# Assessment Without Levels - Ten Pitfalls to Avoid

**What are the weaker features of school approaches to AWL?**

### 1. Recreating Levels using other words to describe them

Levels are a measure developed for the old National Curriculum, designed to wrap up a package of what a pupil has learnt into one number, i.e. a Level. They depend on a definition, which are a graded set of statements of competence in relation to an area of learning – an Attainment Target.

Attainment Targets were only intended to be used at the end of a course, but schools were using them to track perceived changes in what pupils were learning, and this was problematic, as documented by the AWL Commission. With a new National Curriculum in place we no longer have a definition to support summaries of learning using the shorthand of Levels, so Levels are no longer valid. Alternative numbers or symbols which aim to provide a summary of what pupils know at any point in time will also need a definition in order to be usable. So the key question to answer is, if a school is using alternative symbols or numbers to Levels, is their definition clear, justifiable and convincing?

### 2. Trying to assess Attainment Targets before all the component parts have been taught

Take the following example from the Computing Subject Content statements: *"Design, use and evaluate computational abstractions that model the state and behaviour of real-world problems and physical systems"*

In order for someone to be competent in this statement they would need to have studied the processes of design, evaluation and modelling. They will need to understand what a computational abstraction is, and have used them in some way, and have knowledge of real world problems, and physical systems.

In order to judge a compound statement like this it will need to be broken down into its component parts. Each of these components would then be taught, and the teacher would decide whether the pupils had learnt them.

It would only be when all the components of this statement had been taught that we would be able to set an exercise which put them all together, and then make a holistic judgment about the extent to which pupils were competent in demonstrating knowledge and skills across the combined components of this statement.

Some schemes expect teachers to go straight into making a judgment about the Attainment Target without providing evidence of learning of the component parts. A suitable assessment scheme will recognise the movement from Component Learning to Holistic Learning, and aim to record evidence from both elements across the key stage.

### 3. Seeking to boil down a large range of learning attributes into just one number

Previous practice with Levels may have led to us to believe that we can express evidence of learning as just one number.  But diverse attributes, learnt to different extents, don't lend themselves to being put into one box. This problem exists for any approach based on the use of elemental competences. Using an atomised list of learning attributes makes it difficult to summarise what pupils are learning.

What is much more important here is not to attempt to arrive at a single number, but to find a manageable way to capture the key evidence of what has been learnt.

Getting the 'chunking' right is the task here. It is not easy to know how best to handle lists of potentially hundreds of individual attributes, nor can we hope to use gradations of a single number representation of the complex holistic statements that we find in Subject Content Statements.

What would be useful is something in between. One or two Learning Objectives associated with each unit of work would be a good, manageable balance.

### 4. Using a 'Working At' approach where pupils effectively start from a 'fail' grade

If we use a 'Working At' approach at key stage 3 based on GCSE number grades, then, for a pupil starting their first lesson in year 7 in a subject they haven't studied before, they will effectively be working at a fail GCSE grade. This will suggest unsatisfactory attainment at a stage where we are trying to encourage a feeling of success and a love of learning in school subjects.

We might try to get around this by creating a new set of assessment categories for use at key stage 3.  But in doing this we will have recreated Levels by another name, and then we would, confusingly, have two different currencies to work with across the secondary phase – think Euros at key stage 3 and Pounds at key stage 4.

Using 'Working At' GCSE grades is also not ideal because the outcomes to key stage 3 are Attainment Targets with different criteria to GCSEs.

Assessment at key stage 3 should primarily be about reporting how well pupils are doing with respect to learning the component knowledge and skills of Attainment Targets. A major purpose of learning at key stage 3 is to build foundation skills and knowledge that will support learning at key stage 4. A 'Working Towards' approach will be useful in this respect by showing where individual assessments are leading to, by providing an early sighting on a likely grade attainable should pupils continue to study the subject at key stage 4.

**5. Using a high level of granularity in grading that is unlikely to be supported by evidence**

Schools may wish to grade the attainment of a year 7 pupil to a precise level to indicate progress as they go through the school year – shown through a gradual increase in the fine grading. At the start of year 7 in a new subject, we aren't going to know with any precision how accurately a pupil is acquiring an Attainment Target.

If we aim to report progress using four mastery categories, then these might be considered as corresponding to four grade-pairs, i.e. Mastered=7,8, Secure=5,6, Developing=3,4, Emerging=1,2. So, using a Mastery approach, the implicit granularity of predicted attainment will be two grades, which, as more data is gathered, could be refined to one grade . By the end of key stage 3 we should have sufficient evidence to know to the nearest grade how well a pupil could do at GCSE were they to continue to study the subject at key stage 4. Then, during key stage 4 we will use grade criteria which will help determine whether a predicted grade will be weak, secure or strong, i.e. by this stage we can justify working at third grade intervals in our estimates.

So, across key stages 3 and 4 the granularity of predictive summative assessments can sensibly move from one grade, to third-of-a-grade intervals. But reporting what pupils are actually learning will remain a more important activity, with the benefit of being able to provide detailed feedback on how well pupils are learning the component parts of the subject.


**6. An assumption that progress advances neatly, like climbing the steps of a ladder**

The old system of Levels and sub Levels gave the impression that 'progress' is something that advances in even, incremental, measurable steps. However, it is doubtful that what happens in the brain when learning takes place has this sort of order to it.

We may not be able to measure learning, but what we can do is observe and record the outward signs of learning. We can teach something and see if pupils understand it, and record this fact. We know that 'progress' involves acquiring both 'height' and 'depth' in understanding the range of learning in what constitutes a subject. The range of evidence of what pupils are learning will indicate a journey towards a predictable outcome, even if that journey may meander. This may best be represented by a dotted line towards an indicative result. Reporting that pupils are on Step 1, Step 2, Step 3 etc. will be much less convincing.


**7. A view that a pupil is 'on target' if they attain their predicted grade – even if that grade is unacceptably low**

We know that prior attainment is a good indicator of future performance, and that grades at GCSE can be estimated from pupil attainment at the end of year 6. This can lead to a target being set in any particular subject based on prior attainment in English and mathematics. Pupils may then be thought of as working above, below, or at their target - even in subjects requiring different learning attributes to those in English and mathematics. The consequence of this is that a school might be perfectly comfortable for pupils to attain a low GCSE grade in any particular -because they have *met their target*.

However, parents of pupils with low prior attainment would expect that a good school will, through effective teaching, attempt to lift their son or daughter's performance and attain higher grades than might be indicated from KS2 scores in English and mathematics.

A Mastery approach will support teaching which is responsive to how pupils are learning through the effective use of formative assessment, and planned opportunities to revisit important themes. Mastery is an approach applicable to teaching and learning at key stage 3. A key theme of using a Mastery approach is to try to ensure that the majority of pupils have understood what has been taught before moving on to the next topic. When using a Mastery approach, our aim should be for all pupils to achieve the highest GCSE grade they are capable of.

The term 'Mastered' might be used incorrectly to mean 'On Target', rather than 'being on track to achieve a high GCSE grade'.


**8. A lack of detail in showing how the teaching will cover all of the Subject Content statements**

Many approaches to AWL say very little about the curriculum content for which the new assessment system has been developed. This may be a good example of an assessment tail wagging the curriculum dog. A school may have a view that it can leave the curriculum for subject specialists to develop, and trust their judgment on their assessment of the outcomes. This is in spite of the fact that it is the evidence of what is taught and learnt that is the most important indicator of the work of schools.

This, however, will not provide a robust position if an external evaluator is seeking to judge the quality of a school's curriculum and its assessment, because assessment is first and foremost a curriculum issue.

The true focus to developing an effective assessment system will be to ensure that the National Curriculum has been analysed into its component parts, that teaching schemes are developed to teach these components in a progressive manner, that there are clearly-identified learning outcomes to each unit of work, and that over key stage 3 all components of the Subject Content statements will have been covered.

**9. A lack of clarity about what pupils should learn after being taught each unit of work**

In the days when Levels ruled, we had Attainment Targets which described, for each Level, a set of sentences which stated what pupils at this Level should understand, know and be able to do. If we try to use these statements to assess pupil progress, the problem will be simply that we are not assessing pupils against what we have taught them.

If we are to place an emphasis on *formative assessment*, a better approach will be to define a Learning Objective for each unit of work that is taught, i.e. a demonstrable fact that a pupil now knows or understands something that they didn't before. We would then be judging pupils on what we have taught them – not on some other criteria that will need to be inferred. It also doesn't need to be a binary decision – yes or no – because Mastery provides us with four categories – Mastered, Secure, Developing or Emerging.

We can use these categories to record how pupils are responding to what they have been taught, which, over time will build a picture of the extent to which all pupils have assimilated each Learning Objective across a Scheme of Work.

Because we will have summaries of the detail of what pupils are learning we will be able to produce diagnostic reports which indicate the extent to which each Learning Objective has been mastered. Without this information we will be back to reporting that a pupil is on '5b', or some other symbolic term which says nothing about what pupils have actually learnt or need to do next in order to improve.

**10. Not taking the opportunity to implement a 'Mastery' approach to learning**

The Mastery approach is the best piece of guidance about curriculum delivery and assessment in the AWL Commission's report on the new, post-Levels world of Education.

A Mastery approach is no longer to be a hectic rush through a sea of content with pupils falling off at each stage. It is first of all based on sound curriculum planning which answers the question '*What are the essentials of this subject which need to be grasped in order to support a rapid growth in learning and understanding in this subject?* These are the 'Key Concepts and Big Ideas' which we need to ensure that all pupils have grasped so that further learning can build upon them. Mastery is not a one-chance-to-learn approach. It is about ensuring the grounding in the subject has been learnt by visiting the key areas more than once, and providing additional opportunities for those who don't quite get it the first time around.

Mastery assumes that all pupils could do well at a subject if the teaching was well-informed by formative assessment and there were opportunities to revisit topics. Mastery will also relate to target-setting, as described in section 7. Clearly there will be learners for whom success is harder to achieve, but for the majority of pupils without learning disadvantages, in a Mastery system the logic is that we should be setting and expecting targets of the highest grades for all pupils with the potential to succeed.

The key characteristics of an approach which avoids these pitfalls would be guided by the following:

● The solution to AWL isn't really about finding an alternative to Levels

● The AWL issue isn't about numbers; it is about good teaching and learning

● At the heart of the solution to AWL is the need for sound planning of the delivery of the National Curriculum

● We shouldn't try to assess an attainment target until all the components of it have been taught

● Good criteria for assessment would be the Learning Objectives for each unit of work in each subject

● We should use an easy way to collect teachers' summaries of Formative Assessment

● Using four Mastery categories to quantify progress in each unit of work makes assessment easier

● We should not cap pupil expectations at KS3 with targets based on prior attainment in English and mathematics.

● A 'Working Towards' approach signals future attainment and avoids 'Working At' fail grades

● Evidence should be recorded across the key stage of both Component Learning and Holistic Learning

● The system should use the data collected to forecast attainment, plot Flight Paths, and produce diagnostic reports