

Learning how to learn through AfL strategies

Why is the issue important?

We know that assessment for learning (AfL) strategies are effective at improving pupil learning. But implementing them effectively is not that easy. For AfL practices to be truly effective, teachers need to change from teaching about a subject or topic, to helping pupils take responsibility for their own learning by reflecting and acting upon information and feedback they are given. This is neither a trivial or straightforward change to practice because it involves changes in understanding, values and attitudes as well as behaviour for both pupils and teachers.

What did the research show?

The Learning How to Learn project¹ showed how few teachers (20%) implemented AfL practices in ways that promoted independent learning by pupils. Teachers who *were* successful at promoting independent learning:

- gave pupils activities that offered them scope to think for themselves and ensured the activities built cumulatively
- exchanged ideas with their pupils and talked with them in ways that developed their understanding
- demonstrated how they believed all pupils had the capacity to learn and saw helping pupils to learn as their responsibility.

How was this achieved?

The researchers found that conducting their own classroom inquiries and reflecting on what they had learned helped teachers to develop AfL practices that led to active learning by pupils. Working collaboratively with their colleagues helped teachers to change their practice and learn the skills necessary for implementing AfL practices effectively, including how to observe learning, give feedback to learners and develop effective interactions with pupils. Leaders who reinforced key messages regularly and sustained a continuous focus on learning how to learn by, for example, making it a regular item on agendas, and integrating assessment into policy documents helped to embed deep change in their school.

What are the implications?

Teachers may like to consider the following implications in acting out the main messages of the study.

- The project found that giving pupils activities that offered them scope to think for themselves and ensuring the activities built cumulatively so that they gradually developed pupils' understanding and knowledge helped foster independent learning. Would you find it helpful to investigate how far the activities you offer your pupils promote independent learning? You could, for example, work with a colleague to observe each other's lessons, noting how the pupils make use of what they learn from one activity in the next.

¹The research papers are available from: www.learntolearn.ac.uk

- The kind of dialogue that took place in the classroom was important. Teachers who exchanged ideas with their pupils and talked with them in ways that developed their understanding of quality criteria were successful at promoting independent learning. Would you find it helpful to investigate how you might improve the dialogue that takes place in your classroom? You could, for example, audio tape a lesson, transcribe some of your interactions and reflect on how you could have probed and challenged your pupils' thinking even more.
- Believing in pupil autonomy and showing this in interactions with pupils made a difference to whether or not pupils became independent learners. Teachers who showed they valued learner independence made clear their belief that all pupils' performance, knowledge and understanding could be developed. They also demonstrated that if they saw that learning failed to take place that they reflected on why it had not happened and what they might do to help. Would you find it helpful to ask a colleague to observe a lesson and note down two or three instances when you model a belief in pupils' capacity to learn and some opportunities for new and fuller modelling? Could you do more to find out how much your pupils learn from the activities you offer them? You could, for example, ask your pupils from time to time what they feel they have learned and what they need more help with?

Leaders might like to consider the following implications.

- Working collaboratively with colleagues helped teachers change their practice and learn the skills necessary for implementing AfL strategies effectively, including how to observe learning, give feedback to learners and develop effective interactions with pupils. Could you do more to support collaborative learning in your school by, for example, releasing teachers to plan activities together and encouraging them to reflect on the impact of the changes they make to their classroom practice?
- Conducting classroom inquiries and reflecting on what they had learned helped teachers to develop AfL practices that led to active learning by pupils. Teachers' classroom inquiries also helped schools to become learning communities that welcomed challenge. Could you do more to support colleagues wanting to carry out classroom-based inquiry into what they and their pupils are doing and learning and encourage them to share their results with other colleagues?
- Leaders who reinforced key messages regularly and sustained a continuous focus on learning how to learn by, for example:
 - asking their colleagues to complete self-evaluation questionnaires to identify which practices to focus on,
 - making learning how to learn a regular item on agendas, and
 - integrating assessment into policy documents
 helped to embed deep change in their school. Would you find these strategies helpful for embedding deep change in your school?

To read the full study, see <http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/tf-mentors/ProfessionalDev/MentorsLibrary/documents/AfL0307.pdf>

¹The research papers are available from: www.learntolearn.ac.uk