CETL:AfL

Assessment for Learning: Current Practice Exemplars from the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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The concept of Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) arose from the Government White Paper "The future of Higher Education", published in January 2003. Within this paper it was recognised that effective teaching and learning was essential to promote excellence and opportunity in Higher Education. CETLs were proposed as a way in which excellent teaching and learning could be rewarded, recognised and best practice could be shared. Successful CETLs were to receive substantial funding to further invest in their practice to further enhance students' experience of university study.

After a two-stage selection process involving 259 applications from both HEFCE1-funded higher education institutions and directly HEFCE-funded further education colleges, fifty-five single institution based CETLs and nineteen collaborative CETLs were announced in January 2005. Northumbria University as been recognised for its excellence in three of these CETLs - two collaborative centres in the areas of Contemporary Music Culture and Healthcare Professional Education and a single institution CETL in Assessment for Learning. This Red Guide outlines the some examples of the exceptional practice across the institution which led to this significant recognition of excellence in Northumbria's Assessment for Learning CETL.

The core Assessment for Learning CETL team are drawn from five subject areas across the university which were able to demonstrate a long-standing commitment to improving the assessment experience of students. These are: Education (significantly Childhood Studies), Engineering, English, History and Psychology. The CETL aims to move well beyond these subject areas, however, during its five-year funding period, so that as many of our staff and students can benefit as possible.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING (AFL)

> "Assessment *defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and graduates*" (Brown & Knight, 1994, p.12)

The impact of assessment on student learning is widely recognised in Higher Education but, despite this, improvement in assessment was identified by Subject Review (QAA, 2004, p.27) as:

> *"The single intervention by universities and colleges that would improve the quality of the student experience."*

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1 Higher Education Funding Council for England

The AfL CETL team wholeheartedly agreed with this but asked themselves - what kind of assessment?
Combined knowledge and experience led the team to recognise that effective assessment:

- performs a powerful formative function, enabling all students to enhance their achievements
- provides rigorous, reliable and valid verification of student performance without allowing this summative function to dominate learning and teaching
- operates within a coherent assessment strategy, employing a diversity of methods to assess genuine and valued learning
- develops students as active participants in their own assessment, enabling them to develop as autonomous learners and effective professionals

The team have paid particular attention to realising the potential of formative assessment, one of the most powerful tools for improving student learning (Black & William, 1998; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Formative assessment is central to effective teaching and, by engaging students in it as active participants - the effect is multiplied.

A key purpose of AfL is to foster student development but it can only function in this ipsative manner when the student takes responsibility for evaluating, judging and improving their own performance by actively using a range of feedback. These capabilities are at the heart of autonomous learning and of the graduate qualities valued by employers and in professional practice.

Our experience and research has led us to synthesise six key conditions for the support of AfL through a learning environment that:

- emphasises authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement
- uses high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly rather than as the main driver for learning
- offers students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed
- is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms e.g. tutor comments on assignments, student self-review logs
- is rich in informal feedback e.g. peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work, which provides students with a continuous flow of feedback on 'how they are doing'
- develops students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others

AFL IN ACTION

This guide will now offer some illustrative examples drawn from across the institution of how existing practice might fulfil these six conditions and support AfL.

Balancing formative and summative assessment

The first example, drawn from an engineering skills module, illustrates an approach to avoiding the dangers of a negative backwash effect on teaching and learning from summative assessment (Biggs, 1999), using formative assessment to enhance learning rather than allowing summative assessment to drive the learning process (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

During the semester, students undertake lab-based and professional practice tasks. During each session formative discussion takes place on how these tasks directly support their achievement of the module learning goals. Students were asked to write these up based in

a reflective manner hence integrating PDP2 concepts within the module to stimulates student reflection and self-management of their learning.

Summative assessment takes the form of a ten-minute individual oral exam, presented in the form of problem-solving exercise which could have referred to any of single task exercises undertaken during the module. This approach has resulted in students focussing on genuine learning rather than leaving work until revision time for exams.

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  i.e. Conditions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6

A second example can be found on a module in literary theory for first-year undergraduates. This is based around short writing exercises that encourage students to use different critical approaches when reading literary texts. Students practice using the different techniques so that they assimilate the new ideas and approaches that are being introduced to them, on a staged basis. Tutor feedback is provided on the writing and students are encouraged to review their own work and discuss it with fellow students. The emphasis in the module is on formative assessment. The work is given a mark as students have said that they want this an indication of the level they are attaining but all that is required for progression is a pass. This means that the pressure of summative assessment is reduced and students are more willing to try something new and take a risk whereas a focus on summative marks tends to lead them to 'play safe'.
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  i.e. Conditions: 2,3,4 and 5

Extended writing where students express their understanding and synthesis of a topic is important in engineering education but is less familiar to students than numerical analysis or the presentation of laboratory or workshop reports and forms the basis of the third example. Summative assessment often reveals problems of poor performance in extended writing despite clear guidance and advice being given. The provision of more formative assessment has been approached through innovative use of the JISC Plagiarism Detection Service. Students write draft essays which are then submitted to the detection service with the output report returned to individuals and then discussed in class sessions. This has addressed a key problem that students find difficulty in expressing their own understanding

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2 Personal Development Portfolio/Planning also sometimes known as Progress Files

without relying too heavily on the sources they use, since the detection service highlights potential plagiarism problems in such over-reliance. Although the focus here is 'plagiarism' in fact the tutor and student group discussions of the draft essays and the detection reports have increased students' understanding of the requirements for this kind of writing more broadly. Summative assessment is based on essays re-drafted on the basis of formative work.

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The final example has had a direct impact on the common component of all honours based programmes the dissertation in their final year of a range of Humanities courses. Within Humanities a long-term view is taken to the preparation process where academic work earlier in the degree is used to serve a formative purpose for dissertation completion. In the second year students select, design and write, under tutorial guidance, an essay project of their own choosing. This helps to prepare them for identifying and developing a dissertation enquiry. Before they go on to write their extended essay, students submit a plan for formative assessment in a tutorial. This not only helps them in writing the summatively assessed essay but also introduces them to the process of discussing draft work with a tutor, as they will do with their dissertation tutor in the final year.

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  i.e. Conditions: 3, 4 and 6.

Developmental assessment

A module on popular writing was summatively assessed by extended essay at the end of Semester Two. However, students tended to leave the preparatory research and planning for the extended essay too late, with detrimental effects on their learning and performance. The module was redesigned to include a reading dossier submitted alongside a draft essay proposal. The dossier includes notes made during seminars or for seminar preparation, and notes on primary and secondary reading. It gives students the opportunity to practice the analytical skills they need, to discuss their thinking and, through reflection, to identify their own interests. The feedback and dialogue between student and tutor concerning the extended essay has much improved. Formal student feedback consistently comments on the appropriateness of assessment in helping them to develop:

> *"There's a progression because you use the tools as you go along and it gets easier"*

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Learning through work with peers

Learning environments need to provide ample opportunities for dialogue and collaboration within the student community, whether this is a formal part of the curriculum, incidental or informal. Often formal opportunities need to be set up to encourage students to actively learn from their peers.

Peer feedback has been successfully used in the Childhood Studies course where first year students undertake a short writing task and post their 'answers' to the Blackboard VLE3 discussion board through which they give and receive peer feedback. Students also bring their writing to a class session where they further compare their writing with tutor-prepared model answers in discussion with their peers. Students find this very helpful and tutors have noted marked improvements in early attempts at writing on the course. Typical student comments are:

> *"listening to other people, not so much tutors, but people on my level, really helped."*

> *"You get the opinions of the whole group on your work and see how others go about answering the question"*

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Effective Feedback

Computer-delivered tests with multiple-choice and other types of fixed-response questions have been used successfully for feedback purposes in a number of subjects. They have been

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3 Virtual Learning Environment

used in first-year History and the students appreciate the way in which more frequent and earlier feedback provide through the tests gives them an indication of how they are doing. In modules assessed by essay, early feedback in this concrete way is not available to them. In Engineering, one use of computer-based testing has been by embedding tests within self-paced learning materials. External evaluation of these materials showed that students especially valued the online testing and the extensive feedback, which they received on completing a test.

Illustrating the computer delivered process:

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  i.e. Conditions: 4 and 6

Check box feedback is often recommended as giving precise and clear information to students and was therefore adopted for feedback on Psychology practical reports. The programme team's evaluation found that their students had difficulties in using this kind of feedback. Students were unable to recognise the problems identified and did not know how to improve their work. The teaching team now begin by asking first year students to write only parts of practical reports, with more frequent submission and more detailed feedback. At a later stage, when students are writing full reports, they are given a structured booklet with examples of frequently occurring errors and weaknesses to avoid. Students now find the feedback more helpful.

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In History, the programme team have taken the unusual step of extending their practice of giving detailed tutor feedback on course work to the provision of generic written feedback on exams opening up the 'black box' of this form of assessment. The feedback on answers to each exam question provides tutors with a much better platform for discussing performance with students in guidance tutorials. A conversation that might have ended with: "I got 56%" now extends to reflection and planning for action.

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Education students have been encouraged to collate and discuss the tutor-feedback they receive at the end of each semester with their Guidance Tutor, via the introduction of Progress Files and Personal Development Planning. This process has been formalised by asking students to summarise the feedback they have received, in order to identify common patterns and issues that they could usefully address on a generic level, rather than simply a

module-specific level. Guidance Tutors have, as a result, been able to discuss the possible benefits of, say, using the Study Skills Support Centre, and students have reported seeking advice which has improved their work, which they might not have done without the impetus provided by this feedback overview tutorial.

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Promoting complex and authentic learning

An Art History module requires students to develop an art exhibition on the Web for summative assessment. It requires them to link 'practice' and 'theory' by presenting an interpretation through the medium of an exhibition. Students develop their exhibitions with enthusiasm and value the opportunity to choose an artist, period or style that interests them and present their exhibition in their own way. It is the process of learning and communicating understanding rather than the final submission of the Gallery for summative assessment that drives student learning. Students are helped to gain confidence in the underpinning skills by the use of an ICT skills checklist to enable them to document their development needs and progress. In workshop sessions, students gain feedback from both tutors and their peers on 'draft' exhibitions and see different ways of approaching the task. This contributes significantly to the high quality of student work.

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  i.e. All six conditions

Childhood Studies is, like other more 'traditional' humanities and arts degrees, focused upon fostering critical academic enquiry, rather than training students to develop workplace skills for direct work with children. Many students struggle, however, to grasp the importance of thinking critically about childhood, especially when the literature they are required to negotiate and the concepts they need to develop seem abstract and 'difficult.' In attempts to respond to students' needs and improve the student learning experience, tutors have introduced enquiry-based learning approaches to the Childhood curriculum to support AfL. In teaching sessions and via the Blackboard VLE students go on 'virtual visits' to authentic child environments, such as a youth library, in order to discuss the direct relevance of theory to practice. An enquiry-based learning assignment, rather than a traditional essay, is used to assess student understanding of key concepts. After the virtual visits students design and theorise their own libraries, with feedback sessions involving peer-review, as well as tutor input.

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i.e. Conditions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6

Psychology undergraduates participate in a mini-conference with their peers from other regional universities where they give talks or present posters based on their experimental research work. This enables students to engage in the type of activity that is practised by academic psychologists and gives an added purpose to the research tasks they undertake in the course. Making a good presentation, especially in front of students from other universities challenges students to do their best rather than just meeting assessment requirements. Students gain much informal feedback and many new ideas from meeting other students and seeing their work. The mini-conference is an activity that greatly enhances their confidence in their achievements.

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i.e. Conditions: 1, 2 and 5

Engineering design is an integrating theme in the Mechanical Engineering programmes linking, theory, practice and professional capabilities. Engineering students appreciate the realistic nature of design tasks and the opportunity to work in teams. Not only does this 'mirror' professional practice but it gives students considerable opportunity to pool ideas and work together on problems thus gaining satisfaction from a good outcome at the end of the projects rather than merely looking to achieve a mark. For this to be effective, students need to pay attention to the process of team working and problem-solving, rather than solely concentrating on the task to be done. They are assisted in this by using peer review and reflective tools such as team role inventories, on a group and individual basis.

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Promoting student autonomy and self-evaluation

In English, past experience had suggested that some students paid no attention to the criteria that they were given. In an attempt to address this students were asked to complete and hand in self-assessment forms with their essays. Now, as students have to think about the assessment criteria through applying them to their own work, evidence suggests that they are now more likely to try to understand them, to discuss them with fellow students and to ask questions about them. Many students go further and actually consider their own writing in relation to the criteria. Tutors have been impressed by the extent to which students identify strengths and weaknesses in their essays, thus beginning the process of self-assessment, and consequently the provision and use of tutor feedback has become more effective.

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i.e. Conditions: 4 and 6

Students in Childhood Studies are systematically introduced to the value of self-evaluation from the beginning of the course. They undertake a series of structured activities, including short-writing tasks, individually and in groups, which allows them to build up a portfolio of work throughout the module. Students are helped to acquire effective understanding of the assessment criteria and expected standards, which can then be applied to one's own work. This skill is explicitly identified and fostered in various teaching sessions, often using reciprocal peer feedback. Students are required to review their portfolio via a reflective commentary, which they submit for summative assessment. In the commentary, they must demonstrate, with accompanying evidence, the progress they have made with their academic writing and outline their plans and suggestions for further areas of improvement. Students learn that it is important to be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own work, rather than simply expecting tutors to do that job for them. This is key to the development of an autonomous approach to learning. They particularly benefit from working with their peers:

> "I like working along with other people, rather than on my own and, although it's a bit funny other people seeing your work, I've got used to it … you get the opinions of a whole group, not just your own ideas, but others. So that's got to be better than just doing it on your own. And you learn from making mistakes, so you can improve."

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Participation in a FDTL4 phase 4 project "ClaSS" introduced the use of various instruments relating, for example, to learning styles and approaches to study to the Psychology degree students. Through analysis and review of the outcomes of the questionnaires on a group basis the teaching staff learnt more about their students. Through their own individual results, students have been encouraged to think more reflectively about their own learning. This has been supported through the PDP process to great effect. Students are receptive to new approaches that were introduced to build on the initial work under the ClaSS project, including the use of reciprocal peer feedback, self-evaluation and reflective diaries. Teachers note that students now take more personal responsibility for reviewing and managing their own learning and, increasingly, for directing their own progress and pursuing their own interests and questions.

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Assessment Strategy

The programme team for BA Joint Hons Childhood Studies redesigned their assessment strategy at programme level with the goal of improving the learning experience for an increasingly diverse student population. The systematic deployment of diverse assessment methods to meet module and programme learning outcomes multiplies their effectiveness in supporting and judging students' learning. This strategic approach fully integrates assessment into teaching and learning . The new strategy provides a balanced programme of assessment which was achieved by mapping and modifying the diversity of assessment methods already in use, with the overall student experience and programme learning goals in mind. The strategy now places increased emphasis on the formative nature of assessment by, for example, designing linked formative assignments in preparation for end of module assessment and hence reduced summative assessment load on students. The programme now includes an induction to the role of assessment and the need for students to manage their own learning in Year 1. This is embedded in the guidance tutor system and the role PDP which continues over the whole of the programme.

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4 Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. Website: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/1046.htm

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i.e. All six conditions

Why do we need assessment to 'work smarter?'

These examples illustrate that a lot has been achieved across the institution and we are aware that there will be examples of similar excellent practice beyond the CETL disciplines. However, there is clearly much more that can and should be done. That's the challenge the CETL is setting itself. It is only by further development of the ways that staff and students approach assessment that we will be able to realise its full potential to support student progress and their development as autonomous learners.

GETTING INVOLVED IN THE CETL

This can be done at either the individual or team level. In the initial stage, although focus is placed on embedded expansion of AfL processes within the core subject areas developmental opportunities and rewards are to offered across the institution in the form of a CETL Associateship scheme involving individual staff members or teams in developing and using AfL.

The CETL will have dedicated premises which act as a focal point for its activities, constituting a shared working space for CETL Directors and Team (given designation of Fellows), Associates, support staff and visitors, and an AfL resource centre.

CETL Associates

There are quite a few benefits to becoming a CETL Associate. You will be able to:

- be part of a group of colleagues who are committed to teaching and to innovation and enhancement in teaching. There will always be someone to discuss your ideas, difficulties and success with!

- share ideas and experiences to help you in addressing problems or making improvements in your teaching based on AfL principles

- apply for CETL funding to support your work

- Access published materials, research and make links to projects in teaching development that are relevant to you and your aims

- Draw upon support from a CETL mentor (one of the CETL Fellows)

- Obtain support on evaluation and research from the CETL Research Associate

- Obtain practical support (e.g. facilities, equipment, production of resources, practical assistance in your classroom) from the CETL Learning & Teaching Officer.

- Use the facilities (including hot desk space) in the CETL Hub (Ellison Building)

- Spend time at the CETL perhaps in the form of a mini-secondment

- Work with others to publish and disseminate your work

- Become recognised for your teaching development activities which will help you in application for awards (e.g. National Teaching Fellowship) or promoted posts.

CETL Recognised teams

The members of a CETL Recognised Team will have access to all of the benefits listed above. The difference is that the team will be working on a single collaborative development rather than individually-led developments. An example could be a team developing a new programme who aim to use the principles of AfL as a philosophy underpinning the whole programme. Another example could be a team from a university service who want to develop study support materials and activities based around AfL. We think it is important to recognise teams, not just individuals, and are aware that collaborative team developments may give rise to higher levels of impact and benefits to students. There is flexibility - we can envisage a small group of 3 or 4 staff working on linked developments might choose to apply as individual CETL Associates, whilst other groups, especially larger ones, might prefer to participate as a Team. Quite likely, a CETL Recognised Team will contain a CETL Associate as the main link person with the CETL.

Further details of funding and application process for these schemes can be found from the CETL website: http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/

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