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## Dialogic feedback as divergent assessment for learning: an ecological approach to teacher professional development

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Neoliberal policy objectives perpetuate an audit culture at both school and system levels. The associated focus on performativity and accountability can result in reductive and procedural interpretations of classroom assessment for learning (AfL) practices. Set in a New Zealand AfL professional development context, this research takes an ecological view of teacher learning as a ground-up approach to improving practice. As a framework, this paper brings together an intersubjective conception of professional learning that positions teachers as co-leaders, principles inherent in ‘the spirit of AfL’, and the notion of ‘intelligent accountability’ to illustrate evidence-informed teacher agency. It applies divergent and dialogic AfL practices to professional learning that can enable teachers to connect with issues that are most relevant to their practice. Dialogic feedback practices of this nature position teachers as capable, reflexive and resourceful practitioners and decision-makers.

**Keywords:** assessment; classroom/school-based research; critical theory; pedagogy; teacher education

### Introduction

Embedded in a counter-politics of teacher professional development that locates teachers as agents in their learning contexts, rather than consumers of knowledge produced elsewhere (Hardy, 2010), this paper identifies influential discourses that impact on teachers’ work and offers an example of intelligent accountability as divergent assessment for learning (AfL) practice. Counter-politics explore the ‘everyday struggles and resistances enacted by students, teachers or others in the practices of their daily lives’ (Youdell, 2011, p. 15). The focus of this piece stems from my work in a New Zealand schooling improvement context where I worked as a teacher educator, facilitating professional development in AfL (see Charteris & Smardon, 2013, 2014). It reports research located in one regional New Zealand high school to illuminate teacher agency through an exploration of dialogic feedback.

Working across schools, I have been troubled by how ubiquitous top-down professional learning approaches are. Even when coaching models are in place they may evoke superficial reflection if there is not space and time allowed for teacher learning (Charteris & Smardon, 2013). Hardy (2010) observes that the ‘increasingly rapid rate of change in schools has exacerbated this trend towards individualistic, decontextualised and passive learning initiatives as part of teachers’ work’ (p. 72). It follows that feedback between teachers or school leaders and teachers can be inherently a passive process of transmission.

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To reframe this passivity, I examine the importance of teacher agency in light of individualistic neoliberal approaches to professional learning that locate teachers as consumers of knowledge created elsewhere. I go on to argue for the importance of an intelligent accountability that takes account of a deeper purpose or ‘spirit’ of AfL, as an ecological conception of teacher ‘intersubjectivity’. Providing an account of teacher agency during a professional learning feedback encounter, I frame AfL as divergent and dialogic teacher-led practice that can enhance learning. AfL is the term preferred over formative assessment in the research context discussed in this paper.

### **Assessment for learning as dialogic feedback**

Where formative assessment can be seen as the formal and informal processes that both teachers and students use to gather evidence to improving learning (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006), AfL also has the additional purpose of the learners’ active participation in this process. The preferred definition of AfL in this paper was formulated by participants at the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning in March 2009. ‘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, p. 2). Although this definition can be read as a focus on student learning, the practices of AfL can pertain to teachers as they explore data through reflective dialogue (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005). Swaffield (2011) highlights the need for AfL practices to be authentic in that they are embedded in collaborative organisational culture that prioritises learning, where learners (both students and teachers) develop their capacity to engage with rich feedback.

The principles of AfL apply to professional and organisational learning as well as to student learning, so teachers come to see themselves as learners, devise rich questions, and share both successes and dilemmas. The trend is towards everyone in school becoming more self-evaluative, seeing feedback as a valuable prop to learning and improvement, changing their views about what is important in learning, deciding how best to take forward developing insights and working together to realise them. (Swaffield, 2011, p. 441)

Thus, practices associated with AfL can be relevant for teachers when they explore their classroom data as a process of dialogic feedback during professional learning. In my capacity as an in-service teacher educator, I facilitated professional learning with a cluster of 15 schools over 4 years to assist teachers to give effect to the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and embed AfL in the schools’ systems and practices.

In this paper I forge links between teacher and student AfL practices. Teachers’ perceptions and understandings of learning can have a significant impact on how AfL practices are enacted in classrooms (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). When teachers engage in collegial dialogue to surface and explore these perceptions and understandings, it can serve as a powerful process of feedback (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). Dialogue as an AfL practice can serve to enhance both teacher and student learning. Dann (2014) observes that ‘[t]hose [students] for whom feedback is less successful are the very pupils for whom feedback needs to open up into more discursive ways of understanding school learning in which challenging differences and tensions are embraced’ (p. 164). It follows that if teachers are to promote practices of dialogic feedback in their classrooms, it is helpful if they have experienced it in their own professional learning.

There now follows an exploration of teacher agency and the landscape of professional learning, human capital development and intelligent accountability, AfL in the classroom and the practices of divergent and dialogic feedback as an aspect of AfL that can relate to both student and teacher learning.

### Teacher agency and professional learning

From an ecological perspective, agency can be defined as the capacity of actors to ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11). Therefore rather than a static account where agency resides in individuals as something they possess, it is embedded in action, as something people do within specific contexts.

[T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137)

Agency can be seen as an element of AfL. It is fundamental to a conception of AfL where learners initiate, participate and contribute to learning in their classroom communities (Carr, 2008). ‘Agency includes developing or adopting particular learning goals and intentions’ (Carr, 2008, p. 40). Furthermore teachers demonstrate agency when they seek out and make sense of information about their practice (Charteris & Smardon, 2015). This notion of teacher agency corresponds with Orlando and Harreveld’s (2014) work to position teachers as capable and resourceful theorists who are ‘increasingly ... expected to spend time adhering to bureaucratic measures at the expense of the freedom to make their own informed decisions regarding curriculum and pedagogy’ (p. 321).

Professional learning can be a complex and potentially transformational process (Kennedy, 2005, p. 244). As I have argued elsewhere, there is the need to develop school cultures that build capacity through nurturing professional trust and teacher co-leadership capability (Smardon & Charteris, 2014). Of course trust and teacher co-leadership are not easily measureable outcomes and require a deeper engagement with the ecological complexity of school cultures. O’Neill (2013) points out that ‘[m]any things that are important for education cannot be counted, or added, or ranked because there is no genuine unit of account’ (p. 14). Accountability mechanisms embedded in recent education reforms have reframed teacher professionalism around prescriptive measures that impoverish practice (Keddie, 2014).

It is well documented that teachers’ work is embedded in a global metanarrative that emphasises neoliberal performativity (Ball, 2003, 2012; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Connell, 2013). Forging links with neoliberalism, Kennedy (2014) draws from Gillies (2011) and Biesta (2009) to conceptualise three discourses that influence the positioning of teachers in teacher education policy (Table 1). Moreover, through her analysis of recent Scottish education policies, she observes that socialisation and human capital theories are the most common, at the expense of a subjectification perspective on teachers’ work.

Of the three key discourses outlined in Table 1, teacher agency can be seen when ‘autonomous educators ... contribute to the common good through the fostering of their own specific interests and talents in creative ways’ (Kennedy, 2014, p. 3). Taking up the

Table 1. Purposes of (teacher) education and the positioning of teachers (Kennedy, 2014, p. 3).

Purpose of (teacher) education	Teachers are positioned as ...
Socialisation	... 'novice' members of the profession who need to be inculcated into the existing culture and practices of the profession, and thereafter help to maintain the status quo
Human capital development	... state functionaries who will enable students to enhance the standing of the country through increased success in international league tables of performance
Subjectification	... autonomous educators who can contribute to the common good through the fostering of their own specific interests and talents in creative ways

concept of schools and early childhood centres as “knowledge-building” learning environments’ (Bolstad et al., 2012, p. 5), I adapt Kennedy’s table to subvert the neoliberal construction of an autonomous subject and argue that professional collaboration can be both purposeful and have potential to be transformational (Charteris & Smardon, 2013). It can be argued that the individualised conception of the teacher subject in Kennedy’s ‘subjectification’ dimension could be likened to Foucauldian conceptions of governmentality and the production of subjects. Governmentality is a mechanism of discursive power that ‘categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Atkinson (2015) summarises governmentality as ‘a form of power constituted through an arrangement of governmental institutions, strategies, technologies and ways of thinking, or mentality, through which governments manage populations from a distance, including shaping individual conduct in a variety of contexts’ (p. 37). While Atkinson’s subjectification is for a common good, an individualistic focus risks an appropriation of ‘social good’ discourse for potentially neoliberal ends. To acknowledge and resist pressures for conformity and the shaping of neoliberal subjectivities, I draw from a critical perspective to suggest that teacher education should foster reflexivity where teachers take into consideration their own discursive constitution and the perspectives of others to grow as practitioners. Reflexivity is embedded in a relational politics that is conceived by Sarup (1988) as intersubjectivity. ‘Our representations of ourselves are always subject to others’ interpretation ... ergo intersubjectivity. How we know ourselves is through the intersubjective relationships we share with others’ (Sarup, 1988, p. 16).

Thus, as Table 2 highlights, professional learning becomes intersubjective and teachers as co-leaders reflexively co-construct meaning together. Across the board there is a need for teachers, school-based administrators and policy-makers to develop a much more reflexive disposition to teachers’ learning (Hardy, 2010).

Table 2. Further purpose of (teacher) education and the positioning of teachers.

Purpose of (teacher) education	Teachers are positioned as ...
Intersubjectivity	... inter-relational educators who can contribute to the common good through co-leadership where they foster their <i>own and others</i> specific interests and talents in creative ways.

Such a disposition at least partially ameliorates neoliberal and bureaucratic logics and is reflective of the field of teachers' work as a space of active, ongoing, collaborative, critical, student-focused teacher learning practices. (Hardy, 2010, p. 82)

Furthermore, a reflexive disposition to teacher learning provides a vehicle to expose, contest and potentially resist the pervasiveness of human capital discourse.

### **Human capital development discourse and intelligent accountability**

Neoliberal policy objectives with their associated focus on performativity (Ball, 2003), accountability and an audit culture at school and system level (Apple, 2005; Biesta, 2010; Lingard, 2010; Sellar, 2015) can generate a technicist interpretation of classroom assessment practices and a reductive approach to assessment (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Vassallo, 2013). Audit technologies standardise and regularise expert knowledges so that they can be used to classify and diagnose populations. In 2003, Ball drew from the Lyotardian theory of performativity to argue that, under neoliberalism, state regulation 'requires individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations' (p. 215). Ball links his conception of performativity with Foucault's panopticon – a mechanism that enables people to surveil themselves and others. This performativity is evident in Kennedy's (2014) allusion to human capital development as a purpose of teacher education.

The act of teaching and the subjectivity of the teacher are both profoundly changed within the new management panopticism (of quality and excellence) and the new forms of entrepreneurial control (through marketing and competition). (Ball, 2003, p. 219)

The increased emphasis on accountability in global education can be construed as a derivative of the economic rationalism of neoliberal policy frameworks. In his more recent reflections on neoliberalism in the British education context, Ball (2012) commented that there is a

... re-grounding of social relations in the economic rationality of the market – the generalisation of a neo-liberal epistemology. The modalities of state power are once again changing, as is the conception of the social. The burdens of social risk are being shifted back to individuals and families and re-embedded in discourses of responsibility, calculation and prudentialism. (p. 101)

The neoliberal discourse of human capital development has long had a significant impact on global education debates. In 2002, O'Neill also speaking from the United Kingdom points out the detrimental effects of accountability measures on practitioners. 'The new accountability is widely experienced not just as changing ... but distorting the proper aims of professional practice and indeed as damaging professional pride and integrity'. As a response, O'Neill coined the term 'intelligent accountability' to address the negative effects of an accountability culture. Building on O'Neill's conception in particular reference to AfL, Crooks (2007) points out that 'intelligent accountability' can preserve and enhance trust among participants in schooling accountability processes. It involves participants in accountability processes through offering them opportunities for professional responsibility and initiative.

Intelligent accountability is a trust-based approach that focuses on the processes that can enhance teacher agency and learning over an ill-conceived over reliance on

performance measures. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2014) locate intelligent accountability as a practice that supports sustainable assessment cultures. They point out that with curriculum reforms and the emphasis on twenty-first century skills, there is a need for teachers to make shifts in assessment practices and pedagogy. Furthermore they argue, ‘a system’s policy context that supports teachers to develop the necessary capabilities and provides resources to facilitate the implementation and development of the reform is demonstrative of intelligent accountability’ (p. 119). Dialogic practice that supports collegial teacher feedback can be seen as a ‘necessary capability’ for quality teacher learning.

A shift to more intelligent accountability systems ... acknowledges the value of quality of teaching in developing the role of the learner through mutual engagement in a community of practice ... System-level support in terms of resources, allocation of time for teacher professional development and helpful policies are needed. (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2014, p. 119)

In 1997, Earl and LeMahieu rejected the surveillance and punitive function of neoliberal assessment practices, by reframing accountability. They describe accountability as the embodiment of professional conversations that are aimed to mine information and connect it with other knowledge – in particular how to use it contextually and proactively to address student learning (Earl & LeMahieu, 1997). Taking up this idea, Earl and Katz (2006) argue that the notion of accountability as a conversation is embedded in a continuing process of engagement and interaction that is founded in trust and a willingness to be open to ideas, where educators are willing to engage in debate. Central to this teacher collegiality is the notion that learners can activate each other’s learning – a peer feedback concept embedded in AfL as I proceed to illustrate.

### **The spirit of assessment for learning**

Drawing from the definitions of 83 teachers and assessment literature, Hargreaves (2005) generated 6 summary definitions for AfL. They are as follows: first, AfL meaning monitoring pupils’ performance against targets or objectives; second, AfL meaning using assessment to inform next steps in teaching and learning; third, AfL meaning teachers giving feedback for improvement; fourth, AfL meaning (teachers) learning about children’s learning; fifth, AfL meaning children take some control of their own learning and assessment; and finally AfL is defined as turning assessment into a learning event. This involves a process through which pupils are involved in assessment as part of learning – assessment as learning. The research discussed here evokes the latter two conceptions of assessment. The preferred Klenowski (2009) definition of AfL, introduced earlier, collapses the ‘as’ and ‘for’ dimensions together. Taking up the notion that *for learning* comprises a sense of learner agency, AfL is applicable to both teachers and students, when they demonstrate initiative in driving the direction of their own learning.

Teacher beliefs about student positioning and their role in the assessment of their own learning can have an impact on learner agency in the classroom. Watkins, Carnell, and Lodge (2007) use the term ‘learner-driven’ to describe a dimension of effective teaching that focuses on learners choosing, deciding, planning and reviewing; steering their own progress. Agency is inherent in the ‘spirit of assessment for learning’ that Marshall and Drummond (2006) describe as the adaptive and creative adoption of formative assessment

practice ‘... [A]dhering to the spirit implies an underlying principle which does not allow a simple application of rigid technique’ (p. 137). Classroom lessons that adhere strictly to the procedures, or the ‘letter’ of AfL are likely to lose the underlying spirit that it is intended to embody. Klenowski (2009) notes that when there is adherence to a procedural adoption of AfL, practices can be ‘mechanical or superficial without the teacher’s, and, most importantly, the students’, active engagement with learning as the focal point’ (p. 263). Classrooms that embody the spirit of AfL with their corresponding emphasis on learner agency are places where students can collaborate with their teachers and peers to develop the capability to assess their own learning (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, & Reid, 2009). Integral to AfL capability is the learner’s appropriation of quality feedback.

Divergent and dialogic feedback

An important learning disposition associated with assessment practice is the capacity to seek and make meaning of feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasise that simply providing plenty of feedback does not necessarily enhance learning. They highlight that it is the nature of the feedback, the timing of it, how students seek it out on their own volition and make sense of it, that makes a difference. Hattie and Timperley also point out the significance of feedforward as a process of identifying next-step actions.

Feedforward for teachers’ learning with its implication for future action is embedded in a dialogic process and is encompassed in the term dialogic feedback. It is well established that dialogue comprises an important element in the promotion of robust peer feedback practices (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Carnell, 2000; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Hatzipanagos & Warburton, 2009). Crooks (2008) points out that guidance from teachers or peers cannot be effective unless students accept that their work can be improved and they can identify the important aspects that they wish to improve. Carnell and Lodge (2002) highlight the two-way nature of feedback/feedforward interchange. ‘The best way to achieve this has the characteristics of a conversation rather than a lecture’ (Carnell & Lodge, 2002, p. 26).

Furthermore, Wiliam and Thompson (2007) propose that the roles of learners, peers and the teacher can be collapsed into five key strategies (Table 3) that are central to three

Table 3. Aspects of formative assessment (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007).

	Where the learner is going	Where the learner is right now	How to get there
Teacher	Clarifying learning intentions and sharing criteria for success (1)	Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities and tasks that elicit evidence of learning (2)	Providing feedback that moves learners forward (3)
Peer	Understanding and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success (1)	Activating students as instructional resources for one another (4)	
Learner	Understanding learning intentions and criteria for success (1)	Activating students as the owners of their own learning (5)	

AfL processes. These processes comprise establishing where learners are in their learning, where they are going and how to get there. The table lays out the roles of teacher, student and peers in relation to each of these processes; roles in which dialogue is an integral component. As [Table 3](#) suggests, peers play a large role in the classroom in activating each other's learning through processes of feedback. Like Askew and Lodge (2000) and Price, Handley, Millar, and O'Donovan (2010) argue that complex learning results when feedback is not provided as an end 'product' but rather as a relational process that occurs over time, is both dialogic, and integral to teaching and learning. This relational process can be seen in [Table 3](#) where teachers and peers collaborate in dialogic feedback interactions (Yang & Carless, 2013).

Torrance and Pryor (2001) interpret classroom practices through making a distinction between convergent and divergent assessment practices. Convergent assessment can assist teachers in finding out if their learners know, understand or can do a predetermined thing. Divergent assessment, on the other hand, emphasises the learner's understandings rather than the agenda of the assessor. Divergent assessment practices emphasise what the learner knows, understands and can do (Torrance & Pryor, 2001). Divergent assessment practices are of particular interest in this study because they enable teachers to connect with their funds of professional knowledge as the resources that both learners (pupils and teachers) bring with them to the classroom. The open-ended nature of divergent assessment encompasses the sort of teacher actions that reflect and potentially nurture learner agency. Divergent assessment practice is linked with the dialogic approach to teacher feedback that I explore as data in this study.

In Pryor and Crossouard's (2008) description of divergent assessment, they illustrate the type of questioning and feedback that can prompt further thinking and engagement. They describe divergent forms of feedback as 'exploratory, provisional or provocative, prompting further engagement rather than correcting mistakes' (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008, p. 4). Thus, feedback can be seen as the motion of a constant dialectic. Game and Metcalfe (2009) point out that 'whereas feedback is commonly understood as an external form of evaluation, every response and every recognition in a dialogue is feedback' (p. 48). Dialogic feedback is a co-constructivist conception constructed from loops of dialogue generated between interlocutors (Askew & Lodge, 2000; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Yang & Carless, 2013). Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2014) describe this collaborative form of teacher learning as a 'dialogic inquiry approach to assessment that takes account of the learners's perspective' (p. 107). While Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith place standards as pedagogical tools at the centre of their dialogic approach, the explicit focus of the professional learning described in this paper was on building student assessment capability in accordance with the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Having discussed teacher agency and how dialogic feedback is a pertinent AfL practice for teacher professional learning, there now follows an account of the research study and an analysis of student and teacher voices in relation to these theoretical concerns.

## **The study**

The research comprises a qualitative study into learner agency as an aspect of 'the spirit' of AfL. In particular, the research explores what agency looked like in secondary classrooms and how learners can take up agentic discourse positions in classrooms. Students and teachers from four secondary classrooms who took part in the professional development project gave their informed consent to participate in the research. Data were gathered over a

year though classroom observations and teacher and student interviews. These were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The transcribed interview data were analysed using critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992) to explore the students' and teachers' positioning and how they acted agentically. To bridge the gap between micro and macro discourses I explored how the students and their teacher deployed AfL terminology at a micro-dimension of classroom talk, with particular reference to notions of feedback, feedforward and self-assessment. This was then considered in reference to macro discourses around accountability and performativity.

Centring on one of the classrooms, the ensuing episode is an exploration of one teacher's response to a sample of student voices during an interview. In the New Zealand context, student voice can be a primary vehicle for AfL professional learning as a feedback process that can assist teacher reflection and learning (Nelson, 2012). The student voices were gathered in a year 9 English classroom that was visited on at least four occasions over a 1 year period. During each lesson, four students from the class were invited to participate in one-to-one structured student voice interviews conducted within their classroom to retain contextual relevance to the specific lesson and particular classroom environment. The students contributed their perceptions on how their teacher's comments helped them to learn. They were asked how the comments made by their teacher assisted them in their learning. I selected the students in dialogue with the teacher. I obtained the students' consent for their voice responses to be shared with their teacher. The dialogic approach to voice collection provided the students with an opportunity to reflect on their own learning.

The teacher interview was conceptualised as reflective dialogue (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005) where the teacher had also opportunities to reflect, prompted by my open-ended questions. Reflective dialogue can be defined as a process where teachers engage with the underlying reasons for their thoughts and actions to recognise what they take for granted (Isaacs, 1999). It can be characterised as 'careful listening, active questioning and an openness to potentially profound change to one's beliefs' (Nehring, Laboy, & Catarius, 2010, p. 400). The teacher was presented with the transcribed student data and invited to engage in her own sense-making. She explored the student voice transcripts closely and reflected upon her students' discourse, to interpret how specific students viewed her classroom practice. The AfL practice of feedback as an engagement with data (at both student levels), closely align with the concept of learner agency.

From this analysis she formulated next steps for her practice. This was not a transmission approach to teacher feedback where the teacher was positioned as a passive recipient (Askew & Lodge, 2000). The interview took place with me after the lesson within the teachers' classroom and lasted for approximately 1 hour.

In the following data sample four students describe how their teacher, Patrice, provides feedback to support their learning. In a second sample of data the teacher makes sense of these comments through reflective dialogue as a process of teacher feedback. Parameters were very clear during the dialogue that the student voice focused on implications for teacher practice and it was not an opportunity to deficit theorise what was lacking in the students' backgrounds. Deficit theorising is dangerous as it shifts the locus of action away from the teacher by blaming school failure on the students and their sociocultural origins. Specifically, in this instance the teacher's interpretation focused on how her students theorised learning, how commensurate the students' perspectives were with her perspective of AfL discourse and what actions she could take to make her rationale for her pedagogy more explicit with students.

### Feedback and feedforward in Patrice's classroom

An experienced teacher, Patrice had been in a leadership team where she peer-coached colleagues in her school to develop their skills and knowledge in AfL over the previous years. During these feedback conversations she would encourage colleagues to reflect on the student voices gathered in their classrooms. The following data of student voices were collected in her year 9 classroom. Four students were asked the question 'How do the comments your teacher makes about their learning help you?' The question is aimed to provide an indication to the teachers of the degree to which their students recognise and can articulate teacher pedagogies and purposes of teacher feedback. In response to this question the students in the data sample below articulated a discourse of AfL. Their responses which follow suggest that they recognised that Patrice's teacher comments comprised elements of feedforward and feedback.

Mel: *There is like feedforward and feedback – what you need to know next time and how you do well. We know what to do next time and do the right thing.*

Ivan: *[The comments] tell me what I need to improve on. She puts a feedback and feedforward to tell me what I should do and what I have done.*

Darren: *[The comments] help me to do things better. (What about the things she writes?) Tells how you can do things better. She gives you a feedforward note to tell you how you can do it better.*

Kiri: *Um. She puts feedforward and feedbacks and writes what we have to do and what we have already done. I just try and do what she says.*

The students commented that Patrice provided feedback that moved them forward as learners. This aligns with strategy 3 as outlined in Table 3 (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007). During the ensuing reflective dialogue, Patrice made her own sense of the voices in this student data. Although the students were asked how the comments Patrice made about your learning helped them, in the ensuing open-ended interview the student voice data are catalyst for Patrice to think about how the students activate each other's learning as instructional resources for one another (strategy 4) and activate their own learning (strategy 5) (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007).

### Patrice's response to the student voice

Rather than simply being pleased that her students are recognising her comments as feedback and using it to generate next steps, Patrice notices how reliant the student are on her feedback. The voice triggers her to reflect on her students' capacity to self-assess.

Researcher: What are you noticing about the feedforward and feedback?

Patrice: *They haven't done enough themselves. I think I am really modelling as much as I can and then I will let them practice on themselves and on their partner. We haven't got there enough. They have done a bit of self-assessment themselves because I found in my early surveys – my questions – a lot of kids found it hard to self-assess. They didn't mind peer assessing and group – but they found it really hard to self-assess. So this year I am thinking I want these kids to become a lot more confident and self-assess themselves before they go on reversing it if you like. Because I found in that class last year they didn't mind assessing their peers but to*

*do [it] themselves – they found that more difficult. It's just about being clear in terms of success criteria and more critical of themselves. Not being afraid to make that judgement about themselves. I just know I need them to be doing a lot more self-assessment and then they can move onto peer assessing.*

Researcher: Why do you think it is?

Patrice: *Because they listen to others. When they listen to what others [say] it encourages them to be more critical. I think they just seem to give each other encouragement when they are in a group. They find 'oh that's what I was thinking – I was thinking that!' They just didn't know how to say it or have the courage to say it. So they never have a problem with group assessing.*

Researcher: Why's that?

Patrice: *Cos they just feed off each other. They give each other confidence OK. Self-assessing they did find more difficult. They didn't enjoy [it] so much. They much prefer peer assessment or to assess in a group.*

Researcher: I wonder about how children are activating each other's learning? How do you think this is happening in the class?

Patrice: *All the time because they come with different experiences and different expectations. And so they are able to help where need be. Give a different perspective. All the time they are feeding cos every kid is unique. Everyone's got something different hopefully to add.*

Researcher: In terms of your next step, what are you interested in exploring?

Patrice: *I really want to get these kids doing a lot more self-assessing. And I want them to enjoy learning ... get some sort of success from and just feel good about themselves. I want these kids to realise they are responsible for their learning ... and know how to. They are ultimately responsible. As a teacher I feel very accountable to my students. I do feel that I am.*

### **Discussion: teacher feedback as divergent, dialogic and intelligent**

The discussion on teacher professional learning advanced in this paper is premised on a non-linear view of feedback. Dialogue constitutes a divergent form of feedback (Charteris & Smardon, 2014) that can be exploratory, provocative and engaging for participants (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008) who are agentially located in their learning and practice. A split screen metaphor can be applied to the dimensions of feedback demonstrated in the sample of reflective dialogue above where Patrice responds to the student voice data. It can be read on two levels, first, as a teacher's engagement with her students' use of AfL discourse (feedback) and, second, as a process of dialogic teacher feedback where the teacher takes an opportunity to think aloud and generate her own next-step actions for her teaching practice. The data above illustrate dialogic feedback as a divergent process where teachers can agentially determine the direction of their professional learning.

During the dialogue Patrice did not allude to the students' use of AfL discourse in which they described how their teacher provided feedforward and feedback to assist them to improve. For example, Darren comments 'She gives you a feedforward note to tell you how you can do it better'. Rather than dwelling on her students' capacities to use these specific terms and congratulating herself that they both understood the purpose of her

comments and knew to act on her feedback, Patrice diverges to talk about how her learners act agentially to make sense of their assessment information. Kiri's comment 'I just try and do what she says' could be interpreted to suggest a reliance on Patrice's teacher direction. Kiri's words cue her to shift her reflective focus to talk about how she strives to develop her students' capacity to self-assess.

Even though the student voice question 'How do your teacher's comments help you to learn?' asks generically how Patrice's discourse influences her students' learning, the student responses suggest that they equate their teacher's comments with the provision of feedforward and feedback. Patrice's reaction to this voice implies that she surmises her students are looking for the 'gift of feedback' (Askew & Lodge, 2000). The student voice prompts Patrice to draw from her other assessment experiences in her classroom. She decides that her students find peer assessment more accessible than the action of reflecting on their own learning in order to grapple with and self-assess their own progress. 'They didn't mind peer assessing and group – but they found it really hard to self-assess'.

This episode demonstrates divergent assessment (Torrance & Pryor, 2001) as a professional learning conversation that facilitated feedback as a form of intelligent accountability. As practice analysis with a feedback purpose, the conversation provided Patrice with an opportunity to agentially and dialogically reflect on the student voice data and consider its implications for her classroom practice. Through the dialogue, she reflected on her teacher actions and determined her next steps for her teaching. Through this feedback process, she articulated that there was a need for her to strengthen her students' capacity to reflect on their own learning and self-assessment.

The process of Patrice's teacher feedback illustrates a 'spirit of AfL' (Klenowski, 2009; Marshall & Drummond, 2006) in that Patrice was afforded scope for agency in her own learning and she determined actions to strengthen her students' active engagement with their learning. The student voice was a catalyst for Patrice to articulate her views on self- and peer assessment. Patrice was able to drive the direction of the dialogue to explore her own practice through engendering her own interpretation of her classroom student voice. This is very different to receiving evaluative feedback as a 'gift' in the form of confirmation from a researcher that the students were using AfL discourse. Patrice was agentic in that she subverted the researcher's influence by leading the conversation in a direction that she deemed was important. This practice reflects intelligent accountability in that it highlights a rich process that led the teacher to challenge her own professional practice. It is a very different approach to one where classroom observations are based on evaluative checklists. This sort of structure can leave little scope for teacher-driven direction. Patrice's example of learner (teacher) agency can be aligned with AfL research that attributes great importance to the teacher actions of gathering and interpreting a range of evidence of student learning in accordance with their own professional learning goals (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Timperley & Parr, 2004).

Although there have been attempts to reframe assessment from a focus on technicist accountability and evaluation to intelligent accountability (Crooks, 2007; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2014), performativity is a global discourse (Ball, 2003) that produces teacher-accountability and manifests tensions, between metric performances and authentic, purposeful relationships. This wider neoliberal cultural imperative is becoming increasingly pervasive in Australasia (Connell, 2013; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Smardon & Charteris, 2012; Thrupp, 2013). Meadmore (2001), like Ball (2003), frames this performativity in Foucauldian terms a 'panopticon effect' (p. 26). Modelled on a prison where prisoners are housed in cells arranged in a circle around a central tower, the

panopticon is an image of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). Always under unseen surveillance, in a panopticon, prisoners eventually discipline themselves. Therefore, the panoptical gaze induces a state of ‘conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Rather than becoming paralysed with ‘melancholia and inertia’ (Braidotti, 2011) with the prospect of the pervasive disciplinary surveillance practices in education, we can consider how resistance is possible and ‘power relations are obliged to change with the resistance’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 167).

For this reason, any discussion of AfL discourse and its relationship with teacher learning should not be undertaken without some consideration of the wider political influences that can impact on students and teachers – for instance, human capital discourse (Kennedy, 2014). Patrice observed that she felt accountable to her students. She sought to promote agency through developing her students’ capacity to take ownership of their learning process as active sense-makers and learner-driven learners. Rather than holding them accountable for their successes and failures, she positions herself in partnership with her students. Patrice evokes the ‘spirit of assessment for learning’ by looking beyond a superficial engagement with AfL as a range of mechanical ‘tips and tricks’ (to develop her learners’ capabilities through her promotion of assessment literacy). In 2004, Mary James expressed concern about the interpretation of AfL in policy-making circles:

... ‘assessment for learning’ is becoming a catch-all phrase, used to refer to a range of practices. In some versions it has been turned into a series of ritualized procedures. In others it is taken to be more concerned with monitoring and recordkeeping than with using information to help learning. (Daugherty & Ecclestone, 2006, p. 165)

As alluded to at the outset of this paper, an instrumentalist view of AfL can lend itself to a neoliberal view of individualism and accountability and therefore the notion of ‘responsibility’ should not be read unproblematically. Learners can be deemed responsible for their lack of achievement when they have had inadequate opportunities to learn, just as teachers (and schools) can be held accountable for student learning when there are a range of factors that influence student achievement. Unfortunately, when student test results are used exclusively as a measurement of teacher quality and effectiveness, there can be a reductive move to ‘teaching by numbers’ (Taubman, 2009). Dinham (2013) argues that rather than being seen as education’s most important asset as the most profound ‘in school’ influence on student achievement, teachers are now held accountable when students fail to reach the standards set for them individually and collectively. He observes that Hattie’s (2009) recognition of teachers’ importance has been

misused to imply that it is the teacher’s fault when students fail to learn. The words ‘in school’ have been mislaid, by accident or design, and we now frequently hear of the teacher being ‘the biggest influence on student achievement’, which is untrue. (Dinham, 2013, p. 93)

This point about accountability and a wider culture of blame is particularly relevant for schools where there are underserved populations, some addressing the effects of transgenerational trauma as a result of colonisation (Atkinson, 2002), although of course there are a range of influences that impact on student achievement outcomes. Earl (2005) argues that, conceptualised as an evidence-based conversation, accountability can be reframed from a method of surveillance to a robust process that can lead to informed professional

judgement. Teacher professional learning processes that engage with and inquire into classroom data can support dialogic feedback and contribute to ‘intelligent accountability’ (Crooks, 2007; Klenowski, 2009; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2014; O’Neill, 2002). This requires a degree of inquiry mindedness (Reid, 2004) and a school culture of professional trust where teachers can draw from the experience of colleagues to have ‘data-informed’ conversations (Lingard & Renshaw, 2009).

O’Neill (2013) points out that ‘teachers and learners, like others, need to be held to account, but this requires intelligent systems of accountability that do not distort primary activities’ (p. 4). Robust AfL practices are ‘intelligent’ in that they locate learners and teachers agentially to address the primacy of quality learning. While a proliferation of studies have explored the nature of effective feedback (Askew & Lodge, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996), there are few studies that examine dialogic feedback in relation to learner agency (Yang & Carless, 2013) as it is theorised in this paper. A dialogic approach to teacher feedback can enable teachers to build knowledge in collaboration with others (Watkins, 2003) as a contextual and authentically situated approach to professional learning.

Considering the political climate in many schools where there is pressure for teachers to achieve specific learning outcomes *for* (not necessarily *with*) students, these divergent assessment processes (Gipps, 2005; Pryor & Crossouard, 2005) can be overlooked. Lofthouse and Leat (2013), writing in their UK context, caution that the performativity cultures that exist in many schools demand accountability and surveillance and can preclude the trust required for collegial professional learning.

Learning emerges from the interactions of a knowledge-generating community (Bruner, 1996) and therefore a corresponding view of feedback locates teachers and students as complex meaning makers. Pryor and Crossouard (2010) pose the question ‘What if learning is a contextualised performance involving students engaging with prospective and current social identities, and therefore an ontological as well as an epistemological accomplishment?’ (p. 265). If we see student and teacher learning as an ontological project, it is pertinent that it is dialogic and potentially divergent.

In its exploration of teacher feedback, this paper has potential relevance for teachers and school leaders who, as learners themselves, value ‘intelligent accountability’ (Crooks, 2007; O’Neill, 2002, 2013; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2012). The teacher in the study explored and critiqued her practice. This critique enabled her to determine that she wanted to take action to promote learner agency through self-assessment. Therefore a divergent, dialogic process can enable teachers to drive the direction of their professional learning. There is scope for further research on the specific schooling practices that can promote learner and teacher agency in accordance with the ‘spirit of assessment for learning’ and ‘intelligent accountability’.

## Conclusion

Assessment, positioned within a sociocultural frame that values teachers’ funds of professional knowledge, is a democratic and divergent process that can have a significant impact on professional agency. Secondary schools, in particular, with their emphasis on credentialing and high stakes assessment practices, are important contexts for research and development in the area of effective AfL practices that evoke intersubjectivity. The ‘spirit of AfL’ is demonstrated when teachers and students take up agentic positions as learners. Furthermore, robust pedagogical research is particularly relevant to teachers aiming to enhance student achievement in secondary schools. It is vital to encourage teachers to

engage critically with research, to be ‘evidence informed’ (Lingard & Renshaw, 2009) so that pedagogy is not a hit-and-miss affair where social justice imperatives can be overlooked. Nevertheless, what this evidence comprises and how it is used is central to current debates associated with neoliberal imperatives. Taking up the gauntlet as a response to the technical–managerial approach to the teacher professionalism (Biesta, 2004) that serves to discipline the profession, Dylan Wiliam (2006) contends that ‘what works?’ is not the right question, because everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere. He argues that the right question is ‘Under what conditions will this work?’ (p. 8).

This paper illustrates just one of the many facets of ‘intelligent accountability’ – dialogic feedback as a divergent assessment practice that is relevant to teacher professional learning. Through adopting practices that demonstrate intelligent accountability, teachers can act both agentially and divergently to engage with a range of evidence and make informed pedagogical decisions to meet the specific learning needs of their students.

### Notes on contributor

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