Assessment for Learning – a sociocultural approach.

Assessment for Learning (AfL) is a title given to classroom evaluative practices that share the purpose of diagnosing and informing teachers and students about learning progress, during the learning process. These practices also have the potential to develop learner autonomy by increasing student motivation and mastery through developing the learner’s capacity to monitor and plan his or her own learning progress. Yet teacher adoption of the practices is not a straightforward implementation of techniques within an existing classroom repertoire. Recent research highlights a more complex interrelationship between teacher and student beliefs, identities, and traditions of power within assessment and learning in classroom contexts. These often hidden relationships can add layers of complexity for teachers implementing assessment change, and may act as barriers that frustrate efforts to realise the AfL goal of learner autonomy. By interpreting AfL practices from a sociocultural perspective, the social and cultural contexts that influence classroom assessment can be better understood. In turn teachers can thus be better supported in adopting AfL practices within the complexities of the social, cultural and policy contexts of schooling.

Repositioning AfL – importance of social and cultural context

Evaluative practices within the flow of regular teaching and learning that are often identified as AfL practices include strategic questioning and sharing criteria (Gipps, 1999) disclosing the purpose and processes of assessment and giving students experience in evaluating the work of others (Sadler, 1998a), giving explicit and forward looking feedback and deliberately framing assessment tasks as learning tasks (Keppell & Carless, 2006), peer and self evaluation (Marshall & Drummond, 2006), activating prior knowledge, shared dialogue over work samples (Shepard, 2000a) and reciprocal teaching (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005). These practices position learners as active contributors to the development and evaluation of understanding. In addition, they position AfL as a pedagogical practice that occurs within teaching and learning rather than at the end of a teaching episode. However, teacher adoption of these practices is challenging and problematic (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Willis, 1993). Powerful social and cultural contexts influence learner autonomy and classroom assessment, and without understanding their impact, AfL may well be “part of the futile search for a universal, culture-free, ‘teacher-proof’ approach to education” (Wells & Claxton, 2002, p. 6). A sociocultural perspective is one way of empowering teachers to negotiate the complexities of their context in order to achieve the potential of learner autonomy.

Sociocultural theory acknowledges that “activities do not exist in isolation [rather] they are part of broader systems of relations, social structures, in which they have meaning” (Murphy, Sharp, & Whitelegg, 2006, p. 5). Within the sociocultural paradigm, learning is viewed as the process of participating in a community of practice, where expertise is developed in social as well as cognitive ways through use of cultural tools learned by working alongside more expert members. Tools that make up the culture, such as assessment activities and the language of the classroom, the relationships among the people, in particular, the social structure and power relations define the possibilities for learning (Lave, 1993). Lave (p. 9) writes that learning that
leads to autonomy and fuller participation in community “cannot be pinned down to the head of the individual or to assigned tasks or to external tools or to the environment, but lie[s] instead in the relations among them.” This understanding enables a teacher to view methods of assessment as “simply practices which develop patterns of participation and subsequently contribute to pupils’ identities as learners and knowers” (Cowie, 2005a, p. 139). This is a new and challenging perspective on the purposes of assessment that gives significant importance to classroom assessment, and closely aligns with the purpose of developing learner autonomy through AfL practices.

Recent AfL research (Black, McCormick, James, & Pedder, 2006; Keppell & Carless, 2006; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Munns & Woodward, 2006) highlights this interrelationship, and the emerging social and cultural contexts of teacher and student beliefs about learning and assessment, learner identity and issues of power and control, has been summarised in the simplified diagram below:

![Diagram 1: Simplified representation of sociocultural contexts influencing AfL practices.](image)

The interrelationships are more complex than this diagram suggests. As Elwood (2006, p. 22) states, assessment is a complex cultural activity situated within “the relationship between the learner, the teacher and the assessment task in the social, historical and cultural context in which it is carried out”. Each classroom context will have unique patterns in what Gipps (1999, p. 378) calls the “assessment relationship”. The purpose of the diagram is to give teachers a framework through which they may seek to understand and examine the social contexts of the classroom. The first practice that the sociocultural perspective may challenge is the understanding of learner autonomy.
1. A sociocultural definition of Learner autonomy

A sociocultural view of mind challenges the more traditional understanding that learner autonomy is “the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 1994, p. 81). Within a sociocultural perspective, learner autonomy can be defined as the socially constructed identity of a self monitoring student who participates in culturally accepted ways within a community of practice. This definition draws from Lave and Wenger’s (1991, p. 93) definition of ‘identities’ as “long term, living relationships between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice”. It is a negotiable rather than fixed sense of belonging within a social community and students are seen as actively managing their goals and making choices to preserve their sense of identity and place. Self monitoring can be understood as “being able to understand and to control the doing while it is happening” (Sadler, 1998b, p. 1), over time reducing their dependence on the teacher (Sadler, 1998a). Students negotiate the boundaries of the languages, skills and behaviours of each classroom context, finding out which are culturally accepted. Within this definition, learner autonomy changes from a fixed state, to a potential state and the role of an autonomous learner becomes one that can only be fulfilled within a social relationship (Ratner, 2000). This perspective recognises the active agency of the student in negotiating their sense of learning identity, and changes the role of the teacher from a cognitive architect dealing with individual brain constructions to that of an elder leading a social learning community. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 53) draw the conclusion “thus identity, knowing and social membership entail one another.” Teacher and student beliefs about ‘knowing’ are therefore significant in determining and understanding learner autonomy and the practices of AFL.

2. Beliefs about learning and assessment

What is worth knowing, what is worth measuring, and how someone may check what has been learned, all relate to values and beliefs about knowledge which can generally be associated with historical teaching and learning theories. James (2006) identifies three common discourses constructed around knowledge, teaching and learning; behaviourist, constructivist, and sociocultural approaches. How these may be reflected within a teacher’s assessment and classroom practice has been summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of common discourses about knowing, learning and assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge viewed as</th>
<th>Behaviourist</th>
<th>Constructivist</th>
<th>Sociocultural</th>
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<td></td>
<td>objective, verifiable, substance transferred, linear, scalar, hierarchical with practical problem solving at bottom and theory at the top. (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, &amp; Gardner, 1991)</td>
<td>relative, subjective, constructed, problematic. Product of ways in which student is engaged by activities &amp; resources; “the residue” of mental processing that occurs in the classroom. (Nuthall, 1997, p. 699)</td>
<td>changing a person. Identity formation of self within a community, growing from novice to expert. First understand within social interaction before progressing to independence.</td>
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<td>Learning viewed as</td>
<td>absorbing, memorizing, and reproducing. Individual behavioural response.</td>
<td>understanding and performance. Individual conceptual restructuring resulting from process of interpreting and making sense of new</td>
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3
While the reality is that teachers often blend approaches (James, 2006) the beliefs that teachers hold as well as the assessment practices they choose create messages that shape the learning identity of students. A behaviourist view positions a learner as a passive receiver, and since knowledge is viewed as stable, objective and external, any lack of learning can be attributed to the innate qualities of the learner rather than the teaching (Murphy, Sharp, & Whitelegg, 2006, p. 5). Within this perspective a significant proportion of failure or poor performance is considered ‘natural’ and students may do what is minimally required, believing that it will make no difference to their understanding if their abilities are fixed (Gipps, 1999). This perspective has a mutually reinforcing set of ideas that continue to shape current thinking and practice even while the theories on which they are based have been significantly challenged (Shepard, 2000b). In order for teachers to engage students in AfL practices and create a community of practice that enables all students to develop an identity as an autonomous learner, teachers need to work beyond the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment of a purely behaviourist paradigm.

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<td>complex performances</td>
<td>uncertain connection between teaching &amp; learning (Nuthall, 1997) as individuals construct their own representations. Teachers mediate activities and experience that create dilemmas and provoke new conceptions.</td>
<td>model &amp; practice activities within social norms of structured interaction situated within community of practice. Meaning is created through social interaction with others, especially talking.</td>
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<td>Teacher’s role as</td>
<td>organiser, matching curriculum goal stages with age/stage development of learner. Neutral, objective and clarity of transmission measured by valid tests of content mastery.</td>
<td>facilitator, to motivate, structure, guide and correct misconceptions. Difficult to intervene without students surrendering to “right” teacher answer. Need detailed knowledge of concepts, progressions and common errors.</td>
<td>mediator and ‘old timer’ who establishes community of practice and works alongside novices developing whole person (behaviour, cognition, language and affective responses) assisting them to independence.</td>
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<td>Teacher’s role as</td>
<td>Student’s role as</td>
<td>learning apprentice through co-operative collaboration and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave &amp; Wenger, 1991).</td>
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<td>working hard to listen and read accurately to memorize and repeat. Can contribute to performance orientation (Shepard, 2000)</td>
<td>major responsibility for learning by being motivated, active, metacognitive to create and recreate sophisticated mental models. Move from novice to expert.</td>
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<td>Student’s role as</td>
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<td>Assessment Task requirements</td>
<td>controlled conditions, individual. Content validity. Often tests occurring at end of instruction.</td>
<td>authentic problem solving. Central and powerful concepts. Can be a learning activity occurring anytime in unit.</td>
<td>activities situated in authentic interactive contexts. Interactive, dynamic. Language and behavioural changes within an interaction (eg: portfolio conversation) as an indicator of developing expertise.</td>
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<td>Assessment purpose</td>
<td>focus on outcomes, measurement, and differentiation of curriculum. Historically used for selection for high status occupations, maintaining social order and control (Gipps, 1999, p. 361)</td>
<td>helping students learn. Focus on process of learning not just outcomes. Identifying conceptions and misconceptions and depth, richness of understanding. Self assessment central.</td>
<td>opportunity to show themselves as active, independent learner. Use of tools &amp; support to produce best performance to investigate the learner’s strategies and processes, and how these can be enhanced (Gipps, 1999) Measure degree of aid needed -Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development</td>
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<td>Student motivation to achieve</td>
<td>external motivation, reward and punishment, positive feedback. (Shepard, 2000b)</td>
<td>“peers have privileged role as without social imperative, there is no cognitive conflict” (Nuthall, 1997, p. 692)</td>
<td>has an identity within a community. Learning apprentice.</td>
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<td>Success or Failure</td>
<td>shared through interaction between teachers &amp; students who can change contexts and tools if unsuccessful.</td>
<td>shared through interaction between teachers &amp; students who can change contexts and tools if unsuccessful.</td>
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Within a constructivist paradigm, students are positioned as active meaning makers, engaged in authentic problem based learning. AfL practices sit well within this paradigm, with the focus on students being actively engaged in constructing their understanding during the learning process. Yet recent research within AfL classrooms, confirms that constructivist techniques by themselves are not sufficient (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Within both the behaviourist and constructivist paradigms, the understanding that ‘mind’ and learning are located within the individual’s head means that the importance of the social and cultural context of the classroom is taken for granted and unexamined, often unchallenged and unchanged.

Within the sociocultural paradigm, learners progress towards learner autonomy through a social process rather than a purely cognitive one. Learning can be viewed as part of an integrated cultural process, where the learning is viewed as an interaction between the individual and the social environment, where “the learner both shapes and is shaped by the community of practice” (James, 2006, p. 57). The student develops expertise through the language and activities while participating in the social interaction of working with a more knowledgeable expert (Wells & Claxton, 2002). Recent AfL research supports the importance of the teacher-student relationship and social goals in supporting the development of learner autonomy. The sociocultural perspective of learning is a powerful explanatory theoretical framework for teachers seeking to engage in AfL practices to develop learner autonomy.

While these beliefs each convey significant differences in the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, they are rarely articulated, operating more as “intuitive, rudimentary theories” (Black & Wiliam, 2006, p. 89) that are more like “solitary intuitions and received traditions” (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991, p. 31). Teacher and student beliefs about learning and assessment can operate as unseen boundaries limiting a teacher’s adoption of AfL into their practice. This is only one of the challenges for teachers when aligning beliefs and practice.

3. Challenges for teachers in aligning beliefs and practice

While teacher beliefs and their impact on classroom assessment practices is well established (Tierney, 2006, p. 242) there are very few neat correlations that can be drawn (Marshall & Drummond, 2006, p. 144). The translation between beliefs and practice is not a simple one. James (2006, p. 58) identifies a powerful “washback effect” that occurs when assessment practice is out of step with effective teaching and learning theory or where traditions and routines of assessment are each based on entirely different theories of learning. The challenge for teachers to make visible and align their theories of learning and assessment demands great teacher expertise (Black, McCormick, James, & Pedder, 2006, p. 131), requires professional confidence and professional consciousness (Yung, 2002) and a supportive context (Tierney, 2006, p. 258) especially as the constructivist and sociocultural theories are not well developed in the areas of assessment practice (Gipps, 1999). Experienced teachers adopting new assessment practices face “tensions between past histories and present discourses and images” (Murphy, Sharp, & Whitelegg, 2006, p. 8) and challenges to self concept as past routines can also be seen as “fluency” and an important part of being a skilled teacher (Shepard, 2000, p. 15). Yet developing learner autonomy is the area in which teachers feel the heaviest burdens of constraint (Black, McCormick,
James, & Pedder, 2006, p. 129), so teachers recognising the potential of AfL practices to develop the qualities they desire for students are engaging with AfL despite all of these challenges.

In recent AfL research with teachers in the UK, Marshall and Drummond (2006) observed how teachers engaged with AfL practices. They noted that teachers who wished to move away from a traditional “chalk and talk” approach, maintained this didactic teacher/student relationship through finite activities, closed instructional dialogue and teacher dependent exchanges even though they were using AfL practices with students. The AfL practices became more like techniques, and did not achieve what the teacher was hoping for as attribution of ineffectiveness was usually placed on the students’ lack of readiness, reminiscent of a behaviourist understanding of learning. Learner autonomy became more like an added bonus rather than a stated aim. In contrast, teachers who changed their traditional hierarchical relationship and considered any lack of learning as their responsibility, used AfL practices to create the readiness within the learner. The shared ownership of learning was more likely to see students develop learner autonomy through AfL. While there is debate about whether changes to teacher knowledge beliefs or change to practice needs to come first, it is clear that both are needed. Within Lave and Wenger’s (1991) legitimate peripheral participation model, changed practice can lead to changes in beliefs as long as the community of practice embodies the new practices. Within this community of practice, students also may need to change their beliefs about learning.

4. Learner identity

Student beliefs about learning are often grouped within two categories of student learner self-concepts. “Performance-oriented students” believe that academic achievement is determined by fixed ability and are more likely to work to please the teacher, pick easy tasks and less likely to persist whereas “learning-oriented students”, who attribute academic success to their own efforts, are motivated by an increasing sense of mastery, use more self regulatory and metacognitive strategies, and develop deep understanding (Dweck, 1986). Mansfield (2007, 10) in a recent review noted that ‘performance’ and ‘mastery’ goals are considered in ‘approach’ and ‘avoid’ forms with multidimensional relationships between multiple reasons that students have for approaching learning;

*multiple academic and social goals may interact in conflicting, converging or compensating ways to influence students’ academic motivation and performance in real school contexts.*

Social goals in fact may be more predictive of students’ motivation and achievement (Dowson & McInerney, 2003). The student needs to feel safe within a relationship of trust and respect with the teacher before risking exposure to formative feedback (Cowie, 2005b). Cowie (2005a) notes that students balance three goals simultaneously in any formative assessment activity. When conflict arises between the goals of completing the work tasks, effective learning and the social-relationship goals, the students tend to prioritise the social relationship goals. If they fear that their feelings or reputation may be harmed, they will limit their participation. The relationships within the classroom are critical in the development of learner autonomy.
as Murphy, Sharp and Whitelegg (2006) found when researching the sense of identity that girls develop through learning Physics. They, like Cowie (2005a) noted that classroom interactions such as the typical sequence of teacher question, pupil response, carry meanings about pupil-teacher relationships as well as content that can either act as boundaries or bridges to participation for students. Cowie (2005b, p. 207) identified the tendency of teachers to rush to ‘cover’ content, and answer student questions with ‘weren’t you listening?’ or ‘don’t you understand that by now?’ as factors that limited the students’ desire to participate. This view of mind assumes ability is measured by how quickly a passive receiver of knowledge can understand when told. For girls, the act of questioning is more often a desire to confirm an understanding, so instead of building a bridge through a shared understanding, this type of teacher response creates a barrier to participation (Murphy, Sharp & Whitelegg, 2006). Students thus can become socialised to teacher practices, and make positive choices to avoid participation that can then become routines that work against learner autonomy (Sadler, 1998a). AfL practices can encourage students as active questioners and by encouraging self and peer feedback can be ‘bridges’ to participation and identity formation.

Shared language and understanding about the quality of performance can make assessment a shared part of the learning process. The assessment tasks can also act as a ‘bridge’ for students. Assessment tasks that are structured in ways that require students to identify relationships, have a deep approach, integrate product and process and have methods that describe the quality of the process, can help restructure a student’s relationship with assessment (Willis, 1993). Tasks that make links between the private world and the social world of students as well as provide opportunities for student voice and exploratory talk to support student confidence and skills, are bridges to participation and the development of learner autonomy (Redman, 2007). However, the sharing of traditional teacher roles with students through these practices of peer and self evaluation is a significant challenge to the traditional relationships of power and control within a classroom.

5. The teacher-student relationship.

The teacher-student relationship is the key context for mediating the kind of open, trustful relationships that empower students to participate actively and responsibly in learning. The new teacher and student relationship that AfL and student learning autonomy seems to embody, requires teachers and students to develop new practices over a sustained period of time (Coffey, Sato, & Thiebault, 2005; Harrison, 2005; Pedder, 2006; Tierney, 2006). It can challenge traditional matters of power and control within the context of classroom assessment which can be exciting for some teachers, and very threatening to others (Black & Wiliam, 2006). Munns and Woodward (2006, p. 199, 210) noted five key areas, communicated through the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment message systems in a classroom, in which students process and negotiate their positions within their teacher’s ‘discourse of power’;

Knowledge: What counts as knowledge and who has access to really useful knowledge?
(“Why are we doing this” to “We can see the connection and the meaning”)

Ability: Who has ability?

(“I can’t do this” to “I can do this”)

Control: Who controls the teaching space?

(“I’m not doing that” to “We can do this together”)

Place: Who is valued as an individual and a learner?

(“I’m just a kid from…” to “It’s great to be a kid from..”)

Voice: Whose voice is given credence within that space?

(“Teacher tells us to” to “We share”)

Munns and Woodward (2006) assert that these factors all influence the way that teachers teach and how students see themselves as learners. These dimensions represent crucial transitions for learners towards an identity of autonomy through active participation and shared understanding within a shared learning community. This is an identity that can only be negotiated by classroom teachers, where assessment is part of informing the learning process. However, within the sociocultural perspective, the policy, social and cultural contexts are significant and can be bridges or boundaries to confident teacher practice.

6. Contexts

The classroom relationships and AfL practices are also influenced by the multi-layered changes to assessment practices and discourses occurring at international, national and state educational policy levels. While AfL is an enhancement from the foundations that already exist within the Queensland system (Sadler, 1998). Queensland schools have worked within a system of school based assessment since 1972 (Pitman & Dudley, 1985). Teachers have recently negotiated policy changes to classroom assessment practices such as the New Basics trial (2000 – 2003) and Queensland Curriculum and Reporting (QCAR) framework as well as a national assessment reform agenda which may be part of a broader international trend, of assessment being used by governments for economic ends to “control and drive curriculum and teaching”(Gipps, 1999, p. 363). The multiple purposes that each of these assessment reforms serve, are often not differentiated by teachers. AfL with its more humble focus on learners in classroom contexts, by virtue of the word ‘assessment’ in its title, is also associated with this political context. The social and cultural contexts of the lives of students, parents and teachers add other layers of complexity. How teachers can be supported to negotiate these contexts within the enacted curriculum, including AfL practices, to achieve valued outcomes for students is a significant area for more research and development.
Understanding complexity of teacher assessment practice- a gap in the literature

Contextually relevant research is still needed to understand the dilemmas teachers experience when adopting AfL practices (Tierney, 2006). Shepard (2000a, p. 13) also calls for more research into these “dilemmas of practice” to understand what makes sense for teachers when creating new cultures of assessment, in what Elwood (2006, p. 22) calls a “humble approach”. In particular listening to the teacher voice and student voices, while recognised as very significant are “quiet zones” (Tierney & Charland, 2007, p. 27) in the research that need more researcher attention. To understand the importance of the teacher-student relationship, students and teachers should be studied together (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002), for as Munns and Woodward (2006, p. 195) contend; it is at the messy point of teachers and students responding to each other culturally in relation to classroom discourse and assessment practices where we are truly going to see whether or not students feel school is for them.”

Improving teacher assessment capacity is more than professional learning about assessment strategies and quality task construction. Teacher assessment capacity has to include a focus on the enabling factors within the student and teacher pedagogical relationship. This includes honouring teacher and student voices, and support for teachers in negotiating the complexities of changing assessment practice within shifting social and policy contexts. The suite of Assessment for Learning evaluative practices have the potential to build bridges for students to help them become active participants in learning, and so develop identities of confident self monitoring learners. Understandings drawn from this paper can also be bridges into participation for teachers seeking to develop their own assessment capacity.