Assessment for Learning and Teacher Education

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Assessment for learning, often abbreviated to Afl, is an aspect of the work of all teachers. For trainee music teachers, Afl is a key feature of the way in which learning can be taken forwards, and should form a normal part of their everyday work in the classroom.

Introduction

In order to understand what assessment for learning is, it is helpful to begin by thinking about the nature of assessment, and what is special about assessment for learning in particular.

Assessment is a process of judging. In education it involves making a judgement about the work of pupils. These judgements can be made by you, the teacher, in which case they will be teacher assessments; by the pupils about each others’ work, in which case they will be peer assessments; or an individual pupil about their own work, in which case they will be self assessments. These are all terminologies you are likely to come across both in your training, and in schools.

The purposes of assessment

It is important to think about the purpose of the assessment which is being made. If an assessment is being made at the end of unit of work, or of a course of study, concerning how well or how much a person achieved during the course of the programme, then what will be being done is summarising that person's achievement. This summary can take the form of a level, or a grade. For example, practical music exams, such as those offered by the Associated Board provide a summary mark, which then provides a graded level of achievement, so that the terminology “grade 5 guitarist” means something quite specific. This assessment is known as summative assessment. The driving test is also a summative assessment, but one in which the results are simply 'pass' or 'fail'. We don't have grade 5 drivers (maybe we should, perhaps they couldn't drive at night, for example?), we have people who hold a driving licence.

If the purpose of assessment is to help decide what course of action should be taken next, then this informs the teacher and the pupil/s. Assessments of this purpose can be seen when, for example, a class music teacher gets her pupils to work in groups on a task of some sort, and goes around the groups as they are working to proffer helpful comments and make suggestions as to how the pupils can improve the work which they are doing. This is formative assessment.

These two purposes of assessment, formative and summative, differ from each other in a number of ways. Summative assessment concerns itself with summarising learner achievement, in the form of a mark, grade, or level. Formative assessment is concerned with helping the learner know what it is they need to do, what steps they need to improve their work, or what they need to do in order improve their performance. As summative assessment is concerned with looking back over pupil achievement, it also known as assessment of learning, often abbreviated to AoFl. Formative assessment, being concerned with the ways in which learning can be developed, is known assessment for learning, often abbreviated to Afl, and it is Afl which is going to be of greatest concern to us in this article. Although there are those who hold that Afl and formative assessment have differences of emphasis one with the other, in this article the two will be used interchangeably.
What is AfL in music education?

Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group 2002)

What does this mean in terms of what you will actually do in the classroom? In many ways music teachers have been employing AfL techniques in their professional practice for many years. In fact it was a music lesson which was chosen to exemplify AfL to teachers of all subjects in the original DfES (as was) guidance (DfES 2002; 2004). The quotation from the Assessment Reform Group above is saying that evidence from learners is important for teachers in deciding what it is that they and their pupils need to do next in order to take learning forwards. This distinguishes it from summative assessment on a number of counts:

- It need not involve giving a grade, mark, or level
- It is rooted in present attainment of pupils, but looks forwards to their future achievement
- It is an integral part of the teaching and learning process

These are important distinctions, and beginning by understanding how formative assessment is not summative assessment will help you grasp more fully what it is that you should be doing.

It need not involve giving a grade, mark, or level

What you are doing in formative assessment is looking for ways in which you can help pupils improve their work, take their learning forwards, and achieve at a higher level than they are doing at present. This means that assessment judgements are based on the work that the pupils are doing now, and are focused on helping them with what they will be doing next. This means that the assessment evidence will be the way in which the pupils are performing, composing, or listening, in whatever the current project they are involved with happens to be. Assessment responses to this sort of evidence will be qualitative judgements which you, the teacher, make in response to the work you see.

It is rooted in present attainment of pupils, but looks forwards to their future achievement

The assessment responses outlined in the previous paragraph are based on evidence from normal learning situations. The work that pupils do in music will be based on their current levels of skills, concepts, attainments, and ability. Your job as teacher is to move their learning on, and in doing so develop their attainment. To do this you will be working with evidence from the work they present you in the here-and-now. This is not, therefore based on notions of what you think they might be able to do, but on the reality of the musical responses and understandings they evidence in your lesson. You will be using your professional subject knowledge, and your pedagogical content knowledge to make a judgement about what needs to be done next.

It is an integral part of the teaching and learning process

The judgements you make in response to the attainment you see in your learners can, and should, affect both teaching and learning. They will affect teaching as what you find out will inform what you teach next. This is why you will have been encouraged to write Units of Work in advance, but the individual details of lesson planning can only be written sequentially, after having taught 9z, for example, you know what needs to be done next lesson to build on their learning and attainment. This is likely to be different from 9x, and as the Unit of work progresses, these differences can become more marked. The judgements will affect learning, as you will be proffering responses which are designed to help the learners with their future achievement, and so a goal will be that learning can be concomitantly developed.
Summative assessment is often designed separately from the teaching process, and tends to involve a distinct assessment activity, the results from which are used to provide a grade, mark, or level. What this means is that ‘...assessment and instruction are often conceived as curiously separate in both time and purpose’ (Graue 1993: 291). Formative assessment, as we have seen, is not like this, but involves judgements in the present that affect what comes next.

**What does Afl in music look like?**
It might seem from what we have been discussing so far that there is nothing specifically different about formative assessment from what you might feel you are doing in your lessons anyway, and from what you have observed your mentors doing when they are teaching. In fact these judgements can feel to be so much a part of the teaching and learning process that they might not feel like you are doing assessment activities at all! This is good, as one of the key principles of formative assessment is that it is integral to the teaching and learning process. Other key principles of formative assessment were suggested in the influential publication *Inside the Black Box* (Black & Wiliam 1998). In this Black and Wiliam suggest that there are four areas involved in formative assessment. These are:

- Questioning
- Feedback
- Sharing criteria
- Self assessment

**1. Questioning**
Questioning seems an obvious thing for teachers to be doing. Indeed some research has found that questioning is one of the most common activities for teachers to do in the classroom. In music lessons we need to think about the questions asked, and importantly, why they are being asked.

In music lessons a common format for practical music-making activities at KS3 and elsewhere is for pupils to be organised into small groups, often comprising four to six pupils. In these small groups the practical music task is accomplished by the group working conjointly. The role of the teacher is to circulate from one group to another helping the pupils with their work. This teaching style is very different from whole-class teaching, where you will be concerned with whole-class matters, and will be interacting with pupils on a different basis.

**Task**
How will questioning differ between the two teaching styles outlined in the last paragraph, those of whole-class teaching, and small group work?

**Task Discussion**
In your response to the task it is possible that you will have mentioned things like:
- Open questioning
- Closed questioning
- Prepared planned questions
- Spontaneous questions in response to pupils' work
- Bloom's Taxonomy
- Question stems
- Questioning for understanding

(If you are unfamiliar with any of these terminologies, it will be worth looking up what they mean)

There are differences in the functions of questions you ask, and these are worth really thinking about. We know that ‘Teachers do not generally review the assessment questions that they use and do not discuss them critically with peers...’ (Black & Wiliam 1998: 8) and although you may have had discussions with your tutors and mentors about questioning, really getting to grips with this may be a new experience for you! In the whole-class situation it is likely that you will be asking questions for recall, this counts as low-level questioning, and you may well have planned the questions you are going to ask in advance. When circulating amongst groups working on practical music making, your questions are far more likely to arise in response to what you have observed, and will take the form of a question-based conversation with the pupils, in which you suggest things they could try, or proffer...’
suggestions as to how they could improve on their work. This takes us into the next area from Black and Wiliam’s list, that of feedback.

2. Feedback
Feedback occurs when you have one of the assessment dialogues we have discussed above, and you make suggestions as to what the pupils can do in order to improve on their work. This feedback needs to be specific, and targeted directly towards the pupils work you have just heard. General exhortations to improve are not what is meant here! What is needed was described by the assessment reform group:

Learners need information and guidance in order to plan the next steps in their learning. Teachers should: pinpoint the learner’s strengths and advise on how to develop them; be clear and constructive about any weaknesses and how they might be addressed; provide opportunities for learners to improve upon their work.
(Assessment Reform Group 2002)

Specific feedback, then, is aimed at the ‘next steps’, not some ill-defined future improvement, but the very specific aspects of what you and the pupils will do immediately as next steps. What this means for you as the teacher is that you will be going from group to group saying things which are relevant to that group now, and next. Although there may be commonalities, for which you may deem it appropriate to speak to the class as a whole, the very specific things you say are of relevance only to the work of that particular group.

Another aspect commented on in the quotation from the Assessment Reform Group above is that of being constructive. Any assessment-focused conversational exchange is founded has an emotional content, and if your feedback is concerned solely with pointing out deficits in the work of your pupils then this can have a potentially harmful effect on your relationship with the pupil/s, to say nothing of the blow to their self-esteem. You will need to judge carefully what it is that you say in order to be ‘clear and constructive’, and remember that your concern is steering pupils towards the next steps in their learning, which leads us to the next criteria from Black and Wiliam’s list to discuss, that of sharing criteria.

3. Sharing Criteria
You will probably be familiar with the notion of using assessment criteria for summative purposes, but they also have an important part to play in formative assessment too.

Task: assessment criteria
Think about a lesson that you will be teaching soon. What do you want the pupils to learn during this lesson?

Task Discussion
This is a key question for teachers at all stages of their careers! It is likely that you will have to plan for learning in your lesson planning documentation. Indeed, many schools require learning objectives to be written on the board at the start of the lesson.

What you will have written will obviously depend on the nature of the subject you will be teaching, so a generalised discussion is difficult. However, what we can do is think about the differences between learning outcomes, and task outcomes. In music this is a key difference! Indeed, many trainee (and more experienced) teachers find it much more straightforward to say what the pupils will be doing, rather than what they will be learning! What is likely to be the case is that in a music lesson pupils will be involved with:

- learning
- doing
- learning by doing
- learning to do

all of which should be leading towards the goal of understanding.

Separating out learning from doing involves quite a complex series of analytical thought processes on your part. Indeed, this sort of planning is of itself quite difficult. Many published schemes of work for music take
activity as the essential premise, and are predicated on the notion that the activities themselves form the basis of any subsequent learning which may (or may not!) arise from them. Indeed, anecdotally you may well be told of 'good' classroom activities. However, your job is to deliver learning outcomes, not just keep pupils occupied with tasks. Being busy is not the same as learning! The reason for this emphasis on learning is that a good learning outcome statement can become its own assessment criterion.

Task: Learning Outcomes I

Compare and contrast the following:

- In this lesson pupils will learn to play the theme from the film 'Titanic' on the keyboards
- In this lesson all pupils will learn to play the melody of the theme from the film 'Titanic' on the keyboards
- In this lesson pupils will learn to play the melody of the theme from the film 'Titanic' on the keyboards using more than one finger
- In this lesson pupils will learn to play the melody, and will learn to add chords to accompany themselves as they play
- In this lesson pupils will learn to play the melody, and will learn to add chords to accompany themselves as they play

Task Discussion

It should be immediately clear that the first learning outcome is far too generalised to be useful in terms of formative assessment. Indeed, if such matters as expressiveness and style are added, this could take more than one lesson. Indeed, it might be argued that the first learning outcome is simply a task outcome repackaged. The second learning outcome is far more specific, applies to a specific lesson, and allows for differentiation. (It may well be the case that this is developed to take account of those pupils who can already do this before they start the lesson.)

In order to consider sharing assessment criteria, we need to go back a stage, and think about the production of criteria in the first place. We saw in the paragraph above that writing a good learning outcome is important, and that a properly written learning outcome is well on the way to becoming an assessment criterion in its own right.

Task: Learning Outcomes II

Think about the learning outcomes above for the theme from 'Titanic'.

- How effective would they be as assessment criteria?
- How much would they need to be re-written to become assessment criteria?

Task discussion

Hopefully you can see that these would be straightforward to re-write as assessment criteria, requiring little more than substituting 'are able to' for 'will learn'.

In terms of assessment for learning, a number of things need to be unpicked with regard to these assessment criteria, derived from learning outcomes. You will notice that they do not link to National Curriculum levels, which were never intended for use with an individual piece of music anyhow, as is discussed below. It might be possible to differentiate within them by giving them a gradation of some sort, but this would be for a different use altogether. The purpose of these criteria is twofold, firstly it enables you to gain a snapshot of the learning that has taken place during the course of the lesson, and make suitable plans for following up. Secondly it enables the pupils to determine straightforwardly whether they are meeting the assessment criteria or not. Which links into the final point we are considering from Black and Wiliam's list, that of self-assessment.

4. Self-Assessment

Self-assessment occurs when pupils are able to make judgements concerning their own meeting of learning outcomes. In doing this they are using the same criteria as you, the teacher, and are working with this criteria to decide how they doing in relation to the
learning outcomes. This is not just a hollow task, in undertaking Self-assessment pupils are taking responsibility for their own learning, and are showing how they are able to develop their own achievement in response to this. This serves a number of functions, including, amongst others:

- It enables you and the pupils to enter into professional dialogues where you are both able to use the same terminologies to discuss learning
- It enables the pupils to get a sense of how well they are achieving in relation to the overall learning outcomes
- It empowers the pupils to know what it is they need to do next in order to develop their learning to the next stage.

**Peer assessment**
We have already mentioned that peer assessment is linked in many ways to self-assessment. What happens here is broadly along the same lines as Self-assessment, but in this case the pupils are applying assessment criteria to the work of each other. Again, there are issues here that we need to unpick:

Peer assessment enables pupils to have learning discussions with each other which focus on how well they have met learning criteria. These conversations may need careful managing in some instances, as we have already seen how all assessment carries an emotional impact within it. Preparing pupils for peer assessment may need some careful time devoted to it; again, it is assessment criteria that are key to its effective deployment. This means that assessment criteria used will need to be carefully fashioned and crafted in order for the pupils concerned to be readily able to understand what is required of them.

**Assessment for learning and groupwork**
It is common for music lessons at Key Stages 2 and 3 to involve groupwork, especially with regard to practical music-making. Indeed, it is highly likely that composing, for example, takes place primarily as a conjoint activity during these key stages. For assessment for learning, what is useful for you to distinguish between is process and product. As Afl is concerned with improving pupil performance then you may well wish to think about how improving the process of musical learning can have a concomitant effect on improving the product, the piece of music which results. It is a common cry from teachers that assessing pupils working together in groups is problematic, we have already discussed how having effective criteria for assessment helps all those involved, so it may well be the case that you think about having criteria for groupwork alongside those which relate to the musical nature of the task in hand.

**The formative use of summative assessment and National Curriculum levels**
So far in this article we have considered AfL – formative assessment, and AoFl – summative assessment. Figure 1 (see below) shows the differences between them in a graphical format.

What Figure 1 also shows is the possibility of using summative assessment in a formative fashion. This is the formative use of summative assessment.

It is appropriate to consider the formative use of summative assessment as the ubiquitous use of National Curriculum levels often makes teachers need to do this. The National Curriculum levels themselves were designed to be summative assessments, and only used at the end of a key stage. Since that time, however, they have become used more frequently than this, and music teachers often need to utilise them on a termly or half-termly basis. The sub-division of National Curriculum levels are not to be found in published format, and, although they do not officially exist, would again be an example of a summative assessment. Using National Curriculum level descriptors to level a single piece of work is problematic, and as the NC website points out ‘A single piece of work will not cover all the expectations set out in a level description’ ([http://www.teachfind.com/qcda/assessment-music-assessment-subjects-assessment-key](http://www.teachfind.com/qcda/assessment-music-assessment-subjects-assessment-key)).
stages-1-2-national-curriculum). This means that assessment for learning using summative assessment data, in other words the formative use of summative assessment, needs to explain to the pupils what it is that they need to do to improve, not just say ‘that was a level 4 piece of work’.

Conclusion
This article has looked at AfL, and has made a number of suggestions as to how you employ this in the classroom. The main thing to remember is that you are assessing pupils’ work in order to help them get better, and so the more specific and focused you can make your comments, the better.

Challenges for ITE
• Ensuring trainees think about the nature of learning, and what it is that pupils can do to improve this.
• Helping trainees write good assessment criteria related to learning outcomes.
• Ensuring that the ubiquitous use of NC levels does not make redundant appropriate AfL strategies.
• Ensuring that trainees understand that AfL is about improving learning, not merely auditing it, as summative assessment does.
• Helping school-based mentors combat enforced managerialism which misunderstands the role of AfL in the arts.

Figure 1: Assessment modalities

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