

Assessment Of AFL And AOL

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Introduction

Assessment is not only a method of grading students after instruction. It also provides information that teachers and learners can use during the learning process. Two commonly discussed approaches are Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL). Assessment for Learning is primarily formative: evidence is gathered during instruction and used to decide what should happen next. Assessment of Learning is primarily summative: evidence is gathered to judge what students have achieved at a particular point. Both approaches are necessary, but they serve different purposes and should not be confused. Effective education uses assessment to improve learning as well as to report achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Assessment for Learning

Assessment for Learning occurs when teachers and students use evidence of current understanding to adapt teaching and learning. The purpose is not merely to produce a score. It is to identify where the learner is, clarify where the learner needs to go, and decide which actions can reduce the gap (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

AfL may include questioning, observation, exit tickets, short quizzes, drafts, peer review, discussion, self-assessment, and analysis of student work. What makes an activity formative is not its format but how the information is used. A quiz becomes formative when the results change instruction or help students revise their thinking.

Assessment of Learning

Assessment of Learning summarizes achievement after a period of instruction. Examples include final examinations, end-of-unit tests, graded projects, standardized assessments, and certification decisions. Results may be used for reporting to students, families, schools, employers, or governing bodies (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Summative assessment has legitimate purposes. Schools need to know whether students met standards, qualifications need credible evidence, and systems need information about patterns of achievement. Problems arise when summative testing dominates instruction or when one score is treated as a complete representation of a learner.

The Main Difference

The clearest distinction concerns purpose and timing. AfL is used to improve learning while it is still taking place. AoL is used to summarize or certify learning after a defined period. The same task can sometimes serve both purposes. A midterm examination may contribute to a final grade while also revealing concepts that need reteaching (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Teachers should therefore ask what decision the assessment is meant to support. If the decision is what to teach tomorrow, a rapid formative method may be appropriate. If the decision is whether a student has met graduation requirements, stronger standardization and reliability are needed.

Learning Intentions

AfL begins with clear learning intentions. Students need to understand what knowledge or skill they are expected to develop. Vague goals such as “understand the chapter” provide little direction.

A stronger intention might state that students will compare two theories, solve equations using a particular method, or construct an evidence-based argument. Clear intentions help students interpret feedback and monitor their own progress.

Success Criteria

Success criteria describe what good performance looks like. They may identify essential features, quality levels, or steps in a process. Rubrics, worked examples, exemplars, and class discussion can help make criteria visible.

Criteria should support judgment rather than reduce complex work to mechanical boxes. A writing rubric should not cause students to insert features merely to collect points while ignoring coherence and meaning.

Questioning

Classroom questions can provide immediate evidence about understanding. Questions are most useful when they require explanation rather than only recall. A teacher who asks “Why?” or “How do you know?” can uncover misconceptions that a correct short answer might hide (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Wait time matters. If teachers call on the fastest student immediately, they learn little about the rest of the class. Think-pair-share, mini whiteboards, polls, and random selection can broaden participation.

Feedback

Feedback is central to Assessment for Learning. Effective feedback identifies what was done well, what needs improvement, and what the learner can do next. A grade alone provides limited guidance (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Feedback should be timely enough for students to use it. Detailed comments on an assignment have little formative value if the course has moved on and no revision is allowed.

Feedback versus Praise

Praise can support motivation, but general statements such as “excellent” or “good job” do not explain how performance can improve. Feedback should focus on the work and strategy rather than fixed judgments about intelligence.

For example, “your evidence supports the claim, but the explanation does not show how the evidence proves it” gives the learner a specific next action.

Peer Assessment

Peer assessment can help students understand quality by evaluating another person’s work against shared criteria. The process encourages learners to articulate standards rather than depend entirely on the teacher.

Peer review requires training. Students should know how to give respectful, specific feedback and should not be asked to make high-stakes judgments about classmates without safeguards.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment helps learners compare their work with criteria and identify next steps. This supports metacognition—the ability to think about one’s own learning.

Students may initially overestimate or underestimate their performance. Examples, reflection prompts, and teacher feedback can improve calibration over time.

Formative Quizzes

Low-stakes quizzes can reveal misconceptions and strengthen retrieval practice. They are especially useful when students receive feedback and another opportunity to use the knowledge.

If every quiz carries heavy grade consequences, students may focus on points rather than using errors diagnostically. The assessment purpose should determine the stakes.

Observation

Teachers gather evidence while students work. They may notice which strategies learners choose, where they become stuck, and how they explain ideas to peers.

Observation can be powerful but may be biased by expectations. Brief notes, checklists, and deliberate attention to all students can improve consistency.

Diagnostic Assessment

Diagnostic assessment occurs before or early in instruction to identify prior knowledge and misconceptions. It supports AfL because teaching can be adjusted before students spend time practicing an inappropriate level of work.

Diagnostic results should not become permanent labels. A student who lacks prerequisite knowledge may need instruction, not lower expectations indefinitely.

Summative Tests

AoL often uses tests because they can sample content efficiently and provide comparable scores. A good test should align with the intended curriculum and include items that represent the knowledge and thinking students were expected to learn.

A test that measures only memorization cannot support strong conclusions about analysis or application, regardless of how reliably it is scored.

Projects and Performance Tasks

Projects can assess research, design, communication, collaboration, or application of knowledge. They may provide richer evidence than selected-response tests.

However, projects can be affected by unequal access to time, technology, family help, and materials. Teachers should distinguish the competency being assessed from resources not central to the objective.

Reliability

Reliability concerns consistency of assessment results. High-stakes AoL requires particular attention to clear scoring procedures, sufficient sampling, and marker agreement.

Formative assessment may tolerate more flexibility because its purpose is immediate improvement, but teachers should still avoid basing important instructional decisions on one ambiguous observation.

Validity

Validity concerns whether evidence supports the interpretation and use of an assessment result. A mathematics test with unnecessarily complex language may partly measure reading ability rather than mathematics.

Validity is not a property of the test alone. The same score may be valid for one decision and insufficient for another.

Fairness

Assessment should provide equitable opportunities to demonstrate learning. Accommodations may be necessary for disability, language development, or other documented needs.

Fairness does not always mean identical conditions. It means removing barriers unrelated to the skill being assessed while preserving the intended standard.

Standardized Assessment

Standardized tests provide comparable information across many learners and can reveal system-level patterns. They can be useful for monitoring equity and achievement.

They also represent a limited sample of learning. Decisions about teachers, schools, or students should not depend on one test without considering context and additional evidence.

Grades

Grades communicate achievement but often combine several dimensions: academic performance, completion, participation, behavior, and improvement. When these are mixed, the meaning of the grade becomes unclear.

Teachers should define what grades represent and avoid using academic marks primarily as punishment for conduct unrelated to learning.

Using Summative Results Formatively

An AoL result can become useful for future learning. Teachers can analyze which standards were weak, identify curriculum gaps, and help students reflect before the next unit.

This demonstrates that formative and summative functions are not completely separate categories. The key issue is the use made of evidence (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Student Motivation

Assessment influences motivation because it communicates what the institution values. Constant high-stakes judgment can encourage avoidance and competition, while well-designed formative feedback can support a sense of progress.

AfL should not become continuous surveillance. Students also need space to practice privately, make mistakes, and develop ideas before being evaluated.

Teacher Workload

Formative assessment is sometimes misunderstood as requiring lengthy written feedback on every piece of work. Sustainable AfL uses efficient strategies such as whole-class feedback, targeted questioning, peer review, exemplars, and selective marking.

The objective is better information, not more paperwork.

Technology

Digital platforms can provide immediate quiz results, adaptive tasks, and dashboards. These tools can help teachers identify patterns quickly.

Automated data should be interpreted cautiously. A dashboard cannot know every reason a student selected an answer, and poor-quality questions produce poor-quality analytics.

AfL in Different Subjects

Formative assessment should reflect disciplinary practice. In mathematics it may focus on strategy and reasoning; in writing, argument and revision; in science, explanation and evidence; in art, process and interpretation.

One generic checklist cannot capture the important features of every subject.

Role of the Student

AfL becomes strongest when students are active users of assessment evidence rather than passive recipients of teacher judgments. They need opportunities to interpret criteria, plan improvements, and monitor progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

This shifts part of responsibility toward the learner without removing the teacher's duty to provide high-quality instruction and support.

Role of the Teacher

The teacher designs tasks that reveal thinking, interprets evidence, provides feedback, and adapts instruction. This requires strong subject knowledge because the same wrong answer may arise from different misconceptions.

Assessment literacy should therefore be part of teacher preparation and professional development.

Balancing AfL and AoL

A healthy assessment system uses formative evidence frequently and summative judgments at appropriate points. Too little AoL can make certification unreliable, while too much high-stakes AoL can distort teaching.

Teachers should plan both from the beginning rather than add tests after instruction and feedback after problems appear.

Conclusion

Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning are complementary approaches with different primary purposes. AfL gathers evidence during learning so teachers and students can decide what to do next. AoL summarizes achievement for reporting, certification, or accountability (Black & Wiliam,

1998).

Effective assessment requires clear intentions, useful criteria, valid tasks, reliable judgments, equitable access, and feedback that leads to action. When assessment is treated only as grading, much of its educational value is lost. When it is used thoughtfully, it becomes one of the main processes through which teaching responds to actual learning.

Reference

Black, Paul, and Dylan Wiliam. "Assessment and Classroom Learning." *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1998, pp. 7-74.