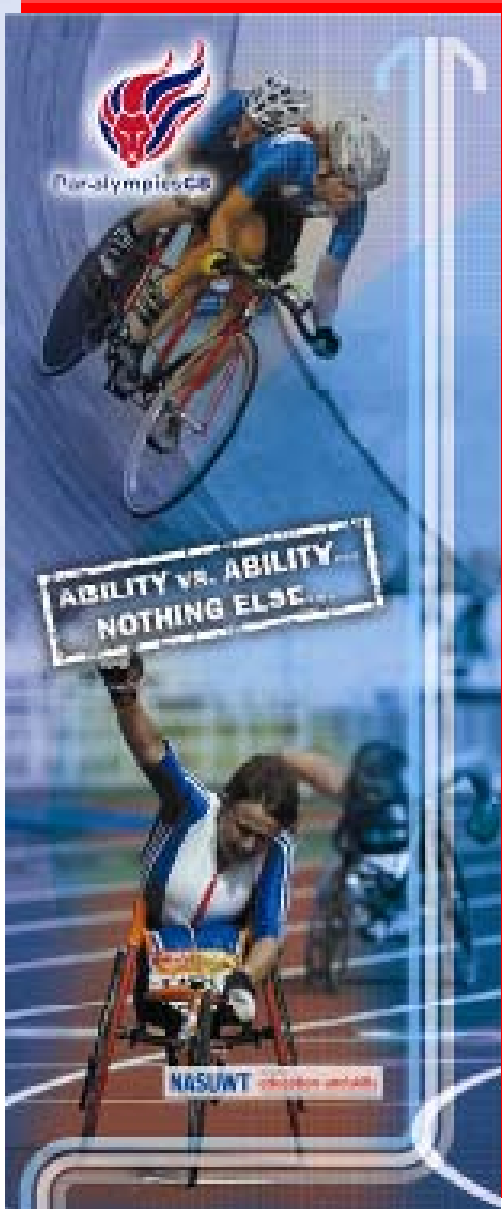


The new curricula and assessment – an introduction for *abilityvsability*



It's time for change

Major changes are happening in all four countries of the UK. There are new National Curricula for England, Scotland and Wales beginning in September 2008 and in Northern Ireland the new national curriculum which began in the primary phase in 2004 is now underway at KS3.

All four countries now have curricula which integrate more across the subjects, with less formal assessment and more assessment for learning. All have much reduced documentation with less prescription about how things should be taught. The result is a greater freedom and a focus on effective learning as an outcome.

In England a new national curriculum for Year 7 is supported by a renewed framework for literacy and English along with new A level criteria and specification - including the opportunity for students to achieve an A* grade. In Scotland the new Curriculum for Excellence will begin in September 2009. This is a cross phase document for students aged 3-18. In Wales there will be no SATs for any age group and the National Literacy Strategy does not now apply. In Northern Ireland a gradual implementation of their new curriculum is already underway and will continue through to 2011.

There are other developments too. QCA has been busy developing the PLTs or framework of personal, learning and thinking skills. This comprises six groups of skills that are essential to success in learning, life and work. For each group of skills, a focus statement sums up the range of skills being deployed. Whilst the skills stand alone, they are interconnected. The six groups are designed to develop *independent enquirers, creative thinkers, reflective learners, team workers, self managers* and *effective participators*.

At the heart of these changes is a shift in the focus from improving the quality of teaching to ensuring an impact on learning. We have recognised this in the schemes of work provided for teachers as part of this resource. We have provided guidance for teachers about how each scheme should be delivered using a teaching sequence and a learning sequence structure. There is a focus throughout on the needs of the learner.

Background

All curricula in the UK have become more learner centred and one of the most obvious ways in which we can see this in national guidance is in the national acceptance of the value of assessment for learning, or AfL.

Teaching and assessment, of course, go hand in hand and there has always been assessment *of* learning - a summative assessment process which measures achievement and progress at the end of a defined period. But now it's recognised that the current focus on assessment *for* learning is really important in supporting the learning of young people. It helps to bring them more obviously into the assessment process and ensures that they have an active part to play in their own learning. So what is AfL?

Assessment for learning is formative in nature and takes place all the time in the classroom. Here are three useful definitions.

In assessment for learning, the learner's task is to close the gap between the present state of understanding and the learning goal. Self-assessment is essential if the learner is to do this. The teacher's role is to communicate appropriate goals and promote self-assessment as pupils work towards the goals. Feedback in the classroom should operate from teacher to pupils and from pupils to teacher.

Sadler, R. (1989)

In this paper...assessment refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged.

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998)

Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.

Assessment Reform Group (2002)

What does AfL do?

AfL helps teachers to help students understand where they are in their learning, where they need to go and how they can get there. To support teachers in using these approaches with their *abilityvsability* materials, we have briefly described some of the key principles and ways in which AfL can be developed and nurtured in the classroom. These are:

- sharing clear learning objectives
- providing informative oral and written feedback
- using skilful questioning

Each of these approaches help students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Evidence has shown that in lessons where AfL is part of everyday teaching, students become increasingly independent, are typically highly motivated and engaged with the learning. AfL can help students to develop the skills of regularly reflecting on their learning, discussing their work, and seeking advice and assistance when they need it. It supports a culture in which all students are confident they can improve because they are aware of their successes and the progress they are making.

Learning objectives and learning outcomes - what's the difference?

A key characteristic of AfL is that it involves sharing learning objectives and outcomes with students. Clear and precise learning objectives help students to know what they are trying to learn. Clear and precise learning outcomes help them to recognise achievement. Both should feature as important aspects of any lesson planning structures. Learning objectives need to be simply and clearly expressed and referred to during the lesson. It is common practice for teachers to write learning objectives on the board at the beginning of the lesson. Sometimes teachers think they are explaining what pupils will be seeking to learn but are only telling them what they are going to do.

Presenting the intended learning as a question can sometimes make this clear - *So what were the Olympic Games really like in ancient Greece?* Using this approach allows the teacher and students to keep coming back to the question in the course of the lesson and checking on whether the objective is understood and some learning has taken place.

So what's the difference between a learning objective and a learning outcome? It's straightforward really: objectives are specified by the scheme of work or the programme of study. Objectives are teacher based and help to guide the lesson planning and the lesson assessment. For example, reading this information is a learning objective; talking it through with someone else to help you understand and implement it is a learning outcome. Learning outcomes are what the students understand and can achieve. Outcomes are student based and are linked to student knowledge. The intention should be that students are constructing their own learning and not just memorizing or reciting the learning objectives.

The value of feedback

An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as *feedback*, by teachers, and by their students, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Good feedback is an essential component of AfL. We all improve what we are doing if we know how best to improve things. The best feedback is always the dialogue that takes place between teacher and student while the task is being completed. This is going to be two-way - student to teacher and teacher to student - another key to effective feedback. It can be oral or written and short term or medium term. Whatever marks or grades are given by the teacher, there should be a clear and consistent relationship between comments made, the level of written and oral praise and the rewards system. Students should be frequently involved in marking their own work. If the criteria which identify a good piece of work have been made clear to the student, then involvement in the marking is appropriate and will lead to better engagement and understanding. Students should be encouraged

to link their marked work to any targets that have been jointly set with the teacher. Additionally, students can indicate in an oral review with the teacher where they think a particular target has been met.

Previously I would have marked the work and graded it and made a comment. The pupils only saw the mark and/or credit. After a credit they lost the motive to improve. Now they get a credit after we have gone over the work so they have an incentive to understand the work.

Rose, Brownfields School [quoted in a PowerPoint presentation by Black and William]

The role of questioning

Did you know that teachers ask up to two questions every minute? That means up to 400 in a day, around 70,000 a year, or two to three million in the course of a career. Perhaps more significant is that questioning accounts for up to a third of all teaching time, second only to the time devoted to explanation. If you're going to be asking up to three million questions as a teacher, it's going to be worth making sure you ask the right ones in the right way. The only point of asking questions is to raise issues about which the teacher needs information or about which the pupils need to think. Good learning starts with good questions rather than good answers, after all. So to improve the quality of the questions asked in the classroom, what can you do?

It's useful to remember the different kind of questions you can ask - and ask the right ones at the right time. Lower order questions just require learners to remember, while higher order questions require them to think. Generally, lower-order or factual recall questions tend to be closed, with a single right answer, and are likely to be of the what, who, when or where variety. Higher-order questions are more likely to start with how, why or which, and tend to be open - with a range of possible responses. Lower order questions are not necessarily of a lower quality - they test factual recall, and that's important. But teachers probably ask too few higher order questions - research has shown that only 8% of questions asked in the classroom are of higher order type.

Most questions asked in the classroom are answered in less than a second. That's the average time teachers allow between posing a question and accepting an answer, throwing the question to someone else or even answering it themselves. Weaker pupils are often given even less time - usually because the teacher is afraid of embarrassing them, or lacks confidence in their coming up with the right answer.

Studies have found that if teachers increase the wait time the number and quality of the responses improves. For a lower-order recall question, three seconds was found to be the optimum wait time, while wait times of more than 10 seconds produced even better results with higher-order questions. The same research also found that extending the wait time between the pupil giving the answer and the teacher commenting on it (typically fractions of a second) allowed pupils to revise or expand their response, and encouraged other pupils to contribute.

Of course, one way of improving learning in the classroom might be to ask fewer questions. There's plenty of evidence that indicates that young learners are more afraid of saying something that might be ridiculed by the teacher or their peers than they are of simply being wrong. This is *peer fear* - and the answer isn't asking simpler questions.

More important is creating a comfortable environment where being right doesn't always matter. This can help to ensure that it isn't always the quickest and most confident pupils who make those contributions. But let's look at this the other way about: at the age of five, children ask dozens of questions a day - many of them higher-order questions starting with *why*. But this process begins to slow down when they are on school. The late Ted Wragg's famous research in 1993 found that an average of just one spontaneous question each lesson came from the pupils, and that was more likely to do with procedure than with learning. Effective questioning isn't a one-way process. If the teacher asks the kind of questions that stimulate thought and debate, there's a good chance their pupils will also start to ask more.

[This information is based on an article by Phil Wood and Colin Patterson in *Teaching Expertise* September 2004]

To ask of other human beings that they accept and memorise what the science teacher says, without any concern for the meaning and justification of what is said, is to treat those human beings with disrespect and is to show insufficient care for their welfare. It treats them with a disrespect, because students exist on a moral par with their teachers, and therefore have a right to expect from their teachers' reasons for what the teachers wish them to

believe. It shows insufficient care for the welfare of students, because possessing beliefs that one is unable to justify is poor currency when one needs beliefs that can reliably guide action.

S. Norris (Alberta), 1997 in *Science Education*
