How teachers engage with Assessment for Learning: lessons from the classroom

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Using video recordings of lessons and interviews with teachers, this article explores the way in which teachers enact Assessment for Learning (AfL) practices in their classrooms. Starting with the hypothesis that AfL is built on an underlying pedagogic principle that foregrounds the promotion of pupil autonomy, we analyse the ways in which teachers instantiate this principle in practice. A distinction is drawn between lessons that embody the 'spirit' of AfL and those that conform only to the 'letter'. The nature and sequence of tasks and especially 'high organization based on ideas' appears crucial to the former. This adds a dimension to more familiar formulations of AFL practices. We also ask whether the teachers' beliefs about learning contribute to the different ways in which they interpret the procedures of AfL. Interviews with teachers indicated that those whose lessons captured the spirit of AfL were more likely to take responsibility for success and failure in the promotion of pupil autonomy. Thus they had a sense of their own agency and sought to use it to overcome barriers to learning.

Keywords: *Agency; Assessment for learning; Beliefs about learning; Autonomy; Learning how to learn*

Introduction

David Hargreaves described Assessment for Learning as 'a teaching strategy of very high leverage' (2004, p. 24). His confident assertion was derived, in part, from the work of Black *et al.* (2003) in the King's Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP). This study took as a starting point the earlier findings of Black and Wiliam's (1998a) literature review in which pupils were found to improve

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performance as a result of the application of formative assessment. Similar gains were found in the KMOFAP study.

The KMOFAP work explored four main areas of classroom practice in relation to formative assessment: questioning, feedback, sharing criteria with the learner, and peer and self-assessment. These procedures were always seen as a 'Trojan horse' for a particular view of pedagogy (Black *et al.*, 2006). In particular it was conjectured that AfL practices might enable pupils to become more independent learners and for this reason it was central to the Learning How to Learn (LHTL) Project (James *et al.*, 2006). The concept of learning how to learn is explored elsewhere (Black *et al.,* 2006); here the connection between formative assessment and pupil autonomy is pursued in order to contextualize the analysis of classroom observations and teachers' beliefs about learning, which is the main focus of this article.

Black and Wiliam (1998a) argued that 'the quality of the interaction [between pupil and teacher] … is at the heart of pedagogy' (p.16). Earlier work on AfL foregrounded the relational element of assessment even more strongly. Arguing against a model of assessment of 'checklists, precision, explicit criteria [and] incontrovertible facts and figures', Drummond (2003, p.13) explains her use of the term to 'describe the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use'. This view of assessment eschews the model of assessment in which 'the assessor collects the evidence, makes judgements on the basis of that evidence, and then certain events follow' (p. 14). Instead the process is seen as 'essentially provisional, partial, tentative, exploratory and, inevitably, incomplete' (p. 14). Torrance and Pryor (1998), who distinguish between 'divergent' and 'convergent' formative assessment, discuss the possibility of early years teachers approaching AfL in a very similar way.

Implicit in the language of divergence and convergence is a sense that certain classroom activities afford more opportunity for pupils to develop independence than others. This echoes Perrenoud's (1998) understanding of AfL, which he characterizes as the regulation of learning. For Perrenoud the nature of the tasks planned for a lesson significantly impacts on the scope and potential of subsequent interaction and feedback between pupil and teacher as the lesson progresses. He differentiates between 'traditional' sequences of activities within lessons, which merely allow for the remediation of narrowly prescribed concepts at the end of the sequence, and those lessons where the tasks are not 'imposed on the pupils but [adjusted] once they have been initiated' (Perrenoud, 1998, p. 88) in order to take the learning forward.

Yet it is Vygotsky's and Dewey's activity based approaches to learning (see Bredo, 1997) which are most helpful in establishing and extending the link between assessment and progression towards independent learning.[1] Much of the work on formative assessment has come out of what might broadly be called cognitive constructivist theories of learning (James, 2006). It is possible, however, to work from a model which arises out of a more socially situated understanding of how learning takes place. This is less common in the literature of formative assessment though it formed part

of the theoretical basis of the KMOFAP work. While Vygotsky and Dewey differed at important points in their understanding of learning, they shared a broadly similar view of the socially constructed nature of learning and desire to promote autonomy (Bredo, 1997; Glassman, 2001).

Crucial to appreciating the relevance for AfL of Vygotsky and Dewey's understanding of learning is the notion of progression toward autonomy, and the teachers' role in facilitating this through the activities in which they encourage pupils to engage. Most obvious is Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Significant, also, is Dewey's (1966) definition of 'progressive' education as 'high organization based upon ideas' (pp. 28–29); the challenge is, 'to discover and put into operation a principle of order and operation which follows from understanding what the educative experience signifies' (p. 29).

Dewey acknowledges that it is 'a difficult task to work out the kinds of materials, of methods, and of social relationships that are appropriate' (p. 29). In a sense this is what the teachers on the LHTL project were attempting to do. The implementation of AfL in the classroom, then, becomes about much more than the application of certain procedures—questioning, feedback, sharing the criteria with the learner and peer and self-assessment—but about the realization of certain principles of teaching and learning.

The question for the LHTL project, and anyone engaged in professional development, was whether teachers need to share these underpinning principles in order to effect change within the classroom, or whether altering classroom practice through the application of certain techniques is sufficient. The Trojan Horse analogy of KMOFAP arose from the premise that:

> Teachers will not take up attractive sounding ideas, albeit based on extensive research, if these are presented as general principles, which leave entirely to them the task of translating them into everyday practice. (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, p. 15)

For this reason the KMOFAP model, adapted by the LHTL project, emphasized the practical procedures, in training sessions with teachers, as a vehicle for encouraging teachers to engage with the pedagogic principles of AfL. The US-based Capital Project (Coffey *et al.*, 2005), which worked in parallel with KMOFAP, took a slightly different approach, however. Underpinning their research was the 'perspective' that:

> Practice is ripe for modification when teachers begin to understand the nature of the gap between their own current actions and the picture they have of themselves as professionals. In the process of becoming the person or professional they want to be, contradictions between beliefs and actions may be confronted, new belief systems may be constructed, existing beliefs deepened, and often times, risks are taken as new actions or behaviours are tried in the classroom. (Coffey *et al.*, 2005, p. 170).

The question of the role of teachers' beliefs about learning, and their impact on practice, became increasingly significant in the analysis of the data in the LHTL project as a whole, which examined practice/values gaps in teachers' Questionnaire responses (see Pedder, 2006).

Data and analysis

The element of classroom level analysis reported in this article[2] drew on two main data sources: video recordings of 27 lessons, part of the wider sample of focal teachers on the project; and interviews with these focal teachers on their beliefs about learning. In developing a strategy for understanding teachers' classroom practices, which would be useful to decision-makers and practitioners, we needed to develop descriptive accounts of teachers' observable classroom behaviours and the thinking that underpins such practices. The complexity of classroom teaching and learning in general, and of formative practices in particular, necessitates detailed description of practice. We therefore collected different kinds of data using a variety of methods. We carried out initial interviews which were conversations that encouraged teachers to talk about their experiences and beliefs across a wide range of contexts and purposes. These interviews, together with the Staff Questionnaire data (see Pedder, 2006) provided a rich data resource to analyse alongside the observation data that we generated.

Almost all the lessons were filmed at the midpoint of the project and so provide snapshots of classroom practice. Video data has an advantage over fieldnotes, or observation schedules, in that it can be re-observed and watched with other viewers. This increases the reliability of the analysis because behaviours can be interpreted, discussed and re-interpreted with reference to the primary data. Since we were interested in what the teachers did, we were not restricted by what the camera operator had chosen to focus upon. In all cases the teacher was in view.

We chose to focus our classroom analysis on those lessons which were filmed, rather than draw inferences from transcriptions of audio tapes and field notes where data had already been reduced, either by the form of the recording or by researchers who were not specifically involved in the analysis of these particular data. All the tapes were viewed by Marshall; a sample of six was jointly observed by members of a classroom level analytic group, including the present authors; and three tapes were viewed by the whole project team early on in the process. Thus, the video evidence was discussed extensively. The authors then watched a selection of tapes individually and transcribed sections of the lesson.[3]

In developing a strategy for analysing classroom practices we built on findings from the LHTL Staff Questionnaire. This provided one source of ideas, about aspects of teachers' practices of particular interest, which became the basis for a semi-structured approach. We used the three classroom factors, developed through analysis of Section A of the Staff Questionnaire—making learning explicit, promoting learning autonomy and performance orientation (see James & Pedder, under review)—as broad categories to help focus viewing of video recordings. These factors, and their related Questionnaire items, provided frameworks for narrative descriptions of each lesson.

We were, however, cautious in our use of these factor labels. On one hand, they had been developed from Questionnaire responses and not from direct observation of practice. On the other hand, the factors could only translate into high inference categories of interpretation. Achieving reliable descriptions of classroom practices on the basis of this strategy alone would be a high-risk approach.

Therefore, we developed an additional, more open-ended but complementary 'grounded' approach. This involved the time-consuming iterative process of viewing the videos, both as a team and individually, in order to explore (a) the adequacy of descriptions based on the categories derived from the Questionnaire; (b) possibilities for generating alternative, additional constructs from more personal interpretations of what we were observing on the videos.

This of course was not an easy process. We wanted to optimize opportunities for developing descriptions that were comparable across cases while remaining faithful to the distinctive features of individual lessons. To do this we drew on Eisner's (1991) notion of connoisseurship and, more particularly, educational criticism. Although Eisner's own work draws more on *in situ* readings of the classroom, a video recording is an artifact in a medium that is traditionally more subject to the type of analysis found within the arts, rather than the social sciences.

The background of the lead member of the analytic group was in the arts and media studies and she was able to bring her particular expertise to the task. All members of the group were knowledgeable in the field of AfL and each brought their expertise, or 'connoisseurship', to bear on the analysis of the data, thus facilitating discussion of complex classroom activity. The video recordings enabled multiple and group viewings so that, although the sample was limited, the analysis was intensive. The use of two different analytic approaches provided opportunities to understand classroom practices from different perspectives. What is presented, then, is more of a 'reading', or critique, of the lessons, which aims at the 'expansion of perception and the enlargement of understanding' (Eisner, 1991, p. 113) about how teachers use AfL practices to promote learner autonomy.

The lessons

Evident from the data was the very real difficulty of transforming AfL procedures or strategies into classroom cultures that promote pupil autonomy. Only about a fifth of the lessons appeared to capture what might be called the 'spirit' of AfL, which we have characterized as 'high organization based on ideas', where the underpinning principle is promoting pupil autonomy. (This proportion corresponds with the Questionnaire findings where only around a fifth of teachers reported that learning autonomy was promoted in practice.) This contrasts with those lessons where only the procedures, or 'letter' of AfL, seem in place. We use these headings—the 'spirit' and 'letter'—to describe the types of lessons we watched, because they have a colloquial resonance which captures the essence of the differences we observed. In common usage adhering to the spirit implies an underlying principle which does not allow a simple application of rigid technique. In contrast, sticking to the letter of a particular rule is likely to lose the underlying spirit it was intended to embody.

The lessons under consideration are divided, then, between those where the balance is towards the spirit of AfL and those where only the letter is evident. Any crude binary opposition is, however, unlikely to capture the complexity of the way

in which teachers implement changes in their practice. However, exploring the two categories, as a starting point, leads to a fuller understanding of the shades of grey that lie between.

Tasks

Here we examine two English lessons to illustrate our distinction and the way in which these differences encourage or constrain the promotion of learner autonomy. Table 1 gives a brief outline of the main activities within each lesson.[4]

On the surface, the lessons share much in common. Both Tracy and Angela ask pupils to engage with pre-twentieth century texts, a requirement of the National Curriculum in English. In Tracy's lesson pupils were looking at a letter they had written based on a Victorian short story; in Angela's they were asked to consider a dramatic rendition of a nineteenth century poem introduced in the previous lesson. Both lessons had the potential for pupils to engage with the question of what makes for quality in a piece of work—an issue which is difficult in English and hard for pupils to grasp (Marshall, 2004). Both Tracy and Angela adopt procedures of formative assessment identified at the start of this article: sharing the criteria with the learner and peer and self-assessment as a means to this end. For these two activities—modelling and peer assessment—are linked. In both lessons the modelling activity at the start of the lesson appears to be designed to help pupils know what to do when they peer assess.

Tracy modelled the criteria for the eventual peer assessment activity by giving pupils a piece of writing which was full of technical errors (i.e., spelling and punctuation). They were asked to correct it on their own while she went around the class monitoring their progress. The discourse revolved around notions of correctness and there was little scope for anything other than closed questions. The second activity in Tracy's lesson again centred on the teacher checking whether or not the pupils had found the errors in the text. The feedback involved pupils volunteering where they had found a mistake and the correction they had made. Occasionally they missed something in the text and Tracy would go back until a pupil identified the missing error and corrected it. Similarly, on the small number of occasions when a pupil got the answer wrong, Tracy would pause, waiting for another pupil to volunteer the right

Table 1.   Two English lessons: activities

Letter	Spirit
Year 8 Lesson A: pre-twentieth century short story (Tracy)	*Year 8 Lesson B: pre-twentieth century poem (Angela)*
Teacher models criteria to be used for peer assessment by asking pupils to correct technical errors in text prepared by teacher	Class draw up list of criteria guided by teacher
	Teacher and classroom assistant perform poem
	Pupils asked to critique performance
Pupils correct text	Pupils rehearse performance
Teacher checks answers with whole class	Pupils peer assess poems based on criteria
Pupils correct each others' work	Pupils perform poems based on criteria

answer. In this exchange the teacher adjudicated questions of correctness with no opportunity for the pupils to extend the narrowly defined scope of the task. Pupils then went on to peer assess each others' work.

Angela modelled the criteria for peer assessment differently. She began the lesson by asking the pupils to draw up a list of criteria for performing a poem. Suggestions all came from the pupils while she probed, challenged and polished their contributions. For example:

Pupil: You could speed it up and slow it down.
Angela: Yes—pace, that's very important in reading.
[Teacher then writes the word 'pace' on the board]

Angela and the classroom assistant then performed the poem to the class and invited pupils to critique their performance based on the criteria. A similar form of probing took place in these exchanges also:

Pupil: It [the performance] was boring.
Angela: What do you mean boring?
Pupil: There wasn't enough expression in your face when the poem was being read
             or in the reading.
Angela: So what could I have done to make it better?
Pupil: You could have looked and sounded more alarmed.
Angela: Like this? [Strikes a pose.]
Pupil: Not quite.
Angela: More like this? [Strikes another pose.]
Pupil: Yeah.

These three tasks in Angela's lesson—the creation of the criteria, the performance of the poem, and the application of the criteria to Angela's and the assistant's performance—governed both the pupils' thinking about what was needed when they acted out the poem themselves and the peer assessment of those performances.

Two crucial but subtle elements differentiate these lessons: the potential scope of the tasks and the opportunities these afforded for current and future pupil independence. Although it is hard to separate out the various aspects of the lessons, as they overlap, it is possible to use the classroom factor headings derived from the Staff Questionnaire (see Pedder, 2006) as a way of organizing the analysis, starting with Making Learning Explicit. To begin with, the scope of the task in Tracy's lesson was considerably more restricted in helping pupils understand what quality might look like, focusing instead on those things which were simply right and wrong. Pupils in Angela's lesson, on the other hand, engaged both in technical considerations, such as clarity and accuracy, as well as the higher order, interpretive concepts of meaning and effect. In addition, the modelling of what was required in Angela's lesson ensured that pupils went beyond an imitation of that model because it challenged them to think about the variety of ways they might enact their interpretation of the poem.

The sequence of activities guided the pupils in Angela's lesson towards being independent or autonomous learners (the second of our classroom factor headings from the Questionnaire), because the tasks, such as encouraging the pupils to create their own criteria, helped them to think for themselves about what might be needed to

capture the meaning of the poem in performance. In Tracy's lesson, the AfL proce-
dures, alone, were insufficient to lead to this key, beneficial outcome of Angela's lesson.

Pupils in Angela's lesson, therefore, also began to engage in the more complex
issues of any performance be it oral or written. That is, the pupils were asked to
explore the relationship between the meaning of a product and the way in which that
meaning is expressed: between form and content. This leads us to consideration of
Performance Orientation, the third classroom factor from the Staff Questionnaire.
Crucially, Angela always described the tasks as opportunities for the pupils to
improve their performance. In this way the activities had an open, fluid feel which
corresponded with the notion of promoting pupil autonomy; it reinforced a sense of
limitless progress whereby assessment is always seen as a tool for future, rather than
past, performance. In the main this was done by creating tasks designed to enable
children to enter the subject community 'guild' (Sadler, 1989). Performance in
Tracy's lesson, by contrast, comprised a finite act, conforming to a fixed, identifiable,
measurable notion of correctness in which issues of quality went undiscussed.

Dialogue

The nature of the tasks also contributes to the quality and type of dialogue that occurs
within the lesson, shown in the extracts (Table 2) from two different lessons, this time
GSCE examination classes. As before, a switch in task is marked by a bullet point.
Speech is written in plain text; description of other behaviour is in italics. Both these
lessons were designed to prepare pupils for GCSE examination writing and occurred
around half way through the course. Both also have specific content to cover—a set
text in the English lesson and a topic in history.

In Simon's history lesson, there is a clear sequence to the tasks, each building on
and developing the previous activity. The sequence of activities themselves exemplify
making the learning explicit in that they follow in a logical order, each level deepening
the understanding of the element that comes before it. A typical pattern, from this
and other videos (Angela's lesson conforms to this pattern also), involves pupils fram-
ing their own notions of quality, negotiating and refining these within the group,
applying these principles to a piece of work, then using this understanding to reassess
their own work in light of the judgements about quality. Exchanges between pupils
and between teacher and pupil are all understood in terms of refinements of the
central aim: understanding what constitutes quality or a good answer. There is a
sense in which, when the pupils reconsider their own work, they are doing so in the
light of the collective wisdom of the class.

In Sheila's English lesson, however, learning is made explicit through instruction,
which is then teased out through a series of closed questions. The sequence of activ-
ities themselves are less useful as an aid in making the learning explicit because there
is a disjunction between the initial expression of the intended learning outcome—
phrased as a question—and the subsequent activity—writing a monologue as one of
the characters. Perhaps for this reason the instructional tenor of the exchanges contin-
ues beyond the opening phase of the lesson and into the group activity.

Table 2. Two GCSE lessons: dialogue

Letter	Spirit
Year 10 lesson: An inspector calls (Sheila)	*Year 10 lesson: apartheid essay (Simon)*

Letter

Year 10 lesson: An inspector calls (Sheila)

Teacher: Objective for today in form of key question. [This written on board]
T: How are we encouraged to empathize with the characters in their situation?
Classroom Assistant: What are the key words in this question? [selects pupils as it's a 'hands down' class: an AfL technique.]
Pupil: Empathize.
CA: Yes, next?
P: Situation.
CA: 'C [pupil's name] any other key words? [extensive wait] Miss is pointing to it.
P: How?
T: Why am I pointing to it? What kind of word is it?
P: A question
T: It is a command word.

Pupils given three minutes in groups to work out the answer to the question; teacher speaks to one group.

T: OK specifically look at two things we always look at.
P: What they say and what they do?
T: Is there a lot of what they do?
P: No.
T: So?
P: How they say.

Whole class feedback on group work [hands down technique made explicit].

T: OK, I would like you to explain what you have to do.
[Pupil doesn't respond.]
T: S could you develop that?
S: How?
T: What they say and how they say it …
T: Can you help me N on showing behaviour is spontaneous? [pupil replies but Sheila tells him he is mumbling. N repeats his answer which is still indistinct.]
T: Anything else? The rest of you need to listen because while N is helping me at the moment this could move around the room.
[Three more pupils respond.]
T: Good, the ideas are developing.
[Fourth pupil responds.]

Spirit

Year 10 lesson: apartheid essay (Simon)

Teacher refers to apartheid essay they completed for homework

Teacher asks pupils to brainstorm five things that make a 'good' essay.

Pupils review individual lists in pairs to create a joint list and add three more ideas. Teacher goes around and listens [sample of the type of teacher interventions below].
T: What do you mean not going on for ages?
T: What would those details entail?
T: What do you mean here by 'To the point'?

Criteria collated by teacher who questions responses further [sample below].
T: What do you mean by detail? [Follows up.]
T: What else?
T: Why do you need this?'

Hands out examination board grade criteria—teacher highlights need for balance.

Pupils given an essay from last year to mark—on own, in pairs [teacher goes round discussing, sample below].

Exchange 1:
T: Is it a level 3?
P: Only really summarizing.
T: Does he use all the sources, his own knowledge? What has he brought in?
P: He justifies his reasons.

Exchange 2:
T: You've given it a seven. How could you make it better?
T: Oh you've given it an 8; that's interesting.
Pupils go back and discuss grading.

Class compare grading—around two thirds agree—discrepancies discussed (sample below).
T: Any other comments on why they gave it a two not a three?
P: They use lots of simple sentences.
T: Who gave it a three? G you gave it a three, why?

Table 2.   *(continued)*

Letter	Spirit
P: It has to be spontaneous because they don't know what's happened before. [Sheila repeats this response and then asks the class if they agree. Most appear to nod in assent. She then says :] T: Are you agreeing with me because it's easier or because you do? [Again there is general assent and they move onto the next task outlined below.] *Sheila gives the pupils the group task of writing a monologue of one of the characters. Photocopies of one done yesterday are handed out as a model.* *Teacher and LSA go around the groups (Sample of dialogue below)* T: The sooner you get below the surface the sooner you'll understand why he behaves as he does. T: You don't have to use this format but I think it's fun. T: No, no, no, you've got to write it as if Mr Birling [a character in the play] is saying it, as if the speech is from him. T: You can use the information on the sheet just change the style. T: I want one version. I want you to work together to share your ideas. *Pupils asked to set target for lesson in terms of the key question and the extent to which they have completed the task in their groups.*	P: Because they used all the sources and their own knowledge especially in the last paragraph. *Pupils revisit own essay answers.* T: Refer back to what we said makes a good essay. *[Asks them to peer assess and set targets for peer's essay.]* T: Hopefully we've identified what makes a good essay. I want you to develop your answers in the light of the discussion for homework.

Despite the idea for group work to foster an 'exchange of ideas', there is little discussion of ideas in the lesson at all. Where it does occur, for example around the nature of spontaneity, it appears to be perceived by pupils as leading to a right answer: they all agree with the teacher when she repeats a pupil's response. While she does challenge their response, 'Are you agreeing with me because it's easier or because you do?' the way she appropriates the pupil's answer to become 'agreeing with me' suggests that this whole exchange is designed for pupils to guess what she is thinking. This is not congruent with the rhetoric of 'Good, the ideas are developing'. In other words the exchange is convergent rather than divergent (Torrance & Pryor, 1998).

Moreover, the exchange has been preceded, and so framed, by a sequence which is closed and again instructional in nature: 'Explain what you have to do'. The development of the response to this demand also invites a 'correct' formula, as a very similar formula has been given earlier on in the lesson.

In addition, references to classroom techniques of questioning (Black *et al.*, 2003) such as 'hands down', increasing 'wait time' and 'this could move around the room', are foregrounded in the classroom dialogue. But, in this instance, they appear more as surface features of the lesson providing pupils with only limited opportunity to extend and deepen their grasp of the central purpose of the lesson—to develop understanding of the characteristics of a good monologue.

Dialogue in Simon's history lesson pushes pupils to think in greater depth about the judgements they make and so, through discussion, deepen their understanding of what is required in a good essay. He has designed the activities to enable pupils to make sense of the tasks in which they are engaged in ways that invite them to bring their own interpretation to bear on what they are being asked to do. Much of the feedback given by Simon, and by peer assessment, relates to the way in which pupils interpreted the task. The questions the teacher asks, which arise out of the tasks, demand that pupils progress in their learning, and then apply that new understanding in the next activity in which they engage. In this way a virtuous cycle is created.

The type of activities in Sheila's lesson affords less of this type of exchange because one activity does not arise out of the previous one. This makes the lesson more fragmented, and, perhaps because of this, much of the dialogue revolves around the clarification of the task. This in turn makes the pupils more dependent on the judgement of the teacher and the recitation of prespecified formulas—'What they say and what they do'—and less on their own understanding.

In some respects, however, both Sheila and Simon's lessons are dominated by a particular exam-driven sense of performance. This is truer of Simon's lesson than it is of Sheila's. This is because the clarity of purpose, and the use of numerical marks based on examination criteria, mean that the focus of Simon's lesson is on making judgements about an end product, and improvement of attainment, rather than engaging in the process of knowledge creation. As we have observed before, this means that while autonomy is encouraged it is tightly circumscribed with little room for experimentation.

As with Angela's Year 8 lesson, the emphasis in Simon's history class is on what can be done to improve performance rather than viewing performance as a fixed, finite event. Again the tasks in Simon's lessons build 'guild knowledge' in the pupils. Questioning plays a role within this enterprise as questions appear intended both to take the pupils' thinking further through follow up demands for clarification, requiring pupils to refine their answer in terms of the central aim: understanding what constitutes quality or a good answer. The iteration between individual responses on notions of quality, class discussion and peer assessment reinforces the notion of quality as a communal property to be understood and experienced through practice rather than a unitary concept to be acquired (Sfard, 1998). This is characteristic of lessons which seemed to capture more of the spirit of AfL, expressed as 'high organization based on ideas', aimed at promoting learner autonomy. It should be noted, however, that none of the lessons we watched appeared to provide much scope for genuine, open pupil choice in task setting; pupil autonomy was limited to expression within set tasks.

The role of teachers' beliefs

If trying to make sense of lessons is an untidy business, relating what occurs in these lessons to the teachers' beliefs about learning is even messier and affords few neat correspondences between teachers' beliefs and their practice. The quantitative data from the LHTL Staff Questionnaire indicated that teachers do not all negotiate the pressures of the performance culture in the same manner (Pedder, 2006). Moreover teachers themselves progress and change in how they relate their values to their practice within a project such as LHTL. So the positions expressed by teachers around the mid-point of the project, when the videos and interviews were carried out, should not be seen as fixed in any way, merely an indication of the point of trajectory (Coffey *et al.*, 2005).

In this article we make reference only to interviews with those teachers for whom we had video data. In our analysis we focused on two aspects: their views on the promotion of learning autonomy, as this element had been central to our examination of their lessons; and their views on what might impede learning taking place. (A more detailed analysis of the interview data will appear elsewhere.)

Bearing all the caveats above in mind, two interesting issues arose out of the teachers' interviews. The first is the extent to which they valued pupil autonomy as an explicit aim of their teaching and the second is the extent to which the teachers hold themselves responsible, rather than either circumstance or pupils, for any impediment to children's learning. All those teachers, identified through the observations of the videos as capturing the spirit of AfL, spoke of the value they placed in pupil autonomy. When asked about impediments to learning, they tended to proffer, as the first or second explanation, their own responsibility for motivating or helping pupils to learn.

One teacher explains:

> The idea that sometimes you prepare the lesson, which isn't appropriate for the pupils. It's over their head or it's too easy and that sometimes prevents learning form taking place, or meaningful learning. … You might be able to control the situations so they complete the task but they haven't actually learnt anything because it's too complicated and they didn't get the hang of it or it was too easy and it was something they could dash off.

It is ironic that these teachers feel the fault lies with them if learning is not taking place, yet they are keenest to promote independence in their pupils. But it appears to be an important relationship. A possible explanation might be found in Angela's responses. Underpinning her Year 8 English lesson was a strongly held conviction that her job was to make her classes less passively dependent on her and more dependent on themselves and one another. Unlike Tracy, Angela's beliefs about learning all centred around a move towards greater pupil independence. Yet running like a *leit motif* through her interview is the phrase, 'If I've taught a lesson, then I'll go over it, reflect, think, what could I do better next time?'. And again, 'So I do a lesson with one and then I think, okay, how could I improve that for the next time?'.

> But it depends, sometimes it's just a thought and sometimes I actually kind of go back over the scheme of work, look at the lesson plan and write notes to myself for next time. So it depends on what it is really and how severely bad it went.

Not all Angela's reflections are negative: 'I suppose you say what do you do better, but you can also say, what went well'.

Angela believes that nothing in the classroom is fixed or beyond her control. It is the place where she needs to learn about how well she has done in relationship to the task she set herself—that of the pupils' learning. Her approach echoes concepts of task versus ego involvement as well as incremental rather than entity theories of learning (Dweck, 2000). All lessons give Angela experiences from which she can refine and develop her craft for the benefit of the pupils. It is this essentially progressive process—the possibility that all performance and knowledge can be developed—that Angela wishes her pupils to understand. In this way there is a synergy between her concept of independent learning, of the formative process for her pupils, and the way she approaches her own teaching

Simon, the history teacher, shares a similar perspective. But the contrast between their positions, Simon and Angela's, and that of Sheila, who took the Year 10 English lesson, are subtle and nuanced. Sheila only comments on the notion of pupil autonomy in one section of her interview. As a stated aim it is far less dominant. What is perhaps more interesting though, is the way in which Sheila articulates the notion of pupil autonomy and how she relates this to her role in the classroom. While stressing the importance of her relationship with the class she sees her role as 'focusing on my pupils': a use of the possessive that suggests a proprietorial, and so hierarchical, relationship with her class. This is a perspective very redolent of Miss Jean Brodie, who famously talked of 'my girls', and is often associated with a traditional style of teaching. That Sheila is keen to distance herself from this approach to teaching, however, is evident in her interview in the section on pupil autonomy. She describes her perception of the pupils' attitudes towards learning:

> Sheila: A lot of them see learning as being taught and their parents see learning as being taught.
> Interviewer: What does that mean, learning as being taught?
> Sheila: The teacher delivers, the child takes note. The old fashioned ideas, the content. The teacher teaches and therefore the child is automatically going to learn because the teacher is standing at the front of the room delivering and we all know that that is not the case. They have to be involved, they have to be active learners so they learn, they are beginning to learn through group work, they are beginning to learn that discussion helps them, that talking to other people helps focus what they are thinking. They will talk now to each other without having to be told 'now you can talk to each other'.

The difficulty is that, despite her desire to change the role of the teacher, and the pupils' perception of that role, her attitudes towards toward the learner and learning, unlike Simon and Angela, are still quite fixed.

> The ones that do it are ready to get feedback, are ready to reassess their targets, and are ready to move on. The ones that don't do it, don't get the feedback, because there is nothing for me to discuss with them, and that's the biggest barrier. They are actually bone idle, that group

> There are others who will do it but I think their biggest barrier is often their lack of confidence. Some of them it's a lack of language, but lack of confidence and inability to be independent.

There is less sense in these responses, by comparison with Simon or Angela, that Sheila feels she can effect change in the classroom environment. The onus is on the pupils' readiness for independence rather than on her creating that readiness. Yet her proprietorial attitude toward the class means that she feels a sense of ownership and responsibility to help the pupils. They are 'her' class. Ironically, the combination of these two factors—her belief in the pupils' lack of readiness and her sense of responsibility—leads her back into becoming the 'old-fashioned' teacher she wishes to avoid. This is because she ends up doing much of the work for them to compensate for their lack. As we saw in her lesson she is anxious to spell out, at every point, what the pupils need to do. Her belief in the class's laziness, and her absence of sense of their readiness, leads her to interrogate them until they have understood what she believes they must do to succeed. Independence becomes an added bonus not a stated aim.

In this sense Sheila enjoys less of a symbiotic relationship than either Simon or Angela, between the underlying principles of formative assessment and the process of learning and the learner. Formative practices map onto Sheila's lessons as procedures, which can be adopted to change the behaviour of pupils, as an aid towards their greater independence, only and if they are ready or able to take them on board.

Sheila's sense of agency, or lack of it, is also evident in the interview of Anthea, a mathematics teacher on the LHTL project. Her interview reveals similar tensions to those of Sheila. Like Sheila, Anthea is keen not to be a traditional chalk and talk teacher and to create a more collaborative classroom culture: 'I think the most effective learning takes place when I'm having a dialogue or a conversation … when I just talk at the board and no one asks a question there's probably very little learning going on'. And again, like Sheila, she attributes her successful AfL practice more to the nature of the classes. But, significantly, she has an emergent awareness that such a difference is not inevitable. She observes that with her bottom set:

> I don't engage enough in conversation and discussion with lower ability groups and I think that could explain why within lower ability groups there is a real lack of progress … you know I would have to take some responsibility for that because there is a big difference in lessons that I teach with top and bottom groups.

Yet still she does not feel the same sense of ownership of the problem that perhaps Angela and Simon display. For Anthea part of her dilemma in affecting change still lies with the pupil: 'They're impatient with each other … just not being prepared to listen to each other if someone is having a conversation with me. … I don't think a lot of them value what each other have to say'. The rest is institutional, both from within the school and from without, in the guise of national tests: 'I think classes are too large particularly the lower ability end because it makes it too difficult to manage behaviour and teaching in the way that I think is most effective'. Also, 'Ultimately for the Key Stage 3 tests and GCSE Exams you've got to cover the material and cover it in such

a way that the pupils are able to answer the exam questions … the curriculum is led by the examinations'.

Anthea also shares the latter view with Sheila, who says:

> It all gets in the way. Exam courses, being tied to rules and regulations. Being tied to a set syllabus, because a lot of what is on the curriculum is not applicable to a lot of these kids and we could make them much better learners if we could be more creative in the way we use the curriculum and now the Key Stage 3 strategy is hampering us even more and it's nonsense. Horrible!

Both Sheila and Anthea appear to believe that there are circumstances beyond their control which inhibit their ability to teach in a way they understand to be good practice. The adoption of what might be deemed AfL techniques, strategies or procedures does not sufficiently aid them in creating the classroom culture they claim to want.

Conclusion

Both the observation and interview data paint a picture, at mid-point in the project, of only a few teachers capturing, through AfL practices, what the promise of the Trojan horse offers—the promotion of learner autonomy. One possible explanation is that the beliefs teachers hold about learning impact on the way they apply AfL in the classroom. This may help us understand why change in classroom practice is so hard to achieve in general (Fullan, 1991) and what Kennedy (1999) calls 'the problem of enactment'. The evidence of this project suggests that teachers need to engage in debates about learning, as well as act on practical advice, to bring about change.[5]

It seems, also, that the beliefs of some teachers map more readily onto what we have called the spirit of AfL. This is partly because they value pupil autonomy and see it as a key goal of their teaching but it also has something to do with how they see the classroom as a site of their own learning. Each of the teachers whose practice we viewed as illustrating the spirit of AfL had an essentially progressive, rather than fixed, view of what went on in any given lesson. Neither circumstance nor the disposition of pupils were beyond change (see also Hart *et al.*, 2004). Indeed these provided a challenge to be reflected upon and overcome. Such an attitude gives these teachers a far greater sense of agency than those who tended to see constraints in the school culture, the examination system or the ability of the pupils.

Finally, it appears that the four original headings, under which AfL practice was conceived—questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self-assessment—need revision. What we have called the spirit of AfL is instantiated in the way teachers conceptualize and sequence the tasks undertaken by pupils in the lesson. The nature of these tasks affects all subsequent interactions within the class. Moreover these tasks tend to create an environment in which learning is socially constructed. In other words AfL demands 'high organization based on ideas' if it is going to help pupils become independent learners.

Notes

1. By 'activity' we are not referring here to the 'activity theory' of more recent developments of Vygotsky's work (for example, Engeström, 1999).
2. Other data will be reported elsewhere.
3. It should be noted that: (1) only the teacher was miked so picking up pupil contributions was more difficult; (2) the camera was at the back of the classroom so it was sometimes hard to see the facial expressions of the pupils; (3) as with any observations there is a degree of artificiality and videoing has a flattening effect on the atmosphere of a class; (4) there is no opportunity, when observing videos, to go and check either impressions or pupils' work. In this way video data lacks some of the advantages of ethnographic approaches (Hammersley, 1999) but this demands a level of involvement that is difficult in large projects because of the nature of LHTL.
4. The outlines refer to 'modelling' criteria. In English lessons it is common practice to start a lesson with a 'model' or example of a piece of work which is used to illustrate what will subsequently be required of the pupil themselves at another point in the lesson. In other words, a model is used to elicit or communicate criteria.
5. A fuller account, through case study, of how teachers negotiate change in their practice by experimenting with new methods in class, reflecting on their beliefs about learning and iterating between these two, will be published elsewhere: James *et al.* (forthcoming).

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