Is assessment for learning really assessment?

I question the legitimacy of treating assessment for learning (AfL) as assessment. The distinction between testing and assessment is first made, then the defining characteristics of contemporary AfL are identified. While AfL claims to be assessment, my analysis argues that AfL is a pedagogical curriculum approach that has some process aspects of assessment. However, because of the interactive and in-the-moment characteristics of AfL, it fails to meet requirements of an assessment. Specifically, because the in-the-moment and on-the-fly aspects of effective classroom discussions and providing feedback happen in ephemeral contexts it is not possible to scrutinize the interpretations teachers make of student products and processes. Furthermore, we cannot know if those interpretations were sufficiently accurate to guide classroom interactions. Without social or statistical moderation, stakeholders cannot be assured that valid conclusions are reached. Additionally, the scale of error in both teacher and student judgment means that AfL practices cannot be relied upon for decision making beyond curriculum-embedded actions within a pedagogical process. Because teaching requires robust evidence to support decisions made about students and teachers, the practices commonly associated with AfL cannot provide sufficient evidence on which to base anything more than teaching interactions.

Bio
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Representing the structure of knowledge in assessment

A series of disciplinary-specific analyses were conducted, of NCEA assessment as predictors of performance in first-year university assessments. In social sciences and the humanities internal assessment was a better predictor of university success than external, examination-based assessment, whereas the converse was true
for mathematics and the sciences. These findings suggest that approaches to assessment that recognise differences in the structure of knowledge may do more to encourage the deep learning, than generic approaches that fail to recognise such differences. Using a conceptualisation of epistemic structure drawn from Bernstein (1999): British Journal of Sociology of Education, 20(2), it is concluded that, if assessment is carefully designed such that the cognitive processes it engages are mapped to those required for deep learning of material, the 'backwash' effect of assessment on curriculum can be used to enhance rather than narrow teaching and learning.

Bio: Dr Michael Johnston is Associate Dean (Academic) in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests focus on educational assessment and measurement, the connection between assessment, pedagogy and curriculum, and the use of assessment data to improve teaching practice. He has previously been a chief research analyst at the Ministry of Education and a senior statistician at the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), where he conducted research and analysis contributing to evidence-based policy and development for New Zealand’s national qualification system for secondary-school students. He has authored a number of peer-reviewed papers published in international and local journals, and contributed to books on child and adult literacy and on educational assessment. Dr Johnston is a member of a Technical Overview Group (Assessment), an independent committee providing expert technical advice to NZQA.