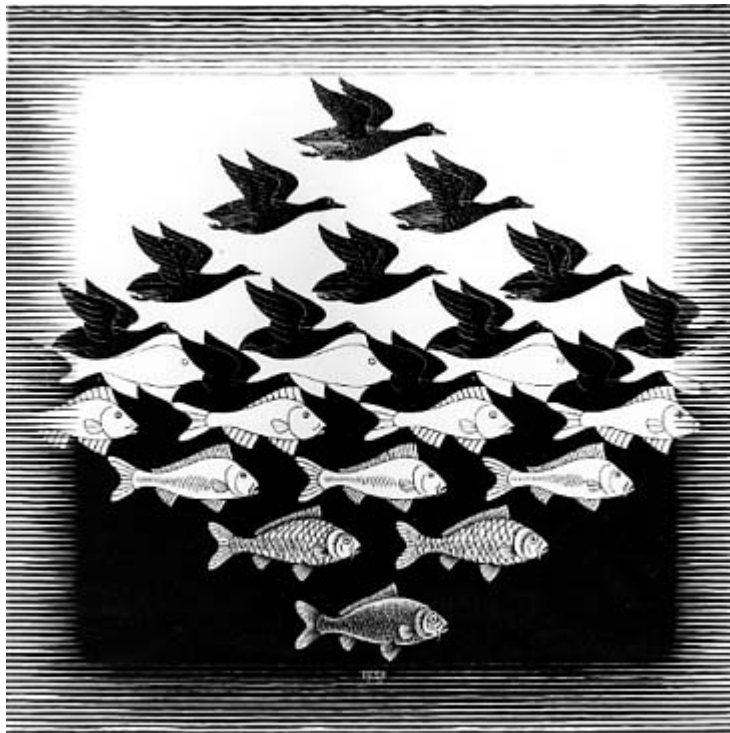


# MA in Educational Assessment

Final Research Proposal for MMASCH\_02 Investigating Research



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I propose to examine the perceived value of a pioneer AfL (assessment for learning) group in a non-selective, independent, secondary school, which is relatively successful academically (80% A\* - C including Maths and English). Black and Williams' research on formative assessment and assessment for learning (1998), is the most well-known and certainly the one which is most cited by other research and literary reviews. The focus of their research has been based on quantitative methodology, rather than qualitative. Yet, as recommended by Yorke (2003), in his study of formative assessment in higher education, qualitative research is especially powerful in finding evidence that may allow deeper consideration of formative assessment. Baird comments in her article, in which she contrasts the use of qualitative and quantitative research methodology to investigate formative assessment, that 'thick descriptive accounts are therefore more valued because generalizability across contexts may not be possible' (2011, p343). The introduction of such an assessment practice, requiring significant cultural and structural changes into an organisation (Bennett, 2011), with its own unique identity, lends itself to qualitative research methods, which will give the very rich view necessary to examine how the general forces and wills interact in this exclusive set of circumstances.

Of particular interest, is the introduction of AfL in to a high stakes testing environment. Other than the first year, year 9, all of the pupils in the school are involved in such testing, either GCSE, AS, A2 or equivalent. It is possible to argue that the pressure of such testing is exacerbated in a fee paying environment (Delaney et Al, 2011), where there is considerable expectation from parents that pupils' results are of a very high standard. The apparent conflict between formative assessment and high stakes, state mandated testing, holds a widespread belief (William et Al, 2004), (Carless, 2005). The lack of influential (well cited) qualitative research in such an independent school environment, especially in the UK, makes this an interesting area in which to investigate.

In the paper by Dixon et Al (2011) it is argued that AfL strategies by assessment experts have little effect on teachers' practice if these are at odds with their personal beliefs and/or their personal competence (p365). A study was made of the practices developed by teachers who held the belief in the development of student autonomy through methods of self and peer assessment.

The research design made use of a case study approach, in which teachers were first interviewed and then in a second stage, the feedback practices of the teachers selected from the first stage were observed. From a list of 400 teachers, who had upgraded their diploma of teaching qualification to a bachelor of education, whilst studying at the University of Auckland, 100 were selected randomly of which 20 accepted the invitation to participate. However, it would appear that all 20 people interviewed were female.

The teachers were interviewed in a semi structured manner, each interview varied in length from 35-60 minutes and the majority (16) took place in classrooms. The data collected from the interviews was combed through and the teachers placed in one of three categories as a result of their responses to the issues explored. Only one of

these groups had characteristics or beliefs that resonated with what was regarded as good feedback practice by Sadler (1989).

Of this group of five teachers, only three chose to participate in the second observational stage. Written language was identified as the context in which it was deemed most likely that data on teachers' feedback strategies could be gathered, although little justification for this was given. A number of lessons throughout the delivery of a written language unit were observed. It was clear from the analysis that even though all three teachers had articulated the same beliefs in the strategies associated with AfL, the actual classroom practice of one of them only correlated to these beliefs in a superficial manner. The third teacher observed was not used in the analysis, on the basis that the other two individuals provided a better example of strong and weak alignment, respectively, between their articulated beliefs from the interview and their observed classroom practice.

It would have been interesting to have had a larger group observed to understand how widespread the gap is between practice and belief. In addition, no mention was made of the relative experience of the individual with weak alignment; this lack thereof may have explained her difficulty in implementing the practice in which she had articulated such strong beliefs. It is possible to imagine an individual, after further educational studies (which all 20 had undertaken), becoming enamoured with a teaching process, yet having had insufficient time for it to be mastered.

The year groups of classes observed were also different; one of year 5 and the other of year 7. The younger class group was taught by the teacher who had only superficially implemented the self and peer assessment in to her classroom practice, was the age group a factor in this difficulty, would it have been better if similar age groups had been observed for comparative purposes?

The subject of the lesson observed was chosen by the researchers, which was English; no substantive reason was given for this choice. It is often the case that teachers of the younger age groups deliver a number of different subjects; were both individuals both equally proficient in delivering this subject, or would it have been of benefit to observe them teaching a number of different subjects?

It would have been interesting to select teachers from the other two groups and examine the alignment between their beliefs and classroom practice. It is argued that the lack of such alignment is predominantly an issue relating to AfL practices, is this the case? In addition by observing individuals and their feedback practices from these two groups who, according to the results of the interview, did not follow AfL strategies so closely, it would have been possible to ascertain how effective the interview was in sorting teachers into these three groups, which might have highlighted flaws in the interview process.

In conclusion the article put forward the position that although teachers may incorporate a number of AfL strategies, their beliefs about learning, assessment, teaching and the roles of teachers and learners in these processes may preclude them from making substantive pedagogical changes. Recommendations are made for teacher professional development, focusing on raising their awareness of their beliefs and how these influence their practice. The research referenced supports this view. It was also clear that the one of the teachers in the study had a significant discrepancy between their beliefs of AfL strategies and their observed teaching

practices. However, it was not clear how typical this occurrence may be amongst teachers, or if this is particularly associated with AfL. The study also did not explore the position of those teachers, who were required to follow AfL practices, perhaps through school policies, but held beliefs diametrically opposed to such initiatives.

Willis (2011) addressed the issue why increased learner autonomy proved to be so rare, despite the prevalence of AfL practices, which aim to foster such a skill and discusses reasons for why this may be the case. The article analyses AfL practices in classrooms as students develop their identities as autonomous learners within a classroom culture of practice. The analysis was undertaken within a sociocultural theoretical framework.

A case study methodology was followed, year 7, 8 and 9 classes, all studying different subjects located in one single school in Queensland were selected. Over a period of one year interviews and observations were used to collect the data and the analysis was undertaken using a constant comparative thematic approach (Charmaz, 2000). 'By describing expert AfL practices the intention was to better understand how to help other teachers help their learners develop autonomy through AfL' (p404). It may be that this methodology is better described as a success case method (SCM) Brinkerhoff (2003), where expert practitioners are analysed. If this is the case, then it would have been useful to know with what criteria they were selected or the process of their selection.

The three teachers chosen were all from the same school, was there a defined culture within the organisation that had implications for their delivery of AfL practices, that may have been different at other schools? Interestingly, the research in common with many other pieces, focussed on middle or lower years, which are generally not those exposed to the pressure of high stakes assessment, is there different implications for older pupils in these year groups?

In conclusion, the article highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between AfL practices and the goal of learner autonomy; this should not be viewed as a 'fixed set of cognitive skills' but instead as 'becoming expert within a specific community of practice' (p412). Teachers are able to form a firm foundation for effective AfL by fostering a sense of belonging through 'supportive teacher-student relationships and mutually engaging learning experiences' (p412). Affiliation was viewed as a necessary precursor to autonomy. Teachers' individual style conveyed messages about how and when pupils should involve themselves and exhibit a measure of autonomy.

The article raises some very interesting questions; given that the researcher found that autonomy was 'defined differently by each teacher and reflected the teacher's own preferences for learning' (p405). The researcher also found those pupils who demonstrated a shared affinity for the teachers' preferred methods of learning were the ones viewed as independent learners by that teacher. If this type of learning is to be encouraged by teachers, the understanding of what makes an independent, autonomous learner is clearly crucial. Black and Jones view autonomy in the following way as 'the power to oversee and steer one's view of learning so that one can become a more committed, responsible and effective learner' (2006, p8). In a much earlier work Holec defined autonomy as 'ability to take charge of one's own learning' (1981, p3). The AfL pioneer group has had no specific definition provided of

an Independent learner, but has instead focussed on teaching strategies and practices to develop such an approach to learning. From this article it is clear that a vital element will be to ensure that there is congruence between the individual teachers' understanding of autonomy, even if it is manifested differently, and that of the pioneer group as a whole.

The article has a particular relevance for my study. The school in which the AfL pioneer group are operating has a large boarding community, drawing pupils from a wide range of differing cultures. The population also has a significant proportion of pupils with varying special educational needs, given students who shared

'similar cognitive, social and emotional purposes and were able to identify tacit expectations of their teacher in interview discussions - were the same students whom the teachers had identified as more autonomous in their mapping of student participation' (Willis, 2011, p406).

Then a possible implication for pupils who have differing cultural backgrounds from their teachers, or who struggle to read social signals, is that they may struggle to become independent learners or fully benefit from AfL practices.

In regards the research methodology for my study I will be taking a best fit approach and not following any one practice slavishly, but instead borrowing elements which I deem to be appropriate to the specific set of circumstances, under which the research will take place and its general aims. Of the more restrictive factors which I will have to take into account, are access to the data subjects and the relatively small window of opportunity in which I have to collect the data.

I am approaching the research with no preformed ideas regarding AfL and I have no intention of using the results to support a theory, in an attempt to generalise the results to other educational establishments, which may appear at a superficial level, similar to the one at which the research is based. AfL is a complex process, which despite being the subject of much research, has had wide debate regarding its meaning and its manifestation (Bennett, 2011). I shall be focussing on gaining an accurate understanding of the perceived value of the pioneer group, which was formed with the aim of introducing the practice of AfL into the organisation. I will engage in a dialogical process between the questions asked and the data collected, allowing the new information to guide and shape the questions and direction of the research as it is being done. The ability of the research to adjust with new information gives the study a higher level of precision (Becker, 1996).

The empirical setting is an Independent establishment educating 770 pupils aged 13-18 with a staff body numbering 123 full time and part time teachers. In conjunction with an organisation offering specialist support, a group of 15 teachers volunteered to form the team of pioneers tasked with introducing AfL to the school, each department has a representative in the group. Other than an initial announcement to the staff body at the beginning of the academic year in 2011, the program has been very low key. No formal declaration has been made to the pupil body, although individual teachers in the pioneer group have explained to their classes that they will be utilising different teaching practices and strategies. In the beginning of the last academic year, 2012, the next wave of pioneers started on the programme, assisted and guided mainly by the initial group. The headmaster had, in his previous school, used AfL as a tool to improve exam results. The access to the setting should be

relatively straight forward, as I am employed by the organisation. However, I shall seek permission from the headmaster to undertake the research.

In the initial sampling stage, I shall follow Glaser's instruction to researchers to go 'to the groups which they believe will maximise the possibilities of obtaining data' (1978, p45). So beginning the study with a sample from the group where the phenomena occur; in this case the group of 15 teachers, who formed the initial pioneer group, and also the pupils who are taught by one or more of these teachers. I shall use intensive interviewing (Charmaz, 2006), as it complements grounded theory in that it has a degree of flexibility and tends to be open ended but is also directed and has a partially structured form. The subjects to be discussed are decided by the researcher, but both the researcher and the informant have the freedom to change the order and the stories. Interviewing is a flexible technique, as issues are uncovered during the interview they can be followed up and immediately pursued.

In preparation for my first interview, due to my inexperience, I shall create an interview guide with a number of open ended questions and probes to elicit response. I hope that as a result of this first interview I will have a clearer idea of the appropriate questions to ask in subsequent meetings.

#### *Initial Open-Ended Questions staff*

1. Tell me about what happened in your last lesson
2. What contributed to the best lesson you had this week/month/term?
3. How have you found your experience as a member of the AfL pioneer group?

#### *Initial Open-Ended Questions Pupils*

1. Tell me about what happened in your last lesson (relevant to pioneer group)
2. What contributed to the most enjoyable/useful lesson you had this week/month/term?

I am aware that it could be argued that I am forcing the data (Glaser, 1992) by asking planned questions, but my inexperience of interviewing make this a necessary precaution. The questions that I address to the pupils may well be shaped and amended as a result of the first teacher interview. I intend to interview five to six teachers and a similar number of pupils, which should be feasible in the window of time available. The pioneer programme will have been in operation for two years by September 2013, I wish to ask those pupils who would have the richest experience of AfL, which will mean those in year 11 and year 13, as they will have had the same teacher for this two year period. Therefore, the window of opportunity is the first six weeks of the summer term, after which they may be unavailable due to exams and possibly exam leave. In addition, a further consideration is that they may be reluctant to sacrifice time on an activity, which may appear to them to be non- essential. I anticipate interviewing two to three individuals a week over this period of time, as the categories become clearer and the theory develops then it may be possible to increase upon this number.

I shall make use of a recording device for the interviews and these will need to be transcribed before the next interview, as the analysis will be taking place alongside the data collection, as it is guided by the emerging theory.

I shall carry out theoretical sampling, as understood by Glaser 'the analyst who uses theoretical sampling cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead him' (1978, p37). I shall be using elements of grounded theory methodology and I will allow the developing theory to drive the sampling, 'in short theoretical sampling is the process by which data collection is continually guided' (Glaser, 1992, p102). The advantage of theoretical sampling in these particular circumstances is that it provides flexibility during the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which given the relatively short period of time available for the research, means that the 'data gathered reflects what is occurring in the field rather than speculation about what cannot or should have been observed' (Glaser, 1978, p38)

In this case, the earlier sections of data collection and sampling are closely linked to the analysis process and cannot readily be differentiated 'data analysis begins at the same time as data collection begins' (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p87). I shall make use of open coding (Cresswell, 2007) to help develop the 'organisational language' (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p87), which is made up of the categories that will be developed during the process of data analysis, making sure that these categories 'explain the data they subsume' (Charmaz, 2003, p251).

The process of constant comparison will help me develop and refine the categories as they emerge from the interviewing stages (Glaser, 1965). Dowling and Brown (2010) recommend the use of memos to facilitate this process, whereby as categories emerge, theoretical concepts are outlined in general terms, with references to the data. I shall return to the sampling frame as the categories develop, using the method of constant comparison to develop the emerging theory. I shall expect coding to guide my sampling, 'Coding helps us gain a new perspective on our material and to focus further data collection and may lead us into unforeseen directions' (Charmaz, 2003, p258). It is unlikely that I will have the time to continue this until 'the categories become saturated' (Cresswell, 2007, p87), at which point, according to Glaser, theoretical sampling of any category ceases. 'Theoretical sampling on any category ceases when it is saturated, elaborated and integrated into the emerging theory' (1992, p102), which may, therefore, have a limiting effect on the complexity of the theory developed.

I will have to make sure that I plan for a number of possible contingencies. Firstly relating to pupil availability, there are a number of reasons why it might not be possible for pupils to be interviewed, such as absence due to exam leave, expulsions or simply unwillingness to be helpful. Fortunately there is a culture of helpfulness and respect towards staff; in addition I have a large pool of pupils from which to draw. A sizeable proportion of the students are boarders, which makes access less problematic, as they are available for extended periods of time.

A second issue is relating to staff availability; fortunately this should be less of an issue, as during the summer term teachers have additional free time, due to pupils being released for exam leave. However, it may be that they are unwilling to help;

however, I have fifteen people from whom I intend to interview six, this should allow for any 'natural wastage' required.

A further factor to consider is the time available to me in the summer term, as I am responsible for producing the school timetable, there are few precautions I can take, but I will have to ensure my planning is detailed and accurate and that I will also need to follow appropriate time management principles. The data collected will be backed up regularly to the cloud, to prevent data loss. The last area of concern is regarding interviewing, with which I have had little experience; I shall arrange a number of trials prior to the main data collection so that this area of the research runs as smoothly and in as timely a fashion as possible.

The research process will be guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2011, 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research'. A primary tenet of these guidelines is the issue of informed consent; this is of particular importance in this research case as children under the age of 16 may well have their views sought. 'In such circumstances researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (e.g. parents) or as responsible others' (BERA, 2011, p6). In this case parental permission will be gained, or if the student is a boarder the permission of the housemaster. It may be worth considering focussing on students over 16 or those in boarding, if this can be done without compromising the theoretical sampling process, given that it is likely that permission will be given more speedily by fellow teachers. I shall of course also need to gain consent from the headmaster and also the teachers; as I will need to speak to the pupils about their experience of lessons with each member of staff. I will aim to do that several weeks before the planned start date of the first interviews.

In addition, sufficient information must be provided such that 'all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported' (BERA, 2011, p5). The school educates pupils from a wide range of countries with differing cultures and so I must be aware of this when undertaking the research, 'Ethical issues also arise when researching in sensitive situations influenced by contexts of cultural difference and which impact on educational experience' (BERA, 2011, p6).

A further extremely important issue is that of privacy, 'Researchers must recognize the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity' (BERA, 2011, p7). Firstly, from the point of view of data collection, pupils must feel free to comment on the experience of lessons; they may feel constrained if their anonymity is not guaranteed. Teachers also need to be forthright in their opinions, which without the pledge of anonymity, may be difficult given that the AfL pioneer group was formed on the recommendation of the headmaster. Secondly, data storage, I shall not make use of the school network, which given the content of our acceptable user policy could feasibly give the headmaster full access to the research. Furthermore, I shall encrypt the research data if I use portable storage devices and keep the use of hard copies to a minimum.

The research will be of interest to a number of people within the school, particularly the headmaster and the deputy head, whose responsibility it is to manage the AfL pioneer group. It is considered good practice under the 'Disclosure' tenet to provide



the participants of research with copies of any 'reports or other publications arising from their participation'; however, I do not anticipate having sufficient time to follow the guidance of offering a full debrief.

It is hoped that a more detailed understanding of the perception of AfL amongst staff and especially pupils will be achieved. A second pioneer group has been formed and it is anticipated that the results of this research may inform and guide practice in this further wave of AfL dissemination. The dearth of qualitative research on this issue, in the niche of academically successful independent schools, makes the research subject an interesting one and of possible benefit to a significant proportion of educational establishments, independent schools are responsible for educating approximately 6.8% of children in the UK. (ISC, 2012). I am also hopeful that it will improve the quality of my own classroom practice and perhaps, even more importantly, my critical appreciation of research in general.

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