

Beyond false dichotomies: the power of learning-focused relationships and Assessment for Learning

Teaching well depends on learning-focused relationships where teachers and students adopt ways of thinking and acting that are grounded in listening actively, being transparent about learning goals and processes, testing assumptions, and being willing to adapt. It's about seeing learning as a partnership, where teachers support students to be agentic, and students step up as active learners. Most teachers believe they already have strong relationships with their students. But a learning-focused relationship goes beyond being caring, approachable, or supportive. It asks: Do my students truly understand what learning is, how to do it well, and what role each of us plays in that process?

Viewing teaching through the quality of the learning-focused relationship between teacher and students exposes the limits of familiar debates about the best ways to teach: knowledge or competencies; explicit instruction or inquiry; teacher-led or student-centred; cognitive science or constructivism. These framings suggest that effective teaching sits at one end of a spectrum, when in practice, the strongest learning happens when these ideas are deliberately brought together.

Assessment for Learning (AfL) is what makes this integration possible. It allows teaching to be structured *and* responsive *and* grounded in evidence of how learners are thinking.

When AfL is not well understood or developed, *either/or* thinking and practice are more likely to dominate and this often shows up in two familiar classroom patterns.

The first is tightly structured teaching where students can follow steps, reproduce procedures, and arrive at correct answers, but struggle to explain the underlying ideas, make connections, or transfer the learning beyond the task at hand.

Students often experience this kind of teaching as efficient but shallow.

In maths it feels like there's a lot of pressure to memorise formulas or follow steps, and then we move straight on to the next thing. But I want to know why a formula works and how it works. When I don't understand the ideas behind it, I feel like I'm stuck memorising again and again.
Year 12 student

The second is engaging, student-centred learning where students are motivated and active in meaningful contexts, but lack the background knowledge, modelling, or explicit teaching needed to develop deep conceptual understanding.

Students can be highly engaged, but learning may be uneven and fragile.

Learning is fun and we do lots of work in groups. But sometimes I'm not sure what I'm actually meant to understand. Year 6 student

Both approaches fall short for the same reason, structure and meaning have been pulled apart.

A learning-focused approach keeps structure and meaning together. It combines deliberate, explicit teaching with rich opportunities for students to make sense of ideas, apply what they have learned, and reflect on their progress. While this sounds straightforward, it is not easy to do well in practice.

Holding structure and sense-making together requires teachers to constantly check how learners are interpreting what is taught and to adjust their teaching in response.

This is where Assessment for Learning becomes essential. AfL shows whether carefully designed instruction is actually landing.

It is the mechanism that connects structured teaching with student sense-making, and it is what allows teaching to be both focused and responsive.

In classrooms with strong AfL, teachers can:

- see how students are interpreting structured input
- surface misconceptions and partial understandings early
- adjust explanations, examples, pacing, and tasks in real time
- make informed decisions about next steps for individuals and groups.

AfL also shifts the role of learners. Rather than being passive recipients of teaching, students are supported to become active partners in the learning process. They develop a clearer sense of what they are aiming for, what quality looks like, and how to improve.

In classrooms with strong AfL, students are supported to:

- understand learning intentions and success criteria
- ask for and use feedback to refine and improve their work
- talk about their thinking and learning strategies
- take increasing ownership of their progress over time.

Without AfL, structured teaching risks becoming rigid and disconnected from students' learning needs, while constructivist approaches risk sliding into too much trial and error.

With strong AfL practices in place, structure becomes adaptive rather than fixed, and sense-making becomes purposeful and clearly focused. This means teaching becomes both more deliberate and more responsive at the same time.

In practical terms, it may be helpful to review your current Assessment for Learning policies and practices and create a refreshed playbook for your team or school. It will be one that builds on what you do well and deliberately uses AfL to hold a coherent learning-focused approach together.

An example of a learning-focused approach powered by AfL

The table below is an illustration of what a learning-focused approach powered by AfL might look like across a lesson or sequence.

Phase	What this looks like	Teacher role	Learner role
Clarify and structure the learning <i>Clarity creates access</i>	Explicit teaching of key curriculum ideas, strategies or procedures Modelling and think-alouds Worked examples that make quality visible	Clarify the learning intention and why it matters Make success criteria explicit and concrete Select and surface examples to surface key ideas Model the language of thinking and learning Anticipate likely misconceptions and plan prompts to uncover them	Explain learning intention in own words Begin to articulate what quality looks like Notice and talk about examples, patterns steps and key ideas Ask questions when meaning is unclear
Support sense-making <i>Understanding is built, not assumed</i>	Guided practice with scaffolding Structured talk and discussion Checks for understanding that reveal thinking, not just answers	Use questioning and prompts and tasks to elicit evidence of understanding Listen closely to student explanations and reasoning Adjust explanations, models, or pacing in response to evidence Maintain a learning-focused orientation	Try out new learning with support Practise, explain, justify their thinking and listen to others Test ideas, notice errors, ask questions and revise understanding Use feedback to improve in the moment

Phase	What this looks like	Teacher role	Learner role
Use the learning <i>Knowledge becomes powerful when it is used</i>	Application tasks Rich tasks and investigations Problem solving in authentic or meaningful contexts	Design engaging tasks that require students to use what has been taught Observe how learners apply knowledge and strategies Notice transfer, flexibility, and remaining gaps Resist stepping in too early, while staying responsive	Apply learning independently or collaboratively Select and adapt strategies for new situations Persist through challenge Make connections across ideas and contexts
Reflect and adapt <i>Learning improves through responsive adjustment in all phases</i>	Checking assumptions Timely feedback for students <i>and</i> teacher Self- and peer assessment against clear criteria Identifying next steps for teaching and learning	Use evidence gathered during and across lessons to decide what to revisit, extend, or move on from Provide feedback that clearly signals next steps Reflect on the impact of teaching choices	Reflect on what they understand and what they are still working on Use success criteria to judge quality Act on feedback to improve Develop increasing understanding of how to learn

This approach is deliberately simple. It isn't a script, and it isn't about starting again. Most teachers already do many of these things. The approach is simply a way of thinking about and strengthening alignment and coherence across pedagogical approaches. It provides a shared starting point for talking about lesson and sequence design, and for keeping structure, meaning, and responsiveness working together in everyday practice.

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