Building bridges to participation: sociocultural case studies of AfL.

Jill Willis

School of Learning and Professional Studies,
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Assessment for Learning(AfL) case studies in a North Queensland school highlight the significance of the teacher-student relationship in creating a supportive culture within which students can negotiate new learner identities. AfL practices are school based evaluative practices that occur within the regular flow of teaching and learning with the purpose of informing and improving student learning to enhance learner autonomy. The identity of an autonomous learner is socially negotiated through participation in the community of practice of the class. Underpinned by a sociocultural perspective this research shows how AfL is manifested in action in its complexity and how positive teacher-student interactions can build bridges for students to move towards full participation.

Introduction

Assessment for Learning (AfL) or formative assessment has excited researchers and policy makers in the eleven years since Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 17) concluded "attention to formative assessment can lead to significant learning gains" from their meta analysis of 250 research investigations of classroom formative assessment. The umbrella term AfL incorporates classroom evaluative practices that focus on informing students of quality standards, most significantly through feedback. The implication is that by giving students the information they need to improve, students will then work to improve their learning outcomes. The competitive international climate of educative assessment has given AfL, with its promise of improved outcomes, a prominence in several countries. In Queensland AfL looks a lot like the familiar school based assessment that has been policy for over thirty years. However, even within this accommodating policy environment AfL is a "set of very complex and tricky practices for both teacher and learners" (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008, p. 6). Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 16) noted that the teacher-student relationship is the key determinant of AfL and it was "difficult to obtain data about this quality". This research inquiry was a search to understand the hidden complexities of AfL practice in achieving learner autonomy by describing the classroom interactions between students and three highly skilled and motivated Queensland teachers. To understand the complexities, AfL was conceptualised from a sociocultural perspective, where learning is viewed as a process of participation and AfL practices and supportive teacher-student relationships as patterns of participation that can act as bridges to understanding.

AfL theorised from a sociocultural perspective

AfL has historically been theorised from a constructivist perspective, situating learning as individual and located in head of learner but has recently been reconceptualised from a sociocultural perspective (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Cowie, 2005; Elwood, 2006; Murphy, 2008; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008). Within this theoretical perspective learning is viewed as social participation in a community of practice and "because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity...[that] entails a process of transforming knowledge as well as a context in which to define an identity of participation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 215) . More simply it is often referred to as the process of both 'becoming' more expert and 'belonging' within a community of practice.

Much of the first generation of AfL research focussed on the cognitive processes of 'becoming' more expert and developing competence in learning processes valued within an academic school community of practice ie: self assessing and evaluating and regulating products of practice for quality performance against a trajectory of expertise. What has been under-theorised in AfL is the importance of negotiating an identity of 'belonging' as a way of experiencing life in the class community as meaningful. Before students can become more expert in the community of practice, they need to identify with it and belong within it. How teachers and students interact and participate helps create relationships that confirm who can belong and become a more central participant, which in turn shapes learner identity.

AfL practices can allow students to work out what is valued in the community of practice so they can participate more fully. Working out what is valued can mean paying attention to what qualities are privileged, what expectations and roles are communicated through the language of the teacher-student interactions, what opportunities are given to participate, and whether the learner judges they have the identity and capacity to participate in a way that will be valued. It is a broader conception than the Assessment Reform Group's (2002, p. 2) more constructivist perspective where AfL is defined as "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". A sociocultural view of learning shifts this focus from individuals internalising learning, an acquisition metaphor of learning, to a more participative perspective so the unit of analysis becomes not the individual teacher or student, but the "patterned collective doings" (Sfard, 2008, p. 124). This research inquiry sought teacher and student perspectives on AfL patterns of practice in the classes.

This theoretical perspective that learning and assessment is both social and cognitive is based on the work of Vygotsky (1997) and Dewey (1910). As understanding and cognition develops through social interaction with more experienced others as a form of guided participation or apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1990) the teacher-student relationship is critical. It includes both the tacit and the explicit interactions (Wenger, 1998). However a sociocultural view of learning acknowledges that both the teacher and students shape and are shaped by their experiences as participants in this and other communities of practice. Meaning is a negotiation within the community of practice that Wenger (1998, p. 84) theorises involves mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire.

Queensland classroom assessment context

Queensland schools have worked within a system of school based assessment since 1972 (Pitman & Dudley, 1985). Queensland teachers have had responsibility for "constructing and administering assessment instruments for appraising student work" within a system of syllabus and moderation processes that act as boundaries and points of comparability to define the freedoms of school based assessment practices ((ROSBA), 1985 - 1987, p. 1). Sadler has described Queensland as a "leader in school based assessment"(1998, p. 1). Since 2000 an assessment reform agenda has consisted of separate but influential projects like the New Basics trial, the Queensland Curriculum and Reporting (QCAR) framework and National tests to assess students against national benchmarks. AfL is positioned as a pedagogical approach. Teachers are left to make sense of the multiple layers of change within their own classroom context. For the three Queensland teachers who participated in this research work, AfL was not regarded as very different to their current classroom practice, and it was the desired outcome of learner autonomy that made an AfL focus attractive.

Methodology

Three teachers from an independent North Queensland school participated in AfL Action Inquiry research throughout 2008 in partnership with the researcher who was also a curriculum leader within the school. The teachers each had reputations for creating positive relationships with students and were interested in developing learner autonomy through AfL and reflectively examining their practice with peers. Rachel Head chose a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach with her Year 7 class, Greg Barra used IT integration within a Year 8 social studies class and Adam Turner focussed on using shared language and routines within his Year 9 science class as contexts for increasing learner autonomy through AfL practices. Each teacher represented different subject disciplines, years of experience and pedagogical approaches. Data was gathered from 9 individual and 3 focus group interviews with the teachers and 8 individual and 11 student focus group interviews. Data from field notes, documents and video footage from 56 hours of classroom observations was also analysed using a constant comparative method.

Case studies

The interactions between teachers and students within three classes were analysed using Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice model with its three dimensions of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. While all three dimensions were observed in each case, the following case studies have been constructed to highlight each of the three dimensions within the context of AfL practices designed to enhance learner autonomy.

Case 1: AfL and joint enterprise

In the year 7 class Rachel Head expected an autonomous learner to contribute to the joint enterprise of learning and improving. AfL practices provided information to the teacher and the students about the development of the desired skills of collaboration and self evaluation. AfL practices were taught as strategies that made learning visible so students could call on various resources including their peers, in order to improve.

Students took time to appropriate the new patterns of collaborative participation which differed from their historical understanding of their role as learners. Rachel reported at the beginning of the year, *"they want to sit there and let me tell them everything... 'This is school, I've got to do it' sort of attitude."* Students confirmed they expected a 'smart' learner to listen instead of talk during lessons. This traditional acquisitional learning identity was the antithesis of the participatory learner identity Rachel preferred. Initially students regarded collaborative learning as an opportunity for having fun in the class, but were exasperated with their peers; *"they go a bit silly, and see it as a time to just go crazy and be able to talk a lot."* Their language was one of "they" rather than "we" maintaining a focus on individuals and a distanced relationship from the teacher who was seen as the controller. By midyear, as students became more experienced in the collaborative patterns of participation, they used the language of "we" and "us" to talk about their class.

Thinking was made a visible and shared process of negotiating understanding. Rachel introduced tools such as graphic organisers, laptops and 'think packs' which included a mini whiteboard & pens, and also structured collaborative routines with partners and small groups. All of the students noted that it was less embarrassing to discuss learning with friends, with some students confiding that they didn't ever answer questions in a whole class discussion or put their hands up to ask a teacher help as *"people might look at you."* They asked their peers, or waited for the teacher to come around to the table groups before quietly asking for

help. The routine of the teacher circulating around groups to give feedback was one that was valued highly by the students as a source of help.

Teaching students how to talk to one another was not seen as separate to the classroom learning, but essential for a learner to become more expert in collaboration and belong within the community of practice. Choosing partners involved social risks; *"It is actually pretty difficult for me as I have two friends and they fight, and they both ask me to be their partner and I have to decide" (Kylie).* Rachel often found herself as a mediator between students; *"a large part of my day was spent modelling relationships and mending relationships...teaching them how to talk to each other, particularly if it hasn't been modelled at home."* The collaborative routines provided socially safe repertoires for peer feedback even when the students had to cross friendship groups. A common language for organising peer collaboration helped students share the ownership of the practices. Feedback and shared understanding was seen as a routine part of learning, and the regular opportunities to consult with peers established a social form of standard setting for work quality as students checked and shared their understanding.

By the middle of the year Rachel noted that students *"have changed from their initial non-responsive pattern, but I am still not seeing students valuing excellence and perseverance" (Rachel, mid-year teacher focus group).* She began to spend much more time in planning AfL practices to help her break out of old routines; *"the way I addressed it was to make it a learning outcome for them as well as me. We talked about it quite a lot of depth ...which made me think about it."* Experience in answering and asking strategic questions within literacy and mathematics helped students develop skills in self monitoring. Rachel would often preface activities with questions asking students in pairs to decide *"How will we know when we are done? What quality indicators should be evident in our work?"* They also looked for answers to these questions in the work of their peers. When Cody was asked why he took some time before he started his self evaluation, he shared *"I had a look at the people around me and it gave me an idea as to how I was going."* This kind of social benchmarking was a significant informal and social form of AfL that regularly occurred in the collaborative culture.

By the end of the year, students had appropriated shared language to report their ideas; *"Rory and I said...."* and *"Hayden and I said..."* By this time students were positioned as central participants so when Rachel used student work as models in a class brainstorm, she asked permission as a co-learner to contribute ideas; *"Can I put my words in?"* By the end of the year Rachel's class *"accepted that [collaboration] was a way of learning and not just fun. They see value in it because they acknowledge this way they do their best work" (Rachel, final interview).* The teacher deliberately structured her relationship with students to move from one of a hierarchical dependency on the teacher, to be one of collaboration. Through shared language and AfL routines, students were given increasing control over their learning, and sense of belonging to the joint enterprise of learning.

Case 2: AfL and mutual engagement

Mutual engagement stems from "being included in what matters" (Wenger, 1998, p. 74). Greg Barra's caring dialogue, his expertise in computing and also his knowledge of Indigenous (capitalised throughout to signify respect for Indigenous people) culture helped him create authentic and challenging learning experiences for his Year 8 social studies classes. Greg created a sense of belonging as he shared stories from his life and invited Indigenous guests who did the same, and created the space for students to become more

expert in using high level computer technologies in learning about Indigenous Australian history.

Greg deliberately built relationships with students as part of his learner centered approach. *"If the kids know I care for them, they're more open and free to come up and say ""Hey, I need help."* His role was to *"invest in their lives"* in and out of class time, *"all through morning tea, kids just want to talk. You've got to do it. It's just a test to see whether you're really interested in them."* He assumed students knew general school rules and would 'read' his expectations by *"getting in and having a go, not waiting to be told".* After a disciplinary exchange Greg would visit the student a short time later to engage in what Tobin (2007) calls repair work to re-establish a sense of personal connection with the child. He used his movement throughout the room to build positive relationships with students; *"Often I will go and sit with kids not to help them. Sometimes I'll just go and sit there and say "Hey how are you going?" That breaks the stereotype of me telling them that they're wrong. Cause if I'm sitting with a kid, it usually means they're wrong or they're having trouble. So I'll go sit with a kid just because I like the kid."* While he was seated near a student, other students would come and bring their laptops over to him, or come and ask a question. When this occurred, Greg modelled respect for the student he was working with by asking permission *"would you mind if I help her quickly?"* Greg also used relevant stories from his life and his personal photos on his laptop to engage students. He would bring the stories back to the Indigenous conceptual framework, so that a way of thinking was being *"taken through learning, so it blurred into assessment".* The invitation for students to develop agentive identities occurred through this sharing of the teacher's personal stories and engaging in conversations with students, but also through the way the teacher shared the ownership of the computer tools in the class.

Students were positioned as knowledgeable and agentive and responsible. They were given access to school computers nearly every lesson, and expected to resolve their own computer problems if they were within a student's capability.

> *"Sir my laptop just ran out of batteries?"*
> *"It's just as well you saved your work. You didn't? That's too bad. So you had better work it out. What could you do?"*

Technical instructions were sometimes given to the whole class, and on other occasions were invitational, so students were given the power to decide whether they wanted to learn them or not and then whether to follow the teacher's example or not. He modelled multitasking, hooking up data projector while students were logging on, and expecting students to work within multiple programs and screens as they completed activities. He modelled risk taking with new technologies, *"This might fall flat on its face and not work, but I want to try it"* and being calm and trying different problem solving strategies, including asking others when problems occurred. Greg's calm attitude towards problems was reflected in the students' approach. When students within the class were seen to have expertise, he would plug the data projector into their laptop and ask them to show the class, or he would direct student inquiries to them, or just not answer a student question and give that student the space to either work it out themselves or see a peer for help. He would then visit that student a little later, *"yep you worked it out. Isn't it great you did it by yourself."* Students recognised and valued the choice, freedom and responsibility they were given within this relationship, *"It's great. He tells us what to do and leaves us to get on with it while we are sitting with our friends" (Elanie).* Students were also observed to resist the teacher's expectations for their participation. On these occasions, Greg would *"go after the relationship with the student*

first." Helping students engage gave Greg job satisfaction, *"I enjoy grabbing those who are not quite in or who are too cool for school, and getting them interested."* He also recognised that *"those social leaders in the class, if you can get them motivated and involved, the rest go 'it's ok to be here'."* Greg's desire to be mutually engaged with students in the learning was a powerful influence in the social construction of the identity of an autonomous learner in this classroom community.

Computer based activities made individual student learning visible and Greg was able to see immediate feedback; *"they are always producing something...I have got multi layered information coming to me at each stage that shows me where they are at."* Peer support was a critical element in this development of expertise. While students were engaged with learning activities on their computers, there was continual movement around the class. Looking at student models from previous classes was valued also in giving general concepts of standards. In particular, they valued seeing a poor example. *"I looked at theirs and saw what they were trying to get at and added bits of that into my own. It was like we were all learning off each other"(Elise).* Students appreciated being able to see someone else's work, and usually thought that they could improve on it. AfL practices were a seamless part of the learning dialogue.

Case 3: Shared Repertoire and AfL

Adam Turner valued AfL practices as ways that his Year 9 students could measure their progress of understanding against their internal goals, and thereby adjust their performance. Adam created a sense of belonging through his enthusiasm for science, his calm and witty approach, and by making the class a safe place to experiment with new ideas. Students were also becoming more expert science learners as they developed a shared repertoire of science stories, experiments and AfL routines of daily quizzes and strategic questioning.

Adam recognised that *"building relationships with students is the most important thing as without it they won't even turn up to learn."* The teacher's energetic expertise and lightly amused banter helped the students trust his leadership. Adam believed that if students saw he was excited, they would find it exciting and therefore planned each lesson to include a hands-on experiment as he wanted each lesson to be memorable and have a "pay off". He used everyday language and stories that related science concepts to student experiences to demystify scientific expertise and its development. He imagined identities of competence for students; *"in 20 years' time there might be a science law named after you Dylan."* As students were encouraged to ask questions and experiment, Adam acknowledged *"you can't keep too tight a lid on it."* He used humour and a calm approach to direct the lesson flow while still allowing students a voice in the discussions.

Adam deliberately reified practices of the scientific method as a way of giving students ownership. Reification is "the process of giving form to our experience" when processes "around which the negotiation of meaning become organised" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). Each lesson followed a routine that began with a revision quiz, where students were encouraged to use their notebooks during the quiz if they needed help. A new concept was introduced with diagrams, definitions and stories. Following some questioning, he would ask students to tell him a science story that exemplified the concept. An experiment testing the concept was then outlined, and demonstrated before students moved into their groups to conduct the experiment and write it up as a science report using the same headings each time. Over the year, students developed in their expertise in the shared repertoire, expressing satisfaction that they knew what to do.

From a sociocultural perspective autonomy is not a fixed, individual attribute. It is a social role negotiated within a teacher's expectations of how a leaner acts as a central participant within a particular context. Students were sometimes able to easily appropriate the teacher expectations such as these students with the AfL practice of storytelling:

> *Zeph laughed, "I thought insulator was the one that let electricity through."*
> *Lachlan explained, "Think of it like a house, insulation is in the house to stop the heat coming through".*
> *Zeph sighed, "Normally I know."*
> *Steve added, "and a conductor makes the music play."*
> *"Oh that's a good one." Jordan nodded.*
>
> *(Student focus group interview)*

For Emma, telling a science story was an AfL practice that risked her identity of competence. *"I'm like scared I will get it wrong and everyone expects me to get it right. I could write it but I can't speak it."* She was also negotiating her gendered expectations of how a 'good' girl participated in a classroom, as being a quiet, observant, well behaved girl and her teacher's expectation of an autonomous learner, *"they don't just sit there and wait to be told everything, they try and figure stuff out for themselves."* This negotiation of identity is a hidden and powerful influence in participation in AfL practices.

Students also negotiated their participation in the AfL practice of the quick quiz, drawing on their identities as learners and their cultural narratives of learning;

> *Steve: "It is good because it refreshes your memory from last week."*
> *Michelle: "plus it shows you, if you do it properly, it shows you where you are at. I try not to look at my word page, but if I really don't know what it's about then I look at my word page...Sometimes I don't look at my word list on purpose. I can get it wrong and"*
> *Lachlan: "learn from that."*
> *Michelle: "study that."*
> *Lachlan: "You learn from your mistakes. You don't from what you get right."*
> *Zeph: " that's what I do most of the time, then sometimes I'm really slack and I just turn back and look at it (laughs). That's not marked on your report card, so it's not really a bad kind of copying."*
> *Interviewer: "But Mr Turner is saying you can look at your word list."*
> *Jordan: "Yeah, but I don't look at my word list. I see that as cheating."*

For Michelle and Lachlan, self evaluation and mistake making were valued as a helpful part of learning. In using the quiz to set goals for themselves, they were in alignment with the teacher's expectations of an autonomous student. For Zeph and Jordan the quiz fitted within their cultural narrative of 'tests' rather than 'learning' and this cultural narrative carried within it expectations about cheating and copying. The teacher was probably not aware that these students were negotiating these value conflicts as the students were observed to complete the quiz without demur.

Discussion
While AfL practices of feedback, routines, questioning and dialogue did help students span gaps of understanding, they needed the significant social support of mutual engagement created through the teacher and student relationship to negotiate participative learning identities.

Mutual Engagement

The teachers established positive relationships with students through humour, shared language and routines, movement throughout the class and a calm but enthusiastic expertise that gave students confidence in the teacher's leadership. Students shared *"It helps if everyone likes the teacher, cos if you don't like the teacher, you don't really want to learn or listen" (Lachlan, 14 years old).* Engaging learning experiences gave students opportunity to use cool tools and work with their peers. Students also had agency, that is the opportunity to adjust and control valued learning outcomes, through tasks that gave students the space to make adjustments or revisit, and permission to participate as legitimate creators of knowledge. While the social sharing of knowledge was encouraged, it required a significant investment of teacher time and emotional energy, and the willingness to reconceptualise traditional patterns of power and control in the classroom. Students felt like they belonged in the class and knew what to do, which was important as self evaluation through AfL involved some risk to their sense of identity.

Negotiating identity

 A centrally participating learner identity involved knowing what was required as well as how to participate. AfL practices of sharing goals and quality expectations helped students be more aware of what was required. Participation involved competence in these cognitive skills, but also being able to read and operate within the social permissions and expectations of the teacher and class. Fear of risking social disapproval was enough to limit some students' participation. In the cases above, the teachers taught and modelled social skills and devised ways to make participation socially safe. The students also negotiated their identities drawing on their personal pasts as well as broader cultural narratives of learning which often involved value conflicts.

Quality as a social norm

Students negotiated their understanding of the quality of work expected partly by observing the standard of work of their peers. When the teachers developed a sense of joint enterprise and shared language and routines they gave permission for this social form of AfL to occur. The participation varied from highly reified small groups, to collaborative routines, or highly participatory sharing of expertise through open dialogue. However, all of these forms helped create a community of practice where peer relationships were also a bridge towards more central participation. A participatory view of learning challenges teachers to recognise that the social narration of student identity is also a central part of teacher work.

Conclusion

An autonomous learner was how the teachers described a centrally participating student. The teachers anticipated that AfL practices would make visible to students expectations about learning quality and progress and so act as bridges to help students move from peripheral participation to more expert central participation. For some students AfL practices were bridges to participation while for others it was a positive relationship with the teacher or a more confident peer that provided the sense of belonging which in turn enabled participation which then led to a sense of becoming more expert. For both the teacher and students AfL involved a continuing negotiation of identity and patterns of participation. This sociocultural perspective of AfL provides teachers with some further insights into the complexities of establishing AfL practices in middle school classrooms.

Jill Willis is a school curriculum leader in a large independent Prep – 12 Queensland school. Her work with teachers in student learning research projects has inspired her continuing PhD in Assessment for Learning through QUT. She has presented refereed papers for the International Lifelong Learning Conferences (2004, 2006), International Pedagogies and Learning Conference (2007), Australian Association for Research in Education conference (2008) as well as conducted workshops at various teacher conferences.   Email: jill9.willis9@gmail.com

References

Assessment Reform Group (2002). Assessment for Learning Principles.   Retrieved 29th December, 2006 from http://www.assessment-reform-group.org/CIE3.PDF

ROSBA, (1985 - 1987). *Discussion Paper 11: School-based Assessment and School Autonomy*. Retrieved 4th February 2008 from http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/publications/yrs11_12/assessment/rosba011.pdf .

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education, 5*(1), 7 - 75.

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2006). Developing a Theory of Formative Assessment. In J. Gardner (Ed.), *Assessment and Learning.* (pp. 81 - 100). London: SAGE Publications.

Cowie, B. (2005). Pupil commentary on assessment for learning. *Curriculum Journal, 16*(2), 137 - 151.

Dewey, J. (1910). What is Thought? In *How we think.* (pp. 1-13): D C Heath.

Elwood, J. (2006). Formative assessment: possibilities, boundaries and limitations. *Assessment in Education, 2*, 215 - 232.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Murphy, P. (2008). Gender and subject cultures in practice. In P. Murphy & K. Hall (Eds.), *Learning and practice: agency and identities* (pp. 161-172). London: Sage.

Pitman, J. A., & Dudley, R. P. (1985). *Criteria-Based Assessment: The Queensland experience.* Paper presented at the 11th International Conference of the International Association for Educational Assessment., from http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/yrs11_12/pubs/docs/crit-ass.pdf

Pryor, J., & Crossouard, B. (2008). A socio-cultural theorisation of formative assessment. *Oxford Review of Education, 34*(1), 1 - 20.

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking. Cognitive development in social context.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Sadler, D. R. (1998). *Letting students into the secret: Further steps in making criteria and standards work to improve learning.* Paper presented at the Annual Conference for State Review Panels and District Panel Chairs. Retrieved 3 March 2007, from http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/yrs11_12/assessment/docs/criteria.pdf

Sfard, A. (2008). Participationist discourse on mathematics learning. In P. Murphy & K. Hall (Eds.), *Learning and practice: agency and identities.* Los Angeles: Sage.

Tobin, K. (2007). *Collaborating with students to produce success in science*. Paper presented at the Second International on Science and Mathematics Education.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1997). *Educational Psychology.* Boca Raton, Florida: St. Lucie Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.