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Keeping Formative Assessment Creative

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Formative assessment, like apple pie and motherhood, is now an unquestioned 'good thing'. There is, however, much less agreement about what it involves. This can even lead to public disagreements about definition of the term, for example, Stiggins' criticism of test publishers use of it (Bennett, 2009). 'Assessment for learning' was coined in the mid-90s to offer a clearer focus, but over time the meaning of this too has become blurred as policy makers and publishing companies appropriated the term.

The aim of this paper is to review some of these different understandings and to consider how they can creatively serve formative assessment's basic purpose of 'informing learning'. This leads to a discussion of how, when its use has become commonplace, it can remain a dynamic and creative part of the teaching and learning process. The focus in this paper will be on understandings of formative assessment which focus on classroom interactions and on learner autonomy.

Defining formative assessment

In their review of the French literature on formative assessment, Allal and Lopez (2005) make useful distinctions between three kinds of formative response (their term is *regulation*) to assessment information.

Retroactive
This is the formative assessment conducted *after* a phase of teaching, often using a test, and is about addressing the learning difficulties that have been identified in it. This 'test and remediate' model of formative assessment remains dominant in the US. It is typified by teaching programmes in which a unit is taught for five weeks at which point there would be a test (an 'interim assessment', normally a multiple choice test). The test results would then be used for a week's 'formative assessment' in which mistakes and misunderstandings were addressed.

This approach can claim to be the original use of 'formative assessment' propounded by Bloom and colleagues in 1967 (see Bennett, 2009). It sits comfortably within a behaviourist tradition with its emphasis on achieving success on small and specified tasks – a 'building block' approach. It is also the approach of most publishers claiming to provide 'assessment for learning' materials.

Interactive
This is based on the interactions of the learner with the other components of the teaching activity (for example, the teacher, other students and the instructional materials). This permeates day-to-day classroom activity. The emphasis here is on the learners actively constructing knowledge and the teacher establishing where learners are in their learning, providing clear learning intentions, negotiating success criteria and providing feedback.

This approach is most closely associated with 'assessment for learning' and represented by Black & Wiliam (1998), the Assessment Reform Group (1999) and Clarke (2001) in the UK, Stiggins (2001) and Shepard (2000) in the US. It is the main focus of this paper.

Proactive
This is when evidence leads to future changes in teaching. A broad interpretation of this is teachers modifying their *subsequent* teaching in response to the evidence from their current students. For example, detailed test results may arrive too late for those who took the test and have moved on, but they could lead to changes in what and how the next group is taught. Carless (2007), for example, has introduced the concept of 'pre-emptive formative assessment', in which teachers, based on their previous experience with similar students, anticipate misconceptions rather than letting them develop.

While all three forms may make up a teacher's formative assessment repertoire, it is their *relative weighting* which leads to differences in interpretation. Central to these is whether the focus is on the teachers' or the students' learning. For both the retroactive and proactive approaches, teachers are the principal learners as they adjust ('self-regulate') their teaching. With the interactive approach, the focus is on the students' learning, while the teachers' role is progressively to hand over control of learning to the students as the students themselves become self-regulating learners.

Creative formative assessment
Formative assessment is a dynamic process which encourages adjustments to both teaching and learning in order to improve a learner's achievement. Creative formative assessment looks for more effective ways of doing this. This becomes ever more important when formative assessment is institutionalised in educational policy and can easily become a series of mechanistic teaching practices.
So, for example, within the American *retroactive* tradition, the Council of Chief State School Officers established a consortium to develop better practices in formative assessment for students and teachers (FAST). They defined formative assessment as 'a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes' (Popham, 2008, p5). What, as Popham points out, makes this creative is that it emphasises formative assessment as a *process,* rather than being the property of a test. It is also used by teachers *and students* rather than being simply teacher focused and it takes place *during* instruction rather than being at the end of it. This shift in direction offers a creative way forward within this test-based model.

Similarly, in the *proactive* model, Carless (2007) is looking at ways in which formative assessment can be made effective in cultures such as Hong Kong where students are strongly motivated by summative results. If formative assessment is to play a central role in learning, he argues it has got to relate to the tests and exams on which students,

teachers and parents focus. Teachers will adjust their teaching in response to previous results to anticipate learning problems. This embracing of tests cuts across the tendencies of many involved in assessment for learning to avoid testing (see below).

It is creativity within the *interactive* model on which this paper focuses. A helpful distinction has been offered by Marshall and Drummond (2006) based on their analysis of observational data from the UK *Learning how to learn* project (see James *et al.*, 2006). They distinguish between the *spirit* and the *letter* of formative assessment. In defining the spirit they draw on Dewey's (1966) definition of 'progressive' education as 'high organization based upon ideas' (pp. 28–29); where the challenge is, 'to discover and put into operation a principle of order and operation which follows from understanding what the educative experience signifies' (p. 29). Translated into formative classroom practice the distinction is between those teachers (who they estimate comprised 20% of their sample) who worked from a clear grasp of how classroom practices relate to students' learning autonomy and their role in this and those who use techniques without really understanding their purpose. Lessons which represented the letter of formative assessment used many of the techniques associated with assessment for learning (wait time, questioning, feedback) but in a convergent way which left the teacher controlling the learning (eg questioning and feedback which led to the teacher providing the correct answers to supposedly open-ended questions). The researchers provide an example of the contrast (Table 1)

Table 1. Two English lessons: activities

Letter
Year 8 Lesson A: pre-twentieth century short story
Teacher models criteria to be used for peer assessment by asking pupils to correct technical errors in text prepared by teacher
Pupils correct text
Teacher checks answers with whole class
Pupils correct each others' work
Spirit
Year 8 Lesson B: pre-twentieth century poem
Class draw up list of criteria guided by teacher
Teacher and classroom assistant perform poem
Pupils asked to critique performance
Pupils rehearse performance
Pupils peer assess poems based on criteria
Pupils perform poems based on criteria

Creative assessment for learning
A widely used definition of assessment for learning is:

> The process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and
> their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where
> they need to go to and how best to get there. (ARG 2002, pp. 2–3)

The classroom practices associate with this are:
1. Making clear the learning intentions and achieving these would involve (success criteria) – the 'where they need to go to'.
2. Establishing 'where the learners are in their learning' through questioning, identifying misconceptions and diagnostic analysis of their work.
3. Providing feedback to assist with 'how to get there'
4. Encouraging self and peer assessment to encourage more autonomous learners

Each of these practices can be ritualised and made routine (the 'letter'), particularly where assessment for learning becomes officially mandated and its dissemination leads to a series of techniques that are to be used in the classroom. Here I will discuss some of the threats to the spirit of assessment for learning related to the first of these, learning intentions. I will also explore some creative approaches.

Learning Intentions and success criteria
I think one of the key contributions of assessment for learning has been to encourage teachers to help learners understand what it is they are learning and to develop of sense of the qualities expected in the successful performance of this learning. The theorising for this goes back to Sadler (1989) who emphasised the importance of students having an appreciation of the standard expected of them. For Sadler, the reason feedback was ineffective was that this standard remained in the teacher's head and the students had little sense of it, so they did not know 'where they need to get to'. Without this understanding, feedback has limited impact. This may also help understand the claim that lower achieving students showed more progress than others as a result of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998), since these were most likely to benefit from clarity about what they were doing, why, and what a good performance looked like. (Higher achieving students, who are more at home in school, may have often worked this out for themselves).

Shirley Clarke's WALT ('we are learning to') and WILF ('what I am looking for') cartoon figures (2002) are widely known examples of this approach, with the learning aims written in speech bubbles. Other developments involved policy in England which required the learning objectives to be made explicit for each lesson.

The dilemma with such approaches is that over time they can become formalised in a way that robs them of their initial intention – to negotiate classroom learning with the learners. The spirit of assessment for learning sees learning intentions and success criteria as a process of negotiation with the learners, so that the learners and teachers

are both active in understanding what is needed. Some of the key threats to the spirit of assessment for learning are:

1. Learning intentions are used without negotiation, they are announced or previously written up and pointed to. For many students this may be a mindless exercise, especially if they are direct 'untranslated' sections of a programme or curriculum. For teachers it can mean little more than complying with managerial demands.

2. Detailed curricula or examination syllabuses become the learning objectives. Torrance has pointed out that 'criteria compliance' can then replace learning: Transparency, however, encourages instrumentalism. The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely are candidates to succeed; but succeed at what? Transparency of objectives, coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them, is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved. (2005, p.2)

   Ecclestone (2002) has described this in term of students allowed only *procedural autonomy* rather than *personal autonomy* which leaves them 'hunters and gatherers of information without deep engagement in either content or process' (p36).

3. Success criteria become quantitative rather than qualitative (eg achieving marks, grades or levels). Here is an example from a school in England. In this school the policy is that every lesson has a measurable outcome and that these should be measurable within the lesson by both the teacher and the student.

   Lesson on Shakespeare's Richard III with Y9. The students watched a scene from a film version of the play, the teacher then explained the key events.

   The learning outcomes were: '*I will be able to identify*

   The key events in the meeting between Richard and Lady Anne (level 4)

   The techniques Richard uses to persuade Lady Anne (level 5)

   How Richard uses emotive vocabulary to persuade Lady Anne (level 6)
   (McKeown, 2009*)*

This approach reflects government policy in England. For example in the *Assessment for Learning Strategy* (DCSF, 2008) we are told that good assessment for learning makes:

- an *accurate* assessment – knowing what the standards are, judging pupils' work correctly, and making accurate assessments linked to National Curriculum levels;
- a *reliable* assessment – ensuring that judgements are consistent and based on a range of evidence.

How can we keep learning intentions and success criteria creative?

1. *Negotiate.* The learning model on which assessment for learning is based requires students to be active in their learning and to make meaning in order to understand. Assessment for learning is best served when there is dialogue about what is being learned, why it's being learned and what successful learning would look like. Simply announcing the learning intentions will not do this.
   One of the neglected areas in presenting learning intentions is convincing students *why this is worth learning.* Blanchard (2009) has emphasised that 'formative assessment needs interesting activity' (p12) since, if learners are not engaged or see no value in what they are doing, formative assessment practices (eg feedback) are going to have little impact. I have criticised elsewhere (Stobart, 2008) the assumption that assessment for learning is curriculum neutral and can be applied to any learning. What has to be learned may need to be justified to students – not always a straightforward process if the teachers are 'delivering' a curriculum parts of which they would not always choose to teach if they had the choice. How can we be more creative than 'Because it's in the curriculum' or 'because you'll need to know it if you want to pass'?

2. *Apply the Goldilock's principle.* The children's story of *Goldilocks* has the refrain of 'but just right' as she explores the chairs (not too big/not too small/but just right), food (hot/ cold/just right) and beds (hard/ soft/just right) of the bears' house. I would want to apply this to the specificity of learning intentions. If they are too detailed we move into Torrance's 'criteria compliance' and micro-teaching to gain a mark here and a mark there – a key threat in test based *retroactive* formative assessment. If they are too vague many students may have difficulty developing a clear picture of what they are doing. What is appropriate will be very context specific. It is here that exploring *success criteria* may play a critical role – what will achieving this intention look like? The role of modelling (eg the earlier poetry example) and exemplars (why is this a good example and why is this less successful?)

3. *Adjust the timing.* To begin every lesson by making explicit the learning intentions has led to a deadening routine in many classrooms. In the creative classroom we may want to see an element of surprise or of students engaging with a problem which leads to new learning (we learn better when we know we've got a problem we

want to solve?). In these cases we would want students to be able to tell us what the purpose of the work was by the end of the lesson (or later) – but it may not always be appropriate to know it straight away.

These are just three examples of how formative assessment can be kept creative. We will need to think through other key elements in this way. Feedback is another area which has to be creative if it is to be successful (Hattie and Timperely, 2007; Stobart, 2008).

Keeping assessment for learning creative

I began with some of the problems of defining formative assessment. Assessment for learning was introduced as an attempt to provide a clearer focus. While the Assessment Reform Group's 2002 definition (p.5) has proved helpful, it too may be in need of some creative refreshment. It has, for example, in England it has increasingly been prone to 'quantitative' interpretations (where the learner is = level/grade x; need to get to = y; feedback = tracking of progress). With this in mind the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning at Dunedin, New Zealand, March 2009 offered this 'second generation' definition:

> 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.

Will this help in the ongoing process of keeping formative assessment creative?

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