Definitions of Assessment for Learning

The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) formulated a definition of AFL that has been widely adopted and often quoted:

‘Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.’ (ARG, 2002)

This reasonably concise yet richly dense definition is congruent with many of the elements of assessment conceived as ‘sitting beside’. It also alludes to assessment as a process rather than an event, to planning for gathering information, to interpretation and reflection, to the agency of learners, and to the appropriate adjustment of future learning and teaching. The definition was published alongside a set of research-based principles to guide assessment for learning practice, each of which was elaborated but whose headlines are:

- AFL should be part of effective planning of teaching and learning
- AFL should focus on how students learn
- AFL should be recognised as central to classroom practice
- AFL should be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers
- AFL should be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact
- AFL should take account of the importance of learner motivation
- AFL should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed
- Learners should receive constructive guidance about how to improve
- AFL develops learners’ capacity for self-assessment so they can become reflective and self-managing
- AFL should recognise the full range of achievements for all learners. (ARG 2002a, 2-3)

These principles extend the understanding of assessment for learning by locating AFL as integral to teaching and learning and indeed a powerful form of learning itself, by recognising the affective facets of assessment, and by adopting a broad notion of learning and achievement, as well as stating key features of AFL. The 2002 Assessment Reform Group’s definition has been used widely, but: ‘the ways in which the words are interpreted and made manifest in educational policy and practice often reveal misunderstanding of the principles, and distortion of the practices, that the original ideals sought to promote’ (Klenowski 2009, 263). This quotation is from a position paper on assessment for learning published in the editorial of an Asian-Pacific special issue of the journal Assessment in Education. The paper was generated at the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning held in Dunedin, New Zealand in March 2009, an invitational conference attended by 31 assessment ‘experts’ (predominantly academics and consultants) from New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada, Europe, and the United Kingdom. The position paper drew attention to the fact that:

‘deciding where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there’, has sometimes been (mis)interpreted as an exhortation to teachers to (summatively) test their students frequently to assess the levels they attain on prescribed national/state scales in order to fix their failings and target the next level. (Klenowski 2009, 263)

It went on to explicate an understanding of AFL that emphasises the centrality of by students. What was termed a ‘second-generation’ definition of assessment for learning captured the key ideas:

Assessment for Learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning. (Klenowski 2009, 264)

Also in 2009, Black and Wiliam published a definition that they said drew on and was consistent with their own (Black and Wiliam 1998) and ARG’s (2002) earlier definitions. They stated that:

‘Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited.’ (Black and Wiliam 2009, 10)