

Assessment for Learning: an overview

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1. There are different forms of assessment, such as summative and formative assessment.
2. Summative assessment is generally considered to be a judgement of what a student has learnt. Thus we very often refer to summative assessment as ‘assessment **of** learning’. When the assessment is summative there is no follow-up on how the individual student can improve on her performance. The student is simply presented with a mark or grade and no other feedback is given.
3. Formative assessment is different and is referred to as ‘Assessment **for** Learning’. The main objective of this type of assessment is to improve learning, thus feedback is a fundamental ingredient in this type of assessment.
4. There were times when the phrases ‘formative assessment’ and ‘assessment for learning’ were used interchangeably. Now-a-days a fine difference is being made. In the classroom the teacher uses ‘assessment for learning’. The teacher gives feedback and therefore provides the necessary help for the student to improve on his or her own work. When the student makes the effort and takes the steps to improve on her performance, the whole process becomes formative. So ‘formative assessment’ is intrinsically linked to students’ progress.
5. Other terms are being used which basically mean the same as Assessment for Learning. In Scotland the term ‘Assessment Is For Learning’ has been introduced so as to emphasise the importance of students’ progress and to insist that assessment should be carried out so as to increase learning.
6. What is ‘Assessment for Learning’? Basically it is a form of pedagogy which proves to be very effective and helps students to learn. So ‘Assessment for Learning’ is a continuous process and not a one-off task or activity.
7. Not everyone understands exactly the same thing when we mention Assessment for Learning. For example, many teachers say that they use Assessment for Learning; but the way they use it is different from what had originally been proposed. What they do is spend a month teaching in traditional ways, that is, mostly teacher-centred, and then at the end of the month they hold a test and remediate according to the needs of the students. This is good practice but it’s not Assessment for Learning proper.
8. In Malta too there is confusion regarding the use of the term. Some persons confuse Assessment for Learning or Formative Assessment with Continuous Assessment. Assessment for Learning is necessarily continuous but not all Continuous Assessment is Formative in nature. This means that you can have Continuous Summative Assessment. Those teachers who give marks or grades to students’ work on a regular basis, or who hold monthly tests and keep records in their registers, are implementing continuous assessment, but there is

nothing formative unless they give, for example, adequate feedback to students who, on their part, take the necessary steps to improve their performance.

9. So what is Assessment for Learning which started off as Formative Assessment?

Assessment for Learning is an effective way of daily teaching. It consists of a number of characteristics that the teacher can and should adopt in class. These features of Assessment for Learning have proved to bring about a positive impact on students' progress. All students benefit when Assessment for Learning is implemented. However, it has been found that low achievers are the greatest beneficiaries.

This type of assessment was given prominence because in the words of Paul Black "there was a strong body of evidence to support the claim that formative assessment practices can raise standards".

Now-a-days the literature on Assessment for Learning is vast indeed.

10. Assessment for Learning is student-centred, it adopts practices that fully involve the student during the lesson, it respects the self-esteem of students and tries to empower them to be in charge of their own learning.

11. What are the characteristics of Assessment for Learning?

These are quite simple and there is nothing extraordinary. A number of teachers in Malta are making an effort to implement Assessment for Learning. Others are resorting to certain aspects not because they consciously want to implement Assessment for Learning but because they are good and excellent teachers. In fact the characteristics of Assessment for Learning are nothing but a collection of good practices that are taking place in various schools.

But, on the other hand, Assessment for Learning is not just a list of good practices. It is a culture and an attitude, a strong belief that assessment is an effective tool to enhance learning. This is, after all, the main objective of schooling: the raising of standards which occurs if more learning takes place.

A List of practices considered to be an integral part of Assessment for Learning

- (a) Learner and teacher have clear and specific learning intentions.
- (b) Learner and teacher have clear and specific success criteria.
- (c) The teacher resorts to different types of questions in class that are well-planned, challenging and at the same time appropriate to learners' abilities.
- (d) Learners and teacher make use of brainstorming, mind webs and concept maps.
- (e) Feedback to learners, oral or written, helps them to improve their own work.
- (f) The teacher reflects on her own practices vis-à-vis feedback obtained from learners; this helps to refine teaching strategies.

- (g) Peer-Assessment and self-assessment are resorted to because these make “unique contributions to the development of pupils’ learning – they secure aims that cannot be achieved in any other way” (Black, 2004).
 - (h) Focusing on the learner who is at the centre and fully involved in the teaching and learning process.
 - (i) The teacher enhances the self-esteem of learners and tries to make them feel good about themselves.
 - (j) Learners and teacher give importance to the plenary that should always reflect the learning intention/s.
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