Theorizing Formative Assessment

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We know that improving formative assessment raises achievement even on externally set tests

- Natriello (1987)
- Crookes (1988)
- Black & Wiliam (1998)
- Hayes (2003)
- Wiliam, Lee, Harrison & Black (2004)

But why, and how, and what is formative assessment anyway?

Formative assessment is not the same as assessment for learning

- Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence.
- An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers and by learners, in assessing themselves and other learners, in order to modify the learning activities in which they are engaged.
- Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' only when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs, whether at the level of the individual, the class, the school, the district, or the state.
- Assessment is formative if, and only if, the information fed back is actually used to improve learning.

Emphasizing formative assessment means a change of focus

- From long feedback cycles to short feedback cycles (from months to seconds)
- From quality control to quality assurance (from assessing learning after it is complete to assessing it while it's happening)
- From teaching to learning (from what the teacher is putting into the process to what the student is getting out of it)
- From regulating activity to regulating learning (from what the students are engaged in to the learning that results)

For effective learning to take place, learners need to know

- where they are in their learning
- where they are going
- how to get there

Different people can play different roles in this process

|	Where the learner is	Where the learner is going	How to get there
Teacher	Evoking information	Curriculum philosophy	Feedback
Peer	Peer-assessment	Sharing criteria	Peer-tutoring
Learner	Self-assessment	Sharing criteria	Self-regulated learning

Improving formative assessment changes views of

- the role of the teacher
- the role of the student
- the nature of subject knowledge
- the nature of learning

These changes could be theorized

- As enculturation into communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- As negotiation of identity and agency in cultural worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998)
- But both of these approaches emphasize stability (of the communities of practice or of cultural worlds themselves)

Activity theory offers a framework for looking at systems in flux
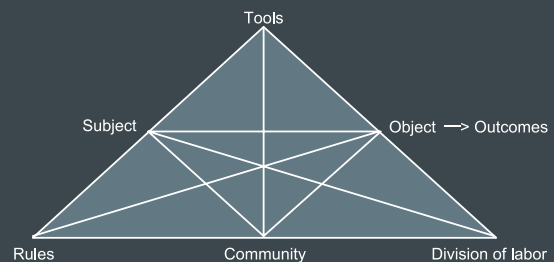
Activity theory in the classroom