Five steps to implementing Assessment for Learning

In an AfL classroom, students are continually demonstrating their learning, usually in an explicit way directed by the teacher. Discussion, observation, and reviewing of students' work through structured learning opportunities enables AfL. Teachers can use assessment information in the planning of future lessons, and during interactions within the lesson being assessed. For example, a teacher uses students' responses to questions to adjust the course of a lesson, or to include remediation activities and corrective instruction after a sequence of teaching.

Here are five steps to help you to implement AfL in your classroom:

1. **Prime students first.** Let the class know that you will be conducting the lesson in ways that they might be unfamiliar with. Explain that the purpose of assessment is for you to see how they are going in their learning and how you can help. Tell students that in your class learning is less about getting the right answer and more about their capacity to express and discuss their own understanding.

2. **Plan classroom activities that will elicit evidence of learning.** Think about your 'opening move' and spend time framing questions which will explore the critical understandings. These might include:

   - recap quizzes

   - concept maps

   - brainstorming and recording students' ideas on a whiteboard

   - journal writing

   - role play

   - drawing understanding or writing a sentence on an 'exit-card' handed in at the end of the lesson

   - holding up fingers or number cards in response to mathematical problems.

3. **Engage rich, thoughtful and reflective dialogue focused on evoking and exploring students' understandings.** Use open questions, phrased to invite students to explore their thinking, and ask students follow-up questions to clarify, explain, elaborate, and suggest connections and applications.

   Allow more time for thinking — extend pauses after your questions and after students' contributions.

   Find ways for all pupils to have an opportunity to think and express ideas (consider paired or group discussion, or a choice of responses to vote on, or asking all students to write down an answer). Invite students to expand on or argue against another student's answer before responding yourself. Write questions such as "How do you know?" or "Why might this be incorrect?" and give students time in class to write a response. Be confident and flexible to explore unexpected answers.

4. **Develop classroom routines that enable you to have individualised, one-on-one conversations with students.** Use dialogue to respond to and reorient students. For example, asking "Are your characters going to be talking or will you just provide a caption at the bottom?" enables the student to maintain ownership of the plans for improvement while also being guided into appropriate actions for improvement.

5. **Consider the cultural and linguistic aspects of assessment.** Be sure you are assessing skills and knowledge rather than students' literacy skills or the task's cultural interpretations. Understand students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to ensure feedback is given appropriately.

...and where you could go wrong

- Not pausing long enough to get students to think or continue expressing ideas.

- Asking rhetorical questions or answering your own questions. Students soon learn not to bother thinking about a response if they know you are going to answer it anyway.

- Directing the student to the correct answer. Over time students work out they are not required to think out their own answers, but only to guess what the teacher expects to hear.

- Relying on eager hand-raisers to fuel discussion. Develop expectations for all students to engage with questions, and consider ways to randomise the way you call on students.

- Not asking follow-up questions to probe students' thinking further. Consider asking students why or how they came to their answer.

- Comparing students' performance with that of other students; instead compare current performance with previous performance.

- Wasting time on record-keeping. It is unlikely there is much use in recording formative assessment.