This paper was written in response to the publication of the DCSF (2008) document ‘The Assessment for Learning Strategy’. It was presented as a ‘work in progress paper’, at the 2009 AAIA National Conference (Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment) Bournemouth, 16 – 18 September, 2009.

The misrepresentation of Assessment for Learning – and the woeful waste of a wonderful opportunity

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If you can bear to hear the truth you have spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools...

Without entering philosophical debates about the meaning of ‘truth’, and whilst not saying that policy makers are knaves or school practitioners fools, I suspect I am not alone in finding a resonance in these lines from Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘If’ with what is happening in England to Assessment for Learning.

As somebody who has for many years been involved with assessment for learning (AfL) and with what was in many ways its precursor Records of Achievement, I was delighted when policy makers’ awareness of assessment seemed to broaden beyond testing and they started paying attention to AfL. For a number of years now there has been growing support for AfL at national policy level, with advocacy (for example Blunkett 2000 and Hargreaves 2004) and materials (for example QCA 2003; DfES 2004). Perhaps the strongest expression of central government commitment to AfL is the Assessment for Learning Strategy and the announcement by Jim Knight, the Minister of State for Schools and 14-19 Learners, that ‘the Government has invested £150 million over the next three years for continuing professional development for teachers in assessment for learning’ (DCSF 2008, p1). Admittedly this figure falls far short of that spent annually on examinations (estimated by PricewaterhouseCoopers to be £610 million in 2005 (House of Commons 2008, Ev47 para 6)) but nevertheless it is a substantial sum and a resource that is to be welcomed.

It is probable that three factors influenced the decision to make this investment in AfL. Firstly, what I suspect is seen as both the moral and political imperatives of ‘raising standards’. Secondly, the fact that approaches to raising standards such as prescribed lesson formats, ‘booster classes’ and revision suggestions appear to have run their course, as witnessed by the plateauing of results. Thirdly, the widely accepted and much quoted review of research on formative assessment by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998a) which concluded ‘that formative assessment does improve learning’ and ‘that significant learning gains lie within our grasp’ (p61).

However, rather than enhancing my delight, examining the Assessment for Learning Strategy left me disappointed, angry, and fearful. Disappointed that a wonderful opportunity for improving schools has been lost, angry that the concept and practice of AfL have been so distorted, and fearful for pupils’ learning, teachers’ understanding and the future of assessment for learning. In this paper I critique the Assessment for Learning Strategy, and in particular its misrepresentation of
assessment for learning. As a basis for this appraisal I first elucidate the concept of assessment for learning by drawing on research that has helped deepen our understanding, set out defining elements and discuss contested aspects. I then scrutinise the Assessment for Learning Strategy, examining it in the light of a research and practice informed understanding of AfL.

Assessment for Learning

‘Sitting beside’
The word ‘assessment’ has its roots in the Latin verb *assidere* meaning ‘to sit beside’, a notion somewhat removed from conceptions of assessment that give prominence to examination and testing. The picture of someone sitting besides a learner, perhaps in dialogue over a piece of work, represents much more accurately assessment as a support for learning rather than assessment as a test of performance. It resonates with Mary Jane Drummond’s definition of assessment as a process of teachers looking at pupils’ learning, striving to understand it, and using that knowledge in the interests of the pupils (Drummond, 2003). It is compatible with Carlina Rinaldi’s challenging definition of the process of assessment as ‘deciding what to give value to’ (Rinaldi, 2006, p70) – a perspective Rinaldi developed through her work with young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

The ‘sitting besides’ form of assessment is a natural part of many teachers’ practice. In supporting students’ learning, teachers take a close interest in what pupils say, write and do, as these give indications of how young people think about and understand what they are learning. Teachers can then judge the appropriate next steps and how best to guide future learning. By sitting besides, literally or metaphorically, teachers gather the evidence which they interpret to provide information about what the students have learnt, how successful their teaching has been, and what to do next. They also, and more importantly, enable and encourage students themselves to develop an understanding of what and how they are learning, to recognise and value achievement, and to take responsibility for directing and regulating their own learning. In so doing, the traditional roles of teachers and pupils, and relationships between them are transformed, and in turn the culture of the classroom undergoes fundamental change.

Developments in understanding AfL
‘Assessment for learning’, very often used synonymously with ‘formative assessment’, is the term used for this understanding of assessment, and is contrasted with ‘assessments of learning’ whose purpose is measurement or judgment for accountability, certification and selection. Knowledge and understanding of AfL has developed considerably over the last decade since the publication of Black and Wiliam’s influential review of literature on classroom formative assessment (1998a and 1998b). This not only drew together the evidence that formative assessment practices result in measured learning gains, but also identified the main features of such practice. The authors categorised these as: sharing criteria with learners; developing classroom talk and questioning; giving appropriate feedback; and peer and self assessment.

Common to all these practices is the active involvement of students, who are cast as
partners in the learning process, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge transmitted or delivered by the teacher. Students come to understand quality and assessment criteria by scrutinising examples, applying marking schemes, comparing exemplar and formulating success criteria for themselves. They participate fully in classroom dialogue, initiating discussions and contributing to debates rather than occasionally replying to the teacher with a single word or phrase. Feedback is not passively received. Rather it stimulates reflection and is acted on, and students evaluate their own and others’ work as a matter of course, identifying strengths and making suggestions for improvements. These practices not only support students’ learning, but they also assist students in becoming better learners (Black et al., 2002).

Black and Wiliam’s review had been commissioned by the Assessment Reform Group, a UK based group of academics that subsequently defined AfL in a sentence that has been widely accepted and often quoted:

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 (ARG, 2002a, p2-3)

This definition encompasses many of the elements of ‘sitting besides’ assessment. The ARG also published a set of research-based and wide ranging principles to guide classroom practice. Their document develops and expands each principle, but the headlines are as follows:

• AfL should be part of effective planning of teaching and assessment
• AfL should focus on how students learn
• AfL should be recognised as central to classroom practice
• AfL should be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers
• AfL should be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact
• AfL should take account of the importance of learner motivation
• AfL should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed
• Learners should receive constructive guidance about how to improve
• AfL develops learners capacity for self-assessment so they can become reflective and self-managing
• AfL should recognise the full range of achievements for all learners. (ARG, 2002a, p2-3)

Two major research projects explicitly built on the Black and Wiliam review, the first of which was the King’s Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP). In this project Paul Black, Dylan Wiliam and colleagues took the findings from their review and worked intensively with a small number of teachers from six schools to see how the ideas from research converted into practice (Black et al., 2002 and 2003). They found that individual teachers adopted and adapted different aspects of formative assessment practice, and that it was important for them to develop a sense of ownership by finding context specific ways of putting general ideas into practice. Teachers developed not only their practice, but also insights into ‘the nature of learning and the role of the teacher in the cognitive and affective development of the learner’ (Black et al., 2003 p121).
A second project, Learning How to Learn (LHTL) (James et al., 2007) was much larger in size and scope and built on the previous research in a number of ways. It widened consideration of assessment for learning into ideas about learning how to learn; it gathered data from many more schools and teachers (40 and approximately 1,500 respectively) in a much more ‘light touch’ manner than KMOFAP; and it expanded the focus to include not only the classroom but also the school and wider networks, incorporating research and expertise in school improvement and networking along with assessment.

Based on the empirical research and theoretical deliberations the Learning How to Learn team generated 12 key messages, at least half of which have direct relevance to the discussion here. Of particular significance was the identification of three factors or principles at the classroom level – making learning explicit, promoting learning autonomy, and focusing on learning as opposed to performance. Assessment for learning practices, individually and together, can support these principles, while the principles themselves provide a useful gauge for checking on the actual effect of practices. ‘If practices fail to serve the underlying principles such as making learning explicit and promoting learning autonomy, then they cease to be assessment for learning’ (James et al., 2007, p215). Practices can fall short of being assessment for learning if, for instance, they are enacted in a procedural, ritualistic manner that belies their pedagogical essence. To avoid this, teachers need to be aware of and think about what underlies the practices, and to check constantly for the actual (as opposed to the intended) effects of practices. The teachers who were most successful in implementing AfL were those who took responsibility for what happened in their classrooms, did not blame external circumstances or pupil characteristics, and applied AfL principles throughout their lessons rather than employing specific techniques at various points. Many teachers found difficulties in bringing their practice into line with their beliefs and learning-orientated values, and ‘felt constrained by a policy context that encouraged rushed curriculum coverage, teaching to the test and a tick-box culture’ (ibid, p216). Teachers’ capacity to implement AfL can be enhanced by opportunities to work together planning, trying out and evaluating new ideas, these opportunities in turn dependent on schools’ structures, cultures and leadership. Those exercising leadership in this respect need to have a clear understanding of what is being aimed for, be able to recognise expertise in colleagues, and nurture and spread this expertise.

**Focusing on learning**

Whilst the ARG, Black and Wiliam’s review, and the KMOFA and LHTL projects have added a great deal to the understanding and development of AfL, other researchers and practitioners have also made contributions, providing alternative perspectives, testing assumptions or drawing attention to aspects insufficiently explored. For example, Philippe Perrenoud (1998) reflected on the work of French-language researchers and conceptualised ‘formative evaluation’ as ‘the regulation of an ongoing learning process’ (p85). Teachers can regulate opportunities for learning, but it is only the learner who can actually regulate learning. Viewing the regulation of learning as the central characteristic of AfL helps keep the focus on learning and the learner, as opposed to teaching activities.

Focusing on learning calls into question assumptions about the nature of learning, and
whether it is essentially a process or a product (Sadler, 2007). Seeing learning as a continually developing capacity, rather than the acquisition of commodities, resonates with John Dewey’s conception of learning as growth – development, both intellectual and moral, in a form that creates the conditions for future growth (Dewey, 1938).

There are also links here with the focus on learning, as opposed to performance, advocated by Mary James and her colleagues (2007), and with the work of Carol Dweck who contrasts performance goals with learning goals (Dweck, 2000). Performance, or ‘ego-involving’ goals are about ‘winning positive judgements of your competence and avoiding negative ones’ (p15) and relate to a fixed entity theory of intelligence, while learning or ‘task-orientated’ goals are about mastering new tasks or understanding new things. They are associated with a desire to get smarter through effort, and are underpinned by an incremental theory of intelligence. However, learning and performance are not always viewed as being diametrically opposed; for example, Royce Sadler’s definition of learning has performance at its core, but it is the conditions of that performance that are crucial. Sadler states that learners can be said to have learned something if they are able to do something they could not do before on demand, independently and well (Sadler, 2007; paraphrased from p390, italics in original). He uses these conditions in contrast to what Harry Torrance refers to as ‘criteria compliance’ (Torrance, 2007, p282), seen in the atomistic assessment of highly specified tasks completed with the aid of strongly supportive coaching, repeated practice and redrafting, leading questions and the directed identification of evidence.

The ways in which learning is conceived and interpreted have important implications for AfL for as James (2008) argues, ‘assessments need to be congruent with our views of learning’ (p20). She adapts Chris Watkins’ (2003) three views of learning and discusses the implications for assessment of a behaviourist view, a cognitive constructivist view, and a socio-cultural view of learning. James argues for striving for alignment among teaching, learning and assessment and advocates fitness for purpose as the overarching principle. Just as how we think about learning should influence approaches to assessment, so too does studying an assessment regime reveal much about the interpretation of learning that is in operation. Assessment reflects our understanding of learning, as well as what is valued (Drummond, 2008). This is explicit in New Zealand where Denise Newfield and colleagues say ‘In thinking about assessment in the multimodal classroom, we have placed human agency and resourcefulness at the centre of what is to be assessed’ (Newfield et al., 2003, p79). When assessment concentrates on dispositions such as resourcefulness and agency, the classroom focus becomes a very particular type of learning.

By contrast in England the two decades since the introduction of the National Curriculum have seen a focus on the teaching and assessment of subject specific knowledge, skills and understanding. The curriculum has been operationalised through schemes of work and plans with tightly specified objectives linked to assessment.

The tyranny of objectives?
A weakness in many interpretations and representations of assessment for learning is the assumption that it is about checking pupils’ attainment of a pre-determined and tightly sequenced set of learning objectives. There is nothing in the definition or
principles of assessment for learning that dictates this limited view of learning, but taken alongside a highly specified and structured national curriculum with levels, objectives and accompanying schemes of work, the phrases ‘where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how to get there’ have very often be interpreted to mean ‘at what level is the student, what is the next in the sequence and which learning objectives need to be targeted’.

The first stage in this sequence is deciding whether a student has attained a particular objective. Harry Torrance and John Pryor (1998) refer to this as convergent assessment, and contrast it with divergent assessment which seeks to find out what a student can do and understands. A divergent approach encourages a broader view of learning, recognising it as a non-linear process, bringing to mind Margaret Carr’s (2008) notion of ‘fuzzy outcomes’ (p37), and a ‘horizon of possibilities’ (James, 2008, p27).

Elliott Eisner’s three-fold categorisation of objectives is helpful in encouraging a more open interpretation of ‘what has been learned and where to go next’. He uses the term ‘curriculum objectives’ (Eisner, 2002, p159) to describe objectives which specify what students are expected to learn in terms of outcomes. Curriculum objectives are linked to standards, and proliferate as finer and finer distinctions are made. One alternative way of thinking about objectives is in terms of open-ended or ‘problem-solving (sic) objectives … in which the criteria to be met are specified, but the form the solution is to take is not’ (ibid, p160). Eisner uses the example of the design specification for a house given to an architect – certain features or functions may be specified, but the end form is not, and indeed the architect may be expected to come up with several diverse solutions. The third perspective is ‘expressive outcomes’, often produced as a result of activities ‘intentionally planned that are likely to yield an unpredictable and heterogeneous array of outcome’ (ibid, p161). The outcomes that students have produced are built on in future lessons through evaluation – not evaluation that matches the outcome with pre-specified intentions but evaluation that is rooted in a sense of quality and an appreciation of the unexpected.

Assessment for learning when the learner is centre stage is equally, if not more, suited to fuzzy outcomes, horizons of possibilities, problem-solving and evaluative objectives, as it is to tightly specified curriculum objectives matched to prescribed standards. It is the (mis)interpretation of AfL as a teacher driven mechanism for advancing students up a prescribed ladder of subject attainment that is the problem, not AfL itself. At the heart of this problem is the understanding of teachers’ and learners’ roles in AfL.

Roles and relationships
Assessment seen as ‘sitting beside’ implies particular roles and relationships for learner and teacher, different from those associated with assessment as ‘standing in front of’, ‘looking down on’, or ‘peering over the shoulder’. Teachers developing assessment for learning reported that they changed the way they thought about their teaching, from concentrating on covering the curriculum to consideration of how best to facilitate student learning (Black et al., 2003). The prime function of a teacher’s subject expertise is not something to be passed on to the students, but the necessary knowledge for devising appropriate learning activities, interpreting students’
responses and misconceptions, framing questions to support learning, and deciding how best to help students move their learning forward.

Teachers are in the position to create and shape the conditions to enable, encourage and facilitate pupils’ learning, but it is the students who must actually do the learning. This does not mean absorbing and regurgitating facts, but becoming aware of how what they are learning fits into ‘the bigger picture’. Students need to develop an appreciation of ‘quality’ in various fields and forms, be able to critique their work and respond to feedback from others in order to improve it, and take responsibility for regulating their learning. Changes from what might be viewed as the traditional roles of teacher and student are at the heart of the principles and practices of AfL. Teachers in both KMOFAP and the LHTL project reported changes in their understanding of roles and responsibilities (Black et al., 2003; James et al., 2007).

As teachers’ and learners’ roles alter, so too do the relationships among them, transforming the culture of the classroom. The focus of the classroom becomes learning as a process - a joint supportive enterprise in which everyone has a part to play, and everyone takes collective responsibility for the activities and their outcomes. KMOFAP, LHTL and other projects developing AfL practice (for example, the ‘8 Schools Project’ (DfES, 2007)) have found that when teachers really embrace AfL transformation is not restricted to the classroom. The principles of AfL apply to professional and organisational learning as well as to student learning, so teachers come to see themselves as learners, devise rich questions, and share both successes and dilemmas. The trend is towards everyone in school becoming more self-evaluative, seeing feedback as a valuable prop to learning and improvement, changing their views about what is important in learning, deciding how best to take forward developing insights and working together to realise them.

AfL for whom and when?
It may seem a strange question to ask, but it helps to clarify AfL if the prime beneficiaries and timing are specified. Although as has been stated above teachers engaging in AfL also become learners, and indeed professional learning is a necessary condition for AfL (James et al., 2007), AfL is directed towards student learning.

Teachers are concerned with the learning of the pupils they are responsible for at the present, as well as those they will come into contact with in the future. When they review the results of periodic tests and assessments they use that information to evaluate and revise provision, perhaps in terms of schemes of work and lesson plans, teaching approaches or classroom organisation. Sometimes the information is used to benefit the pupils who were actually assessed, as is the case when plans are amended for the current group. However, the information can also be used for long term curriculum improvement, in which case the beneficiaries will be other pupils at some stage in the future. Black et al. (2003) point out that in this scenario assessment ‘might be formative for the teacher, but not for the students’ (p122).

The formative use of summative assessment has assumed a higher profile as high stakes summative assessment has become such an all-pervading aspect of contemporary English schooling. The reality of KMOFAP teachers’ everyday concerns was such that they could not separate off summative assessment, and so a number of them worked on ways of integrating formative and summative practices.
They used formative approaches to help students revise for tests, and used the results of summative assessment formatively (Black et al., 2003).

There have been many debates about the relationship between formative and summative assessment, with Wynne Harlen being a particular authority (see for example Harlen and James, 1997; Harlen, 2005; Harlen, 2006; Harlen, 2008). Undoubtedly synergies can be found between the two purposes, and rather than concentrating on the differences Harlen (2006) proposes a dimension of assessment purposes and practices extending from ‘informal formative’ at one end, through ‘formal formative’ and ‘informal summative’ to ‘formal summative’ at the other. These four categories have been replicated by NfER (House of Commons, 2008) although NfER presents them as a two-by-two grid. For both Harlen and NfER it is only ‘informal formative’ that is labelled as assessment for learning.

Assessment for learning’s prime concern is with the here and now of learning. It occurs in the flow of activity and transactions occurring in the classroom. The focus is on the learning of these students now, although there is also consideration given to their learning in the future.

So far in this paper I have explored and explained in some detail my understanding of assessment for learning as ‘clarification is important because the claimed advantages [of formative assessment] only apply to authentic interpretations’ (Black et al., 2003, p122). This elaboration is necessary precursor to critiquing The Assessment for Learning Strategy (DCSF, 2008).

The DCSF Assessment for Learning Strategy

This slim document – less than ten pages of text with two appendices – was published in 2008 and begins with a foreword by Jim Knight (Minister of State for Schools and 14-19 Learners) announcing that the government is investing £150 million over three years for teachers’ continuing professional development in assessment for learning. Support for something that has been shown to have such a positive effect on learning is to be welcomed, but close scrutiny of the document reveals a number of ambiguities and contradictions, and, as I argue in this second part of this paper, a misrepresentation of the central concept of assessment for learning.

At almost exactly the same time as the Assessment for Learning Strategy (AfLS) was launched, Jim Knight was giving evidence to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on Testing and Assessment. Very revealingly, in response to the chairman’s first question the Minister said:

In order to help those [teachers] who do not [use tests appropriately] and to improve best practice generally, we are investing £150 million over the next three years on assessment for learning to improve the way in which the tests are used. (House of Commons 2008, Ev 178 Q329)
So it is clear that the Minister sees assessment for learning as being about the use of tests. This distortion of AfL is carried through the document, and is at the heart of the strategy’s misrepresentation of assessment for learning.

**AfL is not about testing and summative assessment**

The strategy’s introduction says that the AfLS builds on ‘Assessing Pupils’ Progress’ (APP) and the ‘Making Good Progress’ (MGP) pilot, while APP and MGP are referred to throughout the document. The objectives for each year of funding prioritise introducing, establishing and embedding APP.

The APP materials are carefully devised materials that help teachers develop an understanding of levels and progression within the National Curriculum. They are designed to be used by teachers at regular intervals to review pupils’ work so that each pupil can be assigned a National Curriculum level, be set curriculum targets linked to objectives in the teaching framework, and so that levels of attainment can be reported to parents (DfES, 2005). APP guidance also suggests that subject leaders would want to look at the overall picture provided by the assessments to evaluate and, if necessary, revise schemes of work, teaching and pupil groupings. Within a standards based national curriculum framework these may be laudable practices, but they are not assessment for learning. Most of APP is about summative assessment, and the formative use of summative assessment. This view of APP is also that of the DfES/DCSF, as evidenced by their submission to the House of Commons Committee: ‘Teachers can use a number of tools to support their summative assessment judgements, such as tasks provided through the Assessing Pupils’ Progress (APP) materials’ (House of Commons 2008, Ev 159, Para 23).

The Making Good Progress (MGP) pilot is centred on single level tests that are available in reading, writing and mathematics at each of the national curriculum levels from 3 to 8 inclusive. The MGP pilot runs until July 2009 and so a full evaluation before that was premature, but it was one of the areas that the House of Commons committee on testing and assessment reporting in 2008 invited comment. Evidence to that committee included criticism of MGP by many parties including the Association of School and College Leaders, the National Association of Headteachers, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the General Teaching Council for England, the National Foundation for Educational Research, and the National Union of Teachers, and Professors Black, Gardner and Wiliam (House of Commons, 2008). The AfL Strategy states that

‘The [MGP] pilot is underpinned by robust assessment for learning, with teachers rigorously monitoring all pupils’ progress in reading, writing and mathematics throughout the year, using APP assessment criteria’ (DfES 2008, p4)

Once again, AfL is linked directly with APP and thus summative assessment. A list of adjectives used by the AfL Strategy to describe ‘good’ assessment for learning is also very revealing, including as it does ‘accurate’ and ‘reliable’ (DCSF, 2008, p5) – properties of summative rather than formative assessment. For an assessment for learning strategy to focus on testing and summative assessment is erroneous.

*Principles not benefits*
The most colourful graphic in the AfLS document is a three-by-three jigsaw under the subheading ‘the benefits of assessment for learning’ (DCSF, 2008, p5). The statements on the nine jigsaw pieces are actually summaries of the headline principles of assessment for learning from the Assessment Reform Group (ARG 2002a), although there is no acknowledgement. Two of the headlines are combined, presumably to fit all ten neatly onto a nine piece graphic. The Strategy’s appropriation of the ARG’s principles is misleading. They are not benefits or automatic outcomes of AfL, they are principles to guide action. The ARG’s principles, which I listed in the first part of this article, describe what AfL should be like; AfL as represented in the AfL Strategy will not be like this nor have these ‘benefits’. For example, the AfLS version of AfL with teachers rigorously monitoring pupils’ progress will not develop students’ capacity for self and peer assessment.

Readers of the AfLS are not offered the fuller explanation of the principles that is part of the ARG document, and indeed they are denied awareness of or access to it since the source is not provided. Without more details, and given the overall messages of the AfLS, misinterpretation seems very likely. By way of illustration, anyone reading that AfL ‘is central to classroom practice’ on the same pages that they are told that AfL is about using tests to make accurate and reliable assessments to ascertain pupils’ national curriculum levels, may think that this is what they should be doing if they are to be teaching effectively. This is in stark contrast to the picture painted in the ARG’s elaboration of the principle, which talks of prompting, demonstration, observation, interpretation, judgement, and reflection, dialogue, and decision-making by both teachers and learners (ARG, 2002a).

The AfLS’s choice of a three-by-three graphic means that one principle (or in the strategy’s terms ‘benefit’) of AfL sits at the centre. In the AfLS it is given extra prominence by being coloured bright red. The headline afforded this prime position is ‘recognises all educational achievement’ (DCSF 2008, p5). Certainly one of the principles of AfL is that it ‘should recognise the full range of achievements for all learners’ (ARG, 2002a), and this echoes the first of four purposes of Records of Achievement published a quarter of a century ago (DES, 1984). However, the AfL Strategy blatantly contradicts this principle by concentrating on English and mathematics, and even more narrowly on those aspects of English and mathematics that are assessed through single level tests and APP materials (which admittedly are being gradually extended).

Another contradiction is that the strategy states AfL ‘focuses on how pupils learn’ (DCSF 2008, p5), yet its approach belies this. A review of research (ARG, 2002b) has shown that frequent testing and assessment against national standards is detrimental to students’ learning and motivation, especially for the lower attaining students who are the ones particularly targeted by ‘progression tutoring’ (DCSF 2008, p4).

Representations of learning and assessment
In the first part of this paper I discussed the nature of learning that is at the heart of assessment for learning. By contrast the AfL Strategy presents a very different view of learning. Its narrow focus on English and mathematics has already been noted. Moreover, the emphasis is on everybody (senior leaders, teachers, pupils, parents) understanding the characteristics of each national curriculum level in English and mathematics, and how to progress through them. This is a very particular standards-
based conception of learning, involving a prescribed hierarchy of learning objectives akin to Eisner’s curriculum objectives as opposed to problem solving or expressive objectives (Eisner, 2002). Assessment is convergent rather than divergent (Torrance and Pryor, 1998) focusing very tightly on whether particular objectives have been met, not seeking to understand what and how learners are learning. The attendant model of learning is an impoverished one, far removed from the rich process conceived by Dewey (1938), Rinaldi (2006), Carr (2008) and many others.

**Implied roles and relationships**

The models of learning and assessment presented in the AfL Strategy imply very traditional roles for teachers and pupils, roles associated with summative forms of assessment. Teachers teach, and assess pupils’ attainment – assessments that as illustrated earlier by the adjectives attached to ‘assessment’ in the document, are predominantly summative. There are injunctions to teachers to use their assessments to inform future teaching, in other words a to use summative assessment for formative purposes.

Of the fourteen objectives for the three years of the AfLS funding, only four mention children, and in three of these children are the objects of others’ actions. Subject leaders are to understand ‘how best to help children progress through [National Curriculum levels]’; parents are to understand ‘how they can help their children make progress’; and pupils are to be kept ‘on ambitious trajectories’ (DCSF, 2008, p8). The one objective that places pupils in an active role reads ‘To ensure that all children understand what they need to do to progress through National Curriculum levels, and have a growing range of strategies for learning how to learn’ (ibid, p8). I welcome the last part of this objective, but all the other statements make it very clear that the role of pupils is seen as ‘to make good progress’ (ibid, p4) through National Curriculum levels. This conceptualisation of pupils, especially when linked with ‘a progression premium (to reward schools which help pupils who entered a key stage behind national expectations to make good progress)’ (ibid, p4) resonates with David Berliner’s depiction of children as ‘the new commodities’ (Berliner, 2006). It also relates to ethical and legal questions raised by Joy Cumming about students’ rights to engage in assessment decisions and to control the use of data generated by them being assessed (Cumming, 2008).

The predominant portrayal of pupils is of people to whom things are done, and whose progression through the National Curriculum levels is what matters. This is far removed from the ‘sitting besides’ image of assessment for learning, and does not match the statement that AfL ‘recognises all educational achievement’ (DCSF, 2008, p5). Similarly, in the hierarchical model that infuses the whole document, teachers are cast as recipients of messages and materials handed down to them.

**Model of professional development and change**

The strategy’s model of professional development and implementation is top-down and directive. The AfLS emanates from central government and ‘is a joint project between the DCSF, National Strategies and QCA together with the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors’ (DCSF, 2008, back cover), all national bodies. The timeline describes Local Authority leadership as disseminating key messages and materials for use with school leaders, whom Local Authorities must ensure are trained. School and subject leaders receive training and in turn disseminate key messages, as well as
develop and implement plans; teachers use the materials, and are monitored by school and subject leadership (DCSF, 2008). Teachers are at the end of a chain of command, receiving key messages and using prescribed materials in a predetermined way. They are seen as adopters and implementers, not professional responsible reflective learners collaborating on adapting principles to context, acting in accordance with sound educational values and beliefs in order to foster autonomous learning in their students.

It seems as if little has been learnt from the body of literature on professional development, or from the research involving teachers learning about and developing AfL practice. Black and colleagues are emphatic that the successes of the KMOFAP did not arise from telling teachers how to teach, but from encouraging them to think about ideas, experiment with new practices and reflect together on the resulting changes.

We do not think that such wholesale and lasting changes would have occurred if we had been able to provide recipes for successful lessons. The changes in beliefs and values are the result of teachers casting themselves as learners and working with us to learn more. (Black et al., 2003, p98)

The LHTL project built on KMOFAP but with less intensive support for teachers, and highlighted the importance of teachers understanding the principles underlying practices. Without the elements of understanding and reflection, the adoption and implementation of strategies was ritualised. It seems very likely that the approach advocated by the AfL Strategy could result in teachers operating mechanistically, rather than being professional learners whose practice is informed by educationally sound principles.

The AfLS does not appear to recognise the complexity of change. It is a traditional control, direct and monitor model, that is in fact congruent with the representation of teaching and student learning that permeates the whole document. The espoused approach to professional learning is far removed from the conceptions of learning I advocated in the first part of this paper, and ignores the inquiry, collaboration, reflection and experimentation, all underpinned by a valuing of authentic learning, that were the elements found by Mary James and her team to support teachers’ learning (James et al., 2007).

Contradictions, and rays of hope?
As indicated above there are some parts of the AfLS document with which I agree. Aiming to ensure that all pupils ‘have a growing range of strategies for learning how to learn’ (DCSF, 2008, p8) is one of them. But my reading and interpretation of everything in the document is coloured by an awareness of the overall thrust and perspective. In other contexts I would support the aim ‘every child knows how they (sic) are doing, and understands what they need to do to improve and how to get there. They get the support they need to be motivated, independent learners on an ambitious trajectory of improvement’ (DCSF, 2008, p4) (while nevertheless feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the phraseology of the last four words). However, reading this aim in a document permeated with such a narrow standards driven version of learning, I reconsider my approval and with sadness realise the pastiche of the ARG’s definition of AfL refers to National Curriculum levels in parts of English and mathematics. The description of ‘day-to-day’ assessment outlined on page 6
resonates with authentic interpretations of assessment for learning, and the mention on the same page of teachers’ ‘understanding of each child’s disposition, style and learning history’ links with the social and emotional aspects of learning given little attention elsewhere.

The models of student and professional learning that I have depicted and critiqued above are called into question in the document itself in its annex ‘School self-evaluation tables’ (DCSF, 2008 p14-17). Some points in this annex are open to interpretation, for example ‘student performance’, ‘targets’, ‘progress tracked in each subject’. However, much of the language is less ambiguous and is genuinely encouraging of a principled and informed approach to developing AfL. Examples include: ‘developing a community of independent, deep learners’; ‘a shared understanding of AfL continues to become ever more insightful’; ‘reflect critically’, ‘take intelligent informed risks’; ‘sustained professional dialogue’; ‘enquiry’, ‘ongoing action research’; and ‘learning buzz’. It is hard to reconcile the messages given in the school self-evaluation tables with much of the preceding document, until one realises that these tables were developed in another context and that a number of bodies contributed to the AfL Strategy document.

The contradictions in the document could be interpreted optimistically as rays of hope and potential growth points.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have set out my understanding of assessment for learning, an understanding informed by practice and research. In the light of this understanding I have examined the Department’s view of AfL as represented by its Strategy document (DCSF, 2008), and found it to be wanting. The AfL Strategy practically ignores the process and pedagogical essence of AfL, the nuanced interaction among pupils and teachers, the associated values and the underpinning principles. Rather it is dominated by an alignment with ‘Assessing Pupils’ Progress’ and summative forms of assessment.

This is not to deny that ‘APP’ may have a role to play in a comprehensive system of assessment. I am not against teachers occasionally making judgements about pupils’ attainment in relation to National Curriculum levels. In order to do this teachers need a secure understanding of those levels, and the exemplification of standards by annotated illustrations of students’ work is very useful. Well constructed tasks may also be helpful, and the formative use of summative data is a valuable part of a teacher’s repertoire. But this is not assessment for learning, and should not be presented as such.

*Why does it matter?*

I believe this misrepresentation of assessment for learning by the Department for Children Schools and Families matters because of its power to affect people’s view of assessment for learning. Students, parents, teachers, school leaders, local authority personnel, and policy makers may be socialised into a flawed interpretation of AfL. I predict that this normalisation will be pervasive, self-reinforcing, and seen by the vast majority (if it is noticed at all) as unproblematic.
We know from research and practice that authentic interpretations and enactments of assessment for learning improve pupils’ learning, their engagement with learning, and their attainment as measured by tests, and most importantly help them become more self-regulating, autonomous learners. Teachers’ motivation and professional practice are enhanced. The relationships among pupils and teachers, and the culture of the classroom, are transformed. These prizes are too precious to be passed over lightly. I believe that teachers’ professional lives will be impoverished, and the biggest and ultimate losers will be students.

It seems probable that, like every other standards driven strategy, ‘Assessing Pupils’ Progress’ and ‘Making Good Progress’ will in time falter, and any attributed gain in test scores will be short lived. However, since APP and MPG have been appropriated as the ‘Assessment for Learning Strategy’, there is a real danger that it will be ‘assessment for learning’ (as it will have come to be thought of) that will be discredited and rejected.

The tragedy is that it is so unnecessary, and could so simply have been averted. The £50 million that has been promised annually for the next three years could have been put to much better use supporting the development of understanding and practice of authentic AfL practice. There are many examples of such work that could have been replicated, extended, and spread widely, not least the Department’s own eight schools project (DfES, 2007). However the strategy is set in motion, with all the combined force of the Minister, the DCSF, the National Strategies, QCA and the CIEA behind it. Of course, there is the possibility that enlightened teachers, school leaders and local authority personnel will mediate the strategy so it avoids the worse consequences of a misinterpretation of AfL.

What to do?
The first response must be for everyone who has a commitment to assessment for learning to strengthen and develop further our understanding of authentic AfL. We then need to take every opportunity to assert and explain the fundamental principles and features of AfL, spreading understanding to colleagues, school leaders, practitioners, pupils, policy makers and parents. I hope that the first part of this paper will assist.

We need practical tools for evaluating putative AfL practices. Attached as an appendix is one such tool, a sheet inviting reflection on practice using the ‘three imperatives’ drawn from the groupings of classroom practice identified by the Learning How to Learn project (James et al., 2007). We need to work together to develop and share other instruments with similar purposes.

Most of all though, we need the moral will, the commitment and tenacity to maintain our advocacy and active support of authentic assessment for learning. Learners everywhere of all ages deserve nothing less.
References


Assessment Reform Group (2002b) *Testing, Motivation and Learning*. University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.


