't quite understand before. Because it wasn't in textbook language, because it was in language from other students and how they had understood it and it was obviously right, when I looked at them it clicked in my head and I was 'oh right'. Just little things that I hadn't got like that 'gru', the green and blue, but I got it when I saw the poster, I thought that was good.'

However, the data collected also underlined the variation in response, indicating students' contrasting and complex views of the academic task within a social setting. Against the positive response to the task there is also evidence of students' reservations about any task that has the label 'group work'. One student said:

'I liked the poster but I hate working in groups. That's just a personal thing because if you want something done, do it yourself, that's my philosophy. So I don't like working in groups because people let you down. Not that I'm saying I was let down in my group because I wasn't, but the reasoning

behind it, I just don't like it, some people do and I didn't like doing it but because of the people I was working with it was still fun.'

It appears that for this student that the experience of the posters was positive but she remained unconvinced about the value of working with others. There was a fear that something could go wrong in the social process of working together and the need to trust the commitment of others created anxiety. Ironically the student also says that it was the experience of working with others that made the task engaging. This complexity in response to collaborative work was also echoed in the Engineering case study where students noted the tension between keeping on good terms with your friends and achieving a good mark for the task.

In addition to the tension created by social relationships, it appeared from the data that there was also tension that arose from the influence of university systems and policies. The university and Student Union campaigns to combat student plagiarism are an example of this and it appears that the force of these campaigns may be influencing students' views of collaborative academic work. One student says:

'Everyone is scared about plagiarism, so after all the input about plagiarism it's difficult for people to work together, or for some people to'

It is evident from this comment that there are conflicting pressures when students are working collaboratively with others and it may appear to students that the university is sending out mixed messages with this simultaneous emphasis on collaboration and on avoiding plagiarism. It is also clear that AfL operates in a highly complex learning environment where opposing forces from different systems influence student perceptions.

Distinctiveness and impact of AfL

AfL approaches in this module encouraged student engagement with formative assessment tasks. Many university staff maintain that students will not engage with formative tasks unless 'there is a mark attached'. In the case of this module the formative tasks were completed by about 95% of the student group. In the first semester all but 2 of the students submitted their formative essay and in the second semester every student but 4 of the group submitted drafts of their final summative assessment, for formative tutor feedback, four weeks before the completion date. Tittle states that:

'assessment must have meaning for students and teachers in relation to teaching and learning' (1994: 60).

Thus in order to engage students in formative assessment tasks, students must be able to see the use and benefit of formative tasks. For example, in this module students were offered the choice of feedback on drafts of work prior to submission or feedback on the final submission. The tutor said that for reasons of her workload they could only have one or the other. The students all said they preferred to have feedback prior to submission and nearly every student engaged with the process. One student response to the process was as follows:

'It was good practice, it was how we should be doing things and there was no pressure with it being formative - you could go at it whichever way you liked with no pressure. And then when you got it handed back to you, you found out if your style worked, or how you could do it. It helped all round really, because with not having any assignments handed in and given back with any feedback since May, in the year before our A-levels, it was just nice and helpful to be able to get into the swing of things'.

This approach thus provided *'feedforward'* (Hounsell (1987)) rather than feedback, and promoted a cycle of learning and development that looked towards future activity instead of concentrating on past errors. This could help to recast students' views of feedback as formative activity rather than as an *'add-on'* to teaching and learning activities (Orrell, 2006).

In addition to engaging students in formative activity, the data suggested that the AfL approaches of this module improved the depth and breadth of students' engagement with the subject content. For example the fact that students were asked to write their own assignment questions meant that they were required to consider a wider range of subject matter in order to decide which area they were going to focus on. The tutor teaching the module noticed a difference in the breadth of ideas that students were covering. She recorded this statement whilst marking the students' final essays:

'I feel that there is a really big quality difference in the depth of material they are including. They seem to have done a lot more - much wider research, obviously they've done wider research because of the open nature of the task, and I think this has enabled them to get very much more of a depth and more perspective on the material. The errors like errors of expression and bad paragraphing and errors in referencing, those sorts of things are still there, but there seems to be to me quite a noticeable quality difference in the kind of depth of... ideas that students are engaging with'.

Students also found writing their own questions to involve them in different aspects of the subject that were not directly covered in class and found it motivating and interesting that they could choose to include material they had found themselves in their summative assessment. One student said:

'We could write what we wanted, so it gets you interested in different parts of it, but if you read certain stuff that might not be covered in the lessons you could just go and write about it anyway. It's a lot more interesting than saying 'you've got one topic there, it's one topic and everyone is going to write about it'. I don't think that would motivate you as much. It doesn't matter if you are writing in the same area, because everyone has got a different take on it. [And] you can pick the area that you're best at.'

This introduction of an open task to the module has thus encouraged students to develop ownership of ideas and ownership of the assessment process. This student considered that this task gives individuality to each person's work and even if students are working on a similar content area their assignments would have a 'different take'. This is an example of an approach that could design plagiarism out of the curriculum by encouraging students' sense of ownership of material.

Collaborative practitioner research and the evolving processes of AfL

The approach to data collection in this case study was distinctive as it involved two co-researchers who engaged in a process of reflection at the same time that the AfL approaches were being introduced. This produced some interesting findings about the evolving nature of AfL and it also underlined the powerful impact that longer term peer-teacher reflection can have on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. It appeared that being involved in researching and evaluating AfL in this way provided a means of questioning students' level of understanding at particular points throughout the module. The tutor of the module pointed out:

'AfL is another way of seeing 'have they got it?' Yes, in the widest sense, it's 'what have they learned and how is that related to their assessment?' which really is the Assessment for Learning question, isn't it? There's more detail but that's the wider question. So that question is really 'is their assessment gauging whether they've got it or not?''

Thus it appeared from the data that AfL approaches (and indeed reflective teaching and learning processes) led the tutor to question when and how students had understood a particular issue over the course of the module, particularly at points of the module that aimed to convey a level of 'theory'. The process of being involved in research and evaluation of AfL promoted teacher reflection and enabled a clearer picture for the

tutor of how much students had understood. In addition to this it appeared that this process of teacher reflection encouraged the tutor to verbalise the nature of the philosophy of the module as a whole. The reflective dialogue between the co-researchers covered the issue of what the wider purpose of the module was and how to best get this across to students. The module tutor said to the co-researcher:

'I think this module, more than the other modules in their first year, is a process of personal change. There's sometimes a difference between what you put down in the learning outcomes and when you really start thinking about how you know they've got it, or what is it you really want these people to learn.'

The tutor also commented on the importance of the discussions between the co-researchers and suggested that productive reflection on assessment and learning *'needs an observer'*. The reflective dialogue between the tutor/researcher contributed to the continual development and fine-tuning of the AfL approach and helped to develop and apply the tutor/researcher's own understanding of AfL in practice as well as making student learning explicit.

In summary

Distinctiveness and impact of AfL

These case studies suggest that AfL approaches have a distinctive impact that is recognised by both students and staff. Examples from the Engineering case study indicate that students develop a more contextualised understanding of the theory of their subject through the process of collaborative assessment tasks. In English Language it appeared that AfL had encouraged students to embrace formative assessment tasks because the meaning and benefit of the tasks to their learning were made more explicit. Dialogue around teaching, learning and assessment in Childhood Studies enabled supportive learning communities to develop, building links between the learning environment in the classroom and the social and cultural context of the student outside the classroom. This emphasis on the wider informal contexts of learning enabled students to situate the ideas and theory learned into the context of their everyday lives. The case study in English Language also demonstrated that the heightened emphasis on the social context of learning in AfL highlights the complexity of the social learning environment and shows the conflicting pressures that students can experience in working collaboratively with others.

Variation in perceptions of assessment and learning

Research has shown that perceptions held by students, teachers and other participants in the learning context are crucial to the experience and outcomes of learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). It appears from these case studies that AfL approaches can highlight the variation in students' perceptions of assessment tasks. This can help to identify aspects of students' approaches to assessment that can promote a wider engagement with ideas and theory of their subjects and also identify approaches that may limit their understanding. The English Literature case study provides an example of variation in students' discernment of principles and concepts within subject matter. Students' approaches to writing assignments involved some in recognising a 'pattern' between the texts they were analysing and the ideas and perspectives of the course, whilst others tended to foreground the task they had been set, 'checking off' the elements achieved but failing to address wider issues and concepts. Some students focusing too closely on the task were distracted from the wider theory of the module, producing an analysis that did not draw in the theoretical perspectives they had learned about. In contrast to this, in the English Language module the open assessment task enabled students to take a wider view of ideas, allowing students to have choice and to develop an ownership of the ideas and the assessment process. This diversity of approach to learning promotes differential effects in a complex Assessment for Learning context. However, the fine-grained detail of students' observed learning behaviour

and approaches to learning provides essential contextualisation, enabling a move away from focus on generic findings about the student group.

The implementation of AfL involves consideration of aims and principles and careful planning but in the micro-context of the 'classroom' it is an evolving activity influenced by teacher reflection-in-action, student responses and a wide range of contextual factors, many of which are unpredictable. The English Literature tutor identified a 'gap' between student and tutor understandings of the key aims of a particular assignment. This led to refinement of strategies for sharing disciplinary expectations with students and plans for a further cycle of AfL development. The English Language case study highlighted the importance of tutor involvement in the research and evaluation of AfL, suggesting that reflective tutor-researcher dialogue enabled a more contextualised understanding for staff of the nature of AfL as well as making the nature of student understandings explicit.

Assessment for learning is not a simple innovation and its implementation highlights the complexity of the learning context. Following its principles may be more difficult and time-consuming, however, this approach results in a more engaged and more positive student experience with students becoming 'passionate' about their learning and investing their sense of self. One student from English Language noted:

'And I like how in this module you are told things, but your opinion counts for a lot of what you study... I like that we can go into the class and have a debate and get passionate about what we are learning, and I like that we can do that and not all think the same.... Because it's all about our personalities and our opinions, not just theories, I like that about it.'

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