The emphasis given to dialogue by Black and William (1998) in their seminal work on assessment for learning was echoed within Alexander's 2004 work when he proposed that, "the alternative term ‘dialogic assessment’" might be used in order to demonstrate the perceived consonance of purpose between AfL and dialogic teaching and learning. Such practices would develop classrooms where the notion of authentic exchange between peer and peer and student and teacher, with a concomitant shift in the power dynamics of any learning exchange, would produce an environment of genuine collaboration in the development of understanding.

Whilst in intent this may sound attractive, in reality, there are tensions, and these may be inherent in the very process of dialogic exchange:

Communication ... involves tensions: between participants, between ideas... (Lefstein, 2010: 171)

And such tensions also play out in the context of differing schools cultures:

The institution of schooling constrains the way in which dialogue can be conducted within its domain. Thinking about productive dialogue needs to accept and work within these constraints... (Lefstein, 2010: 171)

Further, tensions are to be found in the practices evident in AfL exchanges in classrooms where teachers, in responding to the twin imperatives of examination syllabuses and time, inadvertently replace genuine dialogic exchange by directive (Brindley and Marshall, forthcoming).

In seeking to understand how such tensions might play out at school level, this case study explore the dialogic assessment practices of one secondary school English teacher and tracked his work in developing a dialogic assessment approach with his department through PPD, and then through his own teaching of an A level English classroom. He used a dialogic approach to assessment based on Alexander's work in classrooms in Russia which legitimises extended dialogue between student and teacher, and extends the notion of ‘other’ (Lefstein, 2010; Bakhtin (1982) by positioning other students as in dialogue with that exchange itself - that is, dialogic assessment takes place between student, teacher and observing students. The case study concludes with an analysis of the classroom conditions necessary to support dialogic assessment, drawing on and extending the English classroom case study.