AfL for inclusive, differentiated learning:

Benefiting all students in a class

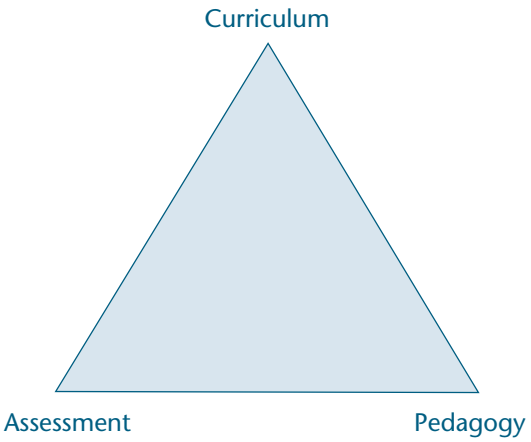
Simon Knight considers the literature on AfL, and its application to differentiation for able students studying a rigid curriculum. He looks at the challenges and benefits for whole-class teaching in terms of how to create an inclusive but stretching classroom.

Most teachers are now familiar with Black and Wiliam's work on Assessment for Learning (AfL) and their oft-cited paper, Inside the *Black Box* (2001). However, relating this to differentiation in the classroom and *inclusive differentiation* (that is differentiation that brings students together on tasks as opposed to segregating learners) is something of a challenge. It isn't clear that 'letting them get on with it' is a satisfactory way to fully stretch and assess our most able students. At the same time, separating these students from the class may only create wider divisions between the able and those needing greater support. To motivate our students it seems desirable to open up their learning, perhaps beyond what they need to know for an exam.

Teaching and learning

The most recent changes to the A-level curriculum are the *stretch and challenge* curriculum and A* grade. Under the stretch and challenge curriculum, 'students now need to develop a greater depth of conceptual understanding and the skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis' (QCDA, 2010, p.4). Along with the A* grade, this change was bought in to enable top-grade students to exhibit their skills of evaluation and understanding of synoptic links (the complexity and interconnectedness of subjects and topics). The intention was that while teaching might be altered to accommodate these changes, the changes would ensure that the most able are stretched and no subject perceived as a soft option or rejected for fear of subject stigma. However, clearly, what is being assessed influences how it is taught. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and how this can be represented as a triangle. While this is useful, it doesn't demonstrate the direction of the effect between the three factors or, as Harlen (2007, p.26) says: 'Does the assessment influence the curriculum or the curriculum influence the assessment?'

Figure 1 The interactions between assessment, curriculum and teaching method (Adapted from Harlen, 2007, p.26



The UK A-level system seems to be largely focused on the end result, the summative assessment. This is likely to heavily influence the style of assessment we use in class. Furthermore, the knock-on effect on the curriculum is likely to be sizeable. We are teaching *how* to complete exams, using AfL to educate on success criteria for the assessment objectives, sometimes to the detriment of subject content and truly stretching material. The impact of this on teaching methods is likely to be that our teaching reflects not the full subject ability of the student but rather their exam-directed potential. This concern is echoed by Bates and Munday (2005, p.39): 'In order to achieve a curriculum that is truly inclusive, and that motivates and stimulates our most able pupils, extension through challenge should be fully integrated into lesson planning.'

By sharing differentiated learning objects – 'all students will...', 'most students will...', 'some students will...' – or replacing all/most/some with grade groups (A*–A candidates should..., B–C, etc.) we can offer a differentiated AfL method for sharing assessment criteria that makes clear the various stages of understanding available. It should be noted here that sometimes it's appropriate to *not* share learning objectives and to instead ask the students to work out what the objective of the lesson was after some of the exercises. Clark's (2005, p.28) comment that 'if they have not been told where they are going, it is unlikely that they will arrive' seems to be inaccurate. A related method is to give learning questions such as: 'Do I know how to write open and closed questions?' These allow direct assessment of learning simply by returning to the question at the end of a lesson to answer it either as a whole class or individually. These make it clear from the outset what questions will be asked, and perhaps even who is, at a minimum, expected to know the answer.

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As described, AfL includes high-quality feedback which comes from varied and clearly operationalised activities *within* a progressive sequence to build up knowledge for each student. Dialogue that includes students in this sequencing of content may be important, particularly if they are to move from tuition to self-monitoring behaviours. Blanchard suggests that, in fact, the original AfL construction might be revised to incorporate a better understanding of sequencing in the classroom:

> *The spirit of AfL is instantiated in the way teachers conceptualise and sequence the tasks undertaken by pupils in the lesson…*
>
> *Formative assessment includes both feedback and self-monitoring. The goal of many instructional systems is to facilitate the transition from feedback to self-monitoring…*
>
> *Classroom learning…depends on learners having some understanding of how and why tasks are designed and ordered as they are…. Dialogue is the medium: dialogue about activity that has yet to start, that is ongoing, and that has been brought to a close.*
> Blanchard (2008, p.145)

Stretch and challenge curriculum and the able, gifted and talented

Tomlinson *et al*. (2004) highlighted the potential whole-class benefits of provision for the gifted and talented:

> *What benefits the health of the regular classroom contributes to the robustness of*

learning for all students, including the gifted. Therefore, rich content, regular expectations for critical and creative thinking, development of meaningful products, establishing expectations for high quality and hard work are goals shared by both sets of educations.
Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004, p.5

Gifted and talented and AfL: so why does it matter?

In our teaching and assessment methods, intertwined as they are, it is important to consider how to challenge our most able students. This might best be achieved by using a range of techniques that not only benefit the most able students but the whole classes. One concern is that students who are used to being left to it and coast through coursework may not adapt well to the demands of AfL and its requirement of being engaged in the classroom. Dietz counters this argument by suggesting:

most activities can be construed as assessment as long as we gain feedback from pupils – as a whole class or individually – and then respond to this in an appropriate and constructive manner

> *A system that is modelled to target individual improvement will necessarily help higher achievers. Group work in which students discuss and explain topics is an important feature of AfL, and it is suggested that those who give help to others generally benefit most, since having to articulate understanding helps in its long-term retention.*
> Dietz (2005, p.2)

Questioning and dialogue

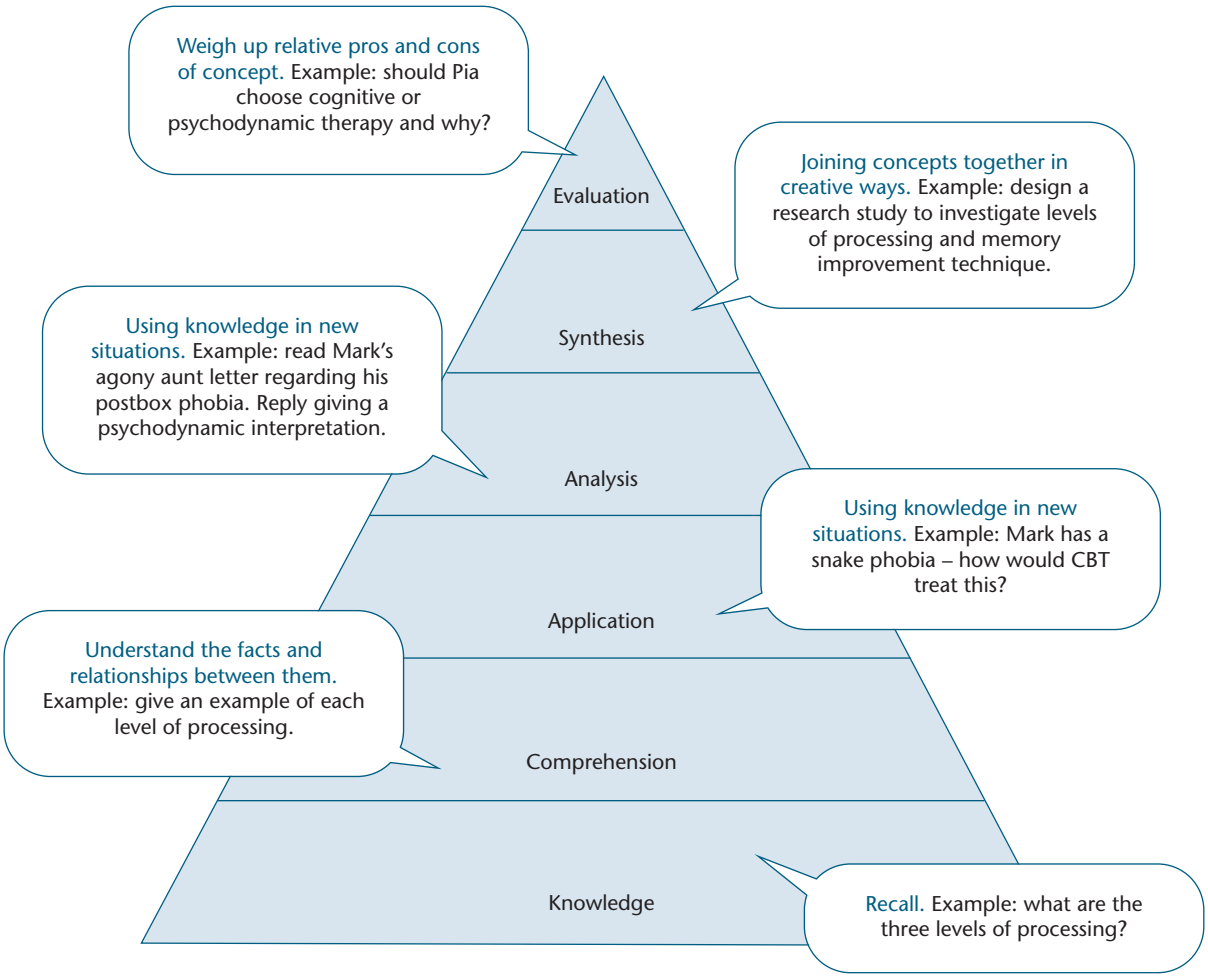
There is a theory (Vygotsky's sociocultural theory) that children can learn new and harder tasks, within the 'zone of proximal development' by teachers (or more-able children) supporting unorganised activity so that these become more targeted behaviours. So, if we look at, for example, how to assess a class's understanding of new terminology introduced in psychology, a useful activity might be instigating a classroom discussion on dating behaviours using the terminology of a particularly psychological approach. As Mercer (2000 p.107) says: 'Fluency in the discourse is likely to be one of the obvious signs of membership.' In this context, membership is to the group that understands the academic language of evolutionary psychology.

One of the fluencies we expect to build up in schools is simply fluency in the learning discourse itself. As Bates and Munday (2005, p.40) say: 'Pupils must be given the linguistic tools they need in order to enhance their awareness of their own thinking processes. Research has shown that able learners have, to a high degree, the ability to reflect on their thinking processes.' Using a range of activities and ensuring high-quality dialogue, it is possible to target pupils' ability to reflect on how they learn.

One way of thinking about the stages of understanding is Bloom's taxonomy (1956), which progresses from basic questions relating to knowledge (the facts of the matter) to being able to apply the facts and evaluate theories (see Figure 2). Such an approach can be used in the questions raised in presentations, activities, homework and in-class debates. According to the principles of AfL (Black and Wiliam, 2001), feedback on these questions should be timely and constructive. Ideally, questions should be asked and, if students fail to provide an answer, rephrased in such a way as to aid the students' discovery without giving the answer.

Within the context of assessing more-able students, questioning (whether through targeted questioning or other means) can

Figure 2 Bloom's taxonomy



aim at the higher application and evaluation levels of Bloom's taxonomy. While these levels may be useful for improving the understanding of all abilities, it is likely that the most engaging types of question will be of most benefit for the more able. These types of questions may also be used to assess basic understanding (alongside application). For example, verbal or written answers to *free response* verbal questions should include key concepts.

A related method is using high-level multiple choice questions which can have a diagnostic purpose in that they assess the understanding of concepts. This can be through hypothetical applications, for example, asking which of four responses (two of which could be from the targeted approach and two from other approaches) is the best. This type of question requires basic understanding of an approach and its general concepts, and understanding of its intricate details and how it can be applied. These types of multiple choice questions are being used increasingly in undergraduate studies. Exposure to this style of questioning is likely to be useful for students that are suitable for university-level study.

Learning styles – human taxonomies versus activity variation

While learning styles have become established in teaching resources, evidence of their validity and reliability as constructs is not strong (Coffield *et al.*, 2004). However, as Coffield *et al.* (2004) pointed

out, that is not to say there are not any benefits. They do encourage students to think about how they might learn and encourage teachers to include a variety of different activities in their lessons, which has the associated benefit of sustaining interest in lessons.

Through a range of activities (some of which could be called *thinking* styles), students and teachers can be encouraged to think about problems in a variety of ways. Varied activities keep our teaching interesting – for both teachers and students. Activities can include targeted questioning and discussions; a range of methods for taking notes including *agony aunt* responses, newspaper articles, research proposals, and visual methods such as diagrams and mind maps; staged debates and media-centred exercises such as creating and editing videos, podcasts and posters.

These activities can help consolidate learning, as well as challenge pupils to assist those who are struggling with certain modes of learning. In particular, they allow access to parts of the curriculum that weaker students might not always experience: asking students to write a response to a problem as an agony aunt using a particular psychological approach (for example, behaviourism) may encourage more engagement with the concepts than asking them to write an essay on the topic of a particular psychological approach. Even if this engagement is lacking in strictly applied concepts, if they are given a list of concepts to use while also being asked to write 'so your gran would understand it', they are likely to gain better understanding and a useful subsequent memory aid. At the same time, writing in the style of an agony aunts pushes even the most able students to engage in activities which they might not normally do whilst applying concepts to both real-world and abstract scenarios. They are taken out of their comfort zone, challenged and encouraged to assist the less-able students.

Er, Sir, this isn't a test, it's a card sort

Questioning techniques can be translated into other activity types. A particularly effective in-class method is to ask students to write in an exam style using, for example, the *point, evidence, explain* (PEE) structure. The students gather answers to create a class mark and a hybrid best answer. This activity can be extended by asking students to complete strengths and limitations card sorts involving not just separating strengths and limitations, but also ranking them by *how* strong a piece of evidence is, and then writing an evaluation paragraph using PEE. These tasks help build high-level subject knowledge whilst also assessing exam technique.

Most activities can be construed as assessment as long as we gain feedback from pupils – as a whole class or individually – and then respond to this in an appropriate and constructive manner. Here, too, there is opportunity to challenge the most able and expose the weaker students to 'model' answers, by asking them to assess each other, in written and/or spoken work.

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Table 1 Marking issues and examples

Issue highlighted	Indicative example
Areas of weaknesses via unanswered questions and/or completely irrelevant material.	Failure to complete a topic section.
Areas of weakness or/and confusion via questions with irrelevant or inaccurate material.	Knowledge or explanation errors.
Probable exam technique issues via incomplete answers or answers insufficient for full marks.	Explanation errors or failure to contextualise.
Areas of content confusion and/or question confusion via inaccurate marking – that is, even outside of exams the content isn't clear to the student.	Over or under marking.

Marking technique

One marking method which is sometimes dismissed as unpopular or too time consuming is the use of peer and self-marking. For example, asking students to complete a practice exam and then marking it for homework serves a number of purposes, including prompting them to think about what they needed to revise, as Table 1 shows.

In particular, it is worth highlighting that self-marked assessment allows us to highlight *content* issues (psychological knowledge) and *technique* issues (understanding the requirements of different types of questions). Further, where peer assessment and subsequent teacher checking are used, these issues can be highlighted directly to the student, and any areas of weakness flagged. Through this method, the traditionally summative mock exam can be used formatively. It is also worth noting that not only does peer assessment encourage students to assess each other's work, it also exposes students to the variety of content that can be used, and (for some) the quality of answers that can be achieved. Students can also be asked to improve their own or someone else's answer in light of exposure to exemplar answers.

Assessment – practice and skills

Summative assessment can be used formatively to give guidance on how to improve dialogue regarding the assessment criteria so that concrete targets are tailored to the individual student. Other formative methods may be embedded in activities, most of which can be utilised as formative assessment if the teacher has a clear understanding of the outcomes of each activity that might be assessed. Perhaps most crucially, the teaching part should acknowledge that 'enabling students to take part more actively in classroom dialogue provides teachers with better opportunities for informally assessing their learning' (Mercer, 2010, p.5). Structuring this dialogue is useful, and planning can reflect this by, for example, including possible questions to ask students at appropriate times. Crucially, for a constructive classroom to exist with an appropriately formative environment, the sequencing of dialogue ought to be considered.

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