Do Assessment for Learning Practices act as a Springboard or Straitjacket for Educationally Worthwhile Learning?

A case study in an Irish Higher Education Institute

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Abstract

This study examines lecturers' and students' views about assessment for learning practices, within a Business School in Ireland, and investigates if these practices contribute to educationally worthwhile learning.

The literature details the practices of assessment for learning, and how enactment of these promote educationally worthwhile learning, a term alluded to in the literature, yet not defined.

This mixed-methods study collected quantitative data by distributing a survey instrument to all third year undergraduate students in the Business School. The qualitative data was gathered from classroom observations of two cohorts of those third year students, some of whom volunteered to participate in a focus group. Lecturers' were interviewed following observation of their classroom practices.

The findings revealed that students do not distinguish between AfL and non-AfL environments, yet classroom observations and focus group data depicted a different reality. While students perceive grade attainment as success, the thesis argues that this does not equate to educationally worthwhile learning. Lecturers regard the practices associated with AfL as good practice and not attributable to any particular environment. They perceive success in educational terms as getting the student 'work-ready' which they equate with educationally worthwhile learning.

In conclusion, the practices of questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment are not exclusive to AfL. It is the enactment of these practices, in *any* classroom environment within particular institutional learning cultures that determine if they act as a springboard or straitjacket to educationally worthwhile learning.

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1. Introduction

This research relates to the assessment practices within the Business School at a Higher Education Institution located in the South of Ireland. The study is primarily concerned with assessment for learning (AfL) and how it is perceived by both lecturers and students. The aim of the study is to investigate if AfL acts as what Davies and Ecclestone (2008) refer to as 'a springboard or straitjacket' for educationally worthwhile learning (EWL) in a HE Business School. In doing so, the study attempts to uncover if and how lecturers implement AfL practices and how these practices influence student learning.

1.1   Finding the Focus

'What is assessed, and how it is assessed, is hugely influential in determining what is taught and how it is taught. Likewise, with respect to learning, while assessment can motivate learners if they are successful, it can also undermine confidence and capacity to learn if they are unsuccessful…'

(Torrance et al, 2005:5)

As suggested by this quotation, assessment in any education system plays a central role. It has come to underpin or even dominate all aspects of teaching and learning and how students perceive programmes and modules (Carter, 2012; Joughlin, 1999). It is not a new phenomenon; some thirty five years ago Derek Rowntree, while discussing the influence of assessment on student learning, commented:

'If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedures. What student qualities

and achievements are actively valued and rewarded by the system? How are its purposes and intentions realized? To what extent are the hopes and ideals, aims and objectives professed by the system ever truly perceived, valued and striven for by those who make their way within it? The answers to such questions are to be found in what the system requires students to do in order to survive and prosper. The spirit and style of student assessment defines the de facto curriculum'. (Rowntree, 1977:1)

Some twenty one years later Black and Wiliam (1998) focused their research on assessment in the primary sector. Their ideas and insights had a strong resonance in higher education. The term 'assessment for learning' was coined, again highlighting many of the questions raised previously by Rowntree (1977), with the resulting research concentrated more on classroom practice at all educational levels (ARG, 2002; McDowell et al, 2004 and 2011; Taras, 2007 and 2008). Practices linked to AfL include questioning, feedback, sharing criteria, peer- and self-assessment. These alone may not lead to AfL. It is how the practices are interpreted and implemented that determines whether or not they encourage a deeper learning approach. Implementation of these practices 'becomes much more than the application of certain procedures… but about the realization of certain principles of teaching and learning' (Marshall and Drummond, 2006:135). It is only then that the full educational benefits of AfL will be achieved (James and Pedder, 2006) and the benefits for both student and lecturer realised (Irons, 2008).

AfL strategies affects both the lecturer and the student (Yorke, 2003; Hargreaves, 2004; Irons, 2008). For lecturers the literature cites the following as benefits of implementing AfL, 'working smarter, not harder' (Hargreaves, 2004:24), 'enhance your teaching' (Irons, 2008:98), 'to develop a sense of self- as teacher' (Harrison, 2005:261). Harlen (2005) discussed the impact AfL practices can have

on the lecturer/student relationship, while Scaife and Wellington (2010) recommend 'sharing good assessment practices and ideas' (2010:148) with colleagues.

These assessment practices influence how students approach their learning, in the words of Rowntree (1977) what does the student need 'to do in order to survive and prosper' (1977:1). If the assessment regime rewards rote learning, why would the student approach his/her learning in any other manner? Yet this surface approach (Entwistle, 1997; McCune, 2003) to learning is considered by Vermunt (1998) as inappropriate for higher education. Instead, what is seen to be desirable is the deep approach (Entwistle, 1997; McCune, 2003) where the student tries to understand and take meaning (Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006) from the learning moment. According to the advocates of AfL the deep approach to learning is more likely adopted when an AfL environment exists (McDowell et al, 2011). Does this deep approach to learning lead to success or educationally worthwhile learning (EWL) in higher education?

How is 'success' measured in higher education institutions? Can it be equated with EWL, a term implicitly assumed in the literature (Ramsden, 1988; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Boud, 2007; Davies & Ecclestone, 2008), not yet defined or explained? The literature review will provide the reader with what previous research considers success to be (Ramsden, 1988; Knight, 2007; James & Lewis, 2012). Rarely is it defined in terms of the grade attained. However in policy terms, success is about grade achievement and student retention and so has a very powerful influence on the 'learning culture' (James and Biesta, 2007) of a particular site/programme/module. However, this focus on grade achievement may lead to instrumentalism as noted by previous research (Habermas, 1984; Yorke, 2003; Glisczinski, 2007; Davies & Ecclestone, 2008; Ecclestone, 2012).

The above outlines the significance assessment has had on the educational discourse policy and practice over the past two decades, and how the assessment regime can influence both lecturers and students. Enacting AfL practices are purported to enhance teaching and promote a deeper learning experience for students but doing so is not straight forward. Set in the context of a Business School, my study aims to explore some of the tensions relating to lecturers' and students' perceptions of AfL. These tensions include the theory/practice divide, the enactment and implementation processes, and how these influence the students' approaches to learning. To this end, the research questions which form the basis of this study are stated below.

1.2 Research Questions

The over-arching research question is:

Do AfL practices act as a Springboard or Straitjacket for EWL?

In order to address this question, a number of sub-questions were deduced:

- *What are the AfL practices and procedures in place and how are these enacted?*

- *How do lecturers perceive AfL?*

- *What are the implications of AfL practices for students' learning?*

- *How do these practices contribute to EWL?*

By addressing these research questions, my study will offer a contribution to the current discourse, theory, practice and research, on assessment practices in higher education within the context of a Business School.

1.3   The Context

This case study was located within the Business School of Waterford Institute of Technology, a government funded university level institution in the South East of Ireland. Established in 1970 as a Regional Technical College, it was awarded Institute of Technology status in 1998. The Institute now confers its own awards from Higher Certificate to PhD, covering Health and Nursing, Science, Humanities, Engineering, Architecture, Education and Business. It is this range of awards that differentiates the Institutes of Technology from Universities. Universities offer programmes at level 8, on the qualification framework, and higher, whereas institutes of technology offer programmes from level 6 and above. It is the largest Institute of Technology outside the country's capital, and is 'the major provider of higher education in the South East region of Ireland' (www.wit.ie) with 10,000 students and 1,100 staff.

The school in which this study is located is sub-divided into three departments, namely, Department of Accounting and Economics, Department of Management and Organisation and the Graduate Business School. The Business School has almost 1,500 students and 85 members of staff incorporating undergraduate, postgraduate, executive and entrepreneurial education. The school's aims are best described by its mission statement:

> 'The Mission of the WIT School of Business is to develop thinking professional to the highest international standards. Our aim is to prepare students for successful careers in business, the professions, public service and society. This is achieved through a suite of innovative and challenging programmes that are delivered in a personalised learning environment. Our intention is to continuously evolve and respond to our changing environment by offering accessible, flexible and relevant courses to all'.
>
> (www.wit.ie)

A core feature of the school is the learning community which exists, the personal nature of the interactions between student and staff, the small class sizes and the supportive culture, all contributing to an over-arching value:

> 'If we are passionate in our role as educators then this will be reciprocated in passionate learners'.   (www.wit.ie)

In theory at least, this passion should be a crucial element in an expansive (Davies & Ecclestone, 2008) and positive (Postlethwaite & Maull, 2007) learning culture where EWL is to the fore.

1.4 Justification for the Study

Assessment methods in higher education have changed considerably in the past number of years, the primary driver being the Bologna Declaration, signed by the Irish Government in 1999, which sought convergence of the European Higher Education sector. One aim of this convergence was to ensure high quality teaching and learning and a move towards the adoption of AfL strategies. A first step in this adoption was the introduction of institute policies that all programmes have at least a 50/50 mix of formative/summative assessments. Summative assessment is the traditional end of semester exam, while formative assessment can be defined as "assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning", (Sadler, 1998:77).

Reviewing the students' results (on the programme for which I am programme leader) the trend indicates modules that are delivered and assessed under AfL conditions show a higher grade than those summatively assessed. Why is this? Do particular modules lend themselves more easily to one assessment strategy over another? If the definition of formative assessment as outlined above is accepted, and such a strategy does "improve and accelerate learning" surely all

modules, lecturers and indeed higher education institutes should promote and adopt the formative assessment strategy.

I work primarily in the Department of Accounting and Economics lecturing Taxation and Accounting modules. These modules are quantitatively orientated, delivered over a twelve week semester and students are assessed at the end of that semester. Module descriptors suggest that these assessments are 'assessment of learning' (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007) which, as the introduction indicated and the literature review shows in more depth, is likely to promote instrumentalism rather than EWL.

What, then, is EWL? It is a term alluded to in the literature without any definition, so is it possible for us educators to state that our students have experienced it while in higher education. The many aims of HE are outside the scope of this study, but perhaps the term EWL encompasses the teaching learning and assessment strategies adopted to achieve those aims.

Within the Irish higher education sector, in particular the context of this study, anecdotal evidence suggests the emphasis is on grade attainment and not the individual. The literature review shows little evidence of research conducted on assessment in Irish higher education. Studies have been conducted into grade inflation (O'Grady & Quinn, 2007) but there is a lack of literature on the process and practices of assessment and how it influences students' learning in Ireland as compared to the UK and further afield. This study aims to add to the Irish discourse by illuminating the processes and practices within the Institute.

1.5   Overview of thesis

This section provides an overview of the contents of the other chapters in this thesis.

Chapter 2. Literature Review, begins with an examination of the purpose of assessment in higher education and how it is influenced by the learning culture. Emphasis is placed on the AfL environment, so the chapter considers the tensions and barriers to the creation and maintenance of this environment from the perspective of both students and lecturers.   The chapter concludes with an exploration of meaning of the term EWL.

Chapter 3. Methodology and Methods, considers my ontological and epistemological position and justification for my use of a qualitative methodology. The methods used for data collection and data analysis, including their pros and cons, are reviewed, together with the ethical and validity considerations.

Chapter 4. Setting the Scene, provides the reader with a context from which the remaining chapters are reported. The chapter outlines the assessment policy within the Higher Education Institute involved in this study, together with background information about the students and lecturers who took part in this investigation. Dimensions of the learning culture (Hodkinson et al, 2007) are considered to determine the type of learning culture existing in the school.

Chapter 5. The students' perspective, presents the findings of the student survey, classroom observations and the student focus group, using extracts from observational field notes and focus group transcripts.

Chapter 6. The lecturers' perspective, explores how lecturers interpret and implement AfL practices. How they understand the term educationally worthwhile learning is also described, again using interview extracts to illuminate their perspectives.

Chapter 7. Discussion of data and findings, discusses the data presented in the previous chapters in relation to the literature review and the research questions this study aims to address.

In **Chapter 8. Conclusions**, I reflect on the findings of my small scale research project via an overview of the study. The limitations to the research are outlined followed by the implications for theory and practice. I then make some suggestions for future research as illuminated by this research.

2.   Literature Review

This study is concerned with assessment in higher education, focusing specifically on assessment for learning (AfL) in an Irish HE business school and how, if at all, this contributes to educationally worthwhile learning (EWL).   This chapter provides a review of the literature exploring the purpose and goals of assessment in HE and the learning culture in which the assessment regime exists before paying particular attention to AfL practices and procedures and how these are perceived by lecturers enacting this particular assessment strategy.   The assessment regime and the learning culture influence how the students approach their learning and studying, so the literature underpinning this issue will be explored.   Finally, this chapter considers EWL in an attempt to clarify how this term is understood and practised in higher education.

2.1   Introduction

Many studies (Brown & Knight, 1994; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Bloxham, 2007; Scaife &Wellington, 2010) suggest that it is assessment, not teaching that influences students most. This includes interest in the ways in which students' perceptions of assessment demands dominates their own study (Gibbs & Simpson 2004) and 'frames students' views of higher education' (Boud & Falchikov 2007:3), 'defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students and graduates' (Brown & Knight, 1994:12).   Research in the area of assessment has investigated students' perceptions, with the following quotes as examples of the findings: 'assessment is something done to students, rather than for them, let alone by them' (Scaife and Wellington, 2010:138) and students view themselves 'as outside the assessment process' (Ecclestone & Swann, 1999:383). In turn assessment strategies and their outcome are influenced by how the student approaches his/her learning.

These concerns relate to the aims of higher education that include "providing a foundation for a lifetime of learning and work" (Boud & Falchikov, 2007:5) and "foster[ing] the development of human qualities and disposition....appropriate to the twenty first century" (Barnett 2007 :29). Others argue that the providers of higher education should aim to equip students with the tools/activities necessary to promote and encourage high quality learning (McCune, 2003). High quality learning is influenced by approaches to learning and studying, type of teaching-learning environment provided and the students' perception of that environment.

Authors in the field of assessment and learning in higher education have suggested a number of purposes for assessment (eg Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Carless, 2007), differentiating between the main purposes of assessment as being the certification element and the learning element. Certification is the method used to identify or evaluate different levels of achievement between students. The learning element equates the promotion of learning via motivation and involvement in course and teaching design. As with any multi-purpose agenda, conflicts often arise between each component and one may dominate the other. Certification/achievement and learning are not synonymous, yet it is apparent from policy documents that certification/achievement dominate this debate. Like numerous other EU countries, Irish policy on higher education is driven largely 'by economic and social development potential of the knowledge economy and broadened access to higher learning and lifelong learning' (WIT, LTAS, 2009: 9). Policy makers recommend that qualifications should be based 'on standards of knowledge, skills or competence to be acquired by learners', (The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999). How these standards of knowledge, skills and competencies are taught, learnt and assessed is core to addressing the question posed in this research which has been adapted from the work of Davies and Ecclestone (2008) who studied AfL in Level 3 vocational qualifications: to what extent do AfL practices act as a springboard or straitjacket for EWL?

This chapter explores the purposes of assessment, both summative and formative, before considering the term 'assessment for learning'. It will present a number of definitions and practices and emphasise the ways in which these interact with the learning culture and learning environment. As lecturers and students are central to any learning environment, how they perceive these practices and their implications for student learning is then explored. Finally, the meaning of the term EWL is considered.

2.2   Purposes of Assessment in Higher Education

According to Carole Leathwood, 'assessment is used to provide a rationale and legitimacy for the social structures and power relations of modern day society and for one's place within these' (Leathwood, 2005:307). In light of optimistic goals for assessment outlined above, this statement sums up the complexities and contradictions of assessment in higher education. These complexities include standards, equity, policies and all that is valued in the education system and can be viewed from a social and political view point. Irish higher education is, in the main, publically funded and as such is subject to government monitoring and control. There are strong drivers for this, for example the Bologna Process (1999) created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the purpose of which was to 'introduce a system of academic degrees that are easily recognisable and comparable, promote the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, ensure high quality teaching and incorporate the European dimension into higher education'. In doing so, this voluntary process required a convergence of education systems and common quality assurance measures.

This trend leans towards assessment *of* learning which entails 'the making of judgements about students' summative achievement for purposes of selection and certification' (Bloxham and Boyd 2007:15). Within the UK education system, this type of assessment also satisfies a key university league table variable, namely the number of good degrees awarded (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Yet

such judgements are subjective: can the student's work be reflected in such subjectivity? The underpinning elements of any assessment strategy are certification, student learning, quality assurance and lifelong learning capacity. The first element is complied with when AfL is the strategy employed, but, depending on the assessment task, validity and reliability may be called into question. Quality assurance may too be satisfied, but again it may just be a box ticking exercise. Both learning elements of the assessment strategy may not be fulfilled because if the certification and quality assurance elements are to the fore, students/learners may adopt a learning approach that regurgitates class notes which has been argued is not appropriate for higher education (Vermunt, 1998).

In response to these pressures, alternative assessment strategies, such as AfL have been proposed. AfL is that 'which provides information about student achievement which allows teaching and learning activities to be changed in response to the needs of the learner' (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007:15). It highlights the crucial influence of feedback on student learning. A third strategy noted in the literature is assessment as learning, which has been described as a sub-set of AfL where the student becomes more involved in the assessment process using feedback, self and peer monitoring as learning tools (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

Assessment *of* learning has been called summative assessment, while the other two strategies can be encapsulated by the term 'formative assessment'. Ecclestone (2010) distinguishes between the purposes of formative assessment and summative assessment, similar to those discussed by Harlen (2012). Depicted below are Harlen's conceptual purposes of formative assessment and of summative assessment. Figure 1, is a framework for reporting what has been achieved. Evidence of achievement is gathered by test/task, judged by teachers and examiners all using the same criteria for judging, thus allowing for comparability between students and programmes. If this evidence is not incorporated into the next teaching and learning cycle, how can the

lecturer/teacher provide the best possible help to the student in the next learning moment (Bruner, 1985) or close the student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978)?
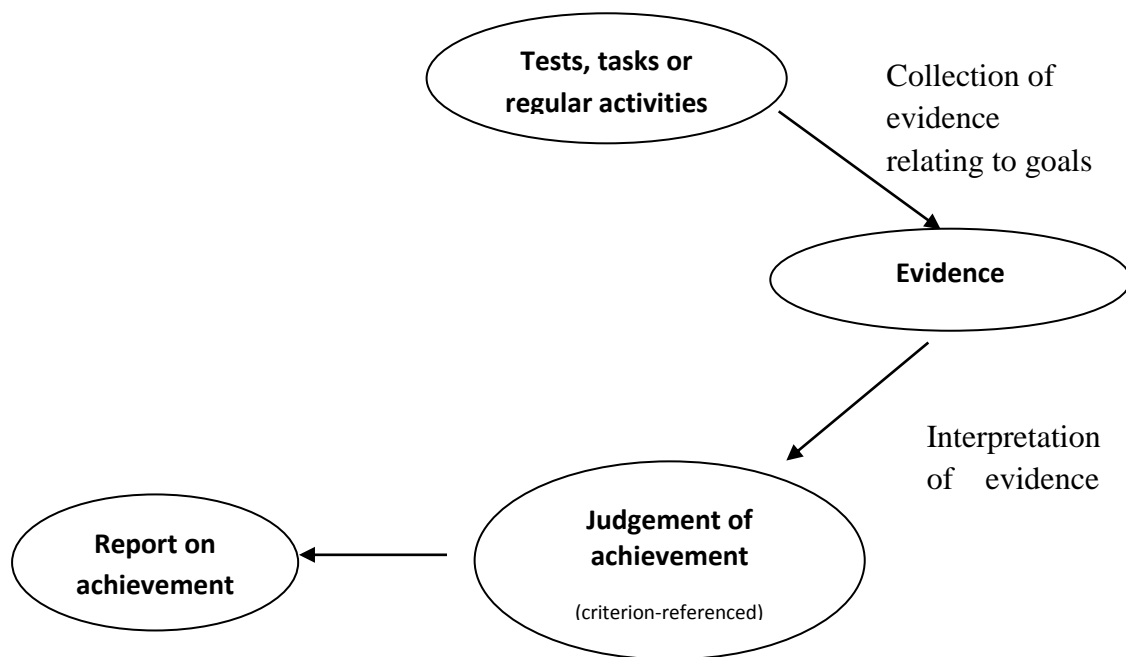
Figure 1   Assessment for summative purposes   (Harlen 2012:91)

Figure 2 depicts assessment as 'a cycle of events' (Harlen, 2012:89). Evidence gathered during activity A is used to interpret 'progress towards the lesson goals' (Harlen 2012:89). Feedback on that evidence is given to both student and teacher which will help indicate the next step in the teaching and learning of activity B, thus placing the student at the centre of the learning activity and enabling the

teacher/lecturer to 'provide scaffolding'(Berryman, 1991:5) to support the next stage of student's learning.

Both assessment strategies contribute to the purposes of assessment it is the emphasis that is different. Assessment is effective and efficient when the overlap between assessment and learning is maximised (Carless, 2007). Effective assessment is that which enables all students to enhance their achievements formatively without allowing the summative assessment to dominate learning and teaching.

Here the goal is to verify the students' achievement as rigorous, reliable and valid, using a diverse range of assessment methods that measure genuine and valued learning. Such assessment practices 'develops students as active participants in their own assessment, enabling them to develop as autonomous learners and effective professionals' McDowell et al (2006:3). Boud and Falchikov (2007) highlight the importance of assessment for developing students' evaluation and self-assessment skills in preparation for future work and life-long learning and as active participants in their own assessment. From this perspective these skills will develop the capacity of determining appropriate standards, critical tasks and other such skills. Boud (2000) refers to this as 'sustainable assessment' which he defines as 'assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (2000: 151). Carless (2007) refers to 'learning-oriented assessment', whereby the learning and certification purposes overlap substantially when the assessment strategy is functioning effectively. He posits that when students are involved in the assessment strategy, they develop a 'better understanding of the learning goals and engage more actively with criteria and standards' (Carless, 2007:59). This active involvement/engagement is achieved by drafting criteria, engaging with quality exemplars, peer feedback/assessment and the development of self-evaluation skills as factors that contribute to the learning environment.

Goals

Students' activities
(steps in learning)

C

B

A

Decisions about how to

take next steps

Collection of evidence

relating to goals

**Next Steps in
Learning**

Students

Evidence

Decisions about

next steps

Interpretation of

evidence

**Judgement of
achievement**
(criterion-referenced
and student
referenced)
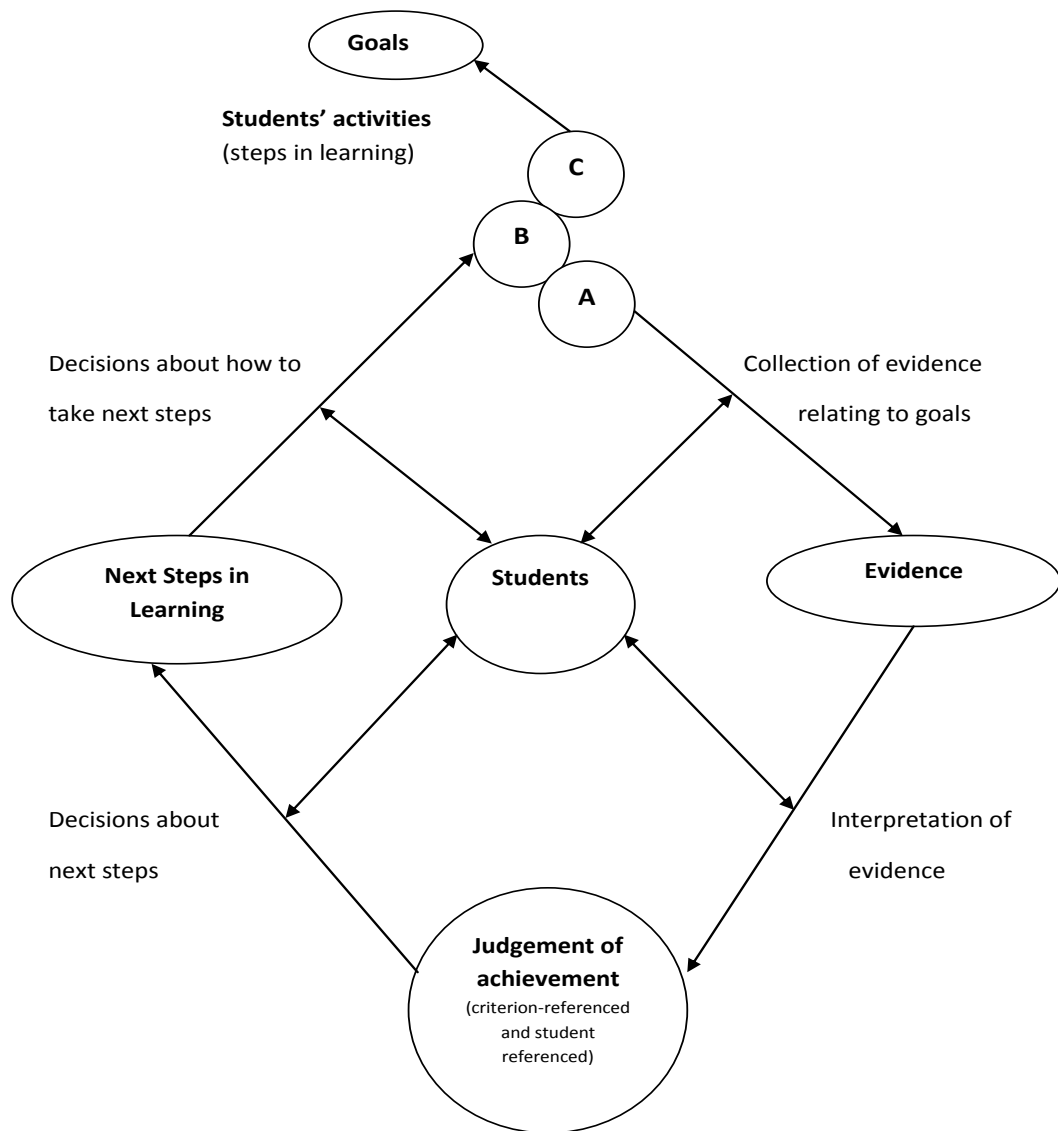
Source: Harlen, 2012, p. 90

Figure 2   Assessment for formative purposes (Harlen 2012:90)

2.3   Learning Culture, Learning Environment

The formal purposes and goals of any assessment strategy are influenced by the learning culture and learning environment of any given context. A learning culture is defined as "the social practices through which people learn" (James and Biesta, 2007:18). The learning culture is not just the course/programme being studied.

Peim and Hodkinson (2007) advise that, when engaging with learning cultures, researchers must address 'implicitly or explicitly, the interplay between the larger context 'the world' and the local context of practice' (p: 389). Davies and Ecclestone (2008) depict a learning culture as 'relational, encompassing participants such as parents, college managers at various levels, policy makers and national awarding bodies' (2008:74). However, as emphasised by James and Biesta (2007), Davies and Ecclestone (2008) caution against using the term learning culture synonymously with learning environment since the environment or context is only part of that learning culture. How a course/programme is viewed by students, teachers, managers, awarding bodies all contribute to the learning culture as each have differing views, beliefs and expectations about the course/programme, students' abilities and motivation. Whether such views are implicit or explicit, accurate or false, the assumptions on which they are based, will all influence the learning culture of that course/programme, in subtle, sometimes hidden and contradictory or unintended ways.

Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2007) give guidance as to how learning cultures are understood. They offer a number of dimensions which when considered in relation to each other should form the basis of understanding a particular learning culture. These dimensions are:

- 'the positions, dispositions and actions of the student;
- the positions, dispositions and actions of the tutor;
- the location and resources of the learning site;
- the syllabus or course specification, the assessment and qualification specifications;
- the time tutors and students spend together, their inter-relationships, and the range of other learning sites students are engaged with;
- college management and procedures, together with funding and inspection body procedures and regulations, and government policy;

- wider vocational and academic cultures, of which any learning site is part'
- wider social and cultural values and practices, for example around issues of social class, gender and ethnicity, the nature of employment opportunities, social and family life, and the perceived status of further education (FE) as a sector'   (Hodkinson et al 2007:415).

Although their study was situated in further education in the UK, it has resonance for other third level education institutions as many of these would have had their origins as further education and vocational education providers. Hodkinson et al (2007) define the learning culture for their study as 'the social practices through which people learn' (p: 419) and so is not limited to the site or environment of the learning. The dimensions above all influence the learning culture, but not always from within the learning site itself. Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' are used in their study to expand on the outside influences and view 'field' as 'a tool to understand how learning cultures work' (Hodkinson et al 2007: 421) and 'habitus' as incorporating the individual into that culture. The students' habitus includes such things as what they expect of the teaching, learning and outcomes to be from a particular learning site and their own participation in those activities, (Postlethwaite and Maull, 2007). Bourdieu believed that the individuals' habitus can and do change; Hodkinson et al (2007) argue that 'learning is one major mechanism that can bring about such change' (p: 425).

In order 'to improve learning, the learning culture must be enhanced' (Hodkinson et al 2007b: 401). By understanding the learning culture it becomes 'clearer what can be achieved and what cannot' (ibid). In their research, Hodkinson et al (2007b) identify a number of different learning cultures, having investigated seventeen sites: cultures of convergence and synergy, cultures of division and conflict, and cultures that mix convergence and divergence. The findings showed learning was most successful where the culture of convergence and synergy was

strongest. The culture of division and conflict present challenges which may promote worthwhile learning, but findings from their study showed conflicts 'generally acted as barriers to that learning' (2007b:407). These conflicts ranged from how the tutors and students valued the course differently to there being no vocational element to the course although it was a General National Vocational Qualification. A mix of convergent and divergent factors was found at a number of sites under investigation which neither promote nor hinder the learning. The article concludes that much of these findings are influenced by what is perceived as good learning. Good learning, according to Peim and Hodkinson (2007) 'is at least partly, but not necessarily, socially constructed' (p: 395), confirming an earlier American study which informs the reader that learning is primarily a social process (Shepard, 2000).

This social process will be facilitated by the learning environment. Postlethwaite and Maull (2007) discuss positive and negative learning environments, positive showing characteristics of 'cohesiveness, satisfaction, task difficulty, formality, goal direction, democracy and environment' (2007:431) whereas the negative learning environment, at least in the settings they studied, is characterised by 'friction, cliqueness, apathy, disorganization and favouritism' (ibid). McDowell et al (2011) argue that, in order to support student learning, it is an AfL environment that is required. This environment encompasses: rich formal feedback (tutor and self); rich informal feedback (teaching and peer interaction); space to practice the knowledge, skills and understanding acquired; assessment tasks that are authentic; enables students to develop as independent and autonomous learners; has a balance between formative and summative assessments, (McDowell et al 2011). Sadler (1998) described a similar concept, in which the commitment of teachers to improve learning is at the forefront of AfL. This, suggests McDowell and colleagues, is 'assessment for success' (2011:751). The AfL environment encourages the student to take responsibility for his/her own learning, by helping 'students to develop independence and autonomy' (McDowell et al 2011:750).

In relation to perceptions or constructions of autonomy, Ecclestone (2004) focuses on the 'comfort zone' in which students learn. This 'comfort zone' is defined as 'a complex mix of expectations and motivations, teaching and assessment activities and relationships' (Ecclestone 2004:30). In her study of English vocational education assessment systems, she argues that 'the comfort zone protected teachers and students from the confusing changes that were arising from repeated political attempts to reform the . . . assessment regime' (ibid). In a similar way to Hodkinson et al (2007), Ecclestone uses Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus to investigate how students are affected by the assessment regime in place at their particular institution. Ecclestone (2007) concluded that researchers, teachers, managers, and policy makers need to understand 'how cultural and social capital are developed or hindered by . . . assessment regimes' (Ecclestone, 2007:44).

In their study of AfL in general vocational qualifications, Davies and Ecclestone (2008) discuss learning cultures and their relationship with formative assessment, arguing that learning cultures can be expansive or restrictive. An expansive learning culture includes the factors that "enable students to maximise their engagement with the subject being studied . . . as well as enhancing their own learning processes, rather than merely meeting targets" (Davies and Ecclestone, 2008:75). Such a culture adopts the 'spirit' of formative assessment and acts as a springboard for EWL (ibid). At the opposite end of the continuum is the restrictive learning culture, which follows the 'letter' of formative assessment and can be a straitjacket to learning (ibid). These authors do caution that the restrictive learning culture is no less good than the expansive one, stating that it can/may be appropriate to have a restrictive learning culture which would build students' confidence which could in time 'act as a springboard to more expansive learning' (Davis and Ecclestone, 2008:75). Ensuring that it really is a springboard and does not become a straitjacket to learning is the key issue in this discourse.

This study is investigating the AfL environment and so the chapter continues with an examination of the role of formative assessment and AfL.

2.4   Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning

Formative Assessment is considered the older term, used firstly in 1967 by Scriven when distinguishing between summative and formative assessment (Scriven, 1967).   Formative assessment is also confused with continuous assessment (ad hoc tests, practical work performed over a semester/term and collated to give a summative result). The term AfL is deemed the newer phrase, having first entered the discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gardner, 2012). McDowell et al (2011) suggest dissatisfaction with equating AfL with formative assessment and they define AfL instead as an assessment environment. Academics researching in the field will probably all concur with Ecclestone (2010) in that 'there is currently no watertight definition of formative assessment (p: 33).   Formative assessment is often referred to as AfL as opposed to 'assessment of learning' (summative assessment) (Volante & Beckett, 2011, Gardner, 2012). These definitions link with how Harlen (2012) discussed the use of the evidence gathered from the assessment task or test. On the one hand, evidence that is used to enhance the teaching and learning falls under the heading of AfL, while that gathered for reporting achievement is classified as assessment of learning. Gardner (2012) suggests that it is the ten principles put forward by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) that underpins many of the definitions found in the literature and which therefore make the practice of AfL 'a complex weave of activities involving pedagogic style, student-teacher interaction, self-reflection (teacher and student), motivation and a variety of assessment processes' (Gardner, 2012:3).

In a similar vein, Swaffield (2011) discusses how AfL differs from formative assessment.   She argues that AfL is a teaching and learning process, while formative assessment is a purpose of assessment; AfL is concerned with the here

and now, concurring with Klenowski (2009), formative assessment has a longer time span; the benefits of AfL are garnered by the particular learning environment whereas formative assessment can be of use to others; students' participation in AfL is active, they are independent and self-directed as opposed to those students participating in formative assessment who 'can be passive recipients of teachers' decisions and actions' (Swaffield, 2011:443); AfL is a learning process in itself whereas formative assessment provides information that can be used to guide future learning; finally AfL, according to Swaffield (2011), 'is concerned with learning how to learn as well as specific learning intentions' (p. 443), while formative assessment is focused on module content.

For the purpose of this thesis, this distinction suggests that it is the term AfL which should be used because the term encapsulates the 'spirit' rather than the 'letter' of the practices associated with this assessment strategy (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). The term also allows the researcher to consider the tensions of process and practice (Crook, Gross & Dymott, 2006), and of espoused goals and everyday realities. It is the 'spirit' of AfL that provides the springboard for EWL, but forces at play in HE may, unwittingly, hamper the springboard effect and create a straitjacket in its place.

2.5   Assessment for Learning (AfL) – Meaning, Process and Practice.

To define AfL is, at first attempt, a simple task. A number of definitions are presented in the literature. Black and Wiliam (1998) brought the topic to the forefront of educational research and defined this type of assessment as 'encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged' (1998:8). Ten years later, Popham defined formative assessment as 'a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust on going teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes' (Popham

2006).   The now defunct Assessment Reform Group (ARG) recommended in 2001 that the terms formative assessment and diagnostic assessment be replaced with AfL.   The ARG defined AfL as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (as cited in Gardner 2012:3).   Paul Black claimed that AfL became 'a free brand name to attach to any practice' (Black, 2006:11).   At the 'Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning' (New Zealand, 2009) a second-generation definition of AfL was generated, 'assessment for learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning' (Klenowski, 2009:2).   Many authors in the field of assessment use the terms formative assessment and AfL synonymously, (Ecclestone 2010, 2007; Davies and Ecclestone, 2008; Ecclestone & Pryor 2003; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; McDowell et al 2006; Torrance, 2012; James and Pedder, 2006).   In contrast, Stiggins (2002) cautioned against using the terms synonymously and submits that it is the involvement of students in the process that distinguishes the two.   Another cautionary note comes from Ecclestone & Pryor (2003) who state that 'without a specific link to learning and motivation, formative assessment can be little more than conscientious summative feedback … designed more for quality assurance purposes than for learning' (2003:472).

According to Randy Bennett, definitions are oversimplified (Bennett, 2011). It is how these definitions and their elaborations are interpreted that deliver meaning and understanding. Bennett (2011) criticises AfL on several grounds, namely definitional, effectiveness, domain dependency, measurement, professional development and system issues. Definitions can be instruments or processes (Bennett, 2011), interpreted in their spirit or to the letter (Marshall & Drummond, 2006) and through narrow or broad viewpoints. If the definitions of formative assessment/AfL are considered as instruments, then AfL is nothing more than a series of diagnostic tests delivered regularly from which the teacher/lecturer can

obtain (upward trending) scores. In contrast, Popham (2006) views the definition from a process viewpoint whereby assessment produces a grade and, more importantly a 'qualitative insight into student understanding' (Bennett, 2011:6). Bennett continues his argument in stating that one without the other is not the solution: instead the integration of the processes and well-defined instruments might advance learning.

The word 'process' is problematic when used in relation to assessment and, depending on how that word is interpreted, will determine how AfL is viewed. Crook et al (2006) discuss the tensions between the process of assessment and the practice of assessment in a higher education context. The process of assessment can be defined as a sequence of stages with measurable inputs and outputs. Put simply, in order to complete the assessment the student must complete stage A, B and C with little concern for how those stages are completed. Policy makers and higher education management teams view this type of assessment as appropriate as it provides valid and reliable outputs that provide an audit trail and can withstand independent scrutiny from various external parties, (Crook et al 2006), thus fulfilling the quality assurance required from an assessment regime.

The practice of assessment is defined as 'recurrent modes of acting that are mediated by shared cultural resources' (Crook et al, 2006:97). Such practices are dependent on communication and negotiation, ingenuity and serendipity, judgement and insight, thus suggesting assessment is socially constructed (Biggs, 2002) and dependent on the assessment environment and culture as discussed by McDowell et al (2011). However, the notion of process and practice of assessment are not alternatives. Crook et al (2006) claim that the process of assessment provides a scaffold for the practice, and 'it is practice that brings process to life, and indeed, life to process' (ibid: 97).

This thesis is investigating how AfL is perceived by lecturers and students in a higher education business school, so this review will continue with a focus on classroom practice and student learning.

2.5.1 AfL Practices

The ARG's ten principles of AfL (2002) are the foundation stones for many, if not all, AfL definitions and the implementation of the environment associated with this assessment strategy. If the meaning of principle is taken as a code of conduct (The Penguin English Dictionary, 2002), these ten principles can be interpreted as a series of actions designed to achieve an end, which is the definition of the word 'process' in the same English Dictionary. The ARG's ten principles are then a process scaffolding the practice (Crook et al 2006) and in order to bring this process to life, AfL enactors require practice guidelines.

The principles/processes of AfL, as summarised by Gardner (2012) include effective planning; focuses on how students learn; is central to classroom practice; is a key professional skill; is sensitive and constructive; fosters motivation; promotes understanding of goals and criteria; helps learners know how to improve; develops the capacity for self-assessment; recognizes all educational achievement (2012:3). So this is a mere list of what AfL is, and alone will not facilitate or promote EWL (for further discussion on this see below). It is the enactment of these principles, by means of practices, that will guide lecturers and students in the adoption of AfL. Literature informs the reader of four main AfL practices, being questioning, feedback, sharing criteria with the learner and peer and self-assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2003; Black et al, 2006; Marshall & Drummond 2006; James & Pedder, 2006). These are discussed in turn below.

Questioning or dialogue between teacher and student; student and teacher; student and student is an essential part of classroom practices. The underlying idea

behind questioning is that, in order to progress, teachers need to know the level of existing understanding, students must be involved and the learning should take place in a social and community environment (Black et al, 2006). However, the type of questioning will determine whether or not it fits with AfL principles. For example, giving the student sufficient time to think about the question asked, encouraging them to listen to their peers and ensuring that each student is comfortable with giving their opinions in the classroom setting are techniques employed to enrich classroom dialogue. Questions need to explore students' understanding, enable the exchange of ideas and to articulate thoughts and answers. To do so, the questions need to be open-ended. Teachers will need time and effort. Questions need to be framed so they are 'critical to the development of students' understanding' (Black and Wiliam, 2003). These questions should allow for broad-ranging discussions, and all answers, correct or otherwise should contribute to the overall understanding of the topic. This practice brings life to a number of the principles summarised in the table below (Table 1).

Feedback is what students want and lots of it (Scaife & Wellington, 2010). Feedback has been defined "as anything that might strengthen the students' capacity to self-regulate their own performance" (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006:205), its purpose, according to Hattie & Timperley (2007) 'is to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance and a goal' (p: 86) Davies and Ecclestone (2008) quoted a participant's view as:

> 'Feedback is the main thing . . . I don't feel as if I'm learning anything unless I'm having feedback, being given feedback. It doesn't matter whether it's positive or negative, but at least you can sort of steer yourself in the right direction'
>
> (James, Group 3, first interview, cited in Davies & Ecclestone 2008:82)

This viewpoint concurs with research which shows that feedback has a direct impact on student learning and achievement (Bloxham, 2007), but these two

concepts are not the same. Learning, put simply, is acquiring knowledge or skills, achievement can be defined as how a student performs in a test or course. Gibbs and Simpson, (2004) cite Hattie (1987) when stating that feedback is the 'most powerful single influence' on student's achievements, whereas Black and Wiliam (1998) suggest that it is feedback rather than teaching that has a positive effect on learning. The learning culture and the environment within that culture will determine if this feedback leads to instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is when the assessment itself becomes an end in itself and this adaption can change teaching and assessment methods, erode subject content, impact on the teacher/student relationship and question the teachers' educational values and beliefs (Ecclestone, 2012). In such an environment, the quality assurance measures and other targets set by policy makers and management are ranked above the EWL on a particular module but if the lecturers/teachers are aware of these processes, there is more chance that the practice of feedback can be enacted in ways which scaffold students' learning.

According to proponents of AfL (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2003; Yorke, 2003Hounsell, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Davies & Ecclestone, 2008), feedback should help the student to close the gap between what they now know and what they need to know, thus focusing the learning needs of the individual/group. Feedback should have understandable language, should be clear and specific, balance between positive and negative comments, but most importantly be delivered in a timely manner. Feedback is of little use to the student if they have little or no time to act upon it. Gibbs and Simpson, (2004) states 'the feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance' (ibid:18). To be effective the feedback must address the following questions: 'Where am I going?, How am I going?, and Where to next?' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007:86) 'Well-crafted' feedback can (a) accelerate learning, (b) optimise the quality of the learning, and (c) raise standards/levels. Students in higher education want to achieve the best possible result, but sometimes are at a

loss as to how to set about achieving a higher standard. Feedback can reduce competitiveness among students and increase task-involvement, (Black et al 2006). 'Well-crafted' feedback should be the starting point of that process (Hounsell, 2007), provided the student is aware of how to interpret and use it (Yorke, 2003). In discussing their study, Black & Wiliam (2003) inform their readers, having been asked 'what makes good feedback?' Their reply, after several years of investigation, was 'good feedback causes thinking' (2003:631). Table 1 below depicts how feedback fits with the ARG principles.

Sharing criteria with students is not a stand-alone issue. Black and Wiliam (2003) suggest that this notion of sharing the learning criteria with the student has become one with feedback and self-assessment thus using the learning criteria as a framework which 'helped learners decide both how to make judgements about their own work and how to structure or detail their next piece of work' (Black et al, 2003:31). Learners are not mere 'objects' but rather 'co-constructors' of their learning and placing the student at the centre of the teaching, learning and assessment is more likely to lead to a promotion of learning, (Pedder et al 2005).

Table 1: How AfL Practices align with the ARG's Principles of AfL

ARG Principles		AfL Practices(Q=questioning; F=Feedback; SC=Shared Criteria; P+SA=Peer and self assessment)
Effective Planning		Q; F; SC; P+SA
Focus on how students learn		F; P+SA
Central to Classroom Practice		Q; F; SC
A key professional skill		Q; F; P+SA
Sensitive and constructive		Q; F (Can be); P+SA (Should be)
Fosters motivation		Q; F; SC; P+SA
Promotes understanding of Goals and Criteria		Q; F; SC; P+SA
Helps learners know how to improve		F; P+SA (depending on learning environment)
Develops the capacity for self-assessment		Q; SC; P+SA
Recognises all educational achievement		Q; F (Should); P+SA (Should)

Another key argument in the AfL field is that 'peer- and self-assessment make unique contributions to the development of students' learning – they secure aims that cannot be achieved in any other way' (Black and Wiliam, 2003:53). It 'is a key to enhancing metacognition, self-direction, and, through peer discussions, the social dimensions of learning' (Black et al, 2006:128). Bloxham (2007) states that 'self and peer assessment are crucial elements in helping students to learn from their assessment and become more autonomous learners', (p: 3). The benefit of peer assessment, include the language used, is the day-by-day language of students, that students accept criticism from one another that they may not accept from the teacher, strengthening of the student voice and improved communication between teacher and learner. By participating in peer-assessment the student can develop the objectivity required for effective self-assessment which, according to Black and Wiliam, (2003:49), 'is essential to learning'. In order to peer- and self-assess, and for the benefits, as discussed above to be realised, students need to be coached in the habits and skills required for such assessment.

Educators in the U.S.A. have similar practices, termed processes, and recommend that teachers assessing for learning should do so by understanding and articulating in advance of teaching the achievement targets, outline these to students in language understood by said students, build student confidence in themselves as learners, give frequent descriptive feedback to include ideas as to how they may improve, continuously adjust teaching based on results of assessment, and coach students in the art of self-assessment (Stiggins, 2002).

Nevertheless, despite the optimistic hopes and claims evident in the literature discussed above, questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment alone may not lead to EWL and may in fact contribute to the rise in instrumentalism. One criticism of the practices of AfL is that of 'coaching to the grade' which leads to grade inflation. The interpretation and implementation of

these practices by teachers will determine whether or not they encourage the deeper learning approach. Difficulties arise in the conversion of AfL strategies and policies; principles and processes into classroom practices and the learning cultures in which they take place.

Here authors have discussed the 'spirit' and 'letter' of AfL, (Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Derrick et al, 2008), convergent and divergent (Torrance & Pryor, 1998), instrumental and sustainable (Davies & Ecclestone, (2008). In their 2006 study, Marshall and Drummond described lessons which promoted pupil autonomy captured the 'spirit' of AfL, while those lessons that followed the practices outlined above in a technical way were sticking to the 'letter'. Derrick et al (2008) state that teachers who enact the 'spirit' of AfL 'encourage students to become more independent, critical learners within subject domains, in contrast to teachers whose formative assessment activities were designed to transmit knowledge and skills' (Derrick et al, 2008:174). Davies and Ecclestone (2008) define instrumental formative assessment as 'a mechanistic means to a summative end' (p: 73), which suggests coaching to the grade, and sustainable formative assessment as that which 'requires students to develop both subject knowledge and insights into the learning process through deep engagement with feedback, questioning and so forth' (p: 73).

In light of these arguments and the apparent discrepancies between aims and practice, it is how providers of HE implement and enact the practices of AfL that will determine whether these will contribute to EWL, especially now that AfL is at the heart of higher education policy, both at European, national and local level. As such stake holders may view this as a 'top-down' initiative which must be enacted to comply with regulation. The literature informs us that the majority of academic staff accept the benefits of AfL. A question posed in this study is how the practices of AfL are perceived by lecturers and whether these practices contribute to EWL, because, as I have aimed to show so far, the enactment of these practices is not straight forward (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam et al, 2004)

and may not produce the positive effects presented in the literature (Smith & Gorard, 2005).

2.6   How lecturers perceive/implement these practices

How those tasked with implementing the practices of AfL interpret them, and the learning cultures in which they do this, are therefore crucial to their success. In a secondary school context, Marshall and Drummond (2006) found that the implementation of the AfL practices of questioning, feedback, shared criteria, peer- and self-assessment was in reality very difficult, with only one fifth of those included in their study reflecting the 'spirit' of AfL – where learning autonomy was promoted, in contrast to those that implemented the practices to the 'letter', that is only the procedures were in place. Their research claims that introducing AfL into classroom practice is not easy for teachers/lecturers to achieve (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). In a school context Webb and Jones, (2009) concur with this argument. 'The implementation of AfL in the classroom, then, becomes about much more than the application of certain procedures . . . but about the realization of certain principles of teaching and learning' (Marshall and Drummond, 2006:135). James and Pedder (2006) question if there is a need to change values and beliefs in order to change practice and state that if consideration is given to the fundamentals of learning – why, what, how, whom – 'assessment for learning may represent a powerful approach to leveraging the full educational benefits of these methods' (James and Pedder 2006:111).

One of the questions being investigated in this study is 'How do lecturers perceive and implement AfL practices?' Implementing such practices is not easy and has barriers, including resources and pedagogy, but, according to advocates, when implemented has many benefits not only for the student but also for the lecturer (Irons, 2008).

As previously alluded to, it is the enactment rather than the implementation of these practices that may lead to EWL, the difference between the two being the participation of all actors, i.e. lecturers and students, involved in the process, as well as the ways in which curriculum and assessment content and tasks are formulated and interpreted. A lecturer may implement AfL, but if the student cohort are not actively participating with the practices, AfL will not bring the perceived benefits, as discussed below.

2.7 Barriers/pressures on the implementation of AfL practices

2.7.1 Problem of Resources

a) Lecturer

The role of lecturer in the higher education institution Business School, in which this study is being conducted, relating to assessment is to, for each module they teach, prepare students for assessment, set exam papers and suggested solutions, correct students' scripts, complete paperwork, liaise with external examiners and attend programme board meeting, all of which link to Newton's (2003) concept of bureaucratisation of teaching. The average teaching timetable for lecturers is 18 hours per week, so each lecturer has a heavy workload. Each module is designed with learning outcomes and is delivered over a twelve week period. On completion of the module, students must provide evidence that these learning outcomes have been achieved through criteria referenced assessment (CRA). In addition to this 'teaching' role, lecturers in many higher education institutions are required to be 'research active', generate funding, become involved in the community via consultancy and voluntary work and participate in institutional administration, i.e. academic council. Engaging with new initiatives and practices, although welcomed by lecturers, may be 'constrained and hindered by their environment and their belief about what is possible within their classroom' (Harrison, 2005:260).

In this context, schools and departments must give opportunities for academic staff to take part in staff development, training and support in order to change practices. Pedder et al advise that if lecturers 'are to sustain engagement with the challenges and cultural shifts involved, they need to continue learning, and to be encouraged and supported by schools that are committed sensitively to the continuing professional learning of their teachers' (Pedder et al, 2005:217). Black and Wiliam (1998) recognised that teaching staff need "to be provoked and supported in trying to establish new practices in formative assessment" (p: 61) but any policy introduced must "be incorporated by each teacher into his or her own practice in his or her own way" (p: 62). Taras (2002) also recommends that where institutes of higher education have the "means available" (p: 508) supports should be provided through time and staff development. Implementing AfL involves changing students' beliefs about learning and so requires time and, given the economic pressures in the vast majority of countries presently, third level institutions need to make "the best use of lecturers' time and energy" (Yorke 2001: 119). Yet the monetary cost of supporting each teacher is approximately 8% of their annual salary costs which is relatively small, given that this cost is a once-off (Wiliam et al, 2004).

b) Student Numbers

HE is no longer the preserve of the few and over the past two decades the numbers gaining access to third level education has increased globally. In Ireland alone the numbers of Leaving Certificate students entering third level education rose from 25% in 1986 to 54% in 2003 (O'Grady and Guilfoyle, 2007:31). This increase has an impact on HE institute facilities, such as class room size, library, canteen, parking, staffing. The majority of HE institutions now have larger class sizes. Gibbs and Jenkins (1992) posit that the traditional lecture and assessment practices are not an effective teaching and learning tool for larger class sizes. Yorke (2003) argues that the increase in the student/staff ratio leads to less time and attention being given to the individual student. What has resulted is that lecturing staff have to review their pedagogical strategies in order to maintain

standards and quality. One of the key elements of AfL is that of feedback. Providing quality feedback to a large number of students 'without over-burdening staff' (Ecclestone and Swann, 1999) is no easy task. Hounsell (2007) suggests ways to reduce the 'workload' of the lecturer in providing feedback to students. Gibbs and Jenkins (1992) comment that 'unless significant change occurs, staff and students will collapse in an attempt to keep the old system going' (1992:19) would appear to have credence in current higher education settings and impacts on how lecturers teach.

2.7.2   Impact on Pedagogy

Academics must balance research activities and teaching activities. Although pedagogy is the art of teaching, it has according to Candy (2000), a reputation of being "a relatively routine and undemanding practice" (p: 274). Many external observers of the HE sector see the role of the lecturer as one directional, insofar as the lecturer passes his/her knowledge/skills to the student, and that student has only one aim and that is to regurgitate that knowledge/skill in any assessment strategy. Marshall and Drummond (2006) quote one of their project participants when questioned about students' attitudes towards learning:

> 'Sheila: A lot of them see learning as being taught and their
>   parents see learning as being taught
>
> Interviewer: What does that mean, learning as being taught?
>
> Sheila: The teacher delivers, the child takes notes'
>
>   (Marshall and Drummond, 2006:145)

This evokes a very "narrow and restricted view" of education (Candy 2000: 274). What teaching aims to do is "stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over" (ibid: 274). I speculate that this is not only the aim of teaching per se, but also the aim of each individual lecturer in higher education. Irons 2008 posits 'what is it that motivates academics?' His answer is: a mix of teaching and research, and he points out that formative assessment "can make

teaching more rewarding and satisfying" (p: 101). Again, Irons (2008: 101) recommends using the processes of formative assessment to obtain an answer to that question. Feedback (from students) and peer observation are two processes that allow lecturing staff gain insight into how they are 'performing'. Yet these processes may satisfy the individual teacher, but fail to satisfy the recording and certification of achievement requirement of the institute.

Currently, lecturers in higher education are working within a high-stakes testing and performance environment. Such an environment can be associated with lecturers focusing on test content, coaching students to the test and 'adopting transmission styles of teaching' (Harlen, 2005:209). Grades/scores will rise as a result, but a corresponding rise in achievement may not be evident. Harlen (2005) claims that this rise in grades is as a result of 'familiarity with the particular test content and not to increased achievement' (p: 209) and this type of testing has negative effects on student motivation for learning. Ecclestone and Swann (1999) discussed how lecturers may award higher grades in order to avoid 'unwelcome challenges from students' (p: 386). Yorke (2003) cautions against 'learned dependence' which he defines as being 'present when the student relies on the teacher to say what has to be done and does not seek to go beyond the boundaries that he or she believes to be circumscribing the task' (p: 489)

Black and Wiliam (1998) discuss how a change in assessment practices will have an impact on pedagogy. They suggest that any change will be slow given that teaching practices are "embedded within their whole pattern of pedagogy" (ibid: 19). For formative assessment to be successful/effective (Black and Wiliam, 1998), the lecture should consider the task under hand, lecturer/student discussion, frequent tests rather than an 'all or nothing' at semester/year end: again Harlen's (2005) words of caution regarding students' motivation for learning is relevant here - but to the fore is the student's involvement in the assessment process. This lecturer/student involvement is bringing the student to the 'heart of the teaching

and learning processes and decision-making (Pedder et al, 2005:216), which is central to AfL. This new relationship involves a shift in the learning culture, which according to Webb and Jones (2009), is crucial to the success of AfL, and environment, a point that is discussed in detail below. However, one of the pivotal findings of research conducted by Volante and Beckett (2011) was that "assessment should be a collaborative process" (p: 251) but some lecturers found the perceived dilution of their authority hard to accept.

Much research has been conducted on how teachers/lecturers can be aided in the development of AfL within their classroom (for example the Learning How to Learn Project and the King's Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project). Webb and Jones (2009) question why lecturers are able to 'talk the talk' before changes in classroom practice were evident. They posit that introducing AfL practices are easier said than done, changing from one system to another takes time, ingrained pedagogical knowledge bases may need adjusting and finally dialogue and questioning were not easily achieved. Similar to Marshall and Drummond's (2006) 'spirit' and 'letter' argument, Webb and Jones (2009) suggests that focusing 'on tools was necessary as a stage in development. However, where teachers saw tools as the object, they failed to focus on developing the students' understanding, approach to learning and the classroom culture' (ibid: 179)

Yorke (2003) and Harrison (2005) both discuss how lecturers may change or enhance pedagogic practices so as to promote deeper learning. McMahon (2006) identifies seven maxims which when implemented should lead to teaching for more effective learning. Yorke (2003) concludes his article by indicating that what is required is a 'radical reconstruction of curricula' (p: 497) perhaps at the expense of lecturing hours, which he contends is 'not the most effective method for enhancing student learning' (p: 497). Pedder et al (2005) and McMahon (2006) argue that educational research deals with probabilities not certainties and

only when lecturers see benefits for themselves and the student, and their institutions support the implementation of findings, will research be valued by those tasked with its enactment.

2.8 Benefits for Academic Staff

Despite these complex pressures, however, Yorke suggests that "the act of assessing has an effect on the assessor as well as the student" (2003:482). Hargreaves (2004) highlights the benefits of AfL and claims that 'through assessment for learning both teachers and students are led to think afresh about the purposes of assessment … They understand better why they are doing what, and how this helps students to learn better. Moreover this can be achieved without extra effort, and sometimes reduce effort. Though the early stages require work, there is a later payoff, for AfL is a teaching strategy of very high leverage – working smarter, not harder' (2004:24). Irons (2008) advises that when the strategies are seen as personal development rather than a rule imposed from above, individual lecturing staff will find the process more constructive and beneficial.

Seen in this light, the practices of AfL - questioning, feedback, sharing criteria with the learner and peer- and self-assessment – 'can be an interesting and informative way to reflect, and ultimately enhance, your teaching' (Irons, 2008:98). Scaife and Wellington (2010) indicate similar action. In doing so, the lecturer benefits in a number of ways.

Firstly, the relationships between lecturer/student and lecturer/colleagues become more personalised. Frequent communications with colleagues aids problem sharing/solving and reflection, critical reflection being one component of enhancing teaching, learning and assessment strategies (Yorke, 2003). Sharing ideas and problems with colleagues allow lecturers to 'develop a sense of

validation and acceptance ... and thus develop their sense of self –as teacher within this community', (Harrison, 2005:261). 'Without reflection, teachers cannot change their practice in a controlled or deliberate way' (Pedder et al, 2005:218).

Secondly, AfL practices allow teachers to have a stake not only in their student's learning, but also their own. Pedder et al (2005) hypothesised that teachers' learning is an embedded feature of classroom practice; is extended through consulting different sources of knowledge; is expanded through collaborative activity; and is deepened through talking about and valuing learning. According to the research, the expanded role is reflected in the ten principles of AfL as presented by the Assessment Reform Group in 2002 (Pedder et al, 2005).

The third opportunity arises when the assessment task is authentic, linking learning to students' experiences, and finally the regular communication between lecturer and students results in the holistic, not just academic, development, 'teachers can build up a picture of students' attainments across the full range of activities and goals', (Harlen, 2005:212). Scaife et al (2010) also recommend that staff take part in pedagogy discussions, reflection on teaching, learning and assessment practices and the idea of sharing good practice. Their research found a "widespread interest.....of sharing good assessment practices and ideas" (p: 148).

Irons (2008) investigates how one particular AfL practice, that of feedback, can be of benefit to each individual lecturer. He offers a list of actions that may develop as a result of feedback from students and peers. The six actions link to the opportunities outlined above and what Harrison (2005) termed personalisation; ownership; contextual authenticity and recognition of diversity. 'Teachers learn about themselves and the improvement in their practices, in part, as they try to make changes in their own professional activities' (Harrison, 2005:260).

Teachers 'hold themselves responsible ... for any impediment to children's learning' (Marshall and Drummond, 2006:144) but also believe that developing pupil autonomy is at the heart of their teaching (ibid). One of the key elements of AfL is the promotion of pupil autonomy and so the enactment and enhancement of the process and practice of AfL can only be of benefit to lecturers/teachers and in turn influence how their students learn.

2.9   Influences on Student Learning

Thus far, this review of the literature has placed the student at the centre of an AfL environment and culture. This section is concerned with the influences on student learning, how they approach their learning and what teaching-learning environment promotes the approach most sought after.

A product of Entwistle's (2003) Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environment (ETL) project presented a conceptual framework indicating influences on student learning reproduced below. At the centre of this framework is the quality of the learning achieved.

Students come to higher education from many different routes: directly from secondary school, return to education, adult learners, non-direct routes. The experiences that such a diverse cohort brings to the learning environment should not be underestimated. Entwistle et al (2002) cite study habits which have been firmly established elsewhere may be 'inappropriate for higher education' (2002:4). One of the many aims of higher education is to aid the student in becoming an independent and autonomous learner capable of self-regulation, but prior educational experience may have relied heavily on teacher guidance and/or very prescriptive assessment regimes which again are not appropriate in a higher

education setting (Vermunt, 1998). These factors together with the teaching – learning environment from which these experiences were garnered all contribute to the approaches to learning and studying adopted by the individual student. A further contributor is the power of groups and their influence; learning is a socialisation process and students have a huge influence on learning cultures too.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework indicating influences on student learning
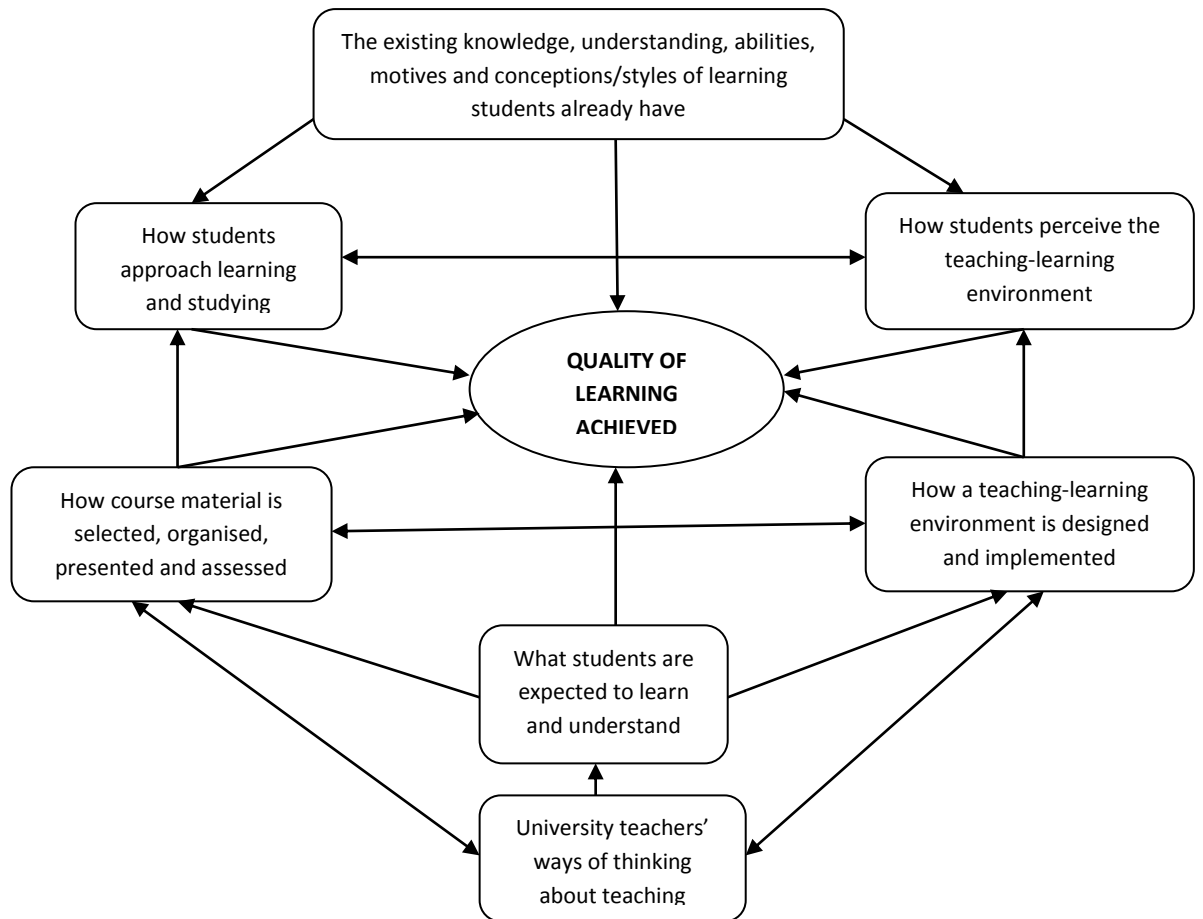
(Entwistle, 2003:1)

2.10　　How students approach learning and studying

According to Marton and Saljo (1997) learning is seen as:

- A quantitative increase in knowledge
- Memorising
- The acquisition of facts, methods, procedures which can be retained for future use
- The abstraction of meaning
- An interpretive process aimed at understanding reality
- Changing as a person.

Few of us working in a higher education context have not heard of these conceptions of learning as illuminated by the work of Marton and Saljo (1997) and Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993).　The first three conceptions are described as primarily reproducing material while four, five and six deal primarily with seeking meaning (Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006).　How students set out to achieve this learning is commonly known as approaches to learning and studying (Biggs, 1996, 2002; Entwistle, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; McCune 2003). According to this research, these approaches to learning and studying are sub-divided into four concepts – deep approach, surface approach, monitoring studying and organisation and effort in studying (Entwistle, 1997; McCune, 2003). Each concept has a number of attributes which give the concept its uniqueness however these concepts do not operate in an all or nothing fashion.

The deep approach is that which is considered desirable and good where the individual tries to understand and take meaning from a given learning moment. The surface approach is adapted when the student does not make sense or meaning of the content, they simply try to memorise it.　The deep/surface debate favours the deep approach with many researchers stating that the surface approach is 'inappropriate and should be discouraged as they are consistently associated with poorer quality learning outcomes' (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999:92).　The discourse on how students learn has a long history, previous categorisations have included 'simple' to 'complex', cognitive style with a field dependent – field

independent continuum and but it is the deep/surface divide that has gained longevity. The literature for this debate suggests that it is the simplicity and universality of the metaphor, that make it so, (Webb, 1997). It is appealing, acceptable, practical and generalisable but not without its challenges.

Table 2: Attributes of Approaches to Learning

Deep approach	**Monitoring studying**
The intention to understand ideas for yourself	Keeping your studies will focused
Making links between topics	Monitoring understanding and addressing any problems
Relating what is learning to the wider world	Monitoring and developing generic skills
Looking for patterns and underlying principles	Monitoring and enhancing the quality of work produced
Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions	
Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically	
Becoming actively interested in the course content	
Surface approach	**Organisation and effort in studying**
The intention to cope minimally with the course requirements	Organising your studies
Studying without reflecting on purpose or strategy	Managing time and effort effectively
Treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge	Maintaining concentration
Memorising without understanding	
Accepting ideas without questioning them	

(McCune, 2003:3)

We as educationalists have been advised to avoid (some put it more strongly, namely despise) the surface approach (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; McMahon, 2006; Saljo, 1979). Yet is the surface approach all bad? If the assessment regime

rewards such behaviour, then adopting the surface approach 'is not an unreasonable choice for students' (McMahon, 2006:35). Webb (1997) employs the Chinese learner to explain when the use of the surface approach is helpful. 'Chinese learners use 'surface' (rote, memorising) strategies, but for 'deep' (understanding) purposes' (Webb, 1997:206). In the quest for understanding, Webb (1997) suggests a 'back and forth movement' between the surface and deep approach to learning. Brooks and Grennon Brooks (1999) also refer to the complexities of learning and that the search for understanding and meaning 'takes a different route for each student' (1999: 21). Bloxham (2007) believes that the approach to learning is 'not a fixed characteristic … but is influenced by their [students'] perception of the learning environment' (ibid: 3). What each student learns is not controlled by the teacher/lecturer; it is how they approach their learning that may be influenced. The research suggests that it is the learning environment that ultimately informs the learning approach adopted by each individual student. The environment which is AfL promotes questioning, feedback, peer- and self-assessment and sharing criteria in other words the active participation of students. The social process that is learning is underpinned by this active participation so suggesting that AfL promotes the deep approach to learning.

2.11   The teaching-learning environment

The idea of a teaching-learning environment is used to describe the various concepts that influence the students learning both within and outside the module/course. Within each module these concepts include course contexts; teaching and assessment content; teachers' beliefs, conceptions of teaching and reflective practice; staff-student relationships and students and student cultures. Entwistle, McCune and Hounsell (2002) present these concepts as a conceptual map which they suggest helps them 'to fix the meaning of the term 'teaching-learning environment'' (p. 8). The project to which this relates was trying to find ways in which lecturers in higher education can enhance the teaching-learning environment which encourages higher quality learning.

Course context includes learning outcomes, course design and organisation, contact hours and workload, and the choices provided for the student. The importance of the assessment strategy for each module/course cannot be over-stated it is seen as one of the main drivers of student learning (Brown & Knight, 1994; Entwistle, 1997; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Scaife & Wellington, 2010). Teaching methods, guidance and the staff-student relationship all play a central role in the teaching-learning environment. How the individual student perceives this environment and context is influenced by his/her own beliefs, norms and values and prior learning experiences, much of which is outside the control of the higher education provider.

As stated, these dimensions form part of the teaching-learning environment, but individually will not lead to higher quality learning, what is required is Biggs (1996) notion of constructive alignment. Constructive alignment refers to how each of the aforementioned concepts works in harmony to provide the environment which encourages high quality learning. Entwistle (2003) argues that constructive alignment does not do justice to the complexities between staff, students and context - both course and institutional. Entwistle also purports that this notion is often viewed from the teachers/lecturers stance without 'taking explicit account of the variety of goals that students may have' (2003:6). Brooks and Grennon Brooks (1999) however place the teacher/lecturer at the heart of constructive alignment in quoting one student's response 'You are like the North Star for the class. You don't tell us where to go, but you help us find our way' (1999:23). Perkins (1999) too argues that constructive alignment is not suitable for all, as this teaching and learning strategy 'can exert high cognitive demands on learners, and not all learners respond well to the challenge' (1999:8), but concludes that such a strategy when used 'in the right place for the right purpose' (1999:8) can lead to better ways of teaching and learning.

The study under consideration is investigating how students perceive two particular teaching-learning environments, an AfL environment and a non-AfL environment and in particular what aspects of these teaching and learning environments are most likely to encourage student engagement with studying and in turn EWL. The descriptive concepts of the AfL environment have been defined as one which:

- 'is rich in formal feedback (e.g. tutor comment; self-assessment systems),
- is rich in informal feedback through dialogic teaching and peer interaction,
- provides opportunities to try out and practice knowledge, skills and understanding,
- has assessment tasks which are authentic or relevant,
- assists students to develop independence and autonomy, and
- has an appropriate balance between formative and summative assessment.'

<div align="right">(McDowell et al., 2011:750)</div>

Similar concepts were put forward by De Corte (1995) which provided ways of creating powerful learning environments. Such an environment allows the student to self-regulate their learning and provides opportunities to improve via the practising of skills and rehearsing subject knowledge prior to being summatively assessed, thereby encouraging higher quality learning.

The factors which contribute to this assessment environment are staff support and module design, engagement with subject matter and peer support. Staff support and module design includes staff guidance, support and feedback, and the clarity of assessment, learning and teaching, which link to two concepts on McCune's (2003) conceptual map – teaching and assessing content and staff-student

relationship. Engagement with subject matter incorporates factors such as understanding and changing views on the subject matter, interest, enjoyment and choice, again linking to two further concepts on McCune's map – course contexts and students and students' culture. The final factor in the AfL environment is peer support.

Earlier in this chapter, the reader was cautioned against using the terms learning culture and learning environment synonymously (Davies and Ecclestone, 2008) but if you map the dimensions of the learning culture as described by Hodkinson et al (2007) with the descriptive concepts of the AfL environment (McDowell et al, 2011) outlined above, what results is a high level of commonality among the factors. The positions, dispositions and actions of tutors and students are fashioned by the formal and informal feedback, in the form of tutor comment, self- and peer-assessments, peer interactions and dialogic teaching, and the trying out and practicing of knowledge and skills. The syllabus and assessment specification is parallel to balancing summative and formative assessment and setting assessment tasks that are authentic and relevant. The relationships between tutor-student and student-student are developed and maintained by the interactions of feedback, peer assessment, trying out and practising skills. There is a perceived notion that all vocational and academic communities promote independent and autonomous learners which is central to the aims of AfL. The final commonality relates to employment opportunities (included in Hodkinson et al, 2007 final dimension). By adopting the AfL environment, students are given opportunities 'to try out and practice knowledge, skills and understanding' (McDowell et al, 2011: 750) and to develop as independent, autonomous learners. It is these qualities that make our graduates employable. McDowell et al (2011) do not include location/resources or management in their concepts of the AfL environment.

Given the overlap between Hodkinson et al (2007)'s dimensions and McDowell et al (2011)'s concepts outlined above, it is understandable why practitioners would and do use the terms learning culture and learning environment synonymously. Irrespective of the choice of terms, the literature has found that the deep approach to learning is more likely when an AfL environment is in place (McDowell et al, 2011). Is this then, EWL?

2.12   Educationally Worthwhile Learning

There is no one definition of what EWL is; its meaning may be explicitly stated or implicitly assumed. Re-reading the articles, papers and books used thus far in this literature review from an EWL view point highlights this lack of a single definition but these authors do put forward a number of ideas which contribute to the discourse. These ideas include understanding/meta-cognitive knowledge; independent learner and the promotion of autonomy; life-wide and life-long learning; and self-assessment/self-regulation. Underpinning the phrase is how the word 'success' is understood. Success is a favourable outcome of an undertaking (The Penguin English Dictionary, 2002), so within an educational context, meeting targets, mastering subject skills and knowledge, intrinsic motivation, gaining confidence are attributes that deem a student to be successful. Rarely is the word 'grade' used to describe the term EWL or indeed success, yet policy makers, politicians, parents, and indeed students themselves, place greater importance on the grade classification, so it is not unusual for EWL to be defined, at least tacitly, in terms of grades and other award classifications.

Ramsden (1988) argues that, in an educational setting, if learning means anything 'it means a movement towards being able to solve unfamiliar problems, towards recognising the power and elegance of concepts in a subject area, and towards

being able to apply what one has learned in class to problems outside class. It means a realisation that 'academic learning is useful for interpreting the world we live in. It means having changed one's understanding' (p: 15). Interpreting this quotation suggests that EWL is an understanding of ideas, processes and phenomena of a given subject and 'being able to respond with awareness to the exigencies of the tasks in which one is engaged' (Boud, 2007:21). Knight (2007) too promotes evaluating and creating ideas as a result of meta-cognitive knowledge of the subject, which are reflected in James and Brown's (2005) categories of outcomes.

Authors that offer the creation of the independent learner and the promotion of learning autonomy as EWL, all cite Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, the gap between what the student now knows and what he/she is capable of knowing with the appropriate support and guidance from the teacher. James and Lewis (2012) suggest that closing this gap 'embraces outcomes associated with creativity, because it provides a description of how knowledge and practices can be transformed' (p: 193). Marshall and Drummond (2006) believe that it is this 'activity based approach to learning' (p: 134) that will promote independent learning. Harrison (2005) too implies that creating learning autonomy is EWL, but cautions 'teachers can only direct and cannot do the learning for the student (p: 259). Yorke (2003) argues that students graduating from higher education institutions need to have 'the ability to operate successfully in the world – be this at work, in voluntary service or generally in the home or community' (p: 491) again implying the notion of learner independence and autonomy as being one of the desirable attributes held by higher education graduates (Falchikov, 2007). Another attribute of graduates is the ability 'to continue learning' when and where required, in a rapidly changing information– and technology- rich environment' (James and Lewis, 2012:190).

Black et al, (2006) suggest that EWL underpins life-long learning which has become a pervading concept in the knowledge economy. The UK's Dearing Report (1997) stated that 'the world of work is in continual change, individuals

will increasingly need to develop new capabilities and to manage their own development and learning throughout life' (p: 12). Taras (2002) explains that if this learning society is to be sustained, higher education providers will need 'to produce confident, independent and autonomous students' (p: 502), but this is hindered/discouraged by the increased focus on grade point averages, standardised testing and testing anxiety (Kvale, 2007). A contradiction exists between assessment strategies that promote life-long learning and one used 'as a control instrument for economic accountability' (Kvale, 2007:69).

Self-assessment is seen by others (Tan, 2007; Dochy et al, 2007) as 'a critical tool for learning beyond university education' (Tan, 2007:114) and should be one of the main aims of higher education. Kvale (2007) cites from an 1852 Oxford University committee stating that examinations should be used to promote 'habits of ... self-instruction, voluntary labour, and self-examination' (p:62). More than 160 years later there is little evidence in the Irish higher education sector of the promotion of such habits.

Pedder et al (2005) in reporting some of the findings of their Learning How to Learn project stated that the aims of the project was to further the understanding of effective learning. Did they use this term as an alternative to EWL? Do these terms mean the same, if indeed a meaning can be attached to both? McMahon (2005) equates effective learning with deep learning. Davies & Ecclestone (2008) and Ecclestone (2010) both discuss cases which show how, under certain conditions, teaching and assessment methods can be 'a springboard to deeper, more meaningful learning' (Ecclestone, 2008:4), but no explanation of that more meaningful learning is offered.

McMahon (2005) too, does not offer an explanation of deep learning, but rather offers seven maxims of practice, one of which suggests that assessment should reward evidence of higher order thinking and learning, concurring with what Ramsden (1988), Boud (2007) and Knight (2007) presented as learning for

understanding and meta-cognitive knowledge. The other maxims include making intended learning process explicit, feedback, and active participation from students (McMahon, 2005). These maxims link to the practices of AfL, namely sharing criteria, feedback, and questioning, thus forming a tentative link between the terms EWL and effective learning. This is further substantiated by the practices of both effective- and assessment for- learning which are closely aligned in the literature.

In light of this supposition and in the context of this study, if I marry Ramsden's assertain that 'academic learning … means having changed one's understanding' (1988:15) with Boud's claim that learning is about 'being able to respond with awareness to the exigencies of the tasks in which one is engage' (2007:21), my understanding of EWL is transformative (Ashwin et al., 2014) insofar as a HE graduate should be in a position to act on his/her initiative, be self-directed, self-governed and, importantly, self-regulated/assessed. These attributes may, according to Boud and Falchikov (2007) be developed by the assessment strategies experienced in higher education.

2.13   Summary

This chapter provides the reader with an insight of claims about the aims and practice of assessment in a higher education setting. Assessment has a dual role, one being the recording and reporting of achievement, the other being the promotion of learning and fulfilling both using the same assessment strategy is not always straight forward. The learning culture within the higher education institute will influence the assessment strategy. Strategies of assessment are commonly termed summative assessment and formative assessment, or assessment of learning and AfL. This thesis is concerned with formative assessment or AfL, the latter term being adopted as it encapsulate the 'spirit' rather than the 'letter' of the practices associated with this assessment strategy (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). The term also allows the researcher to consider the tension of process and practice (Crook, Gross & Dymott, 2006). This literature review illuminated a lack

of research on AfL practices and procedures in the Irish HE context. In order to address this gap my research asks: What are the AfL practices and procedures in place and how are these enacted?

In higher education classrooms, it is the lecturers who are tasked with the implementation of any new initiatives, and this literature review examined how the implementation of AfL practices in their classrooms is undertaken. As with any enactment of new strategies there are barriers and benefits associated with the implementation. The barriers are linked to resources and pedagogy. The claimed benefits include personal development and enhanced teaching practices. The paucity of research on the implementation of AfL practices in the context of this study may be addressed by the following question: How do lecturers perceive AfL?

As already stated, students believe that 'assessment is something done to students, rather than for them, let alone by them' (Scaife and Wellington, 2010:138) and students view themselves 'as outside the assessment process' (Ecclestone & Swann, 1999:383). The approaches students take to learning fall into two categories, deep and surface. It is the deep approach to learning that many authors on assessment and learning consider appropriate to higher education. This approach can be promoted by the teaching and learning environment in any given classroom, with the research indicating that the AfL environment is most effective (McDowell et al, 2011). If this view is accepted how then does assessment influence student learning, in other words: What are the implications of AfL practices for student's learning?

The concept of EWL is then considered. The literature does not provide a definition and its meaning may be implicitly or explicitly stated. The literature reviewed suggests that learning which creates understanding and high order

thinking of the subject content; learner independence and autonomy; promotes life-long learning; and self-assessment is educationally worthwhile or effective. Drawing on Davies and Ecclestone's 2008 notion of formative assessment as a springboard or straitjacket, I put forward my tentative definition of the term, and question: do AfL practices act as a springboard or straitjacket for EWL?

The next chapter sets out the methodology, methods and data analysis I selected in order to address this over-arching question and to explain why I approached my study the way I did.

3.   Methodology and Methods

This chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted, and the methods used to gather data for this study. Some researchers regard methodology as a kind of map, while a method is a set of stages taken to travel between two places on that map, (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). The factors influencing the methodological approach, for example my positionality in relation to this study, will be considered together with the theories underpinning the project and providing a framework for the data gathering and interpretation process. The methods chosen to collect data need to be fit for purpose, namely to address the research question and aims while complying with any ethical protocols relating to the research participants. The chapter is divided into two sections, the first will explain the methodological approach adopted and any ethical issues arising, the second section will consider the methods used to gather data and the challenges they present.

Chapter 1 outlined my research interest in assessment strategies, with particular emphasis on AfL and how it impacts on both student and lecturer. It would be too ambitious to interview all lecturers and observe all students, the reason being twofold, a) the quantity of data from approximately 90 lectures and 1,500 students would be excessive and b) the time required was not possible for a full-time lecturer/part-time EdD candidate. With these limitations in mind I decided to include all third year undergraduate students in my study, some would be surveyed only, others surveyed and observed while a few would be asked to complete the survey instrument, be observed during class and take part in a focus group. Collecting this data using three different methods will aid the validity and authenticity of the findings. Interviews were conducted with lecturers who granted access to their classroom for observation purposes and those that I feel are 'potentially able to provide significant data on the research subject' (Oliver, 2004:129).

3.1   Methodological Approach

3.1.1   Research Process and Design

The research design, questions, methodology and analysis will depend on how the researcher views reality (ontology), relationship between the researcher and the environment (human nature) and how the researcher and participants regard the nature of knowledge (epistemology), not the nature of knowledge per se but whether it is constructed subjectively or objectively. According to Pat Sikes, an individual's ontological approach is described as objective if a person views reality 'as external, independent, given and objectively real' (Sikes, 2004:20). At the opposite ends of a spectrum, reality is viewed 'as socially constructed, subjectively experienced and the result of human thought as expressed through language' (ibid, 2004:20). In broad terms, subjectivist sees reality 'not existing outside oneself' (Holden & Lynch, 2004:6), whereas objectivists believe that reality is 'made up of hard tangible and relatively immutable structures' (ibid, 2004:7). The objectivist is likely to study phenomena that fill a positive criteria rather than human beliefs and interests: in other words, the aim is to make data, research questions and analysis value-free. In contrast, the subjectivist will make a choice based on his/her own beliefs, interests and values, i.e. value laden.

What do I mean by values? Greenbanks' 2003 article focused on how values impact on educational research, describing four types of values: being moral (knowing the right thing to do); competency (the most effective way of doing something); personal (what a person hopes to achieve for themselves) and social (how an individual wishes society to operate including political, educational beliefs). May (2001(b)) presents values as being positive and normative, in other words 'what are' as opposed to 'what ought to be'. In social research, May contends that a researcher must look at culture, history and power when looking at values. Cultures vary and have different values so that what is acceptable in one may not be in another, 'history changes' so that what is considered wrong at one

point in time may be normal as time progresses, and power is 'not evenly distributed between groups', (May, 2001(b)).

As mentioned above, objectivism aims to be value free, insofar as a researcher will be searching for the 'truth' or a concrete depiction of 'reality' and, in doing so, eliminates preconceptions, personal values and judgements. Greenbank (2003) cited a number of authors who argue against this value-neutral notion with the most notable being Eisner (1998) who states: 'The facts never speak for themselves. What we say depends upon the questions we ask'. May (2001(a)) supports this, by stating "...researchers should make their theories, hypotheses or guiding influences explicit and not hide behind the notion that facts can speak for themselves".

In contrast, subjectivism by its nature is value-laden where research can result in different or multiple realities, interpretations and understandings. Researchers with this ontological stance accept the influence of their values rather than depersonalise the research in question. May's 2001(b) article suggests that all research contains values, be they implicit or explicit. This does not render the research invalid but recognising these values 'heightens our awareness of the research process itself and thereby sharpens our insights'. He continues by suggesting that values enter the research process at all stages and gives the following examples:

1. Interests leading to the research
2. Aims, objectives and design of research project
3. Data collection process
4. Interpretation of the data
5. The use made of the research findings.

May advises that with stages one to four above, the researcher must be aware of the values involved, but when one arrives at stage five it is the 'wider influences of values and how they affect research' that becomes apparent. The research findings may have 'unintended consequences' i.e. used for purposes not intended by the researcher. If the researcher has not stated his/her values at the outset, these 'unintended consequences' can be problematic. What these may be for me and my study will be discussed below.

Above, I referred to the ontology spectrum. I will now look at the epistemological spectrum. At one extreme we have positivism, the other interpretive. Positivism is 'based on the rationalistic, empiricist philosophy that originated with Aristotle, Francis Bacon, John Locke, August Comte, and Emmanuel Kant' (Mertens 2005), and 'reflects a deterministic philosophy in which causes probably determine effects or outcomes' (Creswell, 2003). According to Mertens (2005), 'the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world, … there is a method for studying the social world that is value free, and … explanations of a causal nature can be provided'. Arguing against this notion is Gerhardt (2004) who questions the assumption that data participants and context do not change or evolve. Positivist will develop hypotheses (to prove or disprove), collect data using measurements and observations and analyses that data via quantitative analytic methods. Positivist research is 'commonly aligned with quantitative methods of data collection and analysis', (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006). Methodologies/research tactics favoured by positivists include laboratory experiments, large-scale surveys, simulation modelling, forecasting research etc.

Interpretivist researchers aim to understand 'the world of human experience' and tend to rely on the 'participants' views of the situation being studied', (Creswell 2007). With this paradigm the researcher is likely to recognise the influence of their own background and experiences (in other words, values) on the research process (Creswell, 2007). Researchers working under this paradigm are likely to

employ qualitative methodologies. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research is any research that produces results without using statistical procedures or other measurement techniques. Qualitative researchers will usually begin with observations, followed by collecting data that will support, contradict or lead in other directions but 'must often stop short of generalising outside the sample studies' (Gerhardt, 2004:10). However, Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) suggest that although interpretivists favour qualitative methodologies, a mixed method (using both qualitative and quantitative) approach 'effectively deepens the description'. Research tactics favoured by subjectivists include phenomenology, action research, ethnographic, focus groups, participant-observer and game or role playing.

If we are to believe that the quantitative paradigm is value-free, then bias and judgements are not relevant. However if we look at the many procedures under the quantitative label, they lend themselves to 'dual utilisation' (Holden et al 2004). In other words, the researcher can use a research strategy whatever his/her epistemological position. Gerhardt (2004) supports this argument saying that where qualitative research methods are supplemented with quantitative methods (or vice versa) the outcomes of the research will 'reveal different learnings' (ibid, 2004: 9). O'Leary (2010) concurs when discussing the use of the case study methodology, which she says 'allows researchers to burst through the quantitative/qualitative divide' (p: 175).

Does the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher matter? I would argue that there is no right or wrong stance. What is important is for the researcher to apply methods that suit the question/problem rather than methods that suit one's ontological and epistemological position (Holden et al 2004). My investigation into the student and lecturer perspectives of AfL is bridging the gap between research and practice, researcher and practitioner, and as Alan Carter (2012) suggests, in his doctoral thesis about AfL in a college engineering

programme, a new paradigm, requiring new modes of thinking is needed in educational research. Until such a paradigm is available, a philosophical review allows the researcher to consider other possibilities available to address his or her particular question and will also enhance the researcher's confidence in their chosen methodology and, in turn, their results.

A good research question is critical to the research process (O'Leary 2010) as it provides boundaries, direction, definitions and a frame of reference. Without "clear articulation of your question, you are really travelling blind" (O'Leary, 2010:47). That clear articulation will come from an understanding of the researchers' positionality. This positionality

needs to be stated explicitly at an early stage of the research design, as that position will influence methodologies, procedures and on how data is interpreted. Also, by stating one's position explicitly at the outset, the author is setting signposts for the reader.

My background is that of an accountant and traditionally such a background would imply an objective view of reality and the obtaining the truth would involve quantifiable methods, locating myself broadly in the objectivist position (Holden et al 2004). This is not always the case, as at the most basic level every accountant needs the insight (interests, beliefs, perceptions) of the client (person) to obtain the relevant necessary information as it exists at a point in time, finding myself in the subjectivist position (ibid). With this in mind, I am of the view that researchers are required to be open to selecting methodologies and procedures that are suitable to address their research question, as 'inappropriate matching of methodology and the research problem may result in questionable results' (ibid: 14).

According to O'Leary (2005) framing the research question is an "essential starting point for the research journey" (ibid: 32), and sets out a step by step process to aid question development. These steps involve addressing issues on topic, context, goal, nature of the question and relationship. Answering these should lead to a question(s) that is likely to need clarification, narrowing etc. Once the researcher is happy with the question, O'Leary (2005, 2010) puts forward a checklist to ascertain if the question is "doable" (2010:50) and suggests that if the researcher is "uncomfortable with the answers" (2005:35) the question may need adjustment.

The question for this study is Do AfL practices act as a Springboard or Straitjacket for EWL? This question arises from my 18 years of teaching experience in a higher education: it is therefore a practical question through which I want to examine aspects of assessment practices, which according to the literature are at the heart of any education system influencing both lecturers and students. As a student and during the early stages of my lecturing career, I was of the belief that assessment was something done to the student, concurring with the findings of Scaife and Wellington (2010). Worthwhile learning was not a term in my vocabulary. Teaching, learning and assessment were three very different and separate elements of any course/programme – I did the teaching, they (the students) did the learning, assessment was to ascertain if they had done enough learning to pass the test. I began to question my beliefs when taking a group for an accounting module, the third in a series of three and the students, all of whom had passed the pre-requisite module, did not understand the basics of the module. When I questioned the group on this, the students informed me that they 'crammed' for exams and once over that information was all but forgotten. This changed my views of the purposes of assessment and of the benefits of learning at, or indeed attending, higher education institutions. During this research process and attendance at the EdD weekends has led me to question and change my own assessment practices.

My philosophical stance is a socially constructivist one where I am collecting subjective accounts and perceptions that explain how lecturers and students experience assessment 'in their world' in order to improve practice and pedagogy for both students and lecturers in the HE setting while being conscious that I will:

> '…seek the truth whilst knowing that conclusions would always remain provisional … without regarding them as beyond criticism or improvement.' (Pring, 2004:116)

A case study methodology will allow me to gather data using multiple and varied methods, as Sikes (2004) informs her readers 'in educational research … multiple perspectives and interpretations are almost inevitable' (ibid: 15).

3.1.2   Case Study

The "*essence* of good science" (Thomas, 2011:23) is looking at something in depth from many different angles. The use of a case study methodology allows for such investigation. A case study is defined as:

> 'A method of studying elements of the social through comprehensive description and analysis of a single situation or case, e.g. a detailed study of an individual, setting, group, episode, or event' (O'Leary, 2010:174)

This definition is easily understood. Other definitions use 'unit', 'phenomena' and 'context', to explain what the case study is with Yin (2002) putting it simply 'case study as a research strategy comprises an all-encompassing method – covering the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis' (ibid: 14). Case studies are not a method rather a focus on the 'what' is to be studied. The focus will be on one instance, looked at in detail and from many angles (Skate, 2005; Wellington, 2000; Thomas, 2011; Denscombe, 2003). Thomas (2011) stresses the 'particular' rather than the general and by

doing so researchers will 'get closer to the why and the how' (ibid: 4) of something happening.

Literature describes different types of case studies – exploratory, descriptive and explanatory Yin (2002), intrinsic and instrumental (Stake, 2005), and historical-organisational, observational and the life history (Bogden & Biklen, 1982, as cited in Wellington, 2000). Thomas (2011) describes cases as containers, as situation and as argument. Many of these types overlap and rather than concentrating on the type of case study being undertaken, it is more important for the researcher to build a picture - a three dimensional picture (Thomas, 2011) - of the case which will capture 'the texture of reality' (Stenhouse, 1979 as cited in Wellington, 2000:94).

When should the case study method be employed? Yin (2002) asserts that case study methodology should be used when 'a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control' (ibid: 9). Gillham (2000) supports the use of case study when you 'want to understand people in real life … in their context and in the way they operate' (ibid: 11) using multiple sources of evidence. What this suggests is that where the researcher wants to investigate one or a small number of units, collecting and analysing data about "a large number of features of each case", when studying "naturally occurring cases where the aim is not to control variables", quantification of that data "is not a priority", using many different "methods and sources of data" while aiming to "look at relationships and processes" (Thomas, 2011:10).

For my study, the topic under investigation is 'ascertaining AfL practices and perceptions'. The unit under investigation is the Business School of an Institute of Technology. The data to collect will include the what, why, how and when of

AfL methods, thus inquiring about large numbers of features. I am not seeking to control or intervene at any point in the data collection process. Being a social constructivist, the knowledge will be obtained via social interactions not scientific principles therefore I am not seeking to produce replicable results but aim to produce generalisable findings based on analysis of the data 'which are founded on a critical literature review and omnipresent reflexivity' (Carter, 2012:69). In light of these points, I feel justified in using a case study approach while being aware of the advantages and more importantly the disadvantages of this method as they pertain to this research project.

3.2   The Case Study Debate

The case study approach is not without its strengths and weaknesses. Authors have offered lists and tables of advantages and disadvantages of using this approach to research (Wellington, 2000; Thomas, 2011; Denscombe, 2003; Donmoyer, 2002). The advantages include terms such as illustrative, insightful, accessible, meta-evaluation and uniqueness. O'Leary (2010) believes that case studies allow researchers 'to bust through the quantitative/qualitative divide … strategies for data collection could easily include both survey research and in-depth interviewing' (ibid: 175)

It is the weaknesses/disadvantages that need the researchers' attention. Generalisability, validity and sampling are the commonly cited weaknesses of the case study methodology. Yin (2002) adds time, that they take too long, as a further weakness. Generalisation, or lack thereof, is seen as one of the main weaknesses of the case study approach to qualitative research. The case study concentrates on one instance and does not purport to be generalisable it is the use made/interpretation of the findings that are relevant (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2002; Hammersley and Gomm, 2002). Eisner (1998) too had a similar view of generalising from a case study, 'generalising can be regarded not only as going beyond the information given, but also as transferring what has been learned from

one situation or task to another … if each new situation required a wholly new repertoire, it is unlikely that humans could survive' (ibid: 198). The "onus rests upon the reader" (Wellington 2000: 99), but the researcher must "select and present the evidence fairly" (Wellington 2000:99). Again Eisner (1998) stated that 'connections have to be built by readers, who must make generalisations by analogy and extrapolation, not by a watertight logic applied to a common language. (ibid: 211), and thereby they stray into more objectivist/positivist ideas about 'reality' linking to what Wellington et al, (2005) suggest that a researchers' philosophical positioning is rarely clear-cut, tends to lie on a continuum, and can sometimes be contradictory' (ibid: 99).

The issue of sampling is closely linked to generalising. The unit under investigation is a single case, but is investigated using multiple sources of evidence thus allowing the collection of sufficient data 'to facilitate the researcher to explore and interpret significant aspects of a case' (Bassey, 1999:47). Eisner (1998) describes the data collection strategies adopted for the case study as a 'fine meal … each course connects with and compliments the others' (ibid: 211).

'The purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case' (Stake, 2005:460). That report must be credible, with the measure of credibility being validity and reliability. These measures are discussed below. Acknowledging these weaknesses and taking note of Wellington's (2000) cautionary note, "a case study is difficult to do well so the researcher contemplating a case study should be experienced in all the requisite separate methods. He or she should have a deep understanding of the relevant literature, be a good question-asker, listener and observer, be adaptable, flexible and have an inquiring and unbiased mind" (ibid: 100), the strengths of the case study approach allows me to gather rich, thick data which illuminates the unit under study.

3.3   Plan for the Case Study

The object under investigation is the learning environment that helps or hinders AfL bounded within an Irish Higher Education institute, my workplace. Having an object and placing it in a context is what makes this study a 'case study'. The flexible approach to the data collection phase, afforded by the case study approach, was demanded by the research questions as outlined in the introductory section of this chapter. I aim to gain insight into how people behave, feel, think, i.e. the things that contribute to the creation and shaping of a learning culture, and these Gillham (2000) asserts can only be understood by getting 'to know their world and what they are trying to do in it', (ibid: 11). With this in mind, participants for the study were considered. The participants are all based in the Business School but what makes this a case is the focus being placed on their practices and perceptions of AfL and the interaction of these in particular learning cultures. Both the student and lecturer view was required to get an overall picture – I am looking for that three-dimensional picture.

Given the large cohort of students, the obvious method of ascertaining their views on AfL was via a survey instrument. O'Leary (2010) did outline how the use of the case study allowed researchers to break through the quantitative/qualitative divide. This instrument covered factors relating to influences on student learning – approaches to learning; teaching, assessment and learning environment. Observing students during class time will further my understanding and deepen the knowledge gain through the survey.

The lecturers participating in the study were asked their views on issues including meaning and practice of AfL, the benefits and barriers of implementation and how they understand the term EWL. The involvement of the students and lecturers should provide me with the evidence I need to enable the reader 'to smell human breath and hear the sound of voices' (Thomas, 2011:7).

3.4   Ethical Issues

This investigation was conducted within my own workplace and so the concept of insider/outsider raised a number of concerns. Hellawell (2006) informs readers that the traditional view of researcher who 'go native' was negative as it may 'pollute their objectivity' (ibid: 485). Hockey (1993) asserts that it is a central feature of educational research and 'may potentially influence the whole research process – site selection, method of sampling, documentary analysis, observation techniques, and the way meaning is constructed from the field data' (ibid: 200). The accepted definition given by Merton (1972, cited in Mercer, 2007; Hellawell, 2006; Hockey, 1993), states 'insiders are the member of specified groups and collectives or occupants of specified social statuses. Outsiders are the non-members' (Mercer, 2007:3). Insider research was first put forward by Vygotsky (1962, as cited in Costley et al 2010) calling it "social situatedness" whereby data is influenced not only by social and cultural aspects but also context, thereby suggesting that the position of the insider researcher is not unproblematic.

The literature on insider research in educational context is not extensive, which given the number of institutions offering Doctorate in Education programmes is surprising (Mercer, 2007). Hockey (1993) and Mercer (2007) both supply a list of the pros and cons of emic (inside/native) research, Davis (2005) offers the advantages and disadvantages. The use of the terms pros/cons and advantages/disadvantages imply a dichotomy, an either/or position. However, I would argue that this is not the case. The concept of insider/outsider should be viewed as a continuum where 'the two positions are inclined to overlap and are frequently in a continual state of flux' (Davis, 2005:8).   Hammersley (1993) concurs in that by taking the continuum view, the researcher is more likely to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of both.

Caution is advised as researching within one's own institution can blur the lines of the work-life balance (Mercer, 2007; Costley et al, 2010). This project was

completed within a 24 month timeframe and so the challenge to keep the research separate from the 'rest of life' was not an issue as I, family and friends knew that this would be the case from the outset.

Insider researchers have their own knowledge of a particular issue but also have access to others (peers) who can enhance that knowledge. Interviewing/observing one's own peers raises a number of concerns. Hockey (1993) names these concerns as personal hostility; status differences; peer assessment; discipline hostility; confidentiality; filtering process; and intimate knowledge. For me, addressing each of these was in itself a self-reflexive process. I have worked within the research site for the past eighteen years, shared office space with a number of different characters – it is only since my first year of this EdD programme that I have had the luxury of my own office – and thankfully I am of the belief that there is very little personal hostility among my colleagues. Similarly, there is no status difference among colleagues within the Business school: an open door policy is very much in operation among management, lecturers and administration.

Confidentiality is maintained by means of not disclosing the names of those participating in the lecturer observations and interviews in the final report. Discipline hostility in the form of friendly banter does exist, such as hard/soft modules but only in terms of comments such as 'oh you accountants can only see black or white'. Peer assessment, participants and I had a fear of being judged by each other, but that fear faded as the observation/interview progressed. The two concerns that required a greater reflection are the filtering process and intimate knowledge. The filtering process Hockey (1993) suggests is whereby participants give responses which are 'idealised versions of reality rather than those of everyday life' (ibid: 213). To negate this occurrence, a data collection method of observing classroom practice prior to interviewing individual lecturers (Swann & Brown, 1997) was employed. In doing so I want to observe the lecturer in

practice in order to compare this with his/her perception of what he/she has done, thus depicting 'everyday life' (Hockey, 1993: 213).

Finally, intimate knowledge was perhaps the biggest concern. A number of my colleagues are close friends – we socialise together - many knew of my research topic and this familiarity might have led to 'obvious' questions not being asked, shared experiences not raised and many things being taken for granted (Mercer, 2007). These may have impacted on the data collection, analysis and interpretation had they not been acknowledged from the outset. This acknowledgement, together with a professional and respectful approach to my peers, should help sustain me in my 'practice community' (Costley et al, 2010:5), which is small, integrated and closely-knit.

Power, access, familiarity and ethics have been included in many articles as being the challenges to insider research (Costley et al, 2010; Chavez, 2008; Mercer, 2007; Platt, 1981). Like Mercer (2007) I am 'just' a faculty member' (ibid: 14). The element of power will not have a major impact on collecting data from my peers, as the researcher and the participants are on the same "rung of the ladder" (Mercer 2007:14). However, when dealing with the students, care must be taken to control the perceived power imbalance between lecturer and student so as not to influence the data collected. The student survey was distributed by me to students who I did not lecture or correct their assessments, so the 'power' exerted over them was … none. At the observation sessions I sat at the side of the classroom, being a non-participant, and blended into the room so no 'power' was exerted. I accept that I, as owner of my research, had power over topic, questions and to some extent time and place, although the time and place was agreed upon by all parties. The pilot study for the survey instrument did highlight a number of observations from students (discussed below) and so I am confident that this investigation was completed without the perceived 'power' of my lecturer status coming to play.

Being an insider, access to the research site can be more easily granted, involves less travel, data collection is less time-consuming and the researcher has greater flexibility when arranging interview timing. That is the theory, in practice however obtaining access to classrooms did provide a number of obstacles such as short module times, students on flexible semester, available 'slots' clashing with my timetable to mention but a few, which resonate with the obstacles highlighted by Chavez (2008). The concerns discussed above in relation to researching peers are relevant here.

Insider researchers have an advantage of knowing (if not always understanding) the social settings within the organisation. Lack of impartiality and problems associated with fresh and objective views of data are draw backs of familiarity (Hockey, 1993; Davis, 2005; Mercer, 2007; Costley et al, 2010). The familiarity leads to a number of dilemmas, 'everybody knows what she wants us to say' (Mercer, 2007:7) leading to informant bias and the notion of 'idealised versions of reality' as discussed above; common experiences may hinder the interpretation; and 'nowhere to hide' (ibid: 11) – what and how much do we tell participants of the study before and after they participate. Mercer (2007) suggests that only an outsider can achieve an objective account as they have the necessary 'distance and detachment' (ibid; 5) to do so.

Finally, the ethics of conducting insider researcher has many implications. As an insider, I must comply not only with the code of practice of the University of Sheffield (School of Education) but also within my own work institution. The ethical issues include participant anonymity, articulating an informed perspective, ownership of the research, conforming to local rules and practices, (Costley et al, 2010). Ethical clearance for this was obtained from both institutions in December 2013 and January 2014, thus allowing me to start my data collection.

3.5   Sample Selection

The first step was surveying the students followed by classroom observation. The second phase involved the lecturers, and as outlined below, their classroom practices were first observed and then each lecturer was interviewed.   The literature informs us of two different types of sampling in the social sciences, probability and purposive, Table 3 below sets out the comparisons between both. Probability sampling is primarily used in quantitative studies where the participants are randomly selected from an entire population (Teddlie & Lu, 2007). My student population was chosen following the pilot study when it was decided that students in the third year of their programme would be suitable candidates as they have the necessary experience of both AfL and non-AfL modules, thus using purposive sampling techniques.

Purposive sampling may be defined as 'selecting units (e.g. individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions' (ibid, 2007:77), or 'simply put, the researcher decided what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience' (Tongco, 2007:147). Tongco (2007) details the steps involved in purposive sampling; decide on the research problem; determine the type of information needed; define the qualities the informants should or should not have; find your informants based on these qualities; use appropriate data collection techniques; and finally 'remember that purposive sampling is an inherently biased method' (ibid: 151). These steps were not only followed for the survey participants, but also those classes selected for student observations. Focus groups members were invited from these observed students.

Table 3

Comparisons Between Purposive and Probability Sampling Techniques

Dimension Contrast	Purposive Sampling	Probability Sampling
Other Names	Purposive sampling Nonprobability sampling Qualitative sampling	Scientific sampling Randon sampling Quantitative sampling
Overall purpose of sampling	Designed to generate a sample that will address research questions	Designed to generate a sample that will address research questions
Issue of generalizability	Sometimes seeks a form of generalisability (transferability)	Seeks a form of generalisability (external validity)
Rationale for selecting cases/units	To address specific purposes related to research questions The researcher selects cases she or he can learn the most from	The researcher selects cases that are collectively representative of the population
Sample size	Typically small	Large enough to establish representativeness
Depth/breadth of information per case/unit	Focus on depth of information generated by the cases	Focus on breadth of information generated by the sampling units
When the sample is selected	Before the study begins, during the study, or both	Before the study begins
How selection is made	Utilizes expert judgement	Often based on application of mathematical formulas
Sampling frame	Informal sampling frame somewhat larger than sample	Formal sampling frame typically much larger than sample
Form of data generated	Focus on narrative data Numeric data can also be generated	Focus on numeric data Narrative data can also be generated

Teddlie & Yu, 2007:84

The choice of lecturer was more difficult. I was aware of my own preconceived notions of who might give me the responses I was hoping to gain, so to avoid my biased selection of potential participants I adopted a purposive random approach to selecting my sample. To maintain consistency, I only considered those lecturers who delivered third year modules. I divided these into two groups, one comprised of lecturers whose modules, on paper, would be AfL orientated, the other those that are non-AfL orientated. The names of lecturers in each group were placed in a hat (literally) and I asked two colleagues to select three names

from each. I approached each of these individuals and asked them to participate in my study – allowing me to observe their classroom practice and then to be interviewed. Thankfully all agreed.

3.6   Data Collection Methods

3.6.1   Survey

A key element of this study is the student response to AfL. In order to gather data from a large number of students, the employment of a survey instrument was deemed appropriate. I used what O'Leary (2010) referred to as a cross-sectional survey as my aim is to represent a 'target population and generalise findings back to that population' (O'Leary, 2010:181). Conducting a literature review on AfL revealed an existing survey instrument, the AfLQ developed by McDowell and colleagues at the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Northumbria University (2011).

Table 4: Research Activities and Timescale

Group	BBS 3	BBUS 3	BAA 3	BA Mkt 3	Timescale
	No. Participating	No. Participating	No. Participating	No. Participating	
Activity					
Negotiations for access					February-2014
Access Granted					February-2014
Distribution of Survey	56	38	48	24	March-2014
Classroom Observation		38			April-May 2014
Focus Group		8			May-2014
Lecturer Interviews	2	2	2		September-October 2014

My study is investigating a similar aspect exploring the student response to AfL, so in the words of O'Leary (2010:184) I 'don't need to reinvent the wheel'. Permission from the authors was sought, granted and the questionnaire adopted for my study. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) consists of two sections, section 1 – approaches to learning and studying, and section 2 – experiences of teaching and learning on this module. Section one contains 20 items, section 2 contains 27 items. Both sections use a five-point Likert response scale, for further discussion, see below. Participants are required to complete the survey instrument twice, once for a non-AfL module and again for an AfL module.

A pilot study was deemed necessary so as to identify if the survey instrument in its original form is appropriate to address my research question and to ascertain if the participants selected are suitable and also to establish the timing of the distribution of the survey instrument. The students selected to participate in the pilot study are third year Bachelor of Business (BBS) Honours degree students, specialising in accounting. The BBS degree is the flagship course of the School of Business and is a full-time four year honours degree programme. This programme has been in existence for over twenty-five years and attracts over 200 students each year. It offers students two years of general business with five specialist streams in the last two years of the course – Accounting, Economics and Finance, Human Resources Management, Management and Marketing. The aim of the programme and overall policy of the Business School is to provide the educational opportunities for the students that will provide them with the knowledge and skills that are required and valued in the business environment (BBS Course Review, 2004).

The modules under review at the pilot stage were taxation (non-AfL) and business strategy (AfL). The taxation module is one where the assessment, learning and teaching is conducted in a traditional manner with an end of semester examination. The business strategy module differs insofar as the assessment,

learning and teaching fits into what can be described as an environment which is rich in formal and informal feedback, provides opportunities for students to test out new ideas and concepts, develops independence and learning autonomy. So while the students were all enrolled on the one programme two very contrasting modules were included in the pilot study phase of this research.

The resulting findings corresponded with that of the McDowell et al (2011) study in the main and so I was confident of using the instrument in the main study. The instrument itself was not adapted. However, in light of the observations made during the data collection phase the following points were incorporated into the main study. Participants would be third year Business School students involved in both perceived AfL and non-AfL modules; the survey instrument would be distributed during week 9 of a twelve week semester, thus allowing for the students to have participated in the module for a reasonable period prior to commenting on the said module; when distributing the survey instrument, the researcher will explicitly state that it is the module, not the lecturer that is being considered; and finally during weeks ten, eleven and twelve, the researcher will observe one group of students during class, one hour for an AfL module and one for a non-AfL module.

An issue not highlighted by the pilot study, but may be during the data collection stage is the use of the five-point Likert scale with the middle or midpoint category. According to Kulas and Stachowski (2009) respondents select this category 'when (1) they have no attitude or opinion, (2) they are 'balanced' in terms of evaluation, or (3) they have not clearly defined their attitude or opinion' (p: 489). Others cite indifference and lack of caring (Nowlis et al, 2002); unwillingness to answer a personal question (Tourangeau et al 1997) or lack of understanding/clarity (Goldberg, 1981). However, Kulas and Stachowski concluded their study by stating that 'respondents prefer to have a middle option

provided when they complete questionnaires' (ibid 2009:493), but as suggested above, interpreting this mid-point category is far from straight forward.

Research (Matell & Jacoby, 1972; Garland, 1991; Hartley, 2013) suggests that as the number of scale points increases the use of the mid-point decreases, but Worcester & Burns (1975) and Garland (1991) discuss how the elimination of the mid-point category forces the respondent to make a choice.   This debate is ongoing but the common recommendation is that the use or not of the 'neutral' position on the Likert scale is context specific (Garland, 1991; Kulas & Stachowski, 2009). In light of this debate and given that this study is using an existing survey instrument with a five point Likert scale, the influence on the data of the mid-point category will be evidenced at the analysis and discussion phase of this project.

A total of 166 questionnaires were completed.

The survey instrument was distributed in April 2014. Access to students was granted by individual lecturers. I explained to each group what I was investigating and gave each potential participant an information sheet. Once this was read, consent forms were given and those who did not want to participate were asked to leave the room. To my surprise, no student failed to complete the consent form, giving me an initial response rate of 100%. The questionnaire was then distributed. Once completed, the form was handed back to me at which point a unique identification code was attached. This code only identifies to me the class and module to which it relates. Neither I nor anyone else would be able to identify what student completed a particular questionnaire. When this method of data collection was complete, the observation phase began.

3.6.2 Observation

Yin (2009) informs readers that one of the common data collection methods of the case study methodology is that of observation. Observation is defined as 'the circumstances of being in or around an on-going social setting for the purpose of making a qualitative analysis of that setting' (Lofland, 1971:93). For this study, observation will take place on two fronts, firstly students will be observe in their classroom as a means of supplementing or checking on the data collected in surveys (Foster, 1996). Secondly, how lecturers implement AfL will be observed prior to interview as this will identify the pertinent questions and issues to discuss with my interviewees. In both instances the research will see for herself how the classroom practices at the centre of this study are enacted and may illuminate any gulf which exists between what people say they do and what they actually do.

Observation is an indirect data collection method and exists regardless of a researcher's probing, the researcher just needs to gather and analyse existing data, (O'Leary, 2010). Vinten, (1994) cautions that the act of observing is not a simple task but is 'a highly skilled activity for which an extensive background knowledge and understanding is required', (ibid: 30). Gillham (2000) too states that observing is an activity that requires discipline and concentration, as what the researcher is trying to do is 'to make the familiar strange' (Cotton et al 2010: 464; Foster, 1996; May, 2001).

Observational studies are not common in quantitative studies, but are seen as fundamental to qualitative research (Silverman, 2011). The advantages of observing include the researcher seeing for herself what is actually happening in the real world (O'Leary, 2010; Yin, 2009); as mentioned above, it is a direct method of data collection (Gillham, 2000); and allows for a 'fuller and more accurate insight into situations than would otherwise be possible' (Vinten, 1994) what Cotton et al (2010) describe as giving a 'thick description' (p: 463). Mertens (2010) describes this thick description as an 'extensive and careful description of the time, place, context and culture' (ibid: 259), which will enable the readers of

the research to make judgements about the transferability of the findings to their own context.

Where advantages exist, so too do pitfalls. The literature offers reactivity as being the most common of these (Yin, 2009; Foster, 1996; Cotton et al, 2010; Vinten, 1994). Reactivity is how the behaviour of the observed is influenced by the act of observation, either consciously or unconsciously the normal behaviour is likely to change. Another associated pitfall is that of analysing the data – observations are interpreted by the researcher which are subjective and can be biased, which lead to problems of validity and reliability, (see below for further discussion). Time and costs are also highlighted as pitfalls to this data collection approach – there is a tendency to collect large quantities data, Cotton et al (2010) posit that one hour of observation requires 4 – 6 hours transcription.

For the purpose of this study, I suggest that the advantages outweigh the pitfalls and so an overt non-participatory observer role is adopted for both instances of observation. This role allows the researcher to inform participants of the topic under investigation and that they are being observed. I will not engage in classroom activities but will sit in the corner of the classroom watching what people do and listening to what they say (Gillham, 2000), what Silverman (2011) refers to as the 'naturalist model', characterised by: getting inside social reality; understanding 'meanings'; asking 'what is going on?', and field notes as snapshots of the field. An unstructured technique is used so that all observations can be recorded and at a later stage searched for emerging themes/patterns (O'Leary, 2010).

The students participating in this study are observed once the survey instrument is distributed and completed. The risks associated with the survey method of data collection – selectivity, memory limitations, post-hoc rationalisation and

stereotyping – should be reduced by using the 'observational methods in order to see, first-hand the kinds of interactions which take place in a class' (Cotton et al, 2010:465). Two cohorts are selected, one group in an AfL environment, the second group in a non-AfL environment. Each group was observed for one hour/class period each week for three weeks thus giving six hours of student classroom data. Lecturers participating in the study were observed prior to interview thus allowing 'a shared foci for the teacher and researcher, about which the teacher could talk' (Swann & Brown, 1997:100). According to Swann and Brown, this discourages teachers 'from presenting the researcher with idealized accounts of their teaching and generalisations not linked directly to practice' (ibid: 101).

I acknowledge that there are limitations in gathering data from only two classrooms and two lecturers, but as each situation is observed three times, this should allow for an in-depth view of what happens in each environment. I am not aiming to generalise from this case study or from this particular data collection method but as discussed above it is the careful and systematic interpretation of the findings that are relevant (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2002; Hammersley and Gomm, 2002). The data gathered from these observations are not stand alone and should, as Eisner (1998) stated, and I quoted above, 'compliment the others' (ibid: 211).

3.6.3   Focus Groups

'Focus groups are a deceptively simple method which usually involves recruiting a small group of people who usually share a particular characteristic and encouraging an informal group discussion 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues' (Silverman, 2011:227).

In common with much social science research, the focus group in this study was employed 'to clarify, extend or qualify findings produced by other methods' (Silverman, 2011:210). Defined as 'a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher' (Morgan, 2004:263), this data collection method is as popular as the interview in qualitative research (Wilkinson, 2011). Focus groups, rather than group interviews, allow participants to express their views on the topic while being prompted by the views of others (Greenbaum, 2000; Morgan, 2004; O'Leary, 2010).

This 'group effect' (Morgan, 2004:272) is considered the greatest strength of focus groups. It allows participants to interact with each other in an informal setting where an open discussion is encouraged. However, if not facilitated or directed effectively this group think may be a weakness of this data collection method.

The role of the facilitator/moderator is to direct the discussion, encourage and ensure that all participants are involved (Greenbaum, 2000; Silverman, 2011) and not allow one or two members to dominate the interaction, while remaining non-directive in the process (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

For the students, the shared characteristic (Silverman, 2011) in the context of this study is that they are all studying the same modules on a given programme. The number of focus group members is 8, the literature recommends between four and twelve participants (Greenbaum, 2000; Morgan, 2004; O'Leary, 2010). This same literature also recommends between 90 and 120 minutes for each session and given that the participants need to concentrate for that period of time, this may be challenging for some.

These challenges, the group effect, dominant voice, role of facilitator/moderator will only hinder the interactions between participants if not managed effectively.

To do so, I took advice from Kitzinger (1994) who informed her readers that focus group sessions should be 'conducted in a relaxed fashion with minimal interventions from the facilitator – at least at first' (p:106). However, in order to maximise the interaction and in turn the data gathered, the facilitator may need to urge debate, challenge taken for granted assumptions and encourage discussion of 'inconsistencies both between participants and within their own thinking' (ibid: 106)

A focus group for my lecturer participants was considered, but in light of my insider knowledge of the personalities, who lecture to the third year students, I believe that one or two individuals would dominate the conversations, so not allowing for all voices to be heard/opinions expressed. Furthermore, as the Business school under investigation has less than 90 academic staff, I worried that some participants may not share honest opinions as they may be subjected to criticism from other colleagues. For these reasons using interviews to collecting data from these participants was deemed the most appropriate method for this study.

3.6.4   Interview

Researchers have described interviews as a special form of conversation (Denscombe, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; May, 2001). This form of conversation will be used to explore issues, opinions and experiences raised during the observation sessions in more depth. The advantage in doing so is the researcher can first identify a range of perspectives and experiences and, selecting from these areas, confirm and clarify, or otherwise where required. The interview should draw attention to commonalities and differences in what has been observed and what individuals actually say they do.

Interviewing has being defined as "a method of data collection that involves researchers seeking open-ended answers related to a number of questions, topic areas, or themes" (O'Leary, 2010:194). The data collected must be research relevant, valid and reliable. Literature informs readers of the many different forms of interview for example formal and informal, structured, semi-structured, unstructured, one-to-one and group (May, 2001; O'Leary, 2010; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). The topic under investigation will determine the type of interview used. No interview type is considered better than the other (May, 2001; Silverman, 2011).

For this research project, informal, semi-structured interviews were conducted once the observation process was completed. Informal is appropriate because the participants are work colleagues/students of the researcher and interviewer and interviewees should be comfortable with each other, and the purpose of the research. A word of caution must be added here, being an insider familiarity may lead 'to thicker descriptions or greater verisimilitude' (Mercer, 2007: 6), but what needs to be achieved is to make what is familiar strange (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Mercer, 2007; O'Leary, 2010) so as to avoid missing key issues and making easy, comfortable assumptions and not challenging preconceptions. As stated, the research participants were chosen from two departments within the Business School, namely Department of Management and Organisation and the Department of Accounting and Economics and lectured to third year undergraduate students. Semi-structured as the interviews were seeking to clarify and explain issues that arose during the classroom observations.

Data collection via interviewing does present a number of problems. Interviews, as stated, are special forms of conversation and as such are a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding or misdirection (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Rapley argues against interviews being conversations and suggests they are

'conversation*al* but you, as the interviewer, do have some level of control' (2007:26).

Interviews are used in 90% of all social science investigations (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Silverman, 2011), so the potential problems must be outweighed by the opportunities presented by this data collection method.   Many authors (May, 2001; Denscombe, 2003; O'Leary, 2010; Silverman, 2011) have produced lists of the advantages or opportunities of interviewing as a data collection method. These lists include developing rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewee; provides rich, in-depth qualitative data; allows for non-verbal as well as verbal data; flexible enough to allow the researcher to explore issues as they arise; and are structured enough to generate standardized, quantifiable data.

In order to provide the rich data required, interviews need to be participatory, not only for the interviewee, but also the interviewer. The information gained results from a collaboration between parties to the interview process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; May 2001; Silverman, 2011).   For this collaboration to be successful, careful preparation and planning is necessary. Formulating interview questions, selecting participants, recording, transcribing, interpreting, analysing and reporting the findings need to be considered at the outset while allowing for flexibility as the project progresses. In doing so, the interview process should provide the researcher with the rich, relevant, credible data required to address the topic under investigation.

3.6.5   Interview Protocol

A protocol (Skate, 1995) outlines the schedule and the general rules to be used during the interview process. This protocol captures the purpose of the interview;

the structure of the interview; question design and ordering and finally the operational issues involved with the interviews. The interview is being conducted to ascertain lecturers' perceptions of AfL, how it is practised and enacted within their own classroom and whether such practices contribute to EWL.

As each lecturer has different beliefs and perceptions with regard to assessment strategies and favourable or unfavourable conditions for worthwhile learning, the interview schedule should be flexible enough to allow participants to contribute what they feel is relevant and appropriate to addressing the research questions. To facilitate this contribution, a semi-structured interview approach was used while interviewing participants individually. A group interview was considered, but the study is aiming to investigate views of lecturers, I felt that group interviews could possibly be dominated by one or two individuals at the expense of others whose contribution is equally valued.

The first stage of the interview will inform the interviewee about the research, care being taken not to bias the interviewees' response. The participants' information sheet will be explained and consent form signed (or otherwise). The interview schedule set out in Appendix D was followed. The interview will be recorded with the interviewers' permission and later transcribed. Recording allows the interviewer to concentrate on the questions and answers, but if being recorded is uneasy for the interviewee, note taking will replace the tape. A copy of the transcription will be given to each interviewee in order to validate or amend as required. A pilot study took place in September 2014 in order to pre-empt any deficiencies that might arise or unduly influence the research project. On completion no discrepancies arose and the study went live within the School of Business during September/October 2014 at a place convenient to both parties.

In considering the questions to include in the interview schedule, issues identified at the observation stage, questions included in the student survey instrument,

together with questions which have emerged from the relevant literature, were reviewed in the context of the research questions.

3.6.6 Transcription of Focus Groups and Interviews

The focus group was recorded and transcribed manually using Microsoft Word. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed manually, again, using Microsoft Word. The time cost involved with transcribing was considered- should I employ someone to do it for me - but I was of the opinion that by doing the transcription myself the later analysis of that data would be easier. Similarly, the use of a computer programme, NVivo to help store and analyse the data was considered, but as the survey instrument required the use of SPSS, learning another computer based programme was beyond my capabilities.

3.7 Approaches to data analysis

The purpose of this section is to inform the reader how the data will be analysed. At the beginning of this study, and indeed the EdD programme, the act of data collection, was I believed, the biggest obstacle to overcome because it was during my masters' degree. However I have realised that this is not the case. The raw data tells me nothing until I analyse and interpret it. O'Leary (2010) quotes novelist George Elliot 'All meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation' (2010:230).

Social research offers two categories of analysis, being positivist or interpretivist, these being polar opposites on the subjective-objective continuum. This appears to be very simplistic but in reality data analysis is far from simple. In practice, positivist research and interpretivist research are not mutually exclusive, but they do offer differing and contrasting positions relating to a number of assumptions,

(Denscombe, 2003). Positivist research tends to be large scale with a specific focus using numbers and analysis and the researcher is detached from the data. Interpretivist research, in contrast, is associated with small scale studies viewed from a holistic perspective using description and words interpreted by the researcher whose values, beliefs and experiences will influence the analysis (Denscombe, 2003; Silverman, 2011).

This study is investigating how AfL practices influence EWL. A case study approach was employed using both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (observations focus group and interviews) as the modes of data collection. The analysis is undertaken from an interpretivist view point. Doing so, enables me to examine the ways participants understand and behave towards the practice of AfL. Advantages include gaining access to rich detailed data that is grounded in reality, although interpretivists think 'reality' is very open to interpretation and not fixed or set. Subsequently, ambiguity and contradictions are accepted. Disadvantages of this analytical approach include the perceived lack of generalisation; my own role (biases, pre-conceptions) in analysing and interpreting the data; words and descriptions can be taken out of context, and the temptation to oversimplify (Denscombe, 2003).

3.7.1 Survey Analysis

With over 150 survey instruments to analyse, the key is to 'stay on top of it the whole way through your analysis' (O'Leary, 2010:230). The 'user-friendly' computer package, SPSS (in line with the original study from which the survey instrument was adopted) was employed to store, manage and analyse the data, but as the pilot study highlighted there can be a tendency to allow yourself become engulfed in the numbers, graphs and other outputs and lose a sense of what the study is trying to investigate. 'Keeping a keen sense of their overall project is imperative' (O'Leary, 2010:231), and achieved by the process of reflective analysis. This process requires the researcher to: manage and organise the raw

data; systematically code and enter the data; engage in reflective statistical analysis; interpret meaning; uncover and discover findings; and finally draw relevant conclusions. The aim is that I am constantly moving between the data and the research questions in order to tease out those conclusions, both expected and unexpected. Using a pre-existing survey instrument, the findings of which are well documented does lead the researcher to 'expect' certain results/findings and so this reflective approach has helped in maintaining focus on my data and my research questions.

The analysis of the data started during the summer 2014 insofar as the mountain of survey instruments were organised, coded (given an identification mark) and data entered in SPSS. Engagement with reflective statistical analysis raised a number of concerns - I am of an age where my training as an accountant required the use of pencil and paper, not computers so this aspect was daunting. Reading various books on the how and why of SPSS gave me little comfort – admittedly I now realise my reading list was for statistics experts, not students like me - until O'Leary (2010) provided solace: 'Doing statistical analysis in the twenty-first century is more about your ability to use statistical software than your ability to calculate means, modes, medians, and standard deviations' (O'Leary, 2010:232). She contends that, like most social science students, I need a basic understand in order to undertake relatively straightforward statistical analysis but if my study requires expert help, get it.

3.7.2   Observational Data

As with other types of qualitative data, observational data is traditionally analysed as it is collected – we humans do not have the ability to disengage our thinking processes when listening to and observing particular settings, (O'Leary 2010). This is problematic as the observations 'will be entwined with a researcher's biases, prejudices, worldviews, and paradigms – both recognized and unrecognized, conscious and subconscious' (O'Leary, 2010:263). For my study I

wanted to gain insight into a) what students actually do rather than rely on the survey instrument which is based on what they think they do; and b) for lecturer interviews, to determine the important questions I want to address with my respondents. Working with the field notes requires 'drilling in and abstracting out' (O'Leary, 2010:263) meanings achieved using a reflective analysis process. Similar to that used to analyse the data collected using the survey method, but rather than using statistics as an aid to interpretation, with observational data thematic analysis is used. With survey analysis, the process is a step by step approach – over simplified here for differentiation purposes – enter data, statistical analysis, interpret, the use of reflective analysis of qualitative data is 'a more organic process that sees these three steps all influencing each other and working in overlapping cycles' (O'Leary, 2010:257).

During the data collection phase, the field notes were made during each observation session and so were in need of tidying up. Once this was complete each narrative was read and re-read noting general impressions and my own biases. The next step was to code the data into themes thereby reducing and sorting the data under these headings. Once the themes had been identified the data was re-read this time looking for relationships and connections between the themes. With the student observation data, the themes are 'a priori' ones as the observations are used to supplement and check the findings from the survey instruments. Mapping (O'Leary, 2010) my data to these pre-determined themes was the next step. The mapping and the understanding emanating from it are linked back to the literature and the survey findings to answer the research questions. The lecturer observation data will not have pre-determined themes - as it is used to form the basis of the interview schedule - and so a map developed as the data was read and re-read.

3.7.3   Analysing Focus Groups and Interviews

To interpret the focus group and interview data, I decided to employ a thematic analysis approach as I aim to investigate lecturers' experiences, meanings and their reality of AfL. 'Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data', (Braun & Clarke, 2006:6). It is a relatively easy method to learn and do and its main advantage is in its flexibility. Thematic analysis 'is not wed to any pre-existing theoretical framework' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:9) can be used inductively or deductively, patterns can be identified either at a semantic or latent level, and can be conducted within the realist and constructionist paradigms. These issues need to be explicitly stated and repeatedly asked both before and during the analysis process. I have read through the literature on AfL, have analysed the survey findings and made my observations, therefore I have coded the transcripts deductively – specific to my research questions as opposed to the questions evolving from the data, as was the case with the observation of lecturer's classroom practices. Identifying themes explicitly – on a semantic level, allowed for patterns to progress from description to interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). On a latent level, thematic analysis aims to identify the underlying assumptions and ideas behind the language used. Epistemologically, this research is framed by the constructivist paradigm, so the use of thematic analysis is appropriate as this perspective suggests that 'meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:14)

Thematic analysis is not to be rushed and is a recursive rather than linear process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and the table, reproduced below, may imply a step by step approach, the reality is that I moved back and forth through the phases in order to generate credible interpretations. The table is a guide, not hard and fast rules pertaining to thematic analysis, and 'will need to be applied flexibly to fit the research questions and data', (ibid, 2006:16).

As stated above all focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview transcript was given to the interviewee to amend as required. The act of transcription did indeed begin the familiarisation with the data phase. When returned each transcript was read and ideas, first impressions were noted. Codes are applied in a 'theory-driven' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:18) manner as I approached the data with specific questions in mind. The number of codes were then reduced to potential themes and I began to 'consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:19).

Phase 4 required reviewing and refining those themes on two levels. Level 1 read each coded extract for each possible theme to determine if a coherent pattern is emerging, and Level 2 how these themes reflect the data as a whole. 'Coding is an on-going organic process' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:21) so re-coding was expected. Naming and defining themes follows identifying what is interesting about each and why this is the case. This analysis 'provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes', (Braun and Clarke, 2006:23). Themes are then reported back to participants for clarification and further discussion in order to enhance credibility and transferability.

Table 5: Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing the data (if necessary:, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for Themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4. Reviewing Themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

(Braun & Clarke, 2006:35)

3.8 Validity and Reliability

For this study to be worthwhile, I need to produce a rigorous report. Rigor is determined by validity and reliability words associated more with quantitative studies than qualitative ones. Morse et al (2002) argued 'that reliability and validity remain appropriate concepts for attaining rigor in qualitative research' (2002:13). The work of Guba and Lincoln in the early 1980s replaced these measures of rigor with the concept of trustworthiness measured by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. How they relate to each other is

set out in Table 6 below combining the work of Guba & Lincoln (1989) and Mertens (2010).

Table 6

Measures of Research Rigor

Quantitative Studies	Qualitative Studies	Tools Used
Validity – Internal	Credibility	Member checks Triangulation
Validity – External	Transferability	Thick Description Multiple cases
Reliability Objectivity	Dependability Confirmability	Audit Trail Chain of Evidence

However, the use of the quantitative terms in qualitative research are common place in UK and European studies (Morse et al, 2002) and is acceptable as the goal of all research is 'finding plausible and credible outcome explanations' (ibid: 14). In his book Interpreting Qualitative Data, David Silverman (2011) uses the terms validity and reliability as concepts of credible research, so too does the work of Cotton et al (2010), O'Leary (2010), and Kirk & Miller (1986).

Credibility equated with internal validity is concerned with having sufficient data to support claims made in the research project and is achieved via member checks and triangulation. Silverman (2011) offers two types of validation errors, type one believing that a statement is true when it is not, and type two rejecting a statement when in fact it is true. These may occur as a result of reactivity and researcher biases. More importantly how they can be avoided/limited in this study. Member checks, or respondent's validation (Silverman, 2010), allow the researcher to seek verification from participants about themes and constructs developed from the data collected and analysed (Mertens, 2010). These checks may be formal or informal, technical or reflexive but compatible with the particular research design and process (ibid). Triangulation uses a number of combined methods in order to produce 'a more accurate comprehensive and objective representation of the object of study' (Silverman, 2011:369). If the

findings obtained are the same or similar, then the validity of those findings and conclusions has been established (Silverman, 2011). However, according to Silverman, (2011) triangulation and respondent's validation are 'usually inappropriate to qualitative research' (Silverman, 2011:369) as it cannot 'guarantee' the truth, while Denzin and Lincoln (2000) informed their readers that these tools are 'best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry' (ibid: 5). Guba & Lincoln (1989) too argue that triangulation is not appropriate for all, that it can be used for factual information member checks should be used for all other types of data.

Each of these credibility measures were employed for this study. Triangulation in the form of multi – methods, survey – observation, observation – interview has added breadth and depth to the investigation. 'Using different approaches to data collection leads to richer understanding of the social context and the participants therein' (Kawulich, 2005:8). Interview transcripts were given to interviewees so they may validate or amend as appropriate.

Transferability equated with external validity 'enables readers of the research to make judgements based on similarities and differences when comparing the research situations to their own' (Mertens, 2010: 259). Thick descriptions afforded by the case study approach (Thomas, 2011) will provide sufficient detail to allow those judgements to be made. In the context of this study, the thick description was obtained from the various data collection strategies employed.

Dependability, or reliability in quantitative terms, requires transparency – giving a detailed description of the research strategy and data analysis methods, and explicitly stating the theoretical stance from which the interpretations take place (Silverman, 2011). Yin (2002) advises the use of a case study protocol detailing each step of the research process, an audit trail as a tool to aid transparency. A

problem with dependability is that the social world is always changing so replication of any given study is not always possible. In regard to the data collection methods employed for this study, dependability was enhanced by maintaining observation field notes in the manner prescribed by Lofland (1971) and Gillham (2000), that is taking short notes at time of observation, expanding these as soon as possible once the session is complete, maintain a journal and the analysis and interpretation is a continuous reflective process. Silverman (2011) further advised that the researcher should distinguish between the ideas and concepts introduced by the participant (emic analysis) and the researcher (etic analysis) themselves. Dependability of interviews is achieved by the pre-testing of the interview schedule, recording interviews, transcribing and finally 'presenting long extracts of data in the research report' (Silverman, 2011:365).

Finally confirmability, equating to objectivity, means how the influences of my values and judgements are minimised in the research. According to Mertens (2010) confirmability means 'that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher's imagination' (ibid: 260). Yin (2002) describes it as providing a 'chain of evidence'. For my study, objectivity is maintained by keeping all completed survey instruments, observational field notes, focus group transcript and interview transcripts.

In the first section of this chapter I attempted to outline my positionality, my values and beliefs so as to enable the reader to make their own judgements and interpretations about this research. Wellington (2000) asserts that for case study research 'a large part of the onus rests on the reader ...the 'value' or truth of case study research is a function of the reader as much as of the researcher' (ibid: 99). I have attempted to show rigor, measured by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability throughout this investigation, but my success in this endeavour is not judged by me, but by you the reader.

3.9   Summary

When considering this or indeed any research project, the decisions as to how the research will be done and what methodological approaches to adopt need to be addressed. What are the appropriate methodologies and methods I should use to answer my questions? This chapter begins with a review of my philosophical stance and how my work as an accountant (in a previous life) and now as lecturer for the past 18 years has influenced that stance. My participants are students and colleagues so the concept of 'insider research' was discussed.

To answer my research question, a case study methodology was employed allowing me to gather data from many and varied sources – survey, observation and interview. Each of these and the justification for doing so was explained. How the data was analysed is outlined. Finally, my main aim is to produce a rigorous report and the measures of that rigor are discussed.

The next chapter reports on the data gathered, and if as I intended, I have followed the advice of Sikes (2004) 'never to think that anything is straightforward and 'obvious', never to take anything for granted and never to leave any assumptions unquestioned' (ibid: 15) the reporting of these findings should be credible and allow the participants voice to be heard.

4.   Findings – Setting the Scene

This chapter will set the context of the study, which took place within a Business School of an Institute of Technology in Ireland. The chapter provides the background to the data gathered from survey, observation, focus group and interviews which illuminate the learning culture within that institution and how it impacts on EWL. The Business School has been offering programmes to students since the foundation of the institution in 1970. It is 'one of Ireland's largest integrated Business Schools, a unique learning community priding itself on its relationship with its students. The School incorporates undergraduate, postgraduate, executive and entrepreneurial education, with links to business, the professions, and international education' (Business School Website 2014:1). The chapter includes an overview of the Business School's assessment policy; modules delivered within an AfL environment and those that are non-AfL. The students who participated in the survey, those classrooms which were observed will be illustrated as will the lecturers who granted access to their classroom and those that were interviewed.

4.1   Business School's Assessment Policy

In March 2009, the Waterford Institute of Technology introduced a Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy (LTAS), the purpose of which was to "enhance the student learning experience by establishing a framework for co-ordinating decision making across the Institute on the future development of Learning, Teaching and Assessment" (2009:1). Contributors to this document were both internal and external to the environment. Internal in the form of learner intake, the curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment practices and the linkages between research and learning, teaching and assessment. External factors included national policy, European policy and the quality culture.

In line with much rhetoric in higher education institutions, the Institute's Strategy Plan 2007-10 states that "the learner is at the centre of the learning experience" (p: 45). The LTAS outlines the rights and responsibilities of the learner. The rights relating to assessment include receiving information about methods of and criteria for assessment in a timely manner, appropriate teaching in preparation for those assessments and to "receive appropriate, comprehensive and constructive feedback following those assessments" (LTAS, 2009:13).

The LTAS recommends "an appropriate balance of formative and summative assessment" (p 20) so as to enable the student to develop into a self-directed learner. At the time of writing the LTAS, the terminal exam was the most widely used method of assessment and this document supported the movement away from terminal exams to develop and design methods to assess deeper learning "rather than an ability to memorise and recall information" (p 20).

The Assessment policy within the Business School states that each programme must have published learning outcomes, the achievement of which leads to attaining an award or graduating. Each programme has a number of modules (normally 5 credits per module), and each individual module must have its own learning outcomes and published assessment strategy which should inform the student in a timely fashion as to what is expected of them to 'pass' the module. The assessment strategy should be appropriate to the learning outcomes. Each programme should have an assessment schedule which details each modules assessment mode, method and deadlines, if appropriate. These assessment strategies should be reviewed periodically to take account of any feedback from students, lecturers and external examiners.

The role of lecturer in the Business School relating to assessment is to, (for each module they teach) prepare students for assessment, set exam paper and suggested

solutions, correct students' scripts, complete paperwork, liaise with external examiners and attend programme board meeting. The average teaching timetable for lecturers is 18 hours per week, so each lecturer has a heavy workload. The requirement to provide timely constructive feedback is something that requires time and resourcing, which in the current economic climate in Ireland is unlikely to be forthcoming, confirming Chunnu-Brayda's (2012) findings about lack of resources.

Many of the students in higher education require teaching, particularly during their first year. The requirement for 'self-directed study' is common to many modules, for example modules are taught over a 12 week period and the lecturer – student contact time is 3 or 4 hours per week. When reviewing the module descriptors the required study time exceeds 120 hours, indicating to the student the need for self-directed study. Many students, in line with what the respondents of Newton (2003) study suggest, need to be taught, want to be taught and are unfamiliar with the concept of self-directed study/learning.

If we are to accept Newton's (2003) concept of the shift from teaching to learning, then the student is central to the assessment policy. Is this what the student wants? A survey of first year students at the HE institute (MacManus and Taylor, 2013) where this study is located shows that 80% of participants prefer CA to exam based modules, with the same percentage stating they would prefer more CA than exam based modules for the first year programme. Approximately 70% of respondents mostly or definitely agreed that they learnt best from CA modules with 87% indicating that CA modules helped students to develop key employability skills. The data gathered from the focus group concurs with this. All but one of the focus group participants preferred CA modules. That one dissenting voice told of her apparently photographic memory and how she can recall just about anything she reads/writes and has always done better in exams than in CA – she explained

> *'when I was doing the leaving cert, I hated English 'cos I could never write an essay, but one day the teacher told me to write out an essay, she corrected it and I wrote it out again. When the teacher was happy that it would achieve a good grade, I learnt it off by heart'*

Regarding feedback, 80% of participants in the MacManus and Taylor (2013) study are happy that they received timely feedback. My focus group participants gave a mixed response to feedback, as reported in the next chapter.

4.2   Students who completed Survey Instrument

In selecting students to complete the survey instrument, a questionnaire to explore students responses to AfL, I was conscious of the need for these students to have experienced both AfL and non-AfL environments. For this experience to be meaningful, third year undergraduate students were chosen. The reasons for this are many: students have experienced five semesters of higher education; across all programmes AfL and non-AfL modules are delivered; my assertion that students have grown in maturity which positioned them to complete the instrument in a mature manner.

The suite of undergraduate programmes from which the participants were selected include; Bachelor of Business (Honours); Bachelor of Business (Ordinary); Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Accounting and Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Marketing. Two other programmes offered by the Business School were not considered as the students were on work placement or international study. The numbers enrolled on these two programmes are small.

A further programme was omitted as a review of the programme documentation and module descriptors revealed that the modules undertaken in semester six are

non-AfL, so not allowing for a comparative. The modules chosen were Management Accounting; Taxation; Managerial Accounting; Developing Leadership Skills; Sales and Marketing; and Enterprise, whereas the original survey instrument (McDowell et al, 2011) was distributed to students of English, Education, Psychology and Engineering,

4.3 Classroom Observation – students

The classes to observe needed to be selected from the third year cohort to maintain consistency with the survey respondents. These classes had to fit with my lecturing hours and I wanted to observe the same group in both environments. The class with best fit was the Bachelor of Business (Ordinary) and the modules were Managerial Accounting and Developing Leadership Skills.

A review of the module documentation does little to gain insight into the learning culture on a particular programme. Instead, it informs the reader of the indicative content, teaching and assessment strategy, student-lecturer contact hours and number of hours of independent/self-directed study. While worthwhile, this technical approach is generic across the Business School. To understand the learning culture, observing classroom practice is essential. To this end, the field notes from my observations of this module together with data obtained from the focus group will be used to illustrate some of the key factors shaping the culture at that particular point in time. Hodkinson et al (2007) offered a number of dimensions which together aid the understanding of the learning culture and it is under these dimensions that I aim to report my observations.

4.3.1 Course Specification, Assessment and Qualification

'The Bachelor of Business is a three year ab initio degree that provides students with specialised knowledge across a wide range of business areas. The degree

focuses on developing student knowledge in critical areas of business studies in conjunction with developing interpersonal and communication skills that are necessary in today's business environment' (WIT, Website, 2014). The applied nature of the course allows graduates to undertake tasks and assignments similar to those they may experience in industry and commerce. Entry requirements for 2013 and 2014 were 200 and 205 Irish Leaving Certificate points (see Appendix I) respectively and applicants must have passed - achieved Grade D3 – five subjects including English and Maths. From this it may be assumed that students on this programme are not academically high achievers. For some, anecdotal evidence suggests, it is the 'easier option', with fewer expectations being placed on them by the lecturing staff and school management as highlighted in the focus group comments:

'Level 8 programme was too daunting'

(Focus group Participant, Nov. 2014)

For mature and advanced entry students who have completed a yearlong back to education programme, this is the only programme offered to them in the Business School.

On graduating, students may apply for 'trainee and junior management roles in the main business functions across all industry and service sectors' (WIT website), alternatively they may continue studying to achieve an Honours Degree from the Business School. The focus group participants indicated that this is the route many hope to follow. It is interesting to note that a large percentage of graduates do in fact gain entry into the final year of the honours programme so while the schools' expectations of these students in first year may not be high, it is the students themselves who strive to achieve the award necessary to apply for the level 8 programme. Three focus group members expressed their wish to continue

to Masters' Degree (level 9), and two of these aiming for the Doctoral (level 10) programme.

4.3.2   Location and Resources of the Learning site

The observed classrooms varied considerably. For the AfL module the room, situated in one of the newer buildings, was airy, bright with free seating and the lecturer's desk situated in the top corner of the room. White boards and screens decorated the walls. This layout allowed for freedom of movement, both lecturer and student, which in turn encouraged freedom of expression and opinion. To an outsider, it would be difficult to distinguish between lecturer and student.

In contrast, the classroom for non-AfL module located in the older building was dark with artificial lighting, fixed theatre style seating and the lecturer's desk at the top and centre of the room. The white boards and screen were fixed behind that desk. Once seated, students had no freedom of movement and the lecturer, at least during the observed sessions, tended to remain behind the desk. There is a clear distinction between lecturer and student on this module.

4.3.3   Syllabus; time students and lecturers spend together

The AfL module covers five topics over the 12 week semester, three hours per week. Each topic is delivered and assessed by means of

1) Lecture, role play, film, games;
2) Group task – four members per group;
3) Academic Articles;
4) 1,000 word assignment, based on the first three components.

When corrected, feedback is given via notes written on assignments and verbally to each group with individual feedback being available on request. Each topic

builds on the last, so evidence of learning and progression should be seen as assignments are completed.

The non-AfL module covers a similar number of topics over the 12 week semester, four hours per week. For each topic the lecturer puts notes and question banks on the schools' intranet which students are to download to use during class. Topics are delivered didactically and assessed by means of a 2 hour end of semester exam consisting of both computational and theory type questions. Informal feedback is available on 'homework' - the lecturer may work through the solution on the white board - but there are no regulations for providing formal feedback on the actual exam.

4.3.4 AfL Module - Position, disposition and actions of students and lecturer

This group is large, approximately 50 students with a number of Erasmus participants. It was interesting to note that for each of the observed classes, these non-national students all sat at the front of the room, while the Irish students fought for the 'back seats'. This 'back seat' position seemed to convey the right to constant chatter, lack of interest in the topic/module and sleep. One such student was observed filing her nails and when she became aware of being observed she frowned and put the nail file away, (April, 2014).

There was a tendency among the cohort to take verbatim notes rather than listen to what the lecturer was saying, yet when asked to take notes – on the content of a video clip – few did so. Again, it was very interesting to note how engaged the Erasmus students were with that video clip, compared to the Irish students whose body language and facial expressions screamed boredom (March, 2014).

Students do not take the opportunity to ask questions, but when real life situations are applied to the topic under discussion, there was a complete transformation in the class, with all students engaged in the discussion, wanting their opinion to be heard (April, 2014).

The lecturer is female, working in the Business School for the past 12 years and her approach to teaching and learning is best described by her staff profile 'teaching' entry:

> 'I believe that when individuals are engaged, they are more likely to achieve their potential and have seen students' attendance and performance improve when they are positively engaged in the learning process. To this end, I am particularly interested in experiential teaching and learning methodologies and I have attended training courses to develop my understanding of both Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and blended learning approaches.'

> (Lecturer Staff Profile, 2014)

This statement is confirmed by observations where the lecturer tries to engage the students actively with the learning process via the various methods of content delivery, promoting discussion using prompts and ensuring that:

> the student is never wrong; the question/answer is turned so that the student feels he has contributed to the discussion, also allowing for a more confident response the next and subsequent time.

> (April, 2014)

Problem-based learning was also observed, where the students are required to solve a real life business problem. Each student group had to convene a meeting

to decide on a particular strategy to solve that problem. One group member took on the role of observer – this rotated among the group members for different tasks – who had to report to the class as a whole.

> '*The purpose of today's class is to reflect on the group meetings'*

> (Lecturer, April 2014)

This reflectivity required each observer to report on the actions of their group members and how those actions relate to the theory underpinning the topic under consideration. How the problem was solved by each group was discussed and how to incorporate these alternative solutions into the forthcoming assignment was considered.

4.3.5 Non-AfL Module - **Position, disposition and actions of students and lecturer**

A slightly different cohort, in that the number of students on this module is smaller as compared to the AfL module. The Erasmus students who participated on the AfL module are not required to enrol on all modules on this programme, they have the choice of selecting from the entire suite of modules in the Business School.

Similar to the AfL module, on entering the classroom students raced for the back seat, then, when seated, the process of settling in began, i.e. finding pen and paper, calculator and laptop. Fifteen minutes into the first observed session, some were still emptying bags. The group is easily distracted: illustrated by the accidental opening of the door which resulted in a ten minute 'break' in the class.

Notes are taken verbatim, although the same notes are available on their laptops. Rather than using the laptops for class purposes, a number were being used to watch 'you tube' clips and films none of which were relevant to the module.

> A student has just begun to watch a movie on his laptop, with those
> sitting beside and behind him joining in.   (April, 2014)

Computational type questions are favoured by the cohort with many students asking for more examples but when asked to produce the attempts on the questions previously distributed, very few students were in a position to do so. Yet these questions are similar to what to expect in the end of semester exam. When the exam was mentioned, the atmosphere in the room changed, heads raised, and like soldiers, the students, stood to attention to glean whatever information was being given. Theory based questions, even when related to real life situations, were greeted with little response and no engagement an entry in my field notes describe this style of question:

> If I were a student, would I be bored? Yes, the topic is not great,
> but the lecturer is making it as interesting as possible, using real
> world examples but to no avail, students just not engaging.
>   (April, 2014)

The lecturer is male, and has been lecturing the Business School for the past 11 years on a range of accounting modules at various levels. A qualified accountant having worked in that sector for a number of years prior to joining the HE sector, his teaching approach is didactic, with little input from the student cohort. This lack of input from the student body is at times self-imposed. For example, towards the end of the semester the lecturer asked that the group email him regarding what topics they wanted to cover in the revision class. No student did

and at the beginning of that revision class, they were again asked if they had any particular topic to revise the response was silence and when given the option the students left the room rather than take the opportunity for revision.

The lecture notes and the question and solution banks available to students are very comprehensive, covering the given topic in great detail, questions range from very basic to very advanced. A review of previous years' exam papers indicate that these questions are very similar to what appears on those exams, by doing so the lecture, perhaps unknown to himself is promoting rote learning with this particular group. The observations indicate that this is what students want why this is so may be as the result of wider social and cultural values and practices.

4.3.6 Wider social and cultural values and practices

A focus group was conducted in November 2014 with a group of students from the Bachelor of Business programme to explore the wider social and cultural values and practices of this particular group. The group comprised a mix of mature, non-national and traditional students which led to a varied and lively discussion. The mature students had come to college following job redundancy and viewed this opportunity as '*our second chance, to make life better for us and our families*' (mature student). The non-national students came from Eastern Europe and Asia, in Ireland to '*get our education in English*' (non-national student) and as fees are high for these students, '*we cannot afford to fail*' (another non-national student).

Only three members of the focus group have part-time employment. The reasons offered as to why others did not have jobs was the lack of time and the need to concentrate on college work.

All of these students have obtained the Irish Leaving Certificate or equivalent and the majority are the first in their immediate family to enter Higher Education. None of the parents of the focus group members had HE qualifications, with one participant informing me:

'it wasn't the done thing back then' (FG 8)

All participants have cousins who have a HE qualification, and it is these relations who inspired these students to enter third level education, *'they have good jobs with prospects'* according to one focus group member.

The huge expansion in higher education in recent years has made the exploration of the wider social and cultural values and practices of the entire population of this study impossible for this limited investigation, but what was uncovered in the focus group was the desire of these students to achieve, to progress not only in their existing world of HE but in the wider arena of life itself, but their actions and practices either belie this or offer a very particular view of what this means.

4.4   Summary

The aim of this chapter was to illuminate for the reader the learning culture in place in both the AfL and non-AfL classroom. These findings suggest an expansive (Davies & Ecclestone, 2008) learning culture in the AfL environment enabling 'students to maximise their engagement with the subject being studied. . . as well as enhancing their own learning processes, rather than merely meeting targets' (ibid, 2008:75). In contrast, the non-AfL environment was found to be restrictive (Davies and Ecclestone, 2008) or one in which division and conflict exist (Hodkinson et al, 2007b), which 'generally acted as barriers to … learning' (ibid, 2007b:407).   The differentiation between the two modules is, as highlighted in the next two chapters, as a result of module/curriculum design, assessment content/task and not the practices and teaching style of the individual lecturer.

The next chapter presents the students' perspective on both these learning environments to determine which might lead to educationally worthwhile learning.

5. The Students' Perspective

This chapter presents the students' experiences of teaching and learning on AfL modules and modules that are delivered in a more traditional manner, and how they interact with the challenges of both. The themes generated by my findings, obtained via survey (McDowell et al, 2011), classroom observation and focus group concur in the main with themes found in the literature. A cautionary note, as is usual in social science research, the literature review was conducted prior to gathering and analysing the data, an established survey instrument was used, so the themes generated from the findings were deducted from the literature.

5.1   The Learning Environment

'A key purpose of the questionnaire was to see whether students responded differently to AfL and non-AfL modules' (McDowell et al, 2011:755). Analysis of the survey findings suggest that students do not distinguish between differing assessment and learning environments. Table 8 below depicts the conditions for an AfL environment (the components of each are set out in Table 7), the mean scores and the standard deviation, calculated from my data, attributed to each.

Analysis of the focus group data and the observation of classroom practice however reveal a different picture. The focus group participants had never heard of the terms formative assessment or AfL with one student asking 'isn't that the fancy term for CA?' If that is so, they believe that AfL classes are more interactive and that 'you learn more in a CA classroom' while in a non-AfL classroom 'you are just going through the motions'.

Table 7: Components of the Conditions for an AfL Environment

Conditions for an AfL environment		Components /Survey Questions
Formal feedback		1,4,16,18,19,22,23,25,27
Informal feedback		1,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,15,25
Practice knowledge, skills and understanding		4,5,6,12,14,16,20,21,22,23,27
Assessment tasks which are authentic		2,3,4,8,9,10,13,14,15,17,20,24,26
Develop student autonomy		2,3,5,7,9,11,12,14,22,23,27
Balance of Summative and Formative Assessment		1,3,4,7,8,11,12,13,14,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,26,27

Table 8: Conditions for an AfL Environment Mean Scores

(findings from this research)

Conditions for an AfL environment	AfL Module		non-AfL Module	
	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation
Formal feedback	2.28	0.917	2.41	0.993
Informal feedback	2.16	0.992	2.53	0.133
Practise knowledge, skills and understanding	2.25	0.015	2.51	0.245
Assessment tasks which are authentic	2.37	0.946	2.67	0.854
Develop student autonomy	2.39	0.364	2.71	0.523
Balance of Summative and Formative Assessment	2.32	1.021	2.5	1.067

Observations of the AfL module classroom did satisfy the conditions and highlighted an environment that is rich with informal feedback, students applying knowledge skill and understand to authentic tasks with a balance of summative and formative assessment illuminated in the following manner during the first observation session:

> The topic being covered was team leaders. In previous class time, students were given notes and articles to gain an understanding of the topic, followed by group session whereby the students held business meetings to decide on a particular pre-defined strategy. The purpose of this class was to reflect on what happened during that class. Lecturer began by giving informal feedback on how, in her opinion the groups worked with particular emphasis on the team leader. It was not long before the students began to engage in this informal feedback, commenting on their own contribution and the contributions of their team members. This peer- and self-assessment was based on lecture notes and articles. It was obvious which students had reviewed and studied these handouts. Those that did had the ability to apply this knowledge and skill to the 'real world' task. The lecturer-student discourse was formative in nature, no contribution was right or wrong, each was used to progress the discussion which formed the basis of the 1,000 word summative assignment.
>
> (March, 2014)

This learning environment was demonstrated further in the second observation session:

> The topic under consideration was leadership style and a film showing a number of orchestral conductors to highlight different styles was viewed. Once complete the lecturer began the discussion by asking a number of questions about each leadership style. As

with the previous week, the students engaged with the topic, peer and lecture informal feedback was free flowing, no answer being right or wrong each acted as a springboard for further discussion which appeared to aid clarification and understanding of the topic.

(April, 2014)

Learner autonomy, described as the ability to take charge of one's learning (Holec, 1981) and discussed on page 48, is developed over time and this was confirmed in the AfL module over the observation period. During the first session the students were slow to contribute and needed prompts from the lecturer to engage with the topic. Confidence, knowledge and skills developed and grew over the period as illustrated by this observation:

The group has a number of Erasmus students, whose first language is not English. During the first observation session, this cohort were very quiet and appeared to be disengaged, but when asked a direct question one particular student did respond and raised a number of very relevant points for discussion. Three weeks later these students were actively engaging in the discussion, in fact began the confident, competent discussion in a number of instances.

(April, 2014)

Within this module formal feedback is given when requested by an individual student. During week 11 of the twelve week semester a number of students approached the lecturer requesting feedback and appointments were made. A number of these same students requested group rather than individual feedback even though the assignment was submitted on an individual basis.

The survey response for the non-AfL module suggested that the learning environment also satisfies the conditions for an AfL environment, the reality, as observed, illustrates a rather different picture. Formal feedback was not observed in any of the observation sessions as this module is assessed as a two hour end of semester exam. Informal feedback between lecturer and student was noted but only in a 'is my homework right' manner, and peer- and self-assessment raised a number of concerns for this observer, for example:

> The solution to a computational question was written on the white board with the lecturer detailing a 'step-by-step' approach in how to get to the right answer. The students sitting closest to me had not completed the homework and so rather than concentrating on how to work through the question, they franticly took down the solution. When the opportunity arose for some feedback on their own work, they spoke among themselves rather than the lecturer. The student who was giving her version of the solution was incorrect in her understanding (I lecture on a similar module), but the students in this sub-group seem to accept this version rather than asking the lecturer, who gives ample opportunity for them to do so.

> (March, 2014)

Practising knowledge, skill and understanding on this non-AfL module was facilitated by means of a question bank being made available to each student to download from the institutes' learning blackboard website. These question banks formed the basis for each of the classes I observed, however, a large percentage of the group had not downloaded a copy – although the majority of students had laptops at their disposal.

> When working through a solution, the lecturer showed the question while completing the solution on the white board. Rather than

follow the solution, a number of students took down the question which they had available to them at the click of a button.

(March, 2014)

When this observation was put to the focus group, the response startled me:

Student: *'It's easier to learn the question by taking it down'*

Me: *'Sorry, but why would you want to learn the question?'*

Student: *'If you don't learn the question, you can't learn the solution'*

As I type this exchange, I am even more baffled by it. Other focus group members stated that if you write down the question, '*you have the question and solution all on the same page in the same place'*. This describes what the literature labels as rote/surface learning and challenges what advocates of AfL believe, discussed at length above.

This was not the only incident. During another observed class session, the topic being covered was theory rather than computational and again the lecture notes and hand outs were available on the learning blackboard site.

Few students had the notes printed out or downloaded and so are concentrating on note taking rather than the explanation.

(April, 2014)

There was no assessment task observed, so I cannot report any findings on this condition. Developing student autonomy, whereby the student becomes an independent, responsible and self-regulated learner, was not obvious in this

module. In fact the opposite was observed. Students are dependent on the lecturer to provide notes, handouts, question banks and solutions. As outlined above a large number of students did not download these items so learners' responsibility is called into question. This lack of autonomy was demonstrated in the final observation class:

> The lecturer had asked the students to forward to him topics for revision during the final week of class time. Not one student contacted the lecturer and during that final week they, the students, opt to leave class early rather than accept the opportunity for revision work. (April, 2014)

The assessment strategy on this module was entirely summative, so there was no balance between that and formative assessment, put simply by a focus group participant you are *'hit with a big end of term exam'* (F.G. 5).

The analysis of the survey instrument indicated little or no difference between the learning environments of modules where AfL is promoted and where it is not. In reality, the AfL module does appear to satisfy the conditions for AfL, while the non-AfL module does not.

Further analysis on the findings from each module, using principal component analysis, helps to explain these findings in more detail. Four components/themes (Table 9) are derived from the survey respondents, compared to three in the original study (McDowell et al, 2011), staff support and module design; engagement with the subject matter; assessment, feedback and grade; and peer support. Each of these themes will be discussed below using data garnered from the survey instrument, classroom observations and the focus group.

Table 9: Section 2: Module experience: principal component analysis

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Q2.1	.648			
Q2.2				.489
Q2.3		.397		
Q2.4	.787			
Q2.5			.799	
Q2.6			.791	
Q2.7		.457		
Q2.8		.555		
Q2.9		.576		
Q2.10		.575		
Q2.11			.607	
Q2.12	.579			
Q2.13		.513		
Q2.14		.731		
Q2.15	.436			
Q2.16		.521		
Q2.17		.326		
Q2.18	.596			
Q2.19	.806			
Q2.20	.375			
Q2.21	.676			
Q2.22	.462			
Q2.23				.535
Q2.24				.721
Q2.25	.707			
Q2.26				.713
Q2.27				.604

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

5.1.1 Staff Support and Module Design

Elements contributing to this theme include staff patient in explaining; staff support in approaching set work; students are encouraged to think about how best

to tackle set work; clarity as to what student is to learn and what to expect from assessment; what was being taught matches what students are to learn and the assessed work; and the module is more about learning than assessment.

One item, *this module is more about learning than jumping through assessment hoops* was not categorised in any component in McDowell et al (2011) study but my analysis categorised it under this theme. This, I suggest, may be attributed to the teaching, learning and assessment strategy adopted by the lecturer at the module design stage. When considering the AfL module, students linked the statement *'I was prompted to think about how well I was learning and how I might improve'* to staff support. This survey finding was supported by the data gathered at the focus group phase, as the students described how the lecturer-led class discussion on assignment feedback, developed self-assessment capabilities which aided future self-improvement.

Survey findings for the non-AfL modules included elements relating to choice; *choice as to how students went about their learning*, and *choice of what aspects of the module to concentrate on*. These elements would appear to encourage surface learning, concurring with the findings from the classroom observations and the focus group, with both suggesting the students' rote learn for non-AfL modules.

5.1.2   Engagement with Subject Matter

This theme is comprised of teaching, understanding, enjoyment, support, opportunities to develop skills, test out ideas and relevance to outside world. These elements are consistent with those identified in McDowell et al (2011)'s study. Analysis of my survey instruments also included *staff enthusiasm about the subject* under this theme. The lecturer on the AfL module utilised many different strategies to deliver the module and to engage the students, for example during the observation phase, notes, articles, role play, games and films were

employed, all of which showed the lecturer's enthusiasm for the subject and the group. This choice, together with opportunities to develop skills in this subject, was clearly evidenced in the observation of the AfL module, as each group member had to take on the leadership role at least once during the semester, and his/her abilities playing that role was assessed by the other group members.

Other elements included under this heading are working and talking to each other, evidenced during the AfL classroom activities, further encouraged engagement with the module content, but this working and talking together was driven by the lecturer and a requirement of completing the given task. These elements, working and talking to each other, were not categorised under this theme for the non-AfL modules rather included in the peer-support theme discussed below.

In relation to the non-AfL module, the content included many threshold concepts which require a didactic method of teaching. Observations would suggest that the non-engagement with the subject matter stems from this teaching method as the student cohort do not view themselves as active participants in the learning. *'We don't do anything in class, just sit there while (the lecturer) talks and does stuff on the board'* (FG 5). This quote from the focus group highlights this particular group of students' dispositions towards the non-AfL module, which may again, be a result of module design rather than pedagogical styles or relationships between lecturers and students.

5.1.3 Assessment, Feedback and Grades

This component did not emerge in the original study (McDowell et al, 2011). Analysing my students' responses for the AfL module produced findings which relate to the assessment method itself, feedback and grades. The assessment method on this module was five 1000 word assignments completed over the 12

week semester. The lecturer supported the students in their approach to that assignment as revealed during classroom observations:

> How to approach the questions in the next assignment were discussed. (April, 2014)

> *'I don't want you to give me a summary of the lecture notes in the assignment, I want you to show me how you think about and understand (the assignment topic)'.*

> (AE 1, AfL Lecturer, March, 2014)

The survey instrument asked participants to consider feedback as a means to improve learning and clarify understanding, which 48% of students agreed/strongly agreed with. Classroom observations suggest a much improved stance:

> Verbal feedback on previous assignment began a heated debate on the assignment topic and how those that did not get the grade they expected could improve. This debate was general, not relating to any one individual and the lecturer reminded students of her availability to given formal feedback on an individual basis.

> (March, 2014)

Focus group participants also discussed the issue of feedback. Feedback, in their opinion, should be verbal, to aid understanding, but is only appropriate when you can use that feedback for future assignments and assessments. Feedback with no grade is of little use, according to the focus group members as *'without knowing where you currently stand, you cannot use the feedback to improve'* (FG 3).

Good grades are awarded for understanding the subject rather than rote learning the content, according to over 74% of the survey respondents. This contrasts with classroom observations and focus group comments. For example, my observation field notes include:

> Very few students taking notes on what the lecturer was explaining.
>
> (March, 2014)

> Total lack of interest when lecturer breaking solution down into simplified steps with one student commenting 'which way do you want it done in the exam, we don't need to understand how', a question ignored by the lecturer.   (March, 2014)

5.1.4 Peer Support

A final theme/component identified focuses on peer support. For my study this theme emerged from both classroom environments, but observations revealed different types of support. In the non-AfL classroom, peer support in the form of working (60% of respondents) and talking (72%) with other students helped in developing an understanding of the subject and improves learning together with students supporting each other (60%) when needed (survey response analysis). Observation data would suggest that the students do work, talk and support each other, but as my observation note on page 109 above showed, it is the 'deemed expert' on whom the other students place reliance even if this 'deemed expert' role is unwarranted.

Similarly, the survey instrument suggested that within the AfL environment students support each other and tried to give help when it was needed. Evidence at the observation phase revealed a tendency to support friends rather than the class as an entity, illustrated in the following:

Class were divided into self-selected sub-groups. When responding to the questions posited by the lecturer the nominated speaker was supported by his/her group members with each member joining the discussion and nodding agreement.   (March, 2014)

Sub-groups today were selected by the lecturer. When answering questions the group did not support the speaker from their own group, but when their friend in another sub-group was responding they shared their views which could have enhanced the response of their own group.   (April, 2014)

Concluding this section, the findings of the survey show little or no difference between the two module types under investigation. However, the observed practices and responses reality reveals a stark difference in how the majority of students engage with each type of module. The results for observed modules are significantly different the average grade for the AfL module was 62% while that of the non-AfL module was 41%. So while the findings from the survey instrument do not correspond with the findings of McDowell et al, (2011) the findings in my study indicate that reality is that these students do respond differently to AfL and non-AfL modules.

5.2 Approaches to Learning

The literature informs us that it is the learning culture that influences how the student approaches his/her learning. This section details how the student body who complete the survey instrument responded to items relating to approaches to learning and studying. Similar to the original study (McDowell et al, 2011), three components were identified, namely *surface approach*, *deep approach* and *effort and organisation*. Tables 10, 11 and 12 below depict the findings from my study.

5.2.1 Effort and Organisation

Table 10: Survey Findings – Effort and Organisation

Effort and Organisation			
Question/Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1.3 I have generally put a lot of effort into my studying	57%	14%	28%
1.6 I've been quite systematic & organised in my studying	49%	31%	20%
1.11 I've organised my study time to make best use of it	42%	39%	19%
1.17 Concentration is not usually a problem for me	53%	27%	19%
1.20 If I don't understanding something while studying, I try a different approach	56%	20%	24%

Overall, the survey findings suggest that the respondents do not have a good approach to studying. Some illustrations:

60% of respondents do not organise their study time;

47% find it hard to concentrate;

44% do not try different approaches when they fail to understanding the topic; and

43% admit to not putting effort into their study.

These findings are confirmed by the observation of classroom practice where, in the non-AfL environment, students were observed watching 'you tube' clips not relevant to class topic, no notes or question banks were downloaded or printed out, students were easily distracted and it took 15 minutes for the majority to prepare themselves for class. During class it was observed that the students did not know when or how to take notes. For example:

Lecturer said he'd give time to take down example after explanation and him working through the solution, however a large

> percentage of the group began taking down the example
> immediately.   (March, 2014)

A further example where students did not know how to take notes is the taking of verbatim notes:

> One student has asked the lecturer to repeat the sentence, when he
> does, she states 'that is not what you said first time' and continues
> by reciting the exact wording of his first utterance.
>
>   (March, 2014)

The revision class highlighted the lack of effort and organisation among the entire group. As stated above, the lecturer had requested that students contact him with topics for revision, none did so, but during the last class of the semester, a number of students were concerned with issues pertaining to the exam including time allowed, number of questions to answer and exam paper format. To this observer, this suggested a lack of effort and organisation, but during the focus group phase participants from this same group highlighted just how organised the group was and the efforts they adopted to enable and enhance their learning and studying, for example: this group, while discussing 'reading' mentioned sharing what was read with their study group members. Elaborating, I discovered that these students had formed study groups, meeting at a minimum twice a week, and every member of the class had active membership of a study group. These small groups existed outside modules but facilitated a sharing of knowledge, learning and studying among a very motivated group of learners.

In the AfL environment, the majority of students appeared to put more effort and organisation into their learning and studying. As with all large groupings there were some anomalies. Two students were observed sleeping during class time, another filing her nails when supposed to be taking notes on a video clip, that

same student clearing out her handbag and when asked to stop doing so, she asked if she could be excused from class, to which the lecturer replied yes. These and other behaviours are frustrating not only to the lecturer but so too for the group as a whole. My own observation field notes commentary is:

> Same two students completely disengaged. Why they are here is a
> mystery!   (April, 2014)

A very interesting observation from the AfL environment was the reaction of the Erasmus students in comparison to the Irish students. The Erasmus students were highly engaged with the task while the Irish students did not show the same level of engagement. This task involved music not speech so no language barriers existed, a factor which might be used to explain this differential in a language task.

5.2.2 Surface Approach

Table 11: Survey Findings – Surface Approach to Learning

Surface Approach			
Question/Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1.1 Often had trouble making sense of thing I have to remember	56%	25%	19%
1.4 Tend to read very little beyond what is required to pass	41%	37%	21%
1.5 Much of what I've learned seems no more than bits and pieces in my mind	36%	38%	24%
1.8 I concentrate on what I need to know to pass	54%	29%	17%
1.12 Gear my studying to what is required for assignments and exams	70%	15%	15%
1.15 I like to be told precisely what to do in essays/assignments	83%	9%	7%
1.16 I tend to take what we've been taught at face value, without questioning it	46%	30%	23%
1.19 Going through the motions of studying without seeing where I'm going	32%	35%	33%

Eight items on the survey instrument were grouped into this category, with the majority of students indicating that they adopt a surface approach to their learning and studying. 83% of respondents replied positively to the item 'I like to be told precisely what to do in essays and other assignments' and 70% responded positively to 'I geared my studying closely to just what seems to be required for assignments and exams'. Both of these responses are confirmed by classroom observations, particularly the non-AfL classroom, where students' attitude and engagement change completely with any mention of exam.

> *Student: 'Can you put more questions up on Moodle?' (The Institute's Blackboard learning space)*
>
> *Lecturer: 'You have all the questions I have, so if you can do all of those, you have no problem with the exam'.*
>
> *Student: 'Yea, but which ones should I really concentrate on I don't want to waste my time'. At this point, other students joined in and commenting on the relevance of doing questions that may not come up on the exam?* (April, 2014)

Similarly, during the final week of the semester, the lecturer suggested that he recapped on issues pertaining to the forthcoming exam, including exam paper layout, exam location, time allowed and start time. My field notes of the students' response are simple: 'SILENCE – I could hear a pin drop' (April, 2014).

Students in this non-AfL environment did not ask questions, subject-related or otherwise, and were very accepting of what the lecturer said. During the first observation session, the lecturer paused, a number of times, to allow questions, but there was no response. He did this three times during that one hour session

and not one question was asked. This was repeated during the second observed session, and during the final session, questions were asked, but had these students being listening and attentive during class, their concerns and questions had previously been addressed and answered.

In the AfL environment, these same students were more open to discussion when prompted by the lecturer; questions were posed and led to further debate among the students themselves. When the lecturer gave real-life examples each and every student contributed to the discussion, with one student outlining the leadership style of his boss which led to the class going beyond its designated time. These discussions and debates were not student-led, rather initiated and directed by the lecturer.

This issue of not asking questions was put to the focus group members and the responses are simple:

> FG 2   *'You just don't, simple as'*
>
> FG 6   *'Not a chance'*
>
> FG 3   *'I'd be too embarrassed to ask questions'*

These responses, while worrying, are not surprising and may be as a result of a shy/timid student, but it is this final comment that causes deep concern:

> FG 5   *'Some lecturers make a fool of you they humiliate you in front of your classmates'* (to which there was total agreement).

The assessment strategy for this AfL module was via five assignments, requiring the student to write 1,000 words on the topic under consideration. Similarly to the non-AfL module, the mention of the word assignment did trigger student engagement, but not in the same manner. There was the expected moaning, but the discussion related to feed-back from the previous assignment and how to incorporate the games and group tasks into the current assignment. This assignment was submitted by many students during my final observation hour although the submission date was not until the following week.

My observations did note an element within the class that did not engage with the learning as fully as other students did and appeared consistently bored and dis-interested in the module, but when I asked the lecturer 'had these particular students handed in assignments on time', she indicated that they had but when they received feedback on previous assignments, the only issue that concerned them was the grade achieved. This observation highlights the linkage between the surface approach to learning and instrumentalism. This instrumentalism was highlighted again during the focus group when students confirmed that they rote learn for exams '*what choice do we have, the last assignment is due in last day of semester so we'll be working on that until then, then a week of studying for three exams*'. This rote learning acts as a straitjacket for many as, when they do not remember module content for the next semester, one student expressed feeling:

> FG 1 '*Stupid, but first priority is to get the grade we need to progress, once we finish the degree we can worry about how we learn/study*'.

Further comments from another student told of feelings of frustration arising from not remembering module content from one semester to the next but ask 'what choice do we have?' Is that choice given by adopting a deep approach to learning and studying?

5.2.3 Deep Approach

The focus group defined deep learning as:

FG 2   'Learning better, learning more'

FG 3   'Doing everything you are asked, like doing the homework even the reading'

Table 12: Survey Findings – Deep Approach to Learning

Deep Approach			
Question/Statement	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**
1.2 I've been over the work to check my reasoning and see that it makes sense	69%	10%	21%
1.7 New ideas: I have often related them to practical or real life contexts	65%	19%	16%
1.9 Ideas I've come across in my academic reading often set me off on long chains of thought	30%	36%	34%
1.10 Looked at evidence carefully to reach my own conclusions	42%	23%	34%
1.13 Important to follow the argument, or to see the reasons behind things	51%	16%	32%
1.14 Tried to find better ways of tracking down relevant information in this subject	44%	26%	29%
1.18 In reading for this module, I've tried to find out for myself exactly what the author means	32%	35%	33%

FG 5   'Doing that thing, handing in the draft assignment so the lecturer can comment then you can fix it so you get a better grade'.

FG 7   (laughing) 'figuring out and getting into the best study group'

FG 8   'Seriously lads, it's about remembering what we did last semester, for next semester'

The survey instrument produced seven items linked to the deep approach to learning similar to McDowell et al (2011) findings. Two of these items relate to reading which the survey participants do not do, according to these findings:

> Item 1.9: *Ideas I've come across in the academic reading often set me off on long chains of thought* – only 30% of respondents agreed with this statement; and

> Item 1.18: *In reading for this module, I've tried to find out for myself exactly what the author means* – only 32% respondents agreed with this statement.

These findings were confirmed in the observations. When students on the AfL module were required to read an academic article which the lecturer had chosen for its 'readability', less than 10% of those attending the observed class had done so, with some of these only reading part of the article. The focus group participants concurred with these findings however those few that do read the articles do follow interesting threads with further readings and then share this knowledge and understanding with other study group members.

The other five items refer to *making sense of the work*; *relating work to practical or real life contexts*; *reaching one's own conclusion*; *following the argument*; and *finding better ways to track down relevant information*. The students' survey agreed with the first two 69% and 65% respectively. However, from the observations of one particular class these findings do not concur with actual classroom practices. What the observations show is that the students in a non-AfL environment accept, unquestionably, what the lecturer says, do not appear to 'try' for themselves and, when relating the work to real life examples, the students appear disengaged and disinterested. In comparison, within the AfL environment the students made sense of the work, by participating in various group tasks which re-enforced the topic via role play and practical and real life situations.

Less than 45% of respondents agreed with the items of *reaching one's own conclusions* and *finding better ways to track down relevant information*. The observations did not provide any evidence that students in either environment found better ways to track down information: indeed what was observed is that the students relied heavily on the lecturers for notes, articles, question and solution banks. How students '*reach their own conclusion'* is difficult to observe, but on the AfL module, discussion and debate did appear to help students in their understanding of the topic. Conversely, students on the non-AfL module relied on each other for explanations (even if that explanation was incorrect) of the topic and solution to questions.

The item pertaining to '*following the argument'* scored 51% agreement with the survey respondents and while the students observed in the AfL module, when prompted by the lecturer, would concur with this finding, those same students in the non-AfL environment would negate this percentage, which suggests that the AfL module promotes a deep approach to learning as found by McDowell et al (2011), which should be rewarded by achieving higher grades.

5.3 End of Semester Results

The lecturers whose classes were observed gave the following end of semester grades:

AfL Module: Average – 62%; High – 78%; Low – 38%.

Non-AfL Module: Average – 41%; High – 69%; Low – 15%.

Is this a product of a deep approach to learning or instrumentalism? Without taking into consideration the lecturers' classroom practices and their points of view, this question is unanswerable. But, by combining the findings in this

chapter with those presented in chapter 6 allows me to explore a reasonable response to this question (see Discussion Chapter).

5.4 Summary

These findings address one of the research questions posed in this study: how students' perceive the differing assessment strategies and how they impact on their learning.

While the results of the survey instrument did not distinguish between these two environments, the observed classroom practices and data gathered from the focus group illuminate the differences that do exist. Students equate the terms *formative assessment* and AfL with continuous assessment confirming previous research and believe that they learn more in this environment than on a more traditional, exam module.

Approaches to learning and studying suggest that the students surveyed and observed adopt a surface approach, with little effort and organisation, and are very dependent on the lecturer, regardless of the assessment environment. Observations revealed that students are active participants in the AfL environment which may be a result of staff support and module design. This active participation leads to higher levels of engagement with the subject matter which contrasts with the reality of the non-AfL classroom. The focus group did indicate that students do put effort and organisation into their study and are a very motivated group, as highlighted on page 122, but this was not revealed during the survey or observation phases.

Tensions illuminated by these findings include the level of student dependency on the lecturer, the assignments of the AfL module eating into time available for exam study, teaching styles/methods, the emphasis on grades and if these grades are the result of deep learning or instrumentalism. These tensions will be considered further in the discussion chapter.

The next chapter will report on the lecturers' perspective, the findings of which were obtained via observation of classroom practice followed by interview.

6. The Lecturers' Perspective

This chapter presents the lecturers' perceptions of the assessment environment in the HE Business School under investigation. To illustrate the differing assessment environments, participants were asked to describe their assessment practices and procedures which were then linked, where possible, to an AfL environment. Barriers to implementing practices are then presented before considering how the learning culture is influenced by them. Finally, the extent to which participants understand EWL is explored and their views about whether this may be promoted and/or achieved under the current assessment policy within the Institution.

Each participant was given an identification code to maintain confidentiality – MO 1, 2 and 3 AE 1, 2 and 3. The lecturers who allowed me to observe their classroom practices previously are identified as MO 2 and AE 1. Prior to the face-to-face interview, the participants were given the interview schedule to allow them think about my questions.

6.1   Background, Role and Motivation

All respondents have at a minimum education qualification of a masters' degree or professional qualification. Similarly, all worked in industry prior to joining the lecturing staff. The reasons cited for the move include an interest in teaching resulting from an involvement in training others, to what the participant had always wanted to do. One respondent stated that it was not something she had thought about, but was asked/coaxed to *'give it a try'* (AE 3) and has now been working in the school for two decades.

Another commonality is that none of them have a teaching qualification and when recalling their introduction to this new work environment, they relied on the memories of those who had taught/lectured them as students. Two participants had completed in-house pedagogy courses and another is '*looking into doing a masters' degree in education*' (AE 2). One participant has obtained her PhD; two are about to complete theirs and one just beginning hers. These are not in the field of education rather subject specific degrees.

The role of the lecturer was addressed. One or two respondents gave a detailed list of the modules and programmes on which they lecture. Here MO 3 stated that she was a '*facilitator of learning at different levels*'. AE 1 described his role as aiming '*to improve students' understanding and knowledge of the subject area*'. Those participants who hold a programme leader position, of which there are three cite '*paperwork, go to meetings, update and create new modules when necessary and anything else that is asked of me*' (MO 1), while AE 1 who holds such a position states that this role '*tends to fall somewhere between a mentoring and a facilitator*'.

Motivating that role is '*student improvement*' (AE 1), '*to see others experience a light bulb moment* (MO 2), '*to love the role, the subject matter and the student and, to date, I do*' (MO 1). MO 2 also cited '*the impact education can have on someone's life*' describing students whom she taught in first year graduate with a Masters' degree or PhD. MO 3 cites '*my students, my own self- development*' as her motivators, while AE 2 states 'getting a new generation of students ready for the world of finance/accounting/business'. AE 3 finds motivation in '*the students of whatever ability, I love when I break down the barriers put up by the student*'. Put simply, participants in this study all put the student at the centre of their lecturing role. However, continued reading of my study will reveal if they do the same when considering assessment.

6.2 Assessment: Purpose, Illustrations and Aims

Lecturers within the Business School view assessment as an indicator of student achievement. When asked 'What are the general purposes of assessment in Higher Education?' the overall response suggests a measurement of students' learning:

MO 2   *if student has met learning outcomes*

MO 3   *assessing learning outcomes*

MO 1   *assessing knowledge level*

AE 2   *assess level of learning*

Two outliers to these responses were given by participants both of whose background is that of an accountant and who deliver modules within this field:

AE 1   *to get students 'work ready'.*

AE 3   *To prepare the student for the future, be that work or further study, to enable them to contribute to society in an informed manner.*

Certification and reporting were also mentioned with MO 1 stating that the purpose of assessment was 'to have something to put on an exam sheet … do you pass or fail *on paper*' (her emphasis). AE 2 responded similarly in stating *'provide grade for inclusion in overall degree classification'*.

6.2.1 Illustrations of Assessment Practices

All participants were asked to describe a recent assessment they had given to their students. Those working in the Department of Management and Organisation responded very differently to their colleagues in the Department of Accounting

and Economics. MO 2 and MO 3 both describe assessments which provide opportunities to try out and practise skills and knowledge, are authentic and develop learner independence:

MO 2 *The class worked in teams of four-five (with a self-selected team leader) to deliver a video recorded announcement to launch an employee profit-sharing scheme in a fictional company. The team leader was briefed on the task, and asked to deliver it within a specified time-frame, using the resources available within the team. One of the team members acted as a monitor/observer. We then used this experience to reflect on the team leaders skills in goal-setting, assigning roles & responsibilities, motivation, time-keeping and of course leadership. Each team member then reflected on the task and completed a reflective log to document what they learned from the experience.*

MO 3 *A HR consultancy project forms part of the assessment for the HR Consulting module. The assignment involves students working with a local company on a HR related consultancy project which is chosen by the client. Initially the students meet with the client in order to gain an understanding of the problem involved. A project proposal document is then prepared which specifies the objectives and the approach to be used in the assignment. The students then carry out research on the project topic and captured in a final report, which is then presented to the client.*

MO 1   *My most common assessment is to give them a report - a piece of writing to do over a period of weeks. During this time I work with them on the content, structure, and development of their writing styles. I check the work presented to me and suggest changes where necessary. I ask the students to share their work and compare their progress (peer assessment), it's active engagement all the time and I sit and move between them all the time. I will ok a piece of work however many times it is presented.*

In contrast, both lecturers in the Accounting and Economics Department are only examinations.

In contrast, AE 3 who, while constrained by the requirements of Accountancy bodies, which insist on 100% exam-based modules in order for the student to qualify for exemptions from their professional examinations, introduced a method of involving the student more in the assessment process while complying with the above:

AE 3   *I believe that if the students are given a role in their assessment, they can learn more from it. With this in mind, last semester, I got the students themselves to produce a question, solution and marking scheme for question 1 on the taxation paper. 2 groups of students producing one question each. I guaranteed that one of these questions would be on the summer paper, the other on the autumn repeat. The learning that the students did in this task was far beyond my hopes.*

AE 1 has experimented with assessment when possible, explaining '*over the space of 2 days the students are given a case study and must prepare a document*

and make a presentation to a panel of lecturers on the issues raised in that case study' (AE 1). What was he aiming to do with this case study?

6.2.2 Assessment Aims

> AE 1   *It was to get students to see the linkages between the various modules, and not to treat each module as 'stand-alone'. Essentially, I wanted to give them a taste of a real business world environment.*
>
> AE 3   *To get the students to engage with the subject and the assessment process*

Similar aims were reported by the other participants:

> MO 2   *... identify the leadership potential of participants, develop communication skills and examine how different approaches to leadership can either stifle or stimulate group cohesion, individual motivation and ultimately, task achievement.*
>
> MO 3   *... a unique learning opportunity for the students where they can apply the theoretical concepts that were introduced during the module in a practical business context. An applied learning project of this nature ensures graduates have gained 'real world' experience, which affords them the potential to enter organisations with enhanced management skills.*

Could these aims be achieved using a different assessment method?

AE 1 *Possibly, but this was the first attempt to 'link' modules and it proved to be a success.*

MO 2 *The nature of the task could have been different but it really had to be some form of experiential learning – it's hard to learn about what kind of leader you are, without being put in a situation where you have to lead – experiential learning was really the only way to do this.*

AE 3 *Maybe, but this assessment method handed the responsibility to them, it was in their hands*

Under the theme Assessment: Purpose, Illustrations and Aims, I asked those that had tried non-traditional assessment practices why others may not try different methods and modes of assessment. Their responses were very similar. AE 1, AE 3 and MO 1 used the word 'institutionalised', stating that their colleagues were in the jobs for such a long time, they did things that they have always done and were not going to change. Another comment was that many of their colleagues had never worked in the 'real world' (AE 1), that being outside the world of HE, having completed primary and master degrees and doctoral degrees (for some) and commenced lecturing immediately. All three of these participants believe that this leads to the institutionalisation of lecturers and a culture that protects their job, their course and their modules, rather than determining what is best for the students. AE 1 gave an example:

AE 1 *We are in school review mode and rather than starting with a blank sheet, there are some who will come to meetings armed with old course schedules and old module descriptors and will fight tooth and nail to protect their own. So what we will end up with is what we have done for*

the past 10-15 years, the only difference is the edition of the prescribed text!

AE 3 also agreed. She has been involved in 3 school reviews [1]and has seen very little change in modules and programmes in that time.

From the above findings, it appears that participants place their students at the centre of the assessment strategy which is viewed as 'a cycle of events' (Harlen, 2012:89) as depicted earlier on page 16. The participants' perception of this environment in relation to AfL is explored.

6.3 Formative Assessment and AfL

The literature highlights confusion surrounding the terms Formative Assessment and AfL. This was reflected in participants' responses. For example:

MO2   *… monitoring student progress during the course of a module, and giving them feedback on their progress, (as opposed to evaluating their learning at the end). Continuous assessment is built into a number of modules I teach. This requires designing a CA to match one or more learning outcomes, along with marking schemes.*

MO1   *… coming back to the student in phases during the learning process to give feedback to the student on their progress on a particular piece of work. The idea is that they improve during the cycle of formative feedback.*

---

[1] In this HE institution a school review takes place every 5 years

Two participants hinted at a deeper understanding:

AE1   … *it means giving a student a chance to show their strengths but also to make them aware of any weaknesses/gaps in knowledge in a 'safe' environment. As formative assessment isn't counting towards a grade it can encourage students to continue on the same path or can also act as a 'wake- up call'.*

AE 3   *Using assessment to provide feedback and determine the next stage of teaching and learning*

When asked about AfL, participants were less confident in their response. AfL enables feedback and counts towards a final grade, whilst formative assessment is not included in final grade (AE 1). MO 1 has heard the term but is not sure about its meaning. MO 2 responded:

I have read about it though I'm not familiar with it – I think it's related to the student taking a more active part in their learning so that they become better at managing their own ability to learn.

AE 3   *Using assessment as a learning tool, making the student responsible for their own learning.*

However the remaining participants' understanding of AfL was limited as highlighted by the following

AE 2   *Not sure, but I think it's the same as formative*

MO 3   *Don't know what it is.*

The understanding described by MO 2 and AE 3 is aligned to the literature, but it is the practices associated with AfL that link the theory to practice.

6.4 Assessment for Learning Practices

Questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self- and peer-assessment are the practices of AfL, or characteristics of an AfL environment. It is feedback that features most strongly in these findings with five of the six participants highlighting feedback as the main practice of AfL. The other practices were not mentioned by the respondents.

Interestingly, classroom observation of AE 1 and MO 1 practices provided some differing insight. For the sessions observed, each of these participants did start each class with outlining what the aim of class was, therefore sharing criteria with the group. Similarly, and contrary to the perceptions in the student focus group, both AE 1 and MO 1 frequently allowed time for questions, MO 1 in particular used student questions as the catalyst for driving the class/topic. In AE 1's classroom, when he asked 'any questions?' the response was, for my time with the group, silence. Peer- and self-assessment were also evident in both classroom settings. MO 1 had the students complete group tasks and each student had both to assess other group members and how their actions influenced their own. This assessment was included in the assignment handed in at the end of the given topic. AE 1 gave question banks to each student, he completed some of these in class and suggested that the student do the others in their own study time, after which he gave a solution bank.

During interviews, I asked each interviewee about the practices of questioning, sharing criteria and self- and peer-assessment, asking them to describe how these are used in their classroom.

AE 1   *If, by sharing criteria, you mean outlining the topic and how it fits with the rest of the module, how it will be assessed, percentage marks then yes, of course, I enact this practice, but it's not something I think about, it's part of good practice. On the questioning issue, I find it very frustrating when I allow time for questions and no one asks, and I know that some have issues around a particular topic, but what can I do, it appears to be in their culture, not just the class you observed but my students in general. Peer- and self-assessment, I do try to get students to work through examples and questions together, working in groups so as to share knowledge and assessment oneself against other group members. It works sometimes but not always, it is dependent on the individual student.*

MO 2   *I begin each topic with a discussion on the learning outcomes for it, followed by a description of the content and how that will be delivered, my expectations from the student body, and how the topic will be assessed, so yes I share the criteria with my students. Questions are at the heart of what we as lecturers do and I encourage students to ask, ask, ask. Their questions allow me to gauge the level of learning and understanding . I don't consider questioning a classroom practice, it is a necessity and a two-way flow. I hope my students engage with peer- and self-assessment. They are required to include an element of peer-assessment in their assignment, and the better assignments do include a section on self-assessment/reflection.*

I put to both participants the comment from one member of the student focus group, namely that 'some lecturers make a fool of you they humiliate you in front of your classmates'. Neither was surprised by this and stated that they could identify one or two lecturers who have reputations for this type of behaviour, but no one in the Business School, neither the management nor fellow colleagues, would be '*brave enough*' (MO 2) or '*foolish enough*' (AE 1) to challenge them on it.

Yet, as earlier discussion in the thesis indicates, these practices alone do not lead to AfL; instead, it is how they are implementing that may lead to EWL.

6.5 Implementing these practices

The initial data showed that my participants focus, in the main, on feedback:

AE 3   *Feedback is constant in my classrooms. My lecturing style is to deliver the information in one class then get the students to do questions, starting with the basic continuing to the advanced. I sit among my students every day, every class giving them continuous feedback on what they are doing. I am a great believer in 'show me where you attempted to complete the question and I will help to complete it'!!*

MO 1   *By breaking a CA into small manageable pieces and giving feedback at every stage before continuing.*

MO 2   *In terms of AfL, the best example I can give is the one to one meetings I would have periodically with my research*

students, to discuss their work and provide feedback on their progress in that regard. This regularly addresses issues around the students' learning needs, in terms of developing the skills they need to complete their research work. This process is very much driven by the student.

As mentioned above, my participants consider questioning, sharing criteria and peer- and self- assessment as good practice, yet they became frustrated when I tried to delve further into this area. I suggested that we, as a business school in a non-university higher education institution, adopt a more hands-on approach to our teaching, resulting in the thinking that questioning, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment are not concepts/practices that can be easily separated from their teaching approach. AE 1 responded that some colleagues are more suitable to research than teaching and vice versa and our class sizes, compared to those in universities, allow us to take this approach. MO 2 is of similar opinion and advises that we in Ireland should perhaps look at the UK model where there are differing types of employment contracts at third level institutions '*for example teaching only contracts*' (MO 1). AE 2 appeared to be at a loss when asked about implementing practices and he simply answered 'just do them'.

6.5.1 Barriers to the implementation of AfL practices.

The barriers discussed by my participants can be categorised into *class size, time, self-perception, other* and *student*. Class size was referred to by all of the participants, with MO 2 stating '*the biggest inhibitor is the class size – experiential learning approaches which incorporate feedback work well with small groups but this is not always the case*'.

Time was the second most referred to barrier/pressure, including 'too little contact time' (MO 1); '*12 weeks semesters ... little time to do anything other than lectures/tutorials*' (AE 1); and '*lack of double classes ... an hour is too short*' (AE 3)

Some of the participants considered how their practices might be viewed by other colleagues and by their students

MO 1   *you have to be confident in your practice, you have to maintain a relationship with the group and motivate them to keep going*

MO 2   *sometimes we assume too much about our students and it can be revealing to talk to them one to one to get an insight into how they perceive the module.*

AE 3   *If I think of handing control of the final assessment, albeit one question worth 20-25 % of the total marks, I tend to stress about standards, giving them control, how others (lecturers) might perceive this, students might rote learn the solution which is against the aim of doing this in the first place.*

MO 3   *Makes you more reflective, draining to implement but worth it.*

Other barriers included the exemptions awarded by the professional accountancy bodies, facilities – some classroom features do not allow for freedom of movement/group work, - and institutional policies (discussed further below).

Pedagogically the differences between AfL and non-AfL classrooms were considered. Two participants did not comment as they were involved in one or the other not both, so were not in a position to do so. Referring to the non-AfL module, MO 2 '*feels obliged to 'lecture' a bit more on this to ensure we have covered the material sufficiently for the exam'*, a similar feeling expressed by MO 3 and AE 3. AE 1 believes that his teaching strategy remains the same for both environments '*as I tend to try link my content to the wider business environment anyway'*.

6.5.2   Benefits of implementing AfL practices

The barriers, while significant do not detract from what lecturers' perceive to be the benefits for students. The practices associated with AfL confer the following advantages:

> AE 3   *They are taking responsibility for their own assessment and in turn their own learning as they are now setting the exam (can't blame me anymore). Drawbacks include some students do not fully participate in the task and they miss out on the experience.*

> MO 2   *feedback helps them to figure out where they are in relation to where they need to be, but if the student is consistently working towards deadlines it may be stressful.*

Both MO 1 and AE 1 commented that it is these practices that help the students learn from each other and work as a team. AE 1 concluded it '*creates a good class environment'*.

6.6 Learning Culture

Having explained '*learning culture*' to my participants, the findings show that respondents use the words *culture* and *environment* synonymously. Three respondents used the word *positive* to describe the environment in their classroom 'positive but challenging' (MO 2). Other descriptions are 'engaged' and 'enthusiastic'. But the responses were not all so encouraging. AE 2 described the environment in his classroom as being 'automated with rote/surface learning, students focused on getting exemptions rather than understanding'. AE 3 was similarly despondent

> *Competitive, majority feeling each man for himself, instrumental (were not keen to produce the question for the final exam) in that they want the grade that is all that matters. While the class is not the flagship programme, it does contain the majority of high achievers in the school. Non-national students can hinder progress, Eastern Europeans want only to focus on what is on the exam and nothing else, Asian students want numbers, numbers, numbers and process, process, process.*

Classroom observations also revealed a mixture of factors associated with culture/environment. Within the non-AfL classroom, the students were obviously surface learners, concentrating only on what may be on the exam paper and not linking that particular module to the programme as a whole or to the real world. This particular class was a level 7 degree programme and the overall sense emanating from the group was 'nobody expects too much from us'. When I put this to the lecturer, he was not surprised and stated '*the attitude of the mature students tend to set the temperature*'. MO 2 disagrees and, in her opinion, it is the lecturer who creates the culture/environment so that the same group of students can experience a number of different cultures during any given day. I also put to these participants the role of parents, programme- and institution-management. AE 1 believes many of our students, particularly first years, are in college because

it is what their parents want them to be, they themselves did not experience higher education and hold the view that it can lead to a better future for their child. This, he contests, feeds into the 'HE for all' strategies held by many policy makers, without considering that not everyone is suitable for higher education. MO 1 concurs stating that '*mass higher education has created a monster that no one knows how to control*'.

Both of these participants place responsibility for classroom culture/environment at the door of programme managers. A motivated, enthusiastic, confident programme leader will encourage those qualities in a particular group and vice versa. In relation to institution management, there can be tendencies to promote the flagship programmes, but within the business school under investigation, the participants state that all programmes are treated equally and level 6 students are equal to level 9 in terms of facilities, promotion, encouragement and expectation. MO 3 advised:

> *What we in the Business School are aiming to do is getting the student to be the best they can be regardless of programme level and produce successful graduates.*

6.7 Educationally Worthwhile Learning

This notion of 'successful graduate' leads into what we, as educators, deem to be success and allows participants to consider what is EWL. Each participant was asked 'How do you define 'success' in educational terms?' The responses in the main relate to changing/transforming the student as described in the following:

AE 1   *students have maximised their abilities and that we have prepared them properly to enable them to enter the workplace*

AE 2   *Change in the students' abilities, knowledge and thinking*

AE 3   *changing how the student views himself and the world around him, breaking down barriers*

MO 1   *retaining knowledge for future use*

MO 2   *the struggling student who through determination and perseverance achieves an academic award*

MO 3   *recognition in your field with good strong publications*

I asked MO 3 if this relates to the student or lecturers to which the reply was '*both as we all need to strive for the top*'. HE does, in the opinions of these participants, equip students with these ideas of success, with AE 3 highlighting the most important thing HE may do for students is '*breaking down barriers, levelling the playing field, changing the 'it's all about me' attitude'*. MO 2 took a more holistic, social view

MO 2   *I would hope that HE encourages students to think more about themselves, their workplaces, and their communities, and to be able to build positive relationships with others in their work and in their personal lives, based on an understanding and appreciation of individual differences and world views.*

According to participants, factors that hinder success include the focus on exam results, over-emphasis on retention and student numbers, module descriptors being too rigid, people being afraid of change. Lecturer autonomy and independence (as explained on page 48), and the work of the quality promotion office are factors that contribute to students' success. The quality promotion

office within the institute holds workshops on various teaching, learning and assessment strategies which all lecturers are invited to attend. These workshops allow discussion on differing approaches used among colleagues, across all departments and schools. The aim is that these discussions will feed into the institute's assessment policy. These, however, are not compulsory and given the shorter term time, lecturers are not always in a position to attend. Lecturer autonomy and independence in module delivery is, according to my respondents, key with many lecturers '*trying to make a difference*' (AE 3).

6.7.1 Educationally Worthwhile Learning and Assessment Policy

Does the assessment policy promote worthwhile learning? This question divided my participants in a manner that I was not expecting. Those respondents working in the Department of Accounting and Economics are constrained by professional body exemptions' while the others are not, so I thought the divide would be departmental. I was wrong. MO 1 stated that the *policy 'promotes the student getting through the system, it takes this 'student centred' idea to a whole new level'*, which is not leading to EWL. AE 3 and AE 2 concur. MO 2 and AE 1 held a mid-point view, without giving a definite answer. AE 1 stated '*anything that links different areas of business in the student's mind is a worthwhile exercise'*. MO 2 believes that once '*flexibility is incorporated into the assessment policy'* anything is achievable. MO 3 believes that the assessment policy does promote worthwhile learning.

Participants were given a speculative definition of EWL, from the literature reviewed as being the creation of the independent learner and the promotion of learning autonomy, and asked for their opinion. All agreed with the ideal of the independent learner, but as stated by MO 1 '*it isn't easy to achieve*'. MO 3 admitted to not being familiar with the term, but believes that '*lecturers are becoming facilitators of learning, enabling the student to continue 'managing'*

their learning beyond the scope of the module or programme'. AE 1 expressed a similar view

> *At secondary school there is an over-emphasis on learning by rote. It is important that we change this and develop students who can think for themselves and are able to direct their own learning. They have to be able to react and adapt to changing circumstances'.*

AE 3 agreed with the definition and stated *'if we cannot produce students who are capable of taking what they have learnt in the HE environment and using that in the workplace, what is the point in HE? Creating independent learners who take responsibility for their own assessment is vital not only for the continuation of HE but for the economy as a whole'.*

Finally, participants were asked if their definition of success equated to EWL. All but one did.

> AE 3 *Yes, if we can get the individual to view himself in terms of society as a whole and equip them with the tools necessary to break barriers (of whatever nature) then we have succeed in our role as educationalist.*
>
> AE 1 *Yes, but it is important they we don't see ourselves as facilitators to getting a degree, but as educators of people.*

In keeping with her more holistic, social view of the purpose of education, MO 2 was the only dissenting voice

I am not sure if they are the same. Success for some might be simply completing a particular programme with a lot of direction from the lecturer. For others it might be the idea of learner autonomy. It is in my opinion very individualistic.

6.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the lecturers' perspective on assessment in higher education. Assessment purposes, aims and practices were considered with some participants being restricted by the accountancy institutions' professional examination exemptions. Classroom observations and interview data both highlighted the synonymous use of the terms formative assessment and AfL and, indeed, with continuous assessment. The practices of questioning, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment were considered good practice and not associated with any one type of assessment environment. Class size and time were offered as barriers to implementing these practices. The practice of feedback was associated more with the AfL environment in which the learning culture was described as positive. The learning culture in the non-AfL environment was described as competitive, yet both were dependent on the lecturer and the mature student cohort.

As Chapter 2 showed, the literature reflects a view that the term educationally worthwhile is underpinned by the word success. In an attempt to put a definition to the term, participants were asked to express their interpretation of EWL and whether or not the assessment policy contributed to or promoted that understanding.

In the next chapter, the findings and the literature will be combined in order to discuss the implications of EWL in terms of success and the lecturers' perceived

aims of assessment in HE. This will underpin exploration of whether the AfL practices, as applied in the context of this study, act as a springboard or straitjacket for EWL (Ecclestone, 2010).

7. Discussion of Findings

This chapter will discuss the data with reference to the research questions, themes from the literature and the analysis of that data. The data was presented using extracts from the student survey, classroom observations, student focus group, and lecturer interviews to illuminate the perceptions of AfL in an integrated Business School in South East Ireland.

7.1 Assessment in Higher Education

The Bologna Process of 1999 sought convergence of the HE systems in Europe with common quality assurance measures. Bloxham and Boyd (2007) argued that this may lead to assessment of learning with an emphasis on selection and certification. Within the Business School under investigation, the majority of participants view the aim of assessment in HE as to provide indicators of achievement for certification and reporting purposes. Two participants suggested alternative assessment purposes both relating to preparing the student for the future in other words 'work ready' (AE 1). Can both of these aims be satisfied using the one assessment strategy? Designing assessment methods that place the student at the heart of that assessment is believed to provide the solution (Berryman, 1991; Carless, 2007; Harlen, 2012).

One such strategy is AfL, a term often used synonymously with formative assessment (Ecclestone, 2010; Swaffield, 2011) both in the literature and in practice. One question posed for this study is: how do lecturers perceive assessment for leaning? I argue that terminology is irrelevant and agree with Paul Black when he claimed, although very critical of the tendency, that AfL is 'a free brand name to attach to any practice' (2006:11) which is not the traditional approach to teaching, learning and assessment. In this investigation, my findings

concurred with those of Ecclestone (2010) and Swaffield (2011), in that the term continuous assessment is used to describe the AfL environment, as depicted by lecturers descriptions, the observed sessions and course documentation. It is how the practices associated with AfL, questioning, feedback, shared criteria and peer- and self-assessment are implemented ('spirit' or 'letter' Marshall and Drummond, 2006) which determine the assessment environment in any given classroom.

Referring to discussion earlier in this thesis, it is important to note that this implementation alone may not lead to an AfL environment: instead; it is the enactment of the processes and practices that make it so, and these include curriculum and assessment content. This enactment requires buy-in from all participants. Evidence gathered during the observation of the non-Afl classroom (sharing criteria, questioning, feedback in the form of working through solutions on the white board) would suggest that the lecturer was indeed implementing the practices of AfL. Yet, since the students showed little or no engagement with the subject the *enactment* of the process that is AfL did not take place.

7.2 Practices and Processes of Assessment for Learning

The literature informed us that the process of assessment fulfils quality assurance requirements of any educational institution (Crook et al 2006), including certification and reporting. The findings of this study would support this view, but to bring this 'process to life' (Crook 2006:97) certain practices must be implemented.

Evidence of questioning, feedback, shared criteria and peer- and self-assessment was observed in the AfL and the non-AfL environment under investigation. It is how they are implemented that differs. Marshall and Drummond (2006) discussed implementation in terms of 'spirit' and 'letter'. My findings, from the lecturers' perspective suggest that within the AfL classroom these practices are implemented to promote learner autonomy (spirit) while in the non-AfL

environment the lecturer does employ the practices of AfL, but does not appear to promote that same spirit of learner autonomy. Why might this be so? Authors discussing the implementation of AfL practices acknowledge that it is not easy to do so and present barriers and pressures that prevent its 'full educational benefit of these methods' (James and Pedder 2006:111). These barriers include lecturer, student numbers and pedagogy.

The role of the lecturers participating in this study equates to Newton's (2003) bureaucratisation of teaching. For some, these additional administrative duties can be problematic, but anecdotally are deemed a necessity. The institution does encourage staff development and training via support and funding of continuous professional development (CPD) on programmes either internal or external to the institution. Participation on these programmes is optional. My findings showed that lecturers do participate in staff development, undertaking doctoral studies, pedagogy modules and various teaching, learning and assessment workshops. But, as suggested by Black and Wiliam (1998), some teaching staff need to be provoked into trying out new ideas and concepts and they may feel constrained by 'their belief about what is possible within their classroom' (Harrison, 2005:260). How the lecturer perceives each cohort contributes to what may or may not be possible in each classroom. This is not one directional but iterative and it is the learning culture of each student cohort that affects the lecturer's teaching and assessment role.

Student numbers is another barrier illuminated in the literature and the findings of this study. Feedback, the practice most commonly referred to by my participants, is not easy to provide in large groups of students (Ecclestone and Swann, 1999), yet class size is the dominant barrier to implement practices, according to my findings. Implementing new practices takes time. Time is another barrier discussed by my participants, but did not feature in debates found in the literature. These two constraints, class size and time, are outside the control of lecturing

staff, and given the ever-increasing numbers entering higher education, it seems likely that this position will worsen before improving. This adds weight to Gibbs and Jenkins (1992) advice:

'unless significant change occurs, staff and students will collapse

in an attempt to keep the old system going'   (1992:19).

The final challenge for implementing AfL practices is how these will impact on pedagogy.   The literature describes a 'narrow and restricted view' (Candy, 2000:274) where the teaching is one directional with the lecturer/teacher passing knowledge to the student and the end of term assessment based on how well the student can repeat that knowledge. If this is our view of teaching, the adoption of rote learning strategies by our students cannot be criticised, as such a restricted view promotes such approaches to learning which as I argued above, citing Vermunt (1998), is not seen as appropriate in HE settings.

Thankfully, my findings do not reflect this viewpoint; instead my participants view their teaching role as being facilitators of learning which concurs with Candy (2000) who suggested that teaching should 'encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers' (ibid: 274). However, the facilitation role can, at times, be over-played and my data reveal a tension. One participant, in describing a recent assessment given to students, explained how she will give feedback on any one assignment as many times as the student requires. This facilitation of learning is very questionable. I query if the final product/assignment is the work of the student or the work of the lecturer? Such an approach to teaching and assessment is spoon-feeding and I argue that this strategy does not benefit either the student or the lecturer in the long term and promotes what Yorke (2003) cautioned against, 'learned dependence' (2003:489).

From the outset of this research, I was aware of the pedagogical differences between AfL and non-AfL classrooms. The majority of the modules on which I teach are deemed non-AfL and the style of teaching is didactic. The reason, I suggest, is that many are accounting-based and required a large number of threshold concepts to be understood before progress can be made. But my findings suggest that our students do not engage with this teaching style. A solution may be found in Webb's (1997) explanation of the stereotype of the Chinese learner where rote learning and memorising are used for understanding purposes. To achieve this will require change, but changing strategy is a slow process requiring lecturers to re-think their pedagogies and the students to become active participants in their learning and assessment. If assessment can be viewed as a collaborative process between lecturer and student, as described by Volante and Beckett (2011), lecturers must be confident in their own practice before inviting students into the fold.

Participant AE 3 detailed her assessment method (giving students the opportunity to write a question for the final exam) and expressed her concerns over standards and how her strategy might be viewed by her colleagues. I suggest that what AE 3 was aiming to do was to include the student in the assessment process while remaining within the constraints of an exemption driven subject, and, rather than stress over how her colleagues may view such a strategy, she should engage with them about how the students benefited from this approach. If the notion of learning as a social process (Shepard, 2000; Peim and Hodkinson, 2007) is accepted, the relationships between lecturers and between lecturer and students are central to that process. These relationships forge the learning culture of any group.

7.3 Learning Culture

The literature identifies the differing types of learning cultures, with the authors cautioning that many of these differences are 'influenced by what is perceived as

good learning' (Hodkinson et al, 2007b). To understand the learning culture, Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2007) offer a number of dimensions and place the student-lecturer relationship at the heart of these. Examples of this relationship were presented by my participants when considering barriers to implementing AfL practices and outlined on page 144.

I believe that the relationship between the student and lecturer is central to developing a learning culture that promotes EWL. Analysing the findings further, confirms my belief. In the AfL classroom the majority of students are actively engaged and enthusiastic, albeit heavily dependent on encouragement from the lecturer. Students appeared to enjoy the class and the focus group confirmed that they (the student) learn more from this environment. The lecturer mingled among the student cohort and as the observation field notes suggest, it was difficult at times to distinguish between lecturer and student. The method of teaching in this environment gave the students an element of choice, each topic was delivered via lecture notes, articles and group task, and assessed by a 1000 word assignment. These lecturers who worked at developing and maintaining relationships with the students describe the culture as positive, engaged and enthusiastic.

In contrast, the non-AfL classroom was more subdued, the majority of students not engaging with the lecturer/lecture. The teaching method was didactic with the lecturer staying at the top of the classroom at all times (during the observation sessions). This module was assessed via an end of semester two hour exam and mentioning this changed the dispositions and actions of students. The focus group data confirmed that for exam-based modules, students adopt the rote learning approach due to lack of time. The lecturers on these modules labelled the culture as competitive, automated and grade orientated.

These findings concur with Postlethwaite and Maull (2007) who outlined factors which contribute to a positive and a negative learning environment. The positive environment facilitates the social process that is learning. However, I posit that it is the learner's own identity that facilitates this social process and creates/enhances the learning culture of a particular classroom. The student participants in this study were third year undergraduates, indicating an average age of 20/21 years of age. The literature informs us that a learner's identity begins to take form at sixteen to eighteen years of age (Illeris, 2014) so how can we, as educators, expect our 20 year olds to fully engage with the social process of learning? My view is further reflected in the findings, both from the lecturers and the student focus group. The lecturers state that it is the lecturer/programme leader or mature student who influences the learning environment, the student focus group suggesting that it is the mature student who determines the atmosphere. Illeris (2014) advises that developing each learner's identity 'is via an advanced kind of trial and error learning where many drafts of behaviour and understanding are tried out' (ibid: 159). I suggest that the differing learning environments offered to our students, be they restrictive or expansive (Davies & Ecclestone, 2008), positive or negative (Postlethwaite & Maull, 2007), AfL or non-AfL within the HE institution under investigation enable this trial and error learning. If that trial and error acts as 'a springboard to more expansive learning' (Davies & Ecclestone, 2008:75), for example the active participation of students on the AfL module as opposed to the didactic teaching style on the non-AfL module, we, as educators, just may achieve EWL.

7.4 Educationally Worthwhile Learning

As discussed in the literature review chapter, there is no definition of EWL its meaning is implicitly assumed and is underpinned by the word success. How my participants (lecturers) termed success in educational terms may be categorised in a single word – transformation (for examples of this, see page 149). According to Knud Illeris (2014), the definition of transformative learning as given by Mezirow (2006), 'transformation of the learners' meaning perspectives, frames of

reference, and habits of mind' (Mezirow, 2006, as cited in Illeris, 2014:148), is a very narrow definition and should include emotional and social elements. Together the cognitive, the emotional and the social conditions 'may be perceived as the most advanced kind of human learning' (Illeris, 2014: 149). Combining this understanding of transformation with the views of the lecturers participating in this study (see below for examples of these views) suggests that EWL is transformative learning. So, for the purpose of this study I offered a tentative definition and asked is transformation of the student the most important thing in HE?

While the many complex aims of HE are outside the scope of this study, I did ask lecturers what they believe the most important thing HE can do for students. Here again, the responses may be categorised by the word transformation, as illuminated by the following quotations

MO 2 *…HE encourages students to think more about themselves, their workplaces, and their communities, and to be able to build positive relationships with others in their work and in their personal lives, based on an understanding and appreciation of individual differences and world views.*

MO 1 *not to be afraid of not knowing but being able to be confident about learning and questioning new things.*

AE 3 *breaking down barriers, levelling the playing field, changing the 'it's all about me' attitude.*

But, where is the evidence that such aims have been realised? Glisczinski (2007) states that 'there is little evidence that HE is doing more than reinforcing patterns that enable students to assimilate new experiences into … conditioned frames of

reference through which individuals filter ostensible learning experiences' (ibid: 318).   Focusing on skill acquisition, mastering tasks or being coached to meet the assessment criteria – instrumental learning (Habermas, 1984) - does not prepare students for the work place, because 'individuals must be able to think and act dynamically – rather than linearly – in postmodern society' (Glisczinski, 2007:319). Instrumental learning – 'consume, compartmentalize, and regurgitate information' (ibid: 319) – is what students and parents have come to expect from educational providers but is not appropriate or reliable for that 'postmodern society' (ibid). My participants, quoted above, are aiming to produce graduates who have the ability to be creative, critical thinkers ready for the world of work, but these aims and beliefs as to what is important in HE are hindered by this instrumentalism promoted by need for grades (both student and school management), exemption driven modules and award classifications.

During the writing of this discussion chapter, I was walking with some final year students who were looking for 'hints and tips' for the forthcoming end of semester exams. I told them that we are trying to create critical thinkers for the benefit of their future employers to which one responded:

> *'employers don't want critical thinkers, they want monkeys*
> *who will do what they (the employer) want, when they*
> *want, how they want'*   (BBS 4 student)

If this is the belief held by our student body, albeit here just the meanderings of one final year student who has secured employment subject to examination results, then the adoption of rote/instrumental approaches to learning is justified, at least from their point of view and concur with Glisczinski (2007) who suggested that 'in its simplest form, higher education today may be generating little more than obedient citizens who are prepared to work within society's institutions, professions and organisations' (Glisczinski, 2007:318).

7.5 Obedient citizens or Transformed learner?

This section aims to discuss the findings from the students' perspective in relation to the literature and the research question posed at the outset of this study: What are the implications of AfL practices on students' learning?

The learning environment was addressed in the first instance. Sub-themes within this are staff support and module design; engagement with subject matter; assessment, feedback and grades; and peer support. Students, like lecturers, use the terms AfL, formative assessment and continuous assessment synonymously. Classroom observations provided evidence of an AfL environment leading me to suggest that within the Business School under investigation AfL equates to continuous assessment. As alluded to above, terminology, definitions and labelling are not important; instead, it is the enactment of practices and process that create the environment which influences students' learning. These practices and processes are enacted via the sub themes, so each of these will now be discussed in turn.

7.5.1 Staff support and module design

Staff support has a different meaning for each individual student. The student cohort who participated in this study came from diverse backgrounds and what they expected from staff varied from one student to the next. Those coming to HE from the traditional Irish secondary school system are teacher dependent and as discussed by Entwistle et al (2002) this dependency 'should be gradually reduced so as to challenge students to develop their own way of learning for themselves' (ibid: 8). My study included third year students, the majority in their final year of HE, yet high levels of dependency on lecturers were evident in both environments under investigation, albeit less so in the AfL classroom. Can this be attributed to the fact that the institution in which this study was conducted does not, at the time of writing, have university designation and our students view it as a 'safer

environment' in which to obtain their higher education? I suggest this is a question suitable for a future study.

Confusion over the type and level of staff support was also evident. Within the AfL environment, the lecturers' prompting of discussion on tasks and assignments led to participants developing self-assessment capabilities which, in turn, led to improved learning. This particular lecturer advised on assignment structure but not content. This was viewed by students as 'staff support'. Observation of the non-AfL classroom depicted a lecturer who strongly supported his students, yet it would appear that these students do not hold this opinion, with students participating in the focus group suggesting that for this particular module they rote learn. Is this a result of module design?

Module design encompasses syllabus, teaching and assessment. For the non-AfL module the didactic method of teaching was observed. From classroom observations, it appears that students do not engage with such methods, yet they (the students) believe that they have a degree of choice as to how they study and what elements of the syllabus they should concentrate on. This choice, I posit comes from the student's ability to review past exam papers and determine what questions may/will appear on their exam. End of semester exams have, I fear, become repetitive, particularly for accounting-based modules, so students can choose what topics in the syllabus to ignore and what to concentrate on to attain the best grade possible. Little or no engagement with the subject matter is required.

7.5.2   Engagement with the Subject Matter

In contrast, the AfL environment promotes engagement through the practice of knowledge, skills and understanding, but what made this practice different to the non-AfL environment was the authenticity of the task. Classroom observations highlighted the 'real-world' tasks in which the students were required to role-play.

This active participation is purported to lead to deeper learning and higher grades, but these are not the same as will be discussed below.

7.5.3 Assessment, Feedback and Grades

This theme emerged from the analysis of the AfL module. Two very different assessment strategies were employed by the lecturers in the observed modules. Students prefer and attain better grades in the AfL environment. Can this be attributed to the feedback given? I would suggest yes. The literature highlights the importance of feedback; according to Scaife and Wellington (2010), this is what students want and lots of it but given without a grade is of little use, according to my focus group participants. This, feedback with no grade, contrasts starkly with all the received wisdom from AfL advocates e.g. Black and Wiliam (1998, 2003).

According to my survey respondents, understanding the subject, rather than surface learning, will lead to good grades on modules delivered in an AfL environment. I posit that within this context, this 'understanding' may lead to instrumentalism or coaching to the grade as the good grades are based on the repetitive process that is the handing in of assignments based on; lecture notes prepared *by the lecturer*, articles that are handed to students *by the lecturer*, group tasks organised and monitored *by the lecturer* and feedback given *by the lecturer*. Focus group participants admitted that they rarely read beyond what is given to them, so are these good grades awarded for 'deep learning'? I think not, but I will discuss this surface/deep divide below.

7.5.4 Peer Support

The theme of peer support emerged from the original study from which the survey instrument for my investigation was borrowed. However, analysis of my findings

showed that peer support was a stand-alone category for the non-AfL environment, while it was incorporated into and dependent upon staff support and module design in the AfL environment. I suggest that the didactic teaching style on the non-AfL module contributes to this position. Although the lecturer on this module was very supportive of his students, as described above, the students were not active participants, did not appreciate the support offered by the lecturer and so turned to the 'deemed expert' for that support and transfer dependency to that peer rather than the lecturer.

Thus far in this discussion, the conclusion would appear to be that we, as a Business School are encouraging our graduates to be 'obedient citizens', yet our aim is to promote critical thinking and learning autonomy. Narrowing the gap between obedient citizen and transformed learner may be achieved by how our students approach their learning which in turn may change the perception of our graduates.

7.6 Approaches to Learning

On first reading the literature in this field, it is the deep approach to learning that is required in higher education, so as providers of higher education we must transform the learner from one who adopts a surface approach to what is appropriate at this level. The majority of the students in this Business School have been awarded for their surface approach to learning/instrumental learning at second level and as stated above, the transformation to a different type of learning is a gradual process. This process should be concluded by third year I suggest, but from the students' perspective this does not seem to be so.

For non-AfL modules where the assessment methods is the traditional end of semester exam, students rote learn – memorising and regurgitate information – because they have little time for anything else, the AfL module assignments take

up so much of their time. Is this due to the effort and organisation skills, or lack thereof, of our students? The focus group did suggest otherwise, but I posit that the students who were willing to participate in a focus group are committed to their studies in the first instance and it is the survey and classroom observations that show the true reality.

Glimmers of hope shine from the AfL modules for the surface/deep divide, where students relate their learning to the wider world and become actively interested in the course content (McCune, 2003). However this only occurs when instructed and prompted by the lecturer, so while the lecturer is trying to influence students to adopt the deep approach to learning, the lecturer dependency issue is raised again, illustrating that our students are not independent or autonomous without the drive and motivation an enthusiastic lecturer provides.

7.7   The surface-deep divide

Learner independency and autonomy are key components of deep learning. The opposite is true for surface learning. Distinguishing between the surface and deep approach to learning is extensively done in the literature yet my focus group findings show that students did not appear to understand the terms, or if they do it is not something they are concerned with as highlighted by 'once we finish the degree we can worry about how we learn or study' (FG 1). Or is it that they do not understand the word learning per se?

In general, many of our students do not read; do not ask questions; do not engage; and only become active participants when instructed to do so by lecturers. The education system from which the majority of our students enter higher education promotes rote/surface learning. Their learning history is the surface approach, with no other choice, and the assessment strategies with which they have become accustomed award this approach to learning, it is their 'comfort zone' (Ecclestone,

2004). At the time of writing, the Irish post-primary sector is being asked by the government to adopt an AfL approach at the junior cycle. This request is being met with much opposition resulting in teachers unions taking strike and work-to-rule action. So if the teachers, with whom our students have engaged for the past six years are adverse to the adoption of AfL practices, how can we, in higher education encourage them to adopt a deep approach to learning?

The literature informs us that it is the learning culture, or more specifically the environment within the culture, that influences learning. Evidence from my findings particularly classroom observations highlight two different learning environments which the students are engaged in. Each environment offered different teaching, learning and assessment styles, yet the level of 'learned dependency' (Yorke, 2003) was equal in both settings. In the context of this study, it appears that it is not the learning environment that influences learning, it is their 'comfort zone' that impacts on how our students approach their learning and extracting them from this is not easy. Ecclestone (2004) discussed that within a vocational education system it was the comfort zone that protected both the students and teachers from the changes in and reforms of assessment regimes. I suggest that the comfort zone of my student participants is restricting transformative learning and they graduate as obedient citizens from the 'simplest form of higher education' (Glisczinski, 2007:318).

7.8 Summary

This discussion chapter began with a focus on assessment in higher education and the practices that bring this process to life (Crook, 2006). Research has defined, labelled, termed these processes and practices, thereby setting boundaries for their implementation and enactment in practice. My (lecturer) participants were not familiar with many of the terminologies provided by the literature but do recognise good practice in teaching and learning. Similarly, they recognise the

different teaching, learning and assessment environments offered to students and the diverse attitudes towards both.

These diverse attitudes contribute to positive and negative learning cultures. The AfL environment provides the positive learning culture, but this I argued is the result of the students' active participation as determined by the module design. Students too, view the AfL module in positive terms, but whether it contributes to EWL is questionable.

My discussion of the literature review and the findings have led me to suggest that EWL is transformative learning, and while this transformation may be cited as the aim of many in working in HE, this investigation found little evidence of that aim being achieved. Students do graduate, some quite successfully. Success equates to high grades and overall degree classification and while this may satisfy the certification and reporting requirements of HE, if there is no transformed learning, our students/graduates are simply obedient citizens - albeit highly qualified ones.

8.   So What and Who Cares?

The title for this research implications chapter stems from comments made by Professor Arthur Money, Emeritus Professor at Henley Business School, University of Reading, during research methods workshops delivered at my workplace. He suggested that researchers, novice and experienced, should always ask themselves 'so what and who cares' at the end of each section of their work. This phrase has never being as relevant for me as it is now at this stage of my study as I consider my response to a question raised by a delegate at the 2015 Higher Education Conference at Sheffield University, 'now that you know what you know, what are you going to do with it?'

This was a small scale case study at an integrated Business School in the South East of Ireland conducted at a micro level to discover the views held by third year undergraduate students and six of their lecturers on AfL during the academic years 2013 and 2014. In this final chapter, I will review the findings referring to the research question and its related sub-questions.

AfL is a term used in the literature to describe the enactment of a set of practices which may result in our students adopting a deeper approach to learning. I use the word enactment, as the simple implementation of these practices is not AfL as prescribed by its early advocates Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998). Although the term was not familiar to the participants in this study, the evidence did show that the practices of feedback, questioning, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment are commonplace in their classrooms, allowing me to conclude that it is the enactment of the practices that bring the process to life and life to process (Crook, 2006).

Evidence suggests that the students approach their learning in a surface way, even when encouraged to do otherwise. The cohort under investigation showed evidence of high levels of 'learned dependence' (Yorke, 2003) with reliance heavily placed on the lecturer, mature student or deemed expert in the group when completing tasks and assignment in both assessment environments under study.

Rote learning appears to be the dominant approach to learning adopted by our student cohort. I would argue that we cannot expect less because we promote it. In the wider context of my study, students who attain high grades are celebrated by being included on the Dean's List and the top 5% from each year of each programme are presented with a certificate of achievement. This accolade is awarded on results only; course leaders, lecturers and peers are not asked to nominate candidates, so those who may not attain the highest grade will never make *the* List. The learning culture encouraged by such learning is restrictive (Davies & Ecclestone, 2008), centred on meeting targets both institutional and individual and does not facilitate the social process that is learning.

Based on my findings, as an insider researcher, I will discuss the implications and offer some recommendations for future research. Finally I will conclude with some thoughts on my plans for dissemination and publication of my thesis and the relationship between AfL and EWL.

8.1   Overview of the Study

This study has suggested that the purpose and goals of assessment in higher education have not changed in recent times. It still dominates the ways in which our students approach their learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004) and how they view the key purposes of higher education (Boud and Falchikov, 2003). Students should be at the heart of any assessment method but many view themselves 'as outside the assessment process' (Ecclestone and Swann, 1999:383). With policy

discourse focused on certification and achievement in higher education, how can we, the educators, set out to place the students at the centre of the assessment process? The literature provided the answer in the form of AfL, the buzz term for improved learning since the 1990s. Definitions were proposed (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Popham, 2006, ARG, 2011; Klenowski, 2009) and practices and processes were developed (for example Black & Wiliam, 1998; ARG, 2002, Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Hounsell 2007). How these practices were implemented in different types of educational contexts came under the spotlight (Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Davies & Ecclestone, 2008) and tensions illuminated by that implementation include problems of resources (Harrison, 2005; Pedder et al, 2005; Yorke, 2003) and the impact on pedagogy (Webb and Jones, 2009; Irons, 2008; Ecclestone & Swann, 1999).

What are the AfL practice and procedures in place and how are these enacted?

In contrast to many of the aspirations embodied in this literature my findings show that the majority of my participants did not understand the term AfL. This and other terms used to describe assessments that are not end of semester examinations are used synonymously with continuous assessment. Classroom observations did illuminate practices that are attributable to the AfL environment. The practices of AfL – feedback, questioning, sharing criteria and self- and peer-assessment – are all evidenced in the classrooms.

Enacting these practices and procedures is not easy and as stated previously, requires the buy-in of lecturer and student. My findings show that in the AfL environment enactment was taking place, however in the non-AfL environment the lecturer was implementing these practices, but as the student cohort were not actively engaged with the procedures, AfL did not take place.

How do lecturers perceive AfL?

When questioned, lecturers did not view questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self- and peer-assessment as being attributable to any one environment, rather it is viewed as good teaching and learning practice. Feedback was highlighted as the main concern as time and class size are considered barriers to providing quality feedback to the student cohort. These, and the other barriers mentioned in section 6.5.1 do not deter the lecturer from implementing/enacting the practices and procedures of AfL as the benefits for both lecturer and student outweigh them.

What are the implications of AfL practices on students learning?

According to research placing the student at the heart of the assessment process should influence how they approach their learning. Approaches to learning are discussed in the literature under four concepts, deep approach, surface approach, monitoring study and organisation and effort (Entwistle, 1997, McCune, 2003), with the deep approach being sought after in higher education (Prosser and Trigwell, 1992). Despite being regarded widely in the literature as inferior to deep learning, the surface approach is not all bad insofar as it is used for understanding purposes (Webb, 1997). The findings from this study obtained via survey instrument, classroom observation and student focus group indicate that the majority of students do, in fact, adopt a surface approach to their learning. Again, in theory at least, the AfL environment should offer these students the conditions where the adoption of the deep approach to learning is encouraged.

This learning environment is determined by factors which include staff support and module design, engagement with subject matter and peer support (McDowell et al, 2011) and when these are constructively aligned (Biggs, 1996) lead to higher

quality learning. This environment may not be suitable for all, but when used 'in the right place for the right purpose' (Perkins, 1999:8) can only benefit both students and lecturers.

Students participating in this study are currently offered two types of teaching, learning and assessment environments, namely continuous assessment and end of semester examination. Findings from the student perspective suggest that students learn better in the former environment with end of semester results confirming their perspective, but learning cannot be equated with results/grades. This type of learning is referred to by Yorke (2003) as learned dependency which may promote instrumentalism and not lead to EWL.

How do these practices contribute to EWL?

This term, educationally worthwhile learning is, in the main, implicitly assumed in the literature. Underpinning the phrase is success, which is defined as a favourable outcome of an undertaking (The Penguin English Dictionary, 2002). Grades are used by students, their parents, politicians and policy makers to determine success and so can be interpreted as EWL. But those grades awarded as a result of rote learning and memorising cannot and should not provide the foundations for future independent and autonomous learning.

My lecturer participants described success in educational terms as transforming the individual (as illuminated in sections 6.7 and 7.4) and believe in the ideal of the independent learner. Achieving this is not easy with one respondent suggesting that it is 'very individualistic' (MO 2).

My student participants were not asked directly what they understood by the term EWL, but during the focus group phase the students did indicate that a third level education would improve their job prospects and in turn their lifestyles. However, the quotes from two students, restated here, do question what students believe to be the many aims of HE:

> 'employers don't want critical thinkers, they want monkeys who
>
> will do what they (the employer) want, when they want, how
>
> they want' (BBS 4 student)

> '… once we finish the degree we can worry about how we learn/study'
>
> (FG 1)

8.2   Limitations

This study was not without its limitations.

It was a small scale study, much smaller than the study from which the survey instrument was adopted, with 166 students completing the questionnaire, ten volunteering to take part in the focus group and six lecturers. It could, therefore, be argued that the findings are not immediately generalisable as they relate to one cohort, one school and one college. But, as Wolcott (1995) argued 'Each case study is unique, but not so unique that we cannot learn from it and apply its lessons more generally' (ibid: 175), concurring with Eisner (1998) and Wellington (2000).

The time period for my study was the academic years 2013 and 2014. The findings and perspectives garnered from students are just a snap shot in time and may not bear resemblance to previous or future year cohorts.

Another student-related limitation arose during the pilot study of the survey instrument. Students commented that their responses were dependent on the lecturer they had for a particular module. This study was not about individual lecturers, rather about the assessment and learning environments in which the students participated. At the live stage of data collection, this was re-iterated to students, but there is no way of knowing if they really understood this or not. Another limitation arising from the survey instrument, which did not arise at the pilot study phase, was the use of a neutral point on the Likert scale, number 3 on a five point scale. In the context of this study this neutral position was adopted by approximately 20% of participants as shown on Tables 10, 11 and 12.

The insiderness of my research may also be considered a limitation. I had ease of access to the students, but in my position as lecturer, although not their lecturer, perhaps they felt they had little choice but to take part in the study. My insider position allowed me insight into the choice of lecture to participate in my study. Such insight or choice would not have been available if I had been an outsider and so these findings should be viewed with this in mind. However, the reader should note that I am well-liked and respected among my colleagues and those that participated in my study knew I wanted the truth, or their version of it, rather than what they perceived to be the answers I required. This knowledge has given me confidence in the findings and my interpretation of them.

For my final limitation, I will quote from the thesis of a fellow EdD student, who also carried out an in-depth study of AfL in a tertiary college in England, at University of the West of England, who so eloquently put 'as a practitioner-researcher, I have endeavoured to be open and honest, but recognise that my findings are always constructions of my mind, remain tentative and are never definitive (Carter, 2012)'.

8.3 Recommendations

The recommendations arising from this research study are broken into three sections; implications for theory; practice and further research.

8.3.1 Implications for theory

At the beginning of this study I, foolishly, set myself the task of defining the term EWL. In contrast to researchers who have contributed to the discourse, I would argue that definitions and the resulting boundaries may focus future research on these rather than the essence/spirit of what is EWL. I offer a tentative definition/understanding of the term for the purpose of this study, but suggest that what was found in the literature review for this study, namely that EWL is explicitly stated or implicitly assumed, is as it should be and allows the reader to conjure his/her own thoughts and interpretations.

The practices associated with AfL; feedback, questioning, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment, are not from my findings, deemed to be exclusive to any one learning environment in this study. As my study also confirms, this problem has led to the over-use of the term AFL, to describe any form of assessment that is not the traditional end of semester examination, a fact Paul Black (2006) was very critical of. This tendency has undermined what the advocates of AfL promoted initially and I posit that in the Irish higher education system, the enactment of, and subsequent implementation of these practices need further attention.

8.3.2   Implications for practice

This study has illuminated a number of practical implications, summarised as:

Assessment is not only at the heart of students learning it is also at the heart of any educational institution. Many third level providers in the Republic of Ireland, similar to the UK, are, in the main, state funded and so accountability plays a key part in the day to day life of those institutions. Accountability in terms of our graduates is viewed in terms of grades and award classifications. What quality mark indicates that we, the education providers, have attained the aims of higher education? A degree classification based on assessment that has been awarded for surface/rote learning is of little use to the graduate or his/her future employer(s).

A further implication from this study is allowing the lecturer space to change their module.   Semesterisation, non-lecturing duties, student numbers all militate against implementing change to any given module, its teaching, learning and assessment. I would argue that lecturers who want to enact change should be encouraged and given space to do so. The incoming President of the institute in which this study was conducted sent a very motivating email to us, his colleagues, on his appointment to the role. The comment most apt in relation to space for change is:

> '*You are the expert in your area and you should be given the platform to suggest and implement changes. Let's not be afraid of change, you suggest something, we try it and if it works we keep it. If it doesn't work then we have learned something*'

> (Donnelly, April 2015, internal staff email)

My research has suggested the need for lecturers to participate in continuous professional development. Courses are offered by the quality promotions office in

the institution. This 'situated learning of professionals' (Boud & Hager, 2012:27) would allow lecturers to engage 'in environments that afford them opportunities to extern their own practice through participation in the practices of others' (ibid: 27), thus enabling participants to implement the 'spirit' rather than the 'letter' of AfL practices (Marshall & Drummond, (2006). However, participation on these programmes is optional. The findings from this research show that none of the participants in this study have any teacher education qualifications. This paucity of pedagogical training may hinder the understanding of teaching, learning and assessment and subsequently impedes the enactment and implementation of same. To negate this imbalance I suggest that these CPD programmes, where the focus is on the enhancement of learning and its complex relationship with AfL, should be mandatory for all lecturing staff. In this way new ideas on teaching, learning and assessment methods can be shared, debated and considered for use in their classroom.

In higher education today, students are viewed as consumers/customers. They have expectations, and there is huge pressure to meet them. Missing from this equation is accountability. Who will take the blame if those expectations are not satisfied? Our students need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions. Accountability, according to Lopez (1970), 'is to be distinguished from responsibility by the fact that the latter is an essential component of authority which cannot be delegated' (ibid: 231). Students can only be held accountable if they are given clearly defined expectations/requirements of a particular module and the resources required to achieve them. Once equipped with these requirements and resources it is each individual student's responsibility to utilise them as deemed necessary. My findings suggest that becoming active participants in their classroom and in their learning may be the first step in that direction.

For the students I propose a 'learning how to learn' module in first year semester one programmes to allow students realise that the type of learning they undertook at second level of the Irish education system is not appropriate for higher

education and to introduce the characteristics of deep learning. This could initiate an approach to studying and learning (Entwistle, 2003; McCune, 2003) that should be further developed during their HE experience which may then promote learner independence and autonomy in their future work place.

8.3.3   Implications for future research

There are a number of opportunities for future research that I have identified as a result of this study.

Widening the scope of this current investigation to include all third year students in all schools across the institute would add impetus to the implications for practice outlined above.

A comparative study between the Institute of Technologies and University sector could establish the differences and similarities between the two environments and provide insight into the impact that these differences have on learning.

To implement in first year semester one a 'learning how to learn' module, and follow the impact of this on the students approaches to learning during the course of their studies.

8.4   Dissemination and Publication

Throughout this research journey, I have discussed my research question and findings with different people, for example, my EdD cohort, my work colleagues, my students, my Head of Department and Head of School. What I recall from each conversation is the level of interest each group had in my research giving me the confidence to assert that my question is one that needs to be addressed in this context. I, therefore, began the dissemination process during the course of this

project, the literature review chapter was presented at the Irish Academy of Management Conference in September 2013 (Bowe, 2013), my pilot study was presented at the same conference in the following year (Bowe,2014), and my findings from the students perspective was presented at the HE Conference in Sheffield University (Bowe-Deegan, 2015). The positive responses to my research have encouraged me to continue to disseminate my findings so that students, lecturers, school management and policy makers may consider the implications of my findings on future learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

In terms of publications from this thesis, my 2013, Irish Academy of Management paper won 'Best Paper' in the Teaching and Learning Track and was subsequently published. In future publications, my goal is to focus on two separate strands of my findings. The first will focus on the students' perspectives while the second will consider lecturers' perspectives in the context of the Irish higher education system. My target publications are Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice; and Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education.

8.5   Conclusion

This research was a small scale, single case study of the AfL in an integrated Business School. The findings offer insights into the teaching learning and assessment environments offered to third year undergraduate students and how these influence their approaches to learning. The teaching learning and assessment strategy for the institution promotes AfL, but reality shows a different truth.

Despite the pressures outlined, I conclude that we should not be too hard on ourselves, the educators. As a social process, the art of learning has many actors, (lecturers, students, management, administrators, policy makers, politicians) and if any group have not developed their own identity, the part they play in the

process is limited. My student participants had an average age of 20/21 years. The age at which an individual's identity is fully formed is their late 20s (Illeris, 2014): perhaps, therefore, we cannot expect our undergraduates to fully engage with the learning process and so hinder the enactment of AfL practices.

The lecturer and the variety of learning environments offered during the course of each particular programme, guides the students through the learning process. It is the lecturer who establishes, develops and maintains relationships with students so they may engage with the different learning and assessment environments that they will encounter at HE. This variety of learning environments allows the student to engage with the many ways in which learning and assessment may be undertaken. In so doing each individual student can experience different modes of learning and assessment as described by Illeris (2014) as 'trial and error learning' which provides the student with the tools necessary to adapt to changing worlds outside of higher education.

Finally, I turn my thoughts to EWL, a term that has invaded my mind for the past two years. What is it and how do we achieve it? Without knowing what it was, a definition per se, how could I know if AfL contributed in any way to its achievement? The literature review did nothing to help since meanings were vague or implicitly assumed in many cases. I gave my participants a tentative definition/my understanding of the term and the majority agreed with it, but I was not satisfied. So what and who cares? I obviously do. In the middle of analysing my data, the 2015 Higher Education Conference at Sheffield University was a standout moment for me. I listened to Professor Paul Ashwin from the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University, whose research interests include students' and academics' experiences of higher education, speak about the transformed learner. I read his paper (Ashwin et al, 2014) and have since concluded in the light of my findings that the outcomes of EWL equate with the outcomes of transformative learning.

So to answer my over-arching research question: do assessment for learning practices act as a springboard or straitjacket for educationally worthwhile learning? As both a researcher and a practitioner I conclude that the practices of questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and peer- and self-assessment are not exclusive to AfL. I conclude that it is the enactment of these practices, in *any* classroom environment within particular institutional learning cultures, that determine if they act as a springboard or straitjacket to EWL.

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APPENDICES

Appendix   **Description**

Appendix A   Ethical Approval from Sheffield University

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Appendix I   Irish Leaving Certificate Examination Points Calculation Grid

Appendix A

Ethical Approval from Sheffield University

Patricia Bowe-Deegan
EdD Higher Education

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31 March 2016

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Dear Patricia

ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER

Springboard or Straitjacket: Assessment for Learning as an Educationally Worthwhile Learning Tool, a case study in an Irish Higher Education Institute.

Thank you for submitting your ethics application. I am writing to confirm that your application has now been approved.

We recommend you refer to the reviewers' additional comments (please see attached). You should discuss how you are going to respond to these comments with your supervisor BEFORE you proceed with your research.

This letter is evidence that your application has been approved and should be included as an Appendix in your final submission.

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely

Professor Dan Goodley

Chair of the School of Education Ethics Review Panel

cc   Prof. Kathryn Ecclestone

Appendix B

Ethical Confirmation from Waterford Institute of Technology

Dear Patricia,

We are delighted to note how your research degree work is progressing. This note is to confirm that the academic management team of the School has discussed your work and is satisfied it meets ethical standards especially for disclosure to the students. The approval in your supervising university can extend to WIT.

This approval will be noted at our next School Board meeting. Again, well done on your best paper award at IAM 2013.

Regards,

Tom.

Dr. Thomas O'Toole,

Head of School of Business and Chair, School Board.

Appendix C

AfL Questionnaire

<u>**Section 1: approaches to learning and studying**</u>

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.1	I've often had trouble in making sense of the things I have to remember.	1	2	3	4	5
1.2	I've been over the work I've done to check my reasoning and see that it makes sense.	1	2	3	4	5
1.3	I have generally put a lot of effort into my studying.	1	2	3	4	5
1.4	I have tended to read very little beyond what is actually required to pass.	1	2	3	4	5
1.5	Much of what I've learned seems no more than lots of unrelated bits and pieces in my mind.	1	2	3	4	5
1.6	On the whole, I've been quite systematic and organised in my studying.	1	2	3	4	5
1.7	In making sense of new ideas, I have often related them to practical or real life contexts.	1	2	3	4	5
1.8	I concentrated on learning just those bits of information I have to know to pass.	1	2	3	4	5
1.9	Ideas I've come across in my academic reading often set me off on long chains of thought.	1	2	3	4	5
1.10	I've looked at evidence carefully to reach my own conclusions about what I'm studying.	1	2	3	4	5
1.11	I've organised my study time carefully to make the best use of it.	1	2	3	4	5
1.12	I geared my studying closely to just what seems to be required for assignments and exams.	1	2	3	4	5

1.13	It has been important for me to follow the argument, or to see the reasons behind things.	1	2	3	4	5
1.14	I've tried to find better ways of tracking down relevant information in this subject.	1	2	3	4	5
1.15	I like to be told precisely what to do in essays or other assignments.	1	2	3	4	5
1.16	I've tended to take what we've been taught at face value without questioning it much.	1	2	3	4	5
1.17	Concentration has not usually been a problem for me, unless I've been really tired.	1	2	3	4	5
1.18	In reading for this module, I've tried to find out for myself exactly what the author means.	1	2	3	4	5
1.19	I've just been going through the motions of studying without seeing where I'm going.	1	2	3	4	5
1.20	If I've not understood things well enough when studying, I've tried a different approach.	1	2	3	4	5

Section 2: Experiences of teaching and learning on this module

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2.1	It was clear to me what I was supposed to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
2.2	We were given a good deal of choice over how we went about learning.	1	2	3	4	5
2.3	We were allowed some choice over what aspects of the subject to concentrate on.	1	2	3	4	5
2.4	What we were taught seemed to match what we were supposed to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
2.5	Working with other students on this module helped me to judge how my own learning was going.	1	2	3	4	5
2.6	Talking with other students helped me to develop my understanding.	1	2	3	4	5
2.7	On this module I was prompted to think about how well I was learning and how I might improve.	1	2	3	4	5
2.8	The teaching encouraged me to rethink my understanding of some aspects of the subject.	1	2	3	4	5
2.9	This module has given me a sense of what goes on behind the scenes' in this subject area.	1	2	3	4	5
2.10	The teaching in this module helped me to think about the evidence underpinning different views.	1	2	3	4	5
2.11	Students supported each other and tried to give help when it was needed.	1	2	3	4	5
2.12	On this module I was given plenty of opportunities to develop my skills in the subject.	1	2	3	4	5

2.13	I found most of what I learned in this module really interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
2.14	This module encouraged me to relate what I learned to issues in the wider world.	1	2	3	4	5
2.15	Staff tried to share their enthusiasm about the subject with us.	1	2	3	4	5
2.16	On this module I was given plenty of opportunities to test out ideas and ways of thinking about the subject.	1	2	3	4	5
2.17	I enjoyed being involved in this module.	1	2	3	4	5
2.18	Staff were patient in explaining things which seemed difficult to grasp.	1	2	3	4	5
2.19	It was clear to me what was expected in the assessed work for this module.	1	2	3	4	5
2.20	This module seemed to be more about learning than jumping through assessment hoops.	1	2	3	4	5
2.21	I could see how the set work fitted in with what we were supposed to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
2.22	Throughout the module I was encouraged to think how best to tackle the set work.	1	2	3	4	5
2.23	The feedback given on my work during the module helped me to improve my ways of learning and studying.	1	2	3	4	5
2.24	You had to really understand the subject to get good marks in this module.	1	2	3	4	5
2.25	Staff gave me the support I needed to help me approach the set work for this module.	1	2	3	4	5
2.26	To do well in this module, you had to think critically about the topics.	1	2	3	4	5
2.27	The feedback given on my work during the module helped clarify thinks I hadn't fully understood.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix D

Lecturers' Interview Schedule

1. Your background, how did you get into H.E?

2. Describe your role as a lecturer in the Business School

3. What motivates your teaching role?

4. What are the downsides?

5. Can you describe for me a typical assessment you have done recently?

6. What were you aiming 'to do' with that assessment?

7. Are there other assessment methods that could have given you the same result?

8. When you use, say, an essay v. a MCQ test, are they doing different things? Do they have different purposes?

9. What do you consider to be the general purposes of assessment in HE?

10. Have you come across the term Formative Assessment? If yes, what does it mean to you?

11. Have you come across the term Assessment for Learning? If yes, what does it mean to you?

12. What practices or activities do you associate with Formative Assessment/Assessment for Learning?

13. How do you put (name the aforementioned practices/activities) into practise?

14. What factors hinder you from being able to implement these practices in your classroom?

15. Thinking of (practice/activity), how does this benefit you? What are the drawbacks?

16. Thinking of (practice/activity), how does this benefit your students? What are the drawbacks?

17. How does your lecturing and assessment change when delivering an AfL module as compared to a non-AfL one?

18. Thinking about class X, how would you describe its overall climate? What sort of organisational aspects affect it? How do students and their attitudes affect it?

19. How do you define 'success' in educational terms?

20. What is the most important thing you see HE doing for students? What's most worthwhile to you?

21. So, what factors in your department/course hinder that goal? What factors promote it?

22. Thinking about the assessment policy specifically, does that

[Type text]

promote worthwhile learning?

23. One definition of Educationally Worthwhile Learning is 'the creation of the independent learner and the promotion of learning autonomy'. What do you think?

24. You defined 'success' as… Does this equate to Educationally Worthwhile Learning?

Appendix E

Student Information Sheet

1.   Research Project Title:
Springboard or Straitjacket: Assessment for Learning as an Educationally Worthwhile Learning Tool, a case study in an Irish Higher Education Institute.

2.   **Invitation paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3.   **What is the project's purpose?**

The purpose of this project is to explore how assessment practices influence student learning. With seventeen years lecturing experience, this researcher believes that the traditional end of semester/term/year exam does not promote the individual students' learning. Assessment for learning or Formative assessment is a strategy whereby assessment is used to inform the next stage in the learning cycle via feedback – lecturer, peer and self. The aim of this project is to investigate if this is how assessment for learning is perceived by lecturing staff and students. The project will be conducted over a two year period with the data collection period is from January to May 2014.

4.   **Why have I been chosen?**

The aim of the project is to investigate perceptions of assessment for learning. Third year undergraduate students have been identified as appropriate research participants as they have experienced different assessment strategies over the previous two years of studying at a higher education institute. This should enable you, the third year student to answer the questions set out in the research questionnaire.

5.   **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

[Type text]

6. **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be required to complete a questionnaire, which should take no longer than thirty minutes. Your honesty in answering the questions is greatly appreciated.

7. **What do I have to do?**

Other than what is stated at question 6 above you the participant will have no other responsibilities to the project.

8. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Other than giving of your time and expressing your opinions, the researcher does not foresee any possible disadvantages or risks associated with you taking part in the project. However, if at any time during your participation you feel disadvantaged or at risk you may withdraw without giving a reason. Similarly, if the researcher encounters a situation where disadvantage or risks may arise, you will be informed immediately.

9. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the teaching learning and assessment strategy of the higher education institute. It is also hoped that the project will promote the benefits of assessment for learning practices.

10. **What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

The project is being conducted to fulfil the requirements of a Doctorate in Education programme. It is not envisaged that the project will stop earlier than expected, however if any unforeseen events to occur which will require the study to stop participants will be notified and given details as to why this is the case.

11. **What if something goes wrong?**

If you, for any reason, have issue with any aspect of your participation in the project you should first address your complaint to the researcher or her supervisor – Professor Kathryn Ecclestone, University of Sheffield. If you are not satisfied by their response you may contact The Secretary, School of Education, Sheffield University, Sheffield, UK.

12. **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

You will complete the questionnaire anonymously and the only way the project will identify you is as a third year undergraduate student at the named institute. By the time the project is complete it is likely you will have graduated from your course of

study further protecting your identity. The completed questionnaires will be kept for the duration of the project and then destroyed.

13. **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

As stated, this project is being conducted so as to fulfil the requirement of a Doctoral in Education programme of study. Another requirement is to publish from the thesis. Here again your identity will remain confidential. If you have completed a questionnaire, you will be offered a copy of the findings and analysis.

14. **Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is not sponsored or funded by any organisation or company.

15. **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by The School of Education's - at The University of Sheffield - ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

16. **Contact for further information**

Should you require further information please contact me, Patricia Bowe-Deegan at + 353 (0)51 834027 or via email edp11pb@sheffield.ac.uk.

The supervisor for this research project is Professor Kathryn Ecclestone, email k.ecclestone@sheffield.ac.uk

Finally, each participant will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep. I would like to thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and if you have decided to volunteer as a participant, I look forward to working with you in the coming months.

Appendix F

Lecturer Information Sheet

1.   Research Project Title:

Springboard or Straitjacket: Assessment for Learning as an Educationally Worthwhile Learning Tool, a case study in an Irish Higher Education Institute.

2.   **Invitation paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3.   **What is the project's purpose?**

The purpose of this project is to explore how assessment practices influence student learning. With seventeen years lecturing experience, this researcher believes that the traditional end of semester/term/year exam does not promote the individual students' learning. Assessment for learning or Formative assessment is a strategy whereby assessment is used to inform the next stage in the learning cycle via feedback – lecturer, peer and self. The aim of this project is to investigate if this is how assessment for learning is perceived by lecturing staff and students. The project will be conducted over a two year period with the data collection period is from January to May 2014.

4.   **Why have I been chosen?**

The aim of the project is to investigate perceptions of assessment for learning. Lecturers' have been chosen following a review of module outcomes and how these are assessed. The researcher believes you practice assessment for learning in your classroom and so would value your input into the project.

[Type text]

5. **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

6. **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be required to participate in the project in three phases:

Phase 1 – The researcher will observe your assessment practices

Phase 2 – Participate in a focus group

Phase 3 - You may be asked to participate in a 45 minute interview.

7. **What do I have to do?**

Other than what is stated at question 6 above you the participant will have no other responsibilities to the project.

8. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Other than giving of your time and expressing your opinions, the researcher does not foresee any possible disadvantages or risks associated with you taking part in the project. However, if at any time during your participation you feel disadvantaged or at risk you may withdraw without giving a reason. Similarly, if the researcher encounters a situation where disadvantage or risks may arise, you will be informed immediately.

9. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the teaching learning and assessment strategy of the higher education institute. It is also hoped that the project will promote the benefits of assessment for learning practices.

[Type text]

10. **What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

The project is being conducted to fulfil the requirements of a Doctorate in Education programme. It is not envisaged that the project will stop earlier than expected, however if any unforeseen events to occur which will require the study to stop participants will be notified and given details as to why this is the case.

11. **What if something goes wrong?**

If you, for any reason, have issue with any aspect of your participation in the project you should first address your complaint to the researcher or her supervisor – Professor Kathryn Ecclestone, University of Sheffield. If you are not satisfied by their response you may contact The Secretary, School of Education, Sheffield University, Sheffield, UK.

12. **Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

In reporting and analysing your views and opinions, the researcher will assign a pseudonym to each participant thus safe guarding your identity. If you are selected and agree to partake in the interview phase, the interview may be recorded. If this happens, the audio recordings will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one other than the researcher and her supervisor will be allowed access to the original recordings. Once the project reaches completion the recordings will be destroyed.

13. **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

As stated, this project is being conducted so as to fulfil the requirement of a Doctoral in Education programme of study. Another requirement is to publish from the thesis. Here again your identity will remain confidential. If you participate in the observation and focus group phase, you will

be offer a copy of the findings and analysis. Those of you being interviewed will once the recording is transcribed receive a copy to confirm and verify what has been recorded. You will also be offered a copy of the findings and analysis of the data collected.

[Type text]

14.   **Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is not sponsored or funded by any organisation or company.

15.   **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by The School of Education's - at The University of Sheffield - ethics review procedure. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

16.   **Contact for further information**

Should you require further information please contact me, Patricia Bowe-Deegan at + 353 (0)51 834027 or via email edp11pb@sheffield.ac.uk.

The supervisor for this research project is Professor Kathryn Ecclestone, email k.ecclestone@sheffield.ac.uk

Finally, each participant will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep. I would like to thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and if you have decided to volunteer as a participant, I look forward to working with you in the coming months.

Appendix G

Student Consent Form

Title of Project: **Springboard or Straitjacket: Assessment for Learning as an Educationally Worthwhile Learning Tool, a case study in an Irish Higher Education Institute.**

Name of Researcher: **Patricia Bowe-Deegan**

Participant Pseudonym for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated *[insert date]* for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. (contact number of researcher(051)834027*)*

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

Patricia Bowe-Deegan   _____   _____
 Researcher   Date   Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: *Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.*

[Type text]

Appendix H

Lecturer Consent Form

Title of Project: Springboard or Straitjacket: Assessment for Learning as an Educationally Worthwhile Learning Tool, a case study in an Irish Higher Education Institute.

Name of Researcher: Patricia Bowe-Deegan

Participant Pseudonym for this project:

Please initial box

4.   I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet
     dated *[insert date]* for the above project and have had
     the opportunity to ask questions.

5.   I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw
     at any time without giving any reason. (contact number of researcher(051)834027*)*

6.   I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis.
     I give permission for members of the research team to have access
     to my anonymised responses.

5.   I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

Patricia Bowe-Deegan   _____   _____
Researcher   Date   Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Copies: *Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy for the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.*

[Type text]

Appendix I

Irish Leaving Certificate Examination Points Calculation Grid

Leaving Cert Grade	Higher Paper	Lower Paper	Maths Foundation #
A1	100	60	20
A2	90	50	15
B1	85	45	10
B2	80	40	5
B3	75	35	
C1	70	30	
C2	65	25	
C3	60	20	
D1	55	15	
D2	50	10	
D3	45	5	

LCVP points awarded: Distinction - 70, Merit - 50, Pass - 30
* 25 bonus points will be added to the points score for Leaving Certificate Higher Level Mathematics.
# Points for Foundation Level Mathematics will be awarded by certain institutions. Applicants should refer to the HEI literature for full details.
NCAD does not award points for Leaving Certificate or other examinations. Consult NCAD literature for details.
Applicants for undergraduate medicine courses should consult the literature of the appropriate institution for information on assessment procedures.
All HEIs award points for results in Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme Link Modules, in place of a sixth Leaving Certificate subject. However, not all HEIs count LCVP as meeting eligibility requirements in regard to passing subjects. Applicants should refer to HEI literature for full details.
Accompanying conditions:

1. The six best results, in recognised subjects, in one Leaving Certificate Examination will be counted for points computation.
2. One sitting only of the Leaving Certificate Examination will be counted for points purposes.
3. In the case of certain subjects, e.g. Home Economics (General), Foundation Level Mathematics or Foundation Level Irish, some HEIs may not award the points shown above. If in any doubt, check with the Admissions Office of the appropriate HEIs.
4. Remember, you must first meet the minimum entry requirements in order to be considered for entry to a course. The bonus points are included in the overall points calculation only when Mathematics is one of the applicant's best six subjects following the addition of the bonus.

[Type text]