

Getting carried away with learning? Assessment for Learning and the 'learnification' of education

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Abstract

For a number of years, Assessment for Learning (AfL) – the idea that assessment and feedback processes should be primarily seen as opportunities for learning – has dominated discussions of assessment and feedback in higher education.

AfL's focus on *learning* is part of a wider trend. Relatively recently, this contemporary focus on learning has been subject to critique by Gert Biesta, who describes a process of 'learnification' with negative consequences such as the promotion of individualist and consumerist ideas.

This paper explores the extent to which Biesta's critique of 'learnification' applies to the idea of AfL. While Biesta's ideas have prompted considerable recent discussion, there has been only tangential discussion of how they might apply to AfL. Does AfL constitute a positive trend taken too far, or does it illustrate a way in which a contemporary focus on learning can preserve questions of meaning, community and a broader conception of (higher) education?

Full paper

For a number of years, Assessment for Learning (AfL) has dominated discussions of assessment and feedback in higher education (Sambell et al 2013). While its prominence in assessment practice is arguable (Chong and McArthur 2023) it does hold considerable sway among researchers, educational developers and others involved in the enhancement of assessment. AfL can be understood in a range of ways, but for the purposes of this paper, it is understood as a holistic approach to assessment whereby assessment processes – whether or not they are grade-bearing – are seen primarily as mechanisms to support learning. Beyond that, the paper takes AfL to encompass a range of more specific ideas, including the active participation of students, the central role of feedback (and engagement with feedback), the value of ungraded assessments, and the rebalancing of power between staff and students with respect to assessment and feedback processes.

AfL's focus on *learning* has not happened in isolation. The growing prominence of learning – and the reduced emphasis on teaching – has taken place over several decades (Barr and Tagg 1995) and can now be seen across a wide range of activities in higher education. Relatively recently, this focus on learning has been subject to critique by Gert Biesta, who describes a process of 'learnification': "the redefinition

of all things educational in terms of learning; such as calling students learners... and seeing teachers as facilitators of learning” (Biesta 2019, p.549).

Biesta argues that the focus on learning is a problematic development that deserves greater scrutiny and an element of resistance, on the grounds that while the language of ‘learning’ has benefits, it also has considerable negative consequences. Firstly, it has served (and been partly caused by) neoliberal ideas of education as an economic “exchange between a provider and a consumer” (Biesta 2005, p.64) in its focus on flexibility and responsiveness to the requirements of the ‘learner’. Secondly, it presents education as an act undertaken by isolated ‘learners’ with responsibility for (and to) themselves, rather than a more collective social process (Biesta 2013). Thirdly, it de-emphasises broader questions of purpose and meaning – what students are learning – in favour of process-related and technical aspects of education – how and whether they learn (Biesta 2012). Finally, ‘learnification’ involves the disempowerment of the teacher and the erosion of their role, due to a sense that while the facilitation of learning is a progressive activity, teaching is reactionary and authoritarian (Biesta 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which Biesta’s critique of ‘learnification’ applies to the idea of Assessment of Learning, as expressed in relevant literature. This is valuable because while Biesta’s ideas have prompted considerable discussion (e.g. Gourlay 2017), there has to date been only minimal and tangential discussion of how they might apply to AfL (e.g. Charteris et al 2015). Given the current dominance of AfL, it is of general importance to subject it to robust critique; and given the role that AfL has played in centering the concept of learning in discussions of assessment (and feedback), it is important in particular to evaluate its relationship to Biesta’s concerns.

These issues will be explored through a review of the literature on AfL, with a focus on whether the emphasis placed by AfL ideas on students’ active participation in assessment and feedback processes, responsibility-sharing, the de-emphasis of graded assessments, and authentic assessment represent the kind of individualised and consumerist approaches highlighted by Biesta. Does Assessment for Learning constitute a positive trend taken too far, or does it illustrate a way in which a contemporary focus on learning can preserve questions of meaning, community and a broader conception of (higher) education?

References

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