

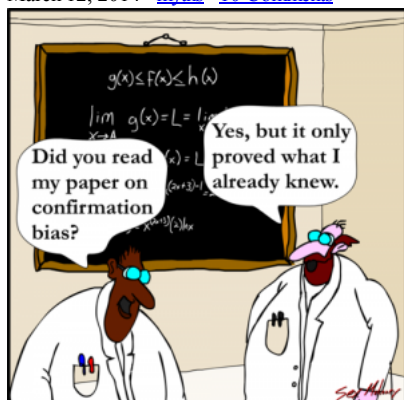


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Why AfL might be wrong, and what to do about it

March 12, 2014 [myths](#) [10 Comments](#)



Some cows are so sacred that any criticism of them is fraught with the risk of bumping up against entrenched cognitive bias. We are fantastically bad at recognizing that our beliefs are often not based on evidence but on self-interest, and it's been in everyone's interest to uphold the belief that AfL is the best thing that teachers can do.

When confronted with 'others' who disagree with our most fervently held beliefs, we tend to make the following series of assumptions:

1. They are ignorant
2. They are stupid
3. They are evil

When in the past I have been critical of AfL (or anything else) the most common responses is that I don't understand it. When I present the incontestable evidence that I do understand it, opponents often treat me as if I'm a bit silly: only an idiot could believe anything so ludicrous and patently untrue. When they accept that my counter-arguments are sufficiently cogent that I prove at least a modicum of intelligence, there are only two remaining propositions: either I am evil, or you are wrong. Of these, it is far easier, and massively less damaging to our sense of self to assume that I must in fact be a bad un seeking to poison children's life chances with my toxic spewing of such dark falsehoods.

So, can we just assume that we've already gone through all that unpleasantness and just engage in the argument I'm presenting?

Of course it's important now to throw out babies along with this dirty bath water. I'm happy to accept that it's a good thing for teachers to know where pupils currently are, where they need to get to and what they need to do to get there. That bit's fine. But what of the rest?



The 'big idea' of AfL, as defined by its progenitor, Dylan Wiliam is that we should, "Use evidence about learning to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs." This is then broken down into '5 key strategies' discussed by Wiliam in his comprehensive book, [Embedded Formative Assessment](#):

1. Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and success criteria
2. Eliciting evidence of learner's achievement
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another
5. Activating students as owners of their own learning

Some of these strategies contain real merit if undertaken thoughtfully, but there's a very real danger that the 'big idea' of AfL might be fundamentally, and fatally, flawed. My problem is that AfL is predicated on the assumption that you can assess what pupils have learned *in an individual lesson*, and then adjust future teaching based on this assumption.

If nothing has changed in long-term memory, nothing has been learned.

[Kirschner, Sweller & Clark](#)

But you can't. There's no meaningful way to assess what pupils have learned during the lesson in which they are supposed to learning it. There's an impressive body of research that tells us that learning is distinct from performance. You cannot see learning; you can only see performance. If we measure performance then we may be able to infer what might have been learned, but such inferences are highly problematic for two reasons: 1) performance in the classroom is highly dependent on the cues and stimuli provided by the teacher and 2) performance is a very poor indicator of how well pupils might retain or be able to transfer knowledge or skills.

Let's consider the merits of each of the key strategies of AfL:

Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and success criteria

I'm happy with the basic premise of letting kids know where they're supposed to be going. Work put into presenting intentions clearly helping pupils to understand what they are supposed to be learning should always be productive. Too often intentions are mechanistic and may actually obfuscate the learning. Time spent on the mechanics of how to share these intentions is fleetingly important: we must simply take care that they do not become 'wall paper', but we must take care not to resort to distracting gimmickry.

But I do have a bone to pick with 'success criteria'. Wiliam recommends sharing rubrics with pupils so that they will know whether they have successfully achieved the learning intention. He explores the merits of 'student-friendly' mark schemes concluding,

Student-friendly language can be useful as students are introduced to a discipline, but it is also important to help students develop the habits of mind that define the discipline. and coming to terms with the 'official' language is part of that process. P 65

Well, now. My view is that many rubrics are inherently meaningless and lead to very lazy thinking in teachers and rarely provide anything meaningful to students. In subjects like English this is especially pronounced: what's the difference between 'confident' and 'sophisticated' really? Any difference is arbitrary and exam boards are forced to provide exemplar work for teachers to understand the process by which they arrive at their decisions. We are forced into concluding that confident means *x* whilst sophisticated means *y*. Instead of wasting their time with vague, unhelpful success criteria, why not spend time deconstructing exemplars and modelling the expert processes we would use to complete a task?

Eliciting evidence of learner's achievement

Basically, this is all about how we use questions. We make decisions about how and what to teach based on what we know about pupils' understanding. Wiliam says it is "unprofessional [to move on] without finding out what the students in the class know", and that questions are "crucially important if we are to improve the quality of students' learning." (p77) He points to a study by Ted Wragg which revealed that less than 10% of the questions asked by teachers "actually caused any new learning." (p 79) But how on earth would we know? All we can infer is that we don't *think* they caused any learning, and that's not the same thing at all.

Wiliam argues that are only two valid reasons for questioning: "to cause thinking and to provide information for the teacher about what to do next." I'm happy with the first of these reasons and tend to agree with Robert Coe that "Learning happens when people have to think hard." But I'm not quite so sold on the second reason.

If we ask questions, no matter how well designed, and then use the responses we elicit to decide whether we should 'move on' we are in serious danger of missing the point that "as learning occurs, so does forgetting" and that "learning takes time and is not encapsulated in the visible here-and-now of classroom activities." (Nuthall 2005)

If pupils don't know the answer to our questions then we can remediate. If misconceptions are revealed then we have an opportunity to explore them. But if they answer our questions correctly, it means very little. Just because they know it now, doesn't mean they'll know it next lesson or in an exam. A correct answer to a question is, perhaps, the least useful student response we can hope for.

But questions might be important for stimulating discussion. Wiliam tells us that, "Engaging is classroom discussion really does make you smarter." (p81) If he's right then it's certainly incumbent on us to ensure all pupils participate in these discussions. But creating the conditions for effective classroom discussions has very little to do with finding out what pupils know and everything to do with provoking thought. Far from hoping for neat answers to Exit Tickets, maybe the ideal circumstances in which to finish a lesson is for pupils to be actively struggling with difficult concepts. Nuthall tells us in [The Hidden Lives of Learners](#) that pupils are unlikely to transfer concepts from working to long term memory until they have encountered them on *at least* 3 occasions. So, who cares what they know at the end of lesson? Let's assume that they are highly likely to forget it.

I've written in more detail about questioning [here](#).

Providing feedback that moves learning forward

Who could argue against providing feedback that moves learning forward? No one, right? Nobody disputes the fact that feedback is powerful, but perhaps we should be using it a little more sparingly than we have been? For a more detailed discussion, have a read of [this post](#). Wiliam says the following in his conclusions on feedback:

We have seen that in almost two out of every five carefully designed scientific studies, information given to people about their performance lowered subsequent performance...If we are to harness the power of feedback to increase student learning, then we need to ensure that feedback causes a cognitive rather than an emotional reaction – in other words, feedback should cause thinking. (p 131-2)

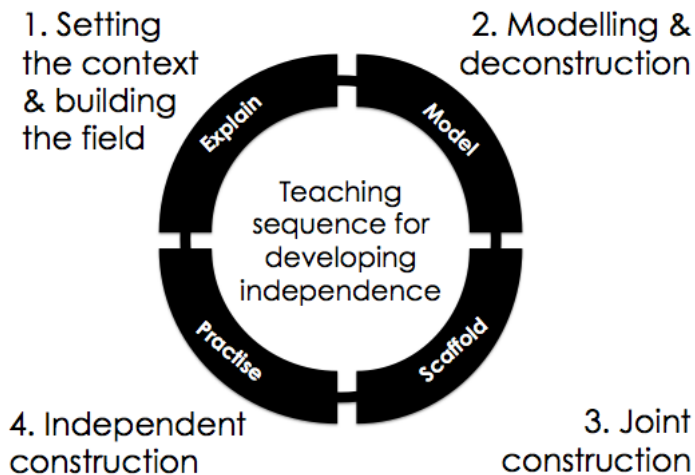
Activating students as instructional resources for one another

Wiliam argues that the whole purpose of feedback is to "increase the extent to which students are owners of their own learning," but what does this mean? He argues that 'cooperative learning' is "one of the greatest success stories of educational research." (p 133) But I'm not so sure. He advocates the following as practical techniques for encouraging cooperative learning:

- C3B4Me
- Peer evaluation of homework
- Homework help boards
- Two stars and a wish

- Student Reporters
- If you've learned it, help someone who hasn't

Each of these are about putting the child at the centre of the classroom and moving the teacher to the side. These kinds of techniques have gained a great deal of traction in classrooms. But often at the cost of efficiency. There is always an opportunity cost: If I ask pupils to spend a lesson working things out in groups, that is a lesson I cannot spend teaching them. This has led to widespread condemnation of 'teacher talk' and has, I would argue, been instrumental in lowering standards and expectations. If we force children to work cooperatively all the time they will never know enough to produce thinking or work of any quality. Cooperative learning (or 'independent learning' as it's often called) certainly has a place, but it should come after careful explanation and modelling:



Read more about this teaching sequence [here](#).

Maybe peer assessment might be a useful strategy for improving pupils' attainment, particularly in light of Nuthall's discovery that 80% of the feedback pupils get on their work is from each other, and 80% of that is wrong. If that's true (and I think it might well be) we need to do something about it. One possible solution is discussed in [this post](#).

Activating students as owners of their own learning

No one can teach you anything, they can only help you learn. And yet, as Wiliam points out:

[O]ur classrooms seem to be based on the opposite principle – that if they try really hard, teachers can do the learning for the learners. This is only exacerbated by accountability regimes that mandate sanctions for teachers, schools, and for districts, but not for students. P 145

Wiliam is convinced that pupils can develop sufficient insight into their own learning to improve it, and I'm inclined to agree. My advice, for what it's worth is develop pupils' error checking skills. I discussed in [this post](#) how proofreading might be used to force pupils to engage meta-cognitively with their work, and to provide opportunity for the feedback teachers give to be targeted at the point at which pupils are ready to learn.

More on metacognition [here](#).

I'm not sure whether using traffic lights has much if any impact on developing metacognition, but I can't see that it does much harm, so if you're keen, by all means carry on.

In conclusion

Many of the strategies discussed by Wiliam and enshrined in AfL have worth, and if considered carefully enough will have a positive impact on pupils' progress. I'm a big fan of Dylan Wiliam and have been hugely influenced by his body of work. Just have a look at the [Dylan Wiliam tag](#) on my blog! But I'm afraid I have to conclude that the 'big idea' of AfL is wrong. Of course, I may well be wrong: I certainly don't know anywhere near as much as many other people. But I do know that there are hugely powerful cognitive biases at work that will protect us from admitting that our belief systems might be wrong. Staying open to the possibility of error is possibly the hardest but most valuable of human endeavours.

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10 Responses to *Why AfL might be wrong, and what to do about it*

1.  [johnpearcel](#) says:
[March 12, 2014 at 3:30 pm](#)

Dropping into your blog always makes me think! I love your defusers at the start (being called ignorant – stupid – evil) to which I'd add another... "To be honest I haven't the time to think today and so I'm going to read a bit, bin it and move on, without further thought". I started to think like that – as I respond from a motorway

service station before driving on fast) and realised this is why, as you say, we can never assume learning takes place “in the moment”.

My obsession at the moment is challenging those who feel they have to, ought to, or (worse) are best when making judgements about the work of others ... Because I believe that true learning only makes sense when the learner knows it, can recognise it and move on, forward under their own steam. So, that is why I default (err) to starting with the learner's perceptions, ideas... So I want, expect teachers to comment on their teaching (prior to the assumed superior judge doing so) and I'd apply this approach to students... I reckon the real dialogue of learning – the most powerful feedback is of ourselves, by ourselves.. So learning records, diaries, blogs, papers (monologues?) are often really powerful statements of “where we are in our own learning”. We think aloud in this way – we are testing out our thoughts and ideas.

The problem, in the potential intersections on social media, and maybe the interactions in a classroom, are that there are SO MANY, to which we feel a need, want to respond... So we don't even bother to try (look at the number of us commenting lurkers of this page) but what spark of new thinking have you unleashed? I know I will not be able to trot out A4L for a while without a little reminder of this David... Thanks... Now about my idea....

[Reply](#)



David Didau says:
[March 12, 2014 at 9:05 pm](#)

Thanks John – I'm not even sure that I'm right about AfL being wrong – it rather hinges on whether I'm right about learning being invisible. I'm really hoping that folk will take me on over this and force me to sharpen my thinking.

But if something can't stand up to scrutiny then it's definitely wrong. Questioning assumptions is always worthwhile.

[Reply](#)



johnpearce1 says:
[March 12, 2014 at 3:36 pm](#)

In my haste – I missed a crucial point – that a powerful enhancement of and to A4L which picks up your advice and my obsession, would be to – encourage students to describe their learning to themselves in diary, log and discussion ie self- assessment and then undertake analysis of the next steps and the action they need to take to get there... As per Kolb and Boyatzis and, dare I say iAbacus models...

[Reply](#)



Cazzwebbo says:
[March 12, 2014 at 7:24 pm](#)

Re proof reading... Currently working in my department with other tutors to adopt the process across other subject areas, not just English. As a result of my comment on your dyslexia post the other week, and Jules Daulbys reply, I've found out that we already have 'balabolka' installed on 'mystudybar' for students but it is underused and tutors don't have it so it's probably hit and miss as to whether students really ever touch it. So, our ALS tutor is now going to roll out a series of proof reading classes after Easter, to try to establish the process of self proof reading, peer proof reading and how to use balabolka to help with that too. She's going to push the learning by mistakes angle and we are talking to subject tutors about doing this too. I'm also going to repeat this often in my classes to reinforce the process, which at the moment isn't really there. We are going to try to normalise this process for staff and students as a regular way of working. Staff are up for it.

[Reply](#)



David Didau says:
[March 12, 2014 at 8:29 pm](#)

Sounds excellent – please keep me up to date on this

[Reply](#)

4. [Why AfL might be wrong, and what to do about it...](#) says:
[March 12, 2014 at 7:54 pm](#)

[...] Some cows are so sacred that any criticism of them is fraught with the risk of bumping up against entrenched cognitive bias. [...]

[Reply](#)

5. [Why AfL might be wrong, and what to do about it | The Echo Chamber](#) says:
[March 12, 2014 at 8:33 pm](#)

[...] Read more on The Learning Spy... [...]

[Reply](#)



Harry Fletcher-Wood says:
[March 12, 2014 at 9:13 pm](#)

A fascinating post which has made me think – much appreciated!

I'd concur with many of the issues you raise about individual techniques for the strategies... for example, I've always believed that sharing learning intentions is critical – if done well, which is pretty rare. Likewise, some tasks designed to 'activate students as resources for each other' are a drag on time – so I try to use only those which seem to me to save teaching time (like asking your neighbour simple questions before asking me).

My big question, however, relates to your central contention. The argument that performance is separate from, and often unrelated to, learning, appears irrefutable; likewise, the case for repetition and the amount of time it takes for something to enter long-term memory. However, the implicit conclusion of this line of reasoning (correct me if I'm wrong) is that the teacher can never know how much students have learned. I'd agree with this in one sense – I don't believe I have anything much more than a basic illusion as to students' 'progress' (least of all when I try to report this in convenient data form). However, if we don't assess some proxy for student learning (like understanding at some point in a lesson), what data do we have to inform our planning and feedback? If the answer is that it is acceptable to gain some snapshot impression of student learning at some point, then do not most AfL techniques stand?

If so, the issue is with the fallacious assumption that competency in one lesson confers retention and ongoing mastery... (AfL is only a culprit inasmuch as it contributes to this – it is not the problem itself).

If not, I see (although I may be wrong) a void in which teachers can never do anything save plan and proceed with schemes of work using their best understanding of cognitive science and what mastery of their domain represents.

But I bow to your superior wisdom on this...!

[Reply](#)



David Didau says:
[March 13, 2014 at 8:46 am](#)

Ha! Not sure I'm superior in any respect, but least of all in wisdom. What I was trying (failing?) to point out in the post was that some proxies are better than others. Distance between instruction & assessment will (I contend) lead to a much clearer indication of whether pupils have learned. But, if we accept the lessons of the Willingham thesis of memory then we can presuppose that certain strategies are much more likely to lead to learning than others.

I had the beginnings of an interesting discussion with Rob Coe last night about what might be 'better proxies' for learning. His contention that 'thinking hard' leads to learning was an attempt to square this circle. But I think there might be others: this post by Peter Blenkinsop is an interesting beginning: <http://manyana-education.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/how-might-we-start-to-see-learning-in.html>

Cheers, DD

[Reply](#)



7. Philip Crooks says:
[March 13, 2014 at 12:23 am](#)

Just a light hearted comment. The real AFL starts tomorrow evening, when Collingwood play The Fremantle Dockers in Melbourne .
I really enjoy your posts, and your new book is on order.

[Reply](#)

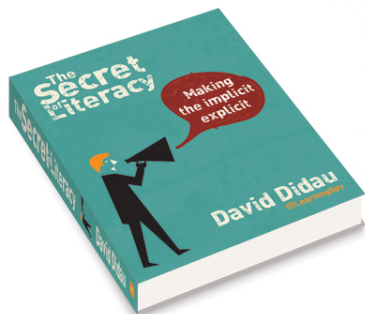
Feedback is always appreciated

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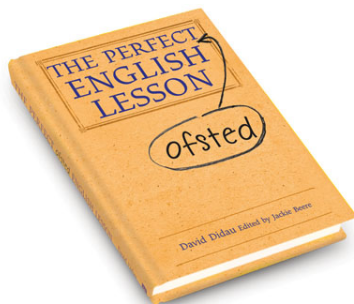
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11:19 am By David Didau

It was great to be back at the IOE for Pedagoo London 2014, and many thanks must go to @hgaldinoshea & @kevbartle for organising such a wonderful (and free!) event. As [Read More »](#)

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[What I've learned about functional grammar](#)

6:42 pm By David Didau

Yesterday I had the good fortune to listen to Professor Mary Schleppegrell from the University of Michigan talk about how functional grammar is having an impact on EFL students [Read More »](#)

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[Getting feedback right Part 2: How do we provide clarity?](#)

3:08 pm By David Didau

As discussed in yesterday's post, I am currently working on the assumption that there are only 3 meaningful purposes of feedback: To provide clarity To increase [Read More »](#)

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Getting feedback right Part 1 – Why do we give it?

8:10 pm By David Didau

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