Reworking practice through an AfL project: an analysis of teachers’ collaborative engagement with new assessment guidelines

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In recent years, the concept of Assessment for Learning (AfL) has travelled across countries, giving rise to a range of educational policy initiatives and school development projects. While researchers have focused on issues such as how formative assessment can support student learning and lead to more efficient classroom practices, less attention has been paid to the collaborative work required to develop shared assessment practices at the school level, and to the integration of AfL-related principles and tools in the collective practice. This paper focuses on the challenges emerging for a teacher team engaging with an AfL project in a lower secondary school in Norway. By employing concepts and perspectives from social practice theory, AfL is understood as a problem complex that needs to be explored and developed locally. We have analysed data from seven video-recorded meetings of an AfL team, supplemented by interviews and field notes, in order to make visible the micro processes of teachers’ collaborative work. The analysis shows how the teachers needed to rework historically established practices and principles, which in turn called for a negotiation and re-contextualisation of new concepts and artefacts in their efforts to develop shared assessment practices. This again required ways of representing existing practices and imagining future scenarios. Based on these observations we recommend that AfL projects be understood in their wider curricular, institutional, and social contexts, and that the constructive dimensions of teachers’ collaborative work in such projects should be acknowledged.

Introduction

Teachers are frequently presented with reforms and change efforts that are initiated outside of local work organisations. Such initiatives often entail comprehensive school development programmes, which are, in turn, regarded as dependent on the development of collective practices within professional communities to become realised (Stoll et al., 2006; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Priestley et al., 2011).

Assessment for Learning (AfL) projects can be seen as one example of such initiatives, as they typically seek to change schools’ collective assessment cultures, frequently supported by collaborative forms of work. Formative assessment, which is based on the principle that assessment should be used to support student learning, has received new attention through the work of Black and Wiliam (1998), and has been incorporated into educational policy in many countries (Black & Wiliam, 2005). While primarily oriented towards improving assessment, AfL projects have implications for other dimensions of practice through the linkages between curriculum,
instructional processes, and learning objectives (Kirton et al., 2007), and for classroom practices and assessment systems more generally (Black & Wiliam, 2003). As such, these projects touch upon—and potentially challenge—different aspects of the infrastructure for teachers’ work. Initiatives like AfL cannot, therefore, simply be inserted into educational organisations, but need to be ‘worked in’ to the organisation for them to become part of collective practice. Such processes require collaborative efforts to translate ideas and transform collective ways of working and reasoning, and to create connections between existing and new modes of practice. Hence, how such an initiative is realised is not given, and complex processes may underlie its local enactment.

Although these ideas may be generally recognised, they are not always reflected in research on changes in teachers’ work. While classroom research displays long traditions of practice studies that highlight the details and patterning of participants’ social interaction, fewer studies focus on teachers’ professional interaction in schools (Little, 2012). This is a paradox, as such ‘micro-process studies’ (Little, 2012) may expose processes that are significant for understanding and fostering change, and for the ways in which new initiatives become realised (Edwards, 2008; Rasmussen & Ludvigsen, 2009). In this article, we therefore seek to contribute to this research by analysing how teachers rework the collective routines for practice in the context of an AfL project in a lower secondary school in Norway (Grades 8–10).

We employ a social practice perspective on collaborative work and meaning making (Wertsch, 1991; Gherardi, 2001; Mäkitalo, 2012) to examine the details of teachers’ interactions, and discuss how they become engaged in reworking not just assessment, but the broader professional practice of which that assessment is part. Analytically, we focus on how new assessment guidelines are negotiated and made sense of; how existing practice is held up for scrutiny; and how teachers go about investing new artefacts, procedures, and relations with meaning. We proceed, however, by situating our analysis in relation to existing research, followed by a presentation of our theoretical and methodological approach.

Changing practice: the role of teachers’ collaborative work

A growing body of research has documented how schools’ capacities to undertake instructional reform and develop classroom practices depend on local collaborative work among teachers (Hindin et al., 2007; Curry, 2008; Priestley et al., 2011). Several studies also point to how different types of collaboration afford varying opportunities for learning and knowledge development (inter alia, Horn & Little, 2010; Levine & Marcus, 2010). Researchers have emphasised the relevance of interdependency and shared, pedagogical objectives (Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006; Meirink et al., 2007; Havnes, 2009); joint, critical reflection on classroom practice (Hindin, Morocco, Mott, and Aguilar, 2007; Prestridge, 2009); flexible use of conversational tools (Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006; Wood, 2007; Little & Curry, 2008); and the role of conflict and tension in driving collaborative processes forward (Achinstein, 2002; Zellermayer & Margolin, 2005; Sannino, 2010).

Of particular interest to our research are the characteristics of teachers’ collaborative work when something ‘new’ is being introduced and considered for incorporation.
into existing practice. Rather than processes of linear implementation, research shows that the ways in which new pedagogical ideas are operationalised depend on how teachers negotiate and invest meaning into what is being introduced, and create linkages between new and existing practices (Coburn, 2001; Torrance, 2007; Rasmussen & Ludvigsen, 2009; Horn & Little, 2010). For example, Coburn (2001) describes how sense-making practices and interpersonal construction of understanding play a key role in how reforms are undertaken, and how new ideas and artefacts are produced with reference to teachers’ world views, pre-existing practices, and shared understandings. Horn and Little (2010) draw attention to interactional patterns in teacher team conversations, and show how the conversational dynamics in two teacher teams afforded different opportunities for opening up problems and re-conceptualising practice. While one team used diverse opening strategies to work through problems in ways that encouraged innovation, the other team’s conversational routines often served to close off in-depth conversations in a way that restricted learning and reflection. Both of these empirical studies align with Opfer and Pedder’s recent review on teachers’ professional development practices (2011), which illustrates the ways in which individual teachers, school systems, and learning activities come together in different ways to produce differential opportunities for (collaborative) learning and knowledge development.

Horn (2005) further illustrates the importance of contextual factors by showing how reform artefacts, teachers’ classification systems, and classroom narratives impact how teachers rework their practice collaboratively. Finally, Baildon and Damico (2008) and Spicer (2011) found that the incorporation of new artefacts involves imagining the tool in future use, establishing ownership over the tool, and articulating the links that bring the different frameworks for teaching together. Such studies highlight the role that mediating artefacts play when practice is being transformed, as well as how social positions are put at stake. Hence, Spicer argues that ‘these realignments of the relationships among person, collective and institution mediated by a range of material and conceptual tools illustrate the dynamic processes of mutual adaptation in the enactment of reform’ (2011, p. 25).

Together, this research highlights how processes of re-contextualisation, meaning making, and the resources upon which teachers draw in collaborative contexts are central to how new ideas or artefacts are taken up, explored, and utilised. The studies highlight the creative and constructive work that is integral to such processes, and help to explain how educational reforms can assume highly localised characteristics, in spite of generic principles and tools acting as carriers of instructional change. Finally, such studies point to the interconnectedness of contextual factors and the work required for new connections to be created and for different dimensions within practices to be (re-)aligned.

In the context of AfL projects, however, such perspectives have been more limited. Here, research has often focused on teachers’ work with AfL in classrooms, exploring issues such as how they work with different tools, perceptions of change processes, and what factors support or hinder the development of AfL. Findings emphasise that the integration of AfL in classrooms is accompanied by a specific division of labour between teachers and students, where students are expected to take increased responsibility for their own learning (Harrison, 2005; Crossouard, 2009; Webb & Jones,
From this perspective, the introduction of AfL is not merely an issue of altering instructional methods, but implies a change in how teachers are positioned as professionals.

Furthermore, the development of AfL has been related to teacher beliefs about learning, knowledge, and assessment (Brown, 2004; Sato et al., 2005; Cooper & Cowie, 2010). Coffey et al. (2005) have shown how teachers’ work with AfL may be influenced by beliefs about what is important to teach, what aspects of the educational process are valued, and how they understand themselves as professionals. More generally, Harris and Brown (2009) have emphasised the complex and integrated nature of teachers’ assessment beliefs. This, in turn, points to the multiple factors that are mobilised and become at stake when there are attempts to change teachers’ assessment practices.

A third set of studies has focussed on how AfL tools and procedures may become narrowly instrumentalist rather than supportive of holistic learning processes, or how previously existing assessment approaches may influence the ways in which AfL tools are taken up (Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003; Hayward et al., 2004; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Torrance, 2007; Davies & Ecclestone, 2008; Hume & Coll, 2009; Webb & Jones, 2009; Tang, 2010). A general lesson here is the importance of aligning tools and procedures with wider frameworks of teaching, as tools seen in isolation are likely to trigger instrumentalist versions of AfL. They further point to the necessity of investing new tools with meaning that is contextually relevant and anchored in pedagogical principles.

AfL-related research has frequently focused on individual teachers’ practices and classroom implementation. In contrast, we place analytical focus on the collaborative work of a teacher team assigned to support the development of joint AfL practices in their school. We investigate the micro processes of such work by focusing on how the teachers discursively unpack and negotiate different dimensions of AfL, and on the multiple dilemmas and areas of work that need to be attended to when connections between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ are in the making. The questions we raise are: What types of questions emerge for the teachers to resolve when attempting to develop shared assessment practices across their school? And what characterises the teachers’ ways of reworking established routines and conventions of practice in this setting? The empirical data are derived from an AfL project in a Norwegian lower secondary school. The study provides new insights into AfL projects as school development initiatives by focusing on the work of a team at the school level and by making visible how new assessment guidelines call for a reworking of the wider professional practice of which assessment is a part. Moreover, it contributes more generally to the research field of teachers’ work by highlighting the collaborative efforts that are required when existing conventions of practice are to be renegotiated and changed.

**Analysing teachers’ collaborative work: a social practice perspective**

To investigate these questions we draw upon social practice theory and the analytical resources it provides for analysing collaborative action (Wertsch, 1991; Gherardi, 2001; Mäkitalo, 2012). A shared assumption in this strand of theory is that human activities are socially and historically constituted, and tend to assume stabilising and
reproductive functions over time through the development of routines, habits, artefacts and conventions. At the same time, it is generally acknowledged that social practices are emergent in activity and take distinct forms in the specific contexts in which they are enacted. Routines, habits and conventions are from this perspective not simply reproduced, and the shared understanding of routines and conventions is not given but needs to be achieved through situated actions.

Within the broader landscape of practice theories, researchers have attended to these aspects and levels of practice in different ways (cf. Schatzki et al., 2001). One strand of literature pays primary attention to structures and to routine actions, and is concerned with accounting for how practices are reproduced and kept stable over time. Researchers in this tradition have, for instance, drawn on the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990) or on system theories. Another strand directs analytical attention to the emergent and constructive dimensions of practice, and is concerned with how collective actions and patterns of practice are achieved and developed. Here we find sociocultural studies of learning and knowledge development which highlight the role of collective meaning making and social interaction (inter alia, Wertsch, 1991; Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002; Ottesen, 2006). The analysis presented in this article is primarily positioned within the latter perspective, as we focus on the explorative and constructive work that emerges as teachers seek to develop new collective ways of conducting assessment. We recognise, however, that this work emerges against a background of established routines and conventions.

To analyse teachers’ engagement with new assessment guidelines we pay special attention to the role that material and discursive resources play in mediating thought and action. From a social practice perspective, the relationship between individuals and their environment is understood as essentially mediated by cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991, 2007). When we make sense of or interact with our environment, we do so by way of resources such as language, concepts, and material devices. These resources are historically developed, incorporate established ideas and collective knowledge, and carry suggestions for how they can be utilised. Moreover, they may form material configurations in which artefacts are bundled together and constituted in particular ways relative to other dimensions of a practice, such as the rules, conventions, and habits that govern work.

When new ideas or artefacts are introduced, a period of destabilisation may occur. Established routines and conventions will need to be opened up and renegotiated, and the ‘new’ has to be re-contextualised and assigned meaning in the light of already existing practice. From this perspective, developing new ways of working is not primarily defined by the arrival of something ‘new’, but by the micro processes through which teachers renew prevailing ways of work (Little, 2012). Moreover, the ways in which a new artefact is employed and the meaning ascribed to it is not given, but rather achieved through collaborative acts of meaning making and ways of envisaging it as a meditational tool. The different ways in which new principles and artefacts are taken up and made sense of may provide direction both to current activities and to future possibilities for development and change (Nerland & Jensen, 2010). Since such micro processes are embedded in different local environments that incorporate distinct local histories, they are likely to take different forms in various school contexts. Efforts to change practice can, therefore, be seen to include ‘dealing with ambiguity,
anticipating the emergence of new problems; the generation of new questions; and the on-going re-mediation of practices, tools, and habits of mind’ (Gutiérrez & Voss-oughi, 2010, p. 103).

In this article, we investigate the ‘what’ dimension of these micro processes by tracing the emerging challenges the teachers attended to as they worked to modify established practice and integrate new concepts, tools and procedures into their work. At the same time, we pay attention to the ‘how’ dimension of the teachers’ interactions by investigating how they opened up existing forms of practice for exploration in order to engage with new forms of assessment, and the ways in which discursive and material resources were drawn upon as part of this process.

AfL may be described as a set of ideas, concepts, procedures, and material resources that carries with it several meaning potentials and directions for use. Research has revealed that it is imbued with partly conflicting meaning potentials, as it may be used for transparency purposes rather than learning (Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Torrance, 2007). Hence, rather than viewing AfL as a single idea or tool, we approach it as a problem complex with multiple dimensions and potentials for use. Moreover, as it incorporates pedagogical knowledge and principles that are generated from research about learning, teaching, and assessment, it may assume the character of a knowledge object (Knorr Cetina, 2001) that practitioners explore and to which they orient in their collaborative efforts. Such objects typically have an unfolding character; temporary solutions give rise to new questions, and when practitioners attempt to reveal them, they often add to, rather than reduce, their complexity (Knorr Cetina, 2001). Hence, they call upon practitioners to act in creative and constructive ways, rather than relying on established routines. At the same time, such modes of work are driven forward in the interplay between the explorative and the confirmative, between processes of opening up and arriving at temporary closures.

Our interest is to investigate the processes involved when teachers open AfL up for exploration and create connections between the new assessment guidelines and other dimensions of collective practice.

Empirical context and methodology

As part of a larger research project, data were collected in three lower secondary schools and at the Local Education Authorities (LEA) in a Norwegian city (henceforth ‘City’), with observations and interviews carried out from September 2009 until April 2011. The teachers were participating in an ‘AfL project’ led by the LEA and reinforced by national policy drives to reform assessment. The project was introduced by the LEA as a research-based initiative, building primarily on the work of Black and Wiliam (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2001; Wiliam et al., 2004). Its stated aim was to improve the schools’ assessment cultures and facilitate personalised education. While all the secondary schools in City were expected to work with AfL at the time of data collection, these three schools had volunteered to be pilot schools in the AfL project when it was first set up in 2007.

The current analysis is based on seven meetings of an ‘AfL project group’ at Bridges Lower Secondary School. Bridges has approximately 580 students and 50 employees, is located in a relatively affluent socioeconomic area, and receives consis-
tently high scores in national tests. The AfL group was a result of the school’s participation in the LEA’s AfL project, and consisted of eight teachers from different grade levels and subject areas who had been asked by the principal to participate in the group. Their expressed objective was, in their own words, to support the ‘institutionalisation’ of AfL practices at the school, both by acting as a ‘think thank’ for the principal and by supporting engagement with AfL among the general teaching staff. We selected the group at this school because its members met frequently, addressed a range of issues, and engaged continuously with senior management. Their meetings had a semi-structured agenda with fairly open-ended discussions, where multiple issues were explored based on the teachers’ experienced needs in addition to agenda items introduced by the principal. The principal (Tom) initiated and chaired all the meetings. An external advisor (Eric), hired by the LEA, whose role was to support the school’s development of AfL practices, participated in four meetings. When observations began, Bridges had been working with AfL-related ideas for about three years. However, AfL-related knowledge and practice were seen by the teachers and the leadership as being unevenly distributed across the school, and they were grappling with how to systematise and institutionalise AfL as a shared practice.

Six of the meetings were video-recorded and the teachers’ discussions were transcribed verbatim, and one meeting was recorded using field notes. Additional data were collected to provide contextual information: Four meetings with all teaching staff at Bridges where AfL was discussed were observed; a group interview was conducted with the AfL group; the principal was interviewed twice; the external consultant was interviewed once; strategy documents were collected; and seminars at the LEA in which teachers from Bridges participated were recorded using field notes. For the current analysis, the supplementary data have primarily been used to gain contextual understanding of the conversations in the AfL group meetings. For example, being present at the meetings with all staff members helped us to make sense of the AfL group’s subsequent discussions about these meetings; the strategy documents provided an overview of the school’s priorities regarding AfL work; and the interviews provided descriptions by the informants of how the group had worked over time, and how the different actors (teachers, principal, and external consultant) understood their roles in relation to the group.

The analysis was conducted in two steps: first, by inductively identifying key themes that the participants oriented towards in the conversations. This was carried out by a repeated reading of the transcripts, with attention to factors such as repetitions, participant categories and expressions, episodes that appeared to raise at stake issues, and similarities and contrasts between different segments that addressed the same topics (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This was supplemented by viewing of video material in instances where artefacts or group dynamics seemed particularly salient. The second step consisted of a more in-depth analysis of how selected themes were explored and negotiated through interaction. In this second reading, we focused on the following three processes that illustrate the teachers’ work with different aspects of their practice: How the teachers made sense of the possible implications of AfL guidelines and principles by opening up the conventions of existing practice, how they negotiated and invested meaning into artefacts and tools, and how they engaged in a collective reworking of social relationships. This choice was guided by our theoretical
interest in how teachers were reworking their practice as they were engaging with AfL, and by our methodological interest in tracing this phenomenon through micro-processes of interaction (Heath et al., 2010; Little, 2012). To explore these processes in more detail, we employ the following intermediate concepts (Jordan & Henderson, 1995; Furberg & Ludvigsen, 2008; Børte & Nerland, 2010). The concept orientation is used to highlight the different concerns towards which teachers orient when discussing AfL, with a view to exploring how these issues are brought to bear on the conversations, as well as their possible implications. The concept positioning is used to illustrate how the participants discursively position themselves and each other through the conversations. These concepts help to explore the social dynamics of the conversations, including how actors frame the topic of discussion in different ways and how they become positioned as professionals in the collaborative work. We further use the concepts elaboration and specification to investigate the means by which teachers open up issues for exploration and attempt to specify the meaning of material and discursive resources, re-shaping and assigning meaning to AfL in the process. Together, these concepts are sensitising devices that allow us to examine how the teachers discursively negotiate and construct shared knowledge and understanding in a collaborative setting.

Reworking practice in the AfL project group

In our first reading of the transcripts, we were struck by the rich variety of questions and issues raised by the teachers, which we summarised under the following thematic headings: handling relationships with students and parents; managing accountability issues; formulating formative feedback; developing shared AfL practice at school; relating to national frameworks for teaching; organising progress meetings (biannual meetings between the students, teachers, and parents where formative feedback is provided); working with assessment criteria; and engaging the external advisor. These themes are not mutually exclusive, but indicate key orientations in the team conversations as they emerged from an inductive analysis. Moreover, they reflect the range of issues that demanded the teachers’ attention in order for them to unpack AfL as a problem complex and re-contextualise its tools and principles for local use.

In the teachers’ conversations, the themes outlined above operated on multiple levels, ranging from accounts of specific encounters with individual students to discussion of school-wide or national policies. In relation to classroom practices, questions for discussion included how to formulate assessment criteria, how to best provide formative feedback to students, and what kind of feedback templates to use. In relation to school wide practices, attention was paid to how to integrate AfL into existing routines and procedures, such as the annual bi-annual student–teacher–parent meetings, the weekly work plans for students, or the local curriculum. Finally, the teachers discussed the implications of national legislation and local guidelines for how they conducted formative assessment, and how the national curriculum should be understood and broken down within the framework of AfL. Curriculum discussions also involved addressing how AfL could be reconciled with the specific affordances and epistemic characteristics of particular subject disciplines. Common to all of these themes was that the issues were not resolved in a straight-forward manner, but required
negotiation and exploration in order for new principles and procedures to be incorporated into existing practice. This in turn led us to a more detailed analysis of the teachers’ interactions, with the aim of investigating in more detail the ways in which they were reworking their practice.

In the following, we present and discuss three extracts from the team meetings, which give insight into the micro processes involved. The examples are chosen to illustrate processes of reworking practice through making sense of the ‘new’ and the ‘old’, through investing artefacts with meaning, and through reworking relationships with students and parents. In the first extract, the teachers are exploring ideas about how to provide written, formative feedback. In the second extract, the focus is on understanding and managing new expectations of teacher–parent relationships. Finally, in the third extract, teachers explore the meaning and principles for constructing assessment criteria.

Example 1: exploring the intentions and principles of formative assessment

The question of what principles of formative assessment implied for teachers’ everyday work and what should be the focus of AfL work at the school, was a recurrent theme in the data material and was discussed from multiple perspectives. This was sometimes expressed as a refinement of existing practice, in which AfL was seen to further develop and specify already existing practices; sometimes as creating distinctions, e.g., something that concerns certain disciplines and not others (‘I have provided written feedback twice a year for the past 20 years… what’s new is that people like physical education teachers have to write something beyond “he is nice and positive”’—Eva, Meeting 4), and sometimes as a change in reasoning more than practice (for example, by stating that they had ‘always’ engaged in practices associated with AfL, but that they were more aware of them now).

The extract below, taken from meeting two, illustrates an episode in which the teachers explore the implications of formative assessment. It starts when one of the teachers (Louis) poses questions that the external advisor (Eric) has raised regarding their formative feedback practices. In the transcription, three full stops (…) indicate a pause, and underlined words indicate words uttered with emphasis. All names are fictitious.
Several questions are raised in this extract: how to best provide formative feedback, the role of assessment criteria, reconciling the pedagogically oriented aspects of the assessment template used during progress meetings with its more bureaucratic features (e.g., the limitations of layout of the form), and how to relate to Eric’s expertise. Of special interest for our concerns are the different orientations towards the concept of formative assessment, how existing practice is explored, and the resources that are drawn upon in the interaction.

Three different orientations towards formative assessment can be seen, two of which focus on the provision of formative feedback and one that is geared towards the role of assessment criteria. The orientation provided by Louis focuses on making explicit to the student how s/he should work to improve, and they elaborate how this would require additional explanation on the part of the teacher and engagement with students’ learning processes (lines 4–5, 8–9, 18). Emma, however, contests this idea and says she was ‘stunned’ by this suggestion; she provides an alternative orientation that requires the teachers to merely point out the key areas on which the student should focus (line 7). Karen later elaborates on this idea (lines 20–21), pointing to the role of textbooks and set exercises. Finally, Anna provides a third orientation, which redirects the focus away from formative feedback practices to what she construes as the foundation of AfL—practice—the proper production and formulation of criteria (lines 14–16).

The re-voicing of Eric’s previous questions and concerns is one of the main resources drawn upon in this extract, and it is his questioning of how they provide formative assessment that triggers the conversation. Louis is the teacher who most proactively draws upon Eric’s voice in order to orient the others towards a specific understanding of how to provide formative feedback. Through his talk, Louis positions Eric as an expert whose opinion they should consider when developing feedback practices, and elaborates on what he presents as Eric’s view. However, Louis’ orientation is contested by both Emma and Anne. Emma directly challenges Eric’s account of how formative feedback should be provided, and thus repositions him not as an authority, but as someone whose advice may not be appropriate or relevant. In negotiating this opposition, Louis alternates between using Eric’s voice to support his ideas and establishing some distance between himself and Eric (line 22; 25). In this way, his positioning relative to Eric is ambiguous; while actively drawing upon Eric’s expertise, he also questions whether Eric should set the agenda (lines 12–13; 25–26).

Emma, however, uses her own experience as a reference point, which, in turn, triggers an examination of existing practices in light of Eric’s suggestions (line 17 onwards). Hence, as the three different orientations are negotiated, the implications of providing formative feedback and how it relates to existing practices and artefacts are explored. Salient issues include how to position the teachers’ role relative to new assessment practices; establishing a division of labour between teachers, students, and institutional artefacts such as textbooks and assessment criteria; and the impact of formative assessment on the work-load and responsibilities placed upon teachers. As they unpack these issues, existing practices are brought up for critical examination and the potential role of artefacts is negotiated. The question of whether Emma’s current practice, or the suggestions offered by Karen, are ‘sufficient’ is not further specified or resolved in the meeting; however, the extract illustrates how existing practice
is put at stake and held up for scrutiny as they negotiate how AfL practices and their implications should be understood.

These questions were not resolved in this meeting, but the teachers generated a diverse list of issues for which they solicited the external advisor’s input; these included the questions of how to best provide formative feedback and how to develop ‘good’ assessment criteria. The construction of a more stable ‘solution’ to these dilemmas was, therefore, postponed and, to some extent, handed over to the external advisor. More generally, efforts to open up the different meanings and implications of AfL dominated their collaborative activity throughout most of the observation period. Although the school had been involved with the AfL project for some time, the teachers were still working on constructing shared understandings of AfL, illustrating how AfL comes with a range of meaning potentials that need to be opened up and negotiated locally.

Example 2: reworking models of teacher–parent relationships

Another recurrent theme in the team meetings was that of creating and maintaining relationships with students and parents that were conducive to the pedagogical division of labour envisaged by AfL tools and principles. This included problems such as defining the parents’ roles relative to the progress meetings, mobilising parents and students to take increased responsibility for the student’s learning processes, and enhancing parents and students’ understanding of assessment criteria as support for learning rather than instrumentalist tools for summative purposes. An important resource in the teachers’ conversations was their stories of personal experiences, both from the classroom and meetings with students and parents; these served to illustrate the dilemmas that teachers encountered and possible ways of relating to them.

In the following extract from meeting four, Eva uses a story about her experience from a progress meeting to show how she and a set of parents had different understandings of an assessment template. The progress meetings, which are biannual, are between the student, his/her class teacher, and the parents. The main topic of discussion is the student’s academic progress as well as his/her social and psychological well-being at school. While recent legislation encourages the use of these meetings as arenas in which formative feedback can be provided, local authorities also expect teachers in City to provide such formative feedback in writing. However, teachers often questioned whether the work involved in providing written feedback in all subjects was ‘worth it’, and whether the parents experienced the meetings in the way that the school anticipated. As Eva said, ‘I have spoken to different people in my social circle who have children in school, who say that they don’t get as much out of these conversations as the teachers do’ (Meeting 4). How to make these meetings, and particularly the production and provision of written documentation, supportive of students’ learning processes without making unreasonable demands on teachers’ work load was a recurrent theme throughout the meetings.

In this specific extract, the assessment template to which Eva refers contained her feedback on a piece of writing that the student had done for a Norwegian class. Such assessment templates were commonly used at the school, and while not standardised, they typically consisted of a grid for assessing the student’s performance relative to specific assessment criteria, as well as suggestions for how the student could improve.
By using this story as a conversational resource, Eva raises multiple issues with which the teachers grappled regarding negotiating their relationships with parents.

Eva: I had seven conversations yesterday and I still think that a lot of parents are extremely preoccupied by grades.

Karen: Oh, yes.

Eva: When they come to us and say, but what should they, and then I had brought a feedback form from Norwegian (inaudible), with criteria for high, medium and below medium levels of achievement. Then they put circles here and there on the form, and then the mother had counted ‘so if there are twelve circles there and four circles there, why didn’t she end up there [in a different grading bracket]?’

Anna: mm

Eva: And then I had to say that this is actually not how we set grades. And then she had received a split grade, which I usually never do, but then I had done that, and then the father was wondering ‘yes, well if she gets that on the pre-finals, then what do you do?’

(one teacher opens her mouth and displays a facial gesture indicating surprise)

Eva: And then I didn’t have the heart to say that she won’t get that [a higher grade]

Catherine: No

Eva: But then I said that this is not actually how, that is, it’s, we don’t calculate the average of the grades, but they [the parents] are still there

Catherine: Yes, some are

Eva: Yes and, ‘yes but you have written that she should expand her arguments in Norwegian texts, that this is the next step. How much more should she have written for it to be sufficient?’

(laughter)

Eva: Yes, right, but then that is a good opportunity to have a conversation about it, because that’s what they’ve been concerned with at home

Several teachers: mm

Eva: ‘Why, we think you have been too strict’ ... ‘Have you see, have you seen what I have written?’ Yes.

A key issue in Eva’s account is how the student’s feedback form is to be understood, and, by implication, the purpose assigned to the biannual progress meetings. Two main orientations are reflected in the story—one towards concerns for supporting learning advocated by the teacher, and one towards accountability concerns advocated by the parents. In Eva’s narrative, the parents’ main orientation is to hold the teacher accountable for her grading practices, and to achieve transparency in the decision-making process that led to their daughter’s grade. This further emerges as quantitatively informed (‘and then the mother had counted “so if there are twelve circles there and four circles there, why didn’t she end up there?”’ (lines 6–7); ‘how much more should she have written for it to be sufficient?’ (line 19). Eva frames this idea as somewhat out of date (‘they are still there’, line 16), suggesting that they have not yet embraced the logic of AfL that centres less on summative results and more on the pedagogical processes for supporting student learning, and the student’s responsibilities as part of that process. As she elaborates on the meeting, she recounts it as a good opportunity to enter into dialogue with the parents about this issue (lines 21–22), where she uses the assessment template to try to explain her own understanding of the form and the meeting (‘have you seen what I have written?’, line 24).

This tension between two different orientations towards learning and accountability is recurrent when teachers recount conversations with parents and students. As teachers are faced with clients who increasingly demand transparency and accountability from teachers, attending to such demands becomes a concern that, at times, conflicts with the pedagogical ambitions of AfL. More generally, these relationships need to be negotiated and maintained on an on-going basis, so that students and parents can become engaged with the roles and responsibilities envisaged by AfL tools.
and principles. In theory, AfL requires that students adopt particular roles in relation to their own learning processes, such as actively participating in setting their own learning targets, constructing assessment criteria, and monitoring and reporting on their own learning. Parents are envisaged to support this process by encouraging and monitoring their children. However, as this extract indicates, enrolling students and parents in these logics require extensive work and active negotiation by the teachers.

In sum, this example points to how the work of aligning social relations, artefacts, and practices is ambiguous, and that a variety of strategies—such as exploring the meaning of artefacts, referring to established conventions of practice, and elaborating on how teachers are held accountable through written documentation—are employed in this process. Through Eva’s story, the meaning potential of the assessment template and the progress meeting, and the question of how summative assessment is to be conducted, are opened up for exploration and concretised. However, although the teachers generally approve of Eva’s account and her approach to the problem, the discussion is kept in an elaborative mode in which the teachers engage in opening up AfL-related challenges rather than explicitly arriving at solutions or instantiating new principles for practice.

Example 3: exploring the meaning potentials of assessment criteria

Our third example focuses more in depth on how the team worked to invest new artefacts, such as assessment templates, criteria, or progress reports, with meaning. How to understand and work with assessment criteria was a recurring theme, and included questions such as how to avoid instrumentalist use of assessment criteria, how to best formulate criteria, and how to relate assessment criteria to other frameworks for teaching, such as the national curriculum or the biannual and weekly progress plans. The discussion of criteria was also linked to broader issues such as teacher–student relations, the specificities of subject disciplines, and the different structures and processes that guided the teachers’ everyday work.

In this extract from meeting number seven, the tenth grade teachers in the AfL project group (Anna and Catherine) recount a conversation from their teacher team meeting in which their colleagues complained that the use of assessment criteria on tests was restricting the tasks set for students and, therefore, also limiting what students learnt. The tenth grade teachers in the AfL group recount this as problematic, and as they shared the story with the rest of the AfL group, the teachers discussed what might have caused this perception.

1 Eva: But I have sometimes been a bit critical ahead of social science tests, because I think that the criteria they sometimes set up are very, well, it’s OK to say in mathematics ‘to solve equations with two parentheses’ or with a fraction, or whatever the case may be
2 Anna: mm
3 Eva: But in social science, and if you are then supposed to list everything you know, then it becomes very focused on, or at least it can easily become, focus on facts and facts and facts and facts [placing fist on the table every time she says ‘facts’], and then it turns into a ‘Yes, you asked about this, but it doesn’t say anything about this in the assessment criteria’, and then there is something wrong with the way we formulate our assessment criteria, I think
4 Anna: mm
5 Eva: And then, the teachers who have asked this question or experienced this
6 Ana: mm
7 Eva: have maybe not managed to develop criteria that are good enough in relation to overarching and broader competency objectives

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At this point, Eric joins the conversation and suggests that the problem might lie with the competency objectives in the national curriculum, rather than with the criteria. Eva rejects this explanation and elaborates on how she believes the criteria become too specific as they are being constructed by teachers. After some deliberation, Eric seems to accept this account of the problem:

51 Eric: So, the criteria become too specific
52 Karen: mm
53 Eva: Yes, I think that often happens
54 Eric: That’s, that’s, yes
55 Eva: Yes, because the students come again and again and say, ‘yes but what are the criteria for this, yes, but we would like it to be clearer’, but it’s obvious that in a subject such as social science, and I’m sure also in religion and in Norwegian, you can’t just provide a recipe which gives everyone the opportunity to get a five or a six [two highest grades on the grading scale]
59 Karen: Yes, of course
60 Eva: I don’t think that’s doable... and then I think that you have limited it very much compared to the overarching learning objectives

At stake in this conversation is how assessment criteria should be understood, developed, and formulated. Two main orientations towards assessment criteria are articulated. The first constructs criteria as being restrictive of students’ learning as they adopt instrumentalist rather than learning-supportive functions; the second constructs criteria as a tool that is used to support and expand student learning. This tension is explored in three ways: First, by elaboration of how subject-specific dimensions may influence the development and formulation of assessment criteria. This is done by exploring the relationship between specific subjects and the development of assessment criteria, and distinguishes between subjects in which, according to the teacher, a ‘narrow’ or ‘recipe-like’ formulation of assessment criteria may be more or less appropriate. This points to the general question of how to relate AfL practices to the specific characteristics of subject disciplines.

The second aspect is the potential role that students play in reinforcing the instrumentalist potential of the criteria. Eva provides an example of this (lines 55–56) and, through her account, creates connections between these student responses and what she considers inappropriately formulated assessment criteria, construing the latter as a cause of the former. This points to another recurrent issue; as teachers explore where to locate assessment criteria on a continuum from open-ended to narrowly phrased formulations, the challenge of students turning assessment criteria into instruments for transparency and ‘recipe-like’ instructions has to be considered.

The third aspect concerns the relationship between assessment criteria and the competency objectives of the national curriculum. Eva frames the issue at stake as being that the tenth grade teachers have ‘not managed to develop criteria that are good enough in relation to overarching and broader competency objectives’ (lines 13–14), but rather have restricted them too much relative to the national curriculum. This orientation calls attention to the balance between the specifying practices that are necessary for breaking down the level of abstraction of the national curriculum, and providing a space for students to interpret the assessment criteria in a way that does not limit their learning opportunities. Thus, creating an appropriate relationship between assessment criteria and the national curriculum is highlighted as a key aspect of developing criteria, and as a tool for addressing student instrumentalism.
Throughout the excerpt, Eva’s orientation is towards specifying the problem as an inadequate formulation of assessment criteria, thereby reframing the issue from being an inherent weakness of assessment criteria, to how to adequately formulate and develop them. Through her story, she elaborates on the different considerations that teachers have to take into account during the development process, thereby situating assessment criteria in specific relationships to the curriculum, to the characteristics of specific subject disciplines, and to a school culture where students are increasingly demanding transparency regarding how they are assessed.

This extract illustrates, first, the work that has to be carried out in order to develop a shared understanding of how assessment criteria should be used, and, second, the ways in which assessment criteria have to be related to other aspects of the professional practice, specifically the national curriculum, the characteristics of subject disciplines, and in relation to students. As seen in the analysis, the ways in which these connection points are constituted impacts what kind of tool assessment criteria become, i.e., whether they are seen as restrictive or supportive of students’ learning, or whether they become a vehicle for pedagogy or accountability. At the same time, teachers’ roles relative to the assessment criteria are also negotiated; by Eva’s discursive attempts to address the problem at hand, she is also paying attention to the ways in which teachers can work with assessment criteria to suit their pedagogical purposes.

**Summary of analysis**

The analysis illustrates that the interaction in the AfL team mobilised a wide range of issues for exploration; these not only concerned assessment but also different kinds of relationships within the wider professional practice. In one way, it can be seen as the opposite phenomenon of implementing AfL to the ‘letter’ (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). While an important orientation in this endeavour was related to developing AfL practices in the ‘spirit’ of AfL (Marshall & Drummond, 2006), the work of unpacking and integrating AfL into practice was about more than explicating and enacting its pedagogical principles. In our analysis, we have highlighted three aspects of this work. First, it required teachers to critically explore their existing practice, for example, by revisiting the ways in which they draw upon already existing resources such as the national curriculum or disciplinary knowledge. Second, it required an exploration and reworking of the established relationships between teachers, students, and parents. Third, extensive work was invested in clarifying and specifying the various meaning potentials attached to AfL-related principles, tools, and procedures. While this related to identifying their pedagogical potential, the meaning making of the AfL team also concerned issues such as the division of labour between students, teachers, and parents, and the maintenance of professional identities. In all three extracts presented in this article, teachers are positioned differently as professionals through the orientations at play. The constellation of AfL practices thus has implications that go beyond assessment in and of itself, but mobilise issues that are at the core of the question of what it means to be a teacher in contemporary society.
Concluding discussion

Throughout the analysis, it is striking how the team conversations were characterised by fairly open-ended discussions in which numerous issues were explored expansively, but fewer issues were closed down with agreement on a specific course of action. This may be understood in light of the professional culture of teachers, which is often described as characterised by endorsing actions, explorative talk, and respect for the individual teachers’ experience-based knowledge (Ottesen, 2006; Horn & Little, 2010; Nerland, 2012). However, it may also be related to Engeström’s (1999) finding that ‘innovative’ teams frequently spend considerably more time on problem finding and definition than on problem solving. This phase of innovative work may nevertheless be critical for change processes to occur, as it is through the identification of problems that the existing practice is opened up for critical scrutiny and the various meaning potentials of tools and guidelines can be made explicit and negotiated.

In the specific context of AfL initiatives, the study suggests that an initial existence of a shared understanding of AfL across the teaching staff cannot be assumed even if the teachers have considerable experience with formative assessment. Rather, such shared understanding needs to be achieved in situ, through dynamic processes of (re) alignment (Spicer, 2011) and in ways that are specific to the sociohistorical context in which it occurs (Coburn, 2001; Edwards, 2008). Here, AfL projects adopt many of the same characteristics previously identified in studies of organisational change and instructional reforms (Sato et al., 2005; Rasmussen & Ludvigsen, 2009), which highlight how change processes require substantial, multifaceted work at the local level that cannot be expressed within the general objectives of a given educational reform. While previous research on AfL initiatives has highlighted the need for aligning relationships between assessment policy, research, and practice in schools on a continuous basis (Hayward et al., 2004), this study indicates how alignments also need to be worked out within the teacher community.

Based on this, we raise two issues for further discussion. First, the interactional pattern between the teachers raises the question of how practice is reworked in the interplay between explorative and confirming modes of action. While the engagement with AfL as a problem complex certainly generated modes of action that go beyond routine, the teachers’ engagement was mainly explorative in nature. The development and distribution of new knowledge and modes of practice will, however, also depend on moments of closure and on the material instantiation of shared principles. By alternating between moments of opening and closure in the engagement with problems, new understandings may emerge, which, in turn, generate new questions to be resolved (Knorr Cetina, 2001; Nerland & Jensen, 2010). In this context, AfL projects may benefit from paying more attention to the role of artefacts and tools in the collaborative work, not merely as given resources but as tools that are developed and invested with meaning through the teachers’ local knowledge work.

Second, since the analysis shows that working with AfL in this particular case implied a significant degree of constructive work, this points to a more general issue of how practitioners in local settings go about re-contextualising generalised knowl-
edge and guidelines for professional work. The challenges emerging for the AfL group in this study resemble what Timmermans and Berg (2003) describe as creating ‘local universalities’, in which practitioners identify and develop shared principles that are valid across the local work environment, at the same time as these principles need to be aligned with the general professional guidelines. We find, as others have done, that the tension between the general and the specific is not resolved once and for all but needs to be addressed recurrently in local settings. In our study, however, this dilemma of universality versus local differentiation also concerns differentiation within the local context in ways that point to paradoxes inherent to the AfL initiative. While resting on shared procedures and standards for assessment, AfL also encourages extensive differentiation through its expectations of personalised teaching and student participation in the assessment process. As such, what should ‘apply to all’ and what should be ‘left to each teacher’ to modify in the relationship with individual students was a recurrent dilemma.

On a general level, we would say that the teachers in our study strived to make sense of what the very notion of shared practice might mean in this professional context. At a time when notions about clinical approaches and standardisation of professional practice are prevalent (Evans, 2011), the question of what standards and shared practices actually imply in the context of teaching and what is required of local work emerges as an important research topic. The present article contributes to this agenda while simultaneously pointing to the need for more studies of the micro processes involved when teachers engage in developing shared practices.

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