Formative Assessment in Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy Programmes: A Literature Review for the OECD

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the influential work in the UK on ideas about formative assessment and assessment for learning has been developed in the compulsory sector in the context of a highly prescriptive summative testing system at five stages of children's schooling (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black et al, 2005). While the theoretical and empirical work has generated a sound evidence base for identifying generic techniques and activities that teachers can use with students, there has not yet been an attempt to either a) relate these ideas to their potential use with adult learners in contexts for learning that are very different from schools or b) review the literature that might illuminate how formative assessment works with adults.

It is especially important to establish sound theories and practices of formative assessment in a context where summative assessment of literacy and numeracy in the UK's Skills for Life initiative has strong implicit theories of learning embedded in its official rationale and in methods such as on-line testing and feedback, individual learning plans and target-setting. The use of summative outcomes for accountability affects ideas and practices in relation to formative assessment in these programmes (see Derrick et al, in press; Ecclestone et al, in progress)

The gap in research on formative assessment for adult learning and growing evidence about the impact of strongly target driven summative systems make it important to differentiate between activities that look like formative assessment but which may be little more than coaching or continuous summative assessment, and to examine the political, social and cultural factors that affect how teachers and students practise formative assessment in different learning and assessment contexts (Ecclestone, 2002; 2004, Ecclestone et al, in progress, Torrance et al, 2005).

In the light of gaps in research on formative assessment in adult education, we begin this literature review by reiterating the principles of formative assessment in order to differentiate between instrumental and deeply engaged practices. It is important to locate this difference in the shifting traditions of adult education in the UK because these traditions have a powerful but implicit effect on how researchers, teachers and students approach ideas and practices in formative assessment. We then illuminate, either directly from empirical evidence of practice or by inference from theoretical discussion, those methods or activities in formative assessment that might work with adults, their possible impact on learning and achievement and implications for implementation.

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1.   DEFINING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ADULT LEARNING

Competing meanings of learning

Formative assessment (FA) is sometimes described as 'assessment **for** learning' as distinct from 'assessment **of** learning':

'Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its 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 their students, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning need' (Black et al 2002).

According to the Assessment Reform Group, assessment for learning should:

1.   be part of effective planning for teaching and learning so that learners and teachers should obtain and use information about progress towards learning goals; planning should include processes for feedback and engaging learners
2.   focus on how students learn; learners should become as aware of the 'how' of their learning as they are of the 'what'
3.   be recognised as central to classroom practice, including demonstration, observation, feedback and questioning for diagnosis, reflection and dialogue
4.   be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers, requiring proper training and support in the diverse activities and processes that comprise assessment for learning
5.   should take account of the importance of learner motivation by emphasising progress and achievement rather than failure and by protecting learners' autonomy, offering some choice and feedback and the chance for self-direction
6.   promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are being assessed, by enabling learners to have some part in deciding goals and identifying criteria for assessing progress
7.   enable learners to receive constructive feedback about how to improve, through information and guidance, constructive feedback on weaknesses and opportunities to practise improvements
8.   develop learners' capacity for self-assessment so that they become reflective and self-managing
9.   recognise the full range of achievement of all learners (ARG, 2002).

Activities that emerge from these principles can, simultaneously, reflect and influence the meanings of learning that are implicitly or overtly communicated to students. These can be characterised as:

- **transmission** of external knowledge and the teacher's expertise, knowledge and advice
- **transaction** between teachers and students or between students about process or activity, the content of an activity or task or about its goals
- **transformation** of students' and teacher's understanding and insight in concepts and processes associated with learning a subject

Yet, many teachers, students and designers of qualifications and summative tests equate formative assessment with continuous or modular assessment which merely comprises summative tasks broken up into interim ones. Hargreaves points out that teachers can espouse a rhetoric about formative assessment that either promotes **learning-as-attaining-objectives** or **learning-as-the-construction-of-knowledge**. Learning as attaining objectives depicts knowledge as fixed and externally-defined while learning as the construction of knowledge conveys knowledge as fluid, open to reconstruction to aid understanding and in need of 'reworking' by students so that it makes sense to them (Hargreaves, 2005).

Evaluating conceptions of learning embedded in formative assessment therefore requires attention to language and practices. Hargreaves shows how the well-known notion of 'closing the gap' between students' existing performance and the quality they are aiming for is often rooted in teacher-led images of 'performance', 'delivery', adapting teaching in the light of assessment information, or as a 'gift' from teacher to pupil. This leads to a variety of ideas about what formative assessment is for:

- monitoring performance against targets or objectives (with the language of marking, tracking, checking, identifying a level, monitoring progress)
- giving feedback on next steps for improvement
- learning about students' progress and adapting teaching accordingly
- enabling pupils to take charge of their own learning and to adapt their own habits and approaches
- promoting inquiry and reflection (with the language of discovering, reflecting, reviewing, finding out, engaging with, understanding, constructing knowledge, making sense of experience) (Hargreaves, ibid).

The 'spirit' and the 'letter' of formative assessment

Further insights about the meaning of learning embedded in formative assessment practices emerged in a project in the Economic and Social Science Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) on 'learning how to learn'. This showed that teachers in the same subject team can change techniques such as classroom questioning, but there is a marked difference in whether teachers present and understand this in the **spirit** or **letter** of assessment for learning (AfL) (see Marshall and Drummond, 2006).

This useful distinction illuminates how the spirit of AfL goes beyond extrinsic success in meeting targets and, instead, enable students to combine better performance with engagement and good learning habits in order to promote 'learning autonomy'. In contrast, the letter of AfL means that formative techniques promote a teacher-centred, transmission view of knowledge and learning, rather than transaction and transformation of understanding. However, as with all categories, these are not neatly separated from each other: teachers in this project often had a particular goal and focus of attention in mind, but shifted between these and others during a lesson (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). The same phenomenon is also apparent amongst vocational and adult education teachers (see Ecclestone et al, in progress).

Formative activities

Formative and diagnostic data and insights can come from a range of activities normally associated with 'teaching', such as classroom questioning and feedback, group work and peer assessment on a piece of previously assessed work, from summative assessment outcomes and from draft or interim assessments:

- initial guidance interview
- initial diagnostic assessment (tests, assignments etc)
- questions asked individually or in class to diagnose understanding and to build understanding with students
- written feedback and advice from teachers, oneself, peers: it is important to note that self and peer assessment are commonly assumed to be 'formative' but they might be used entirely for summative purposes
- oral feedback to answers to questions asked of students or to questions that students ask
- drafting assignments or work for feedback from teachers, self or peers
- using exemplars of good and poor quality work to assess the quality of one's and others' work in relation to the assessment criteria
- tutorials or reviews - group and individual, peer or teacher-led
- questions at the end of sessions to find out what was easy or difficult, what still needs to be learned

The focus of attention can be seen broadly as:

- getting a better grade or mark
- improving skills and knowledge in a specific subject, topic or task
- reflecting on 'learning to learn' processes (meta-cognition)
- building a sense of positive identity, ego, confidence – personal development

Competing meanings of learning in activities that are ostensibly 'formative' make it important to show where instrumental learning can be a springboard for deeper forms and where it remains merely instrumental (see Ecclestone et al, in progress). Narrow, prescriptive outcomes and criteria used for accountability and national measurement cannot easily serve the educational purposes of formative assessment. The consequential **validity** of validity is therefore crucial: if summative goals are narrow and lead to superficial learning, their validity for formative purposes is immediately compromised: a key criterion for validity is therefore one of deep engagement from students (see Stobart, 2005).

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2.   METHODS USED IN THIS REVIEW

(Note: where references are made to the material surveyed in the literature review, they are printed in bold text. The full references are given in appendix 1 of the review. Other references, printed in ordinary text, are given at the end of each section)

Few direct results emerged from our attempts to search systematically for material on formative assessment and adult learning. We have found only one book-length treatment of post-compulsory learning that uses the term 'formative assessment' in its title (**Ecclestone 2002**), and this is based on a study of two groups of 16-19 year-old vocational students in a qualification where goals of formative assessment for autonomy and motivaton were built into a radical, controversial assessment model. Only one short published piece uses 'formative assessment' in its title (**Swain et al 2006**). However, many other studies focussing on a wide range of settings for adult learning deal with topics and concepts clearly related to formative assessment, though mostly not explicitly and almost never systematically. For example, many publications discuss 'feedback' as an important component of adult learning but few link this to the notion of formative assessment.

The term 'formative assessment' is not clearly defined and has not been current in the literature on adult learning until recently. However, other relevant terms and concepts have been widely studied as being central to effective adult learning. A relatively unsystematic approach is supported by Black and Wiliam (2003) who acknowledge the complexity of research reviews in social science and the difficulties of producing 'objective syntheses' of research findings, particularly in fields which are under-theorised and not well-defined. We therefore hope that our review contributes to the eventual development of a systematic conceptual framework for theorising formative assessment in adult learning.

First, we explore factors that distinguish adult learning from compulsory schooling and from further and higher learning for young people progressing from school. Second, we organise discussion of material under relevant themes in discussions of formative assessment, even though these are not always wholly distinct headings and different terminology seems to be being used for similar aspects of teaching and learning.

It is important to stress that evidence discussed here does not establish strong links between specific approaches and achievement. Indeed, some studies demonstrate the difficulty of isolating the clear effects of a single approach or technique in a system in which policy and assessment design, mechanisms to regulate and moderate teachers' assessment, and their impact on institutional providers and groups of learners are complex and intractably entangled (see for example **Ecclestone 2002**).

While there have been no large-scale systematic studies of adult learning aiming to identify such links, the Improving Formative Assessment project is revealing the importance of understanding the links between policy, teachers' and students' beliefs about learning and the effects of assessment practices in adult literacy and numeracy programmes (see Ecclestone et al, in progress).

The review is therefore mainly descriptive and makes only cautious generalisations about effective practice. Nevertheless it highlights useful messages about effective practice and suggests future research questions.

The articles, papers, and chapters surveyed in this literature review fall into the following categories:

- reports of small-scale academic research studies, typically based on one or two groups of students, on topics connected with formative assessment
- reports of ethnographic studies of different contexts in which adults are learning, in which episodes of formative assessment are described and evaluated
- reports making 'arguments to policy', usually including references to academic literature and other policy documents, on topics related to formative assessment
- papers and handbooks written to support good practice and pedagogy in the teaching of adults, dealing explicitly or implicitly with formative assessment
- publications aimed at adult learners, dealing with self-assessment
- examples of studies primarily concerned with the recording of adult learners' achievements for purposes of certification and accountability, but which deal in passing with formative assessment
- publications dealing with the development of learner autonomy that reference formative assessment either explicitly or implicitly

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3.   THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF ADULT EDUCATION

Adult education in the UK has a separate history from other sectors but at times, and in some areas, it overlaps traditions of schooling, further and higher education. For example, Lucas treats adult education distinctively as one of eight broad 'traditions' within further education, recognising that since the early 1990s, publicly-funded adult education has been part of the learning and skills sector where the main providers are further education colleges. He acknowledges the complexity and diversity of traditions

influencing teaching and learning but, by including it in further education, he plays down the continuity between formal and non-formal adult education traditions, thereby over-emphasising formal and institution-based pedagogical approaches at the expense of others (Lucas, 2004).

In a literature review of lifelong learning, Edwards et al (1998) note that while some authorities see school education and training for work as subsections of lifelong learning, others see lifelong learning as a subsection of post-school education, or even of 'training'. Their review notes fundamental changes in policy, funding, and assessment of lifelong learning over the past decades. It argues for a pragmatic approach to boundaries and definitions based on categories that include lifelong learning as broadly post-school learning and formal education and training. It notes that literature from health, social policy, welfare, environment and race would enrich understanding (Edwards et al 1998).

Most histories of adult education emphasise its independent, even oppositional character (for example, Kelly 1962, Fieldhouse et al, 1996). In general, adult education has sought to fill needs and inclinations for learning not provided by the state, whose dominant concerns are schooling and higher education, ie education for children and young adults as preparation for life and work, rather than as a lifelong activity. Adult Education is distinct also from further education and technical and vocational training: although large numbers of adults have always studies in colleges and universities, adult education has focused on learners after the age of compulsory and tertiary education, on education for craft activities, liberal studies and humanities, citizenship and political education, and on the needs of adults failed by their schooling.

There are a number of reasons for this historic distinctiveness. Firstly, adult education in all its forms has typically been non-compulsory: learners choose whether or not to participate, and also when they have had enough. Secondly, in many situations, adults have had to pay at the point of consumption for their learning. These two factors structure their role differently: adult learners are generally seen as self-motivated, bringing valuable experience with the potential to enrich the learning situation, and, in some contexts, as 'the customer' in the relationship with the teacher. These factors give adults unique potential power and agency. Some courses are like study circles, in which there is little difference between the role of the teacher and that of the learners, while others exemplify more traditional models of teaching.

Thirdly, most adult education activity until recently did not aim for learners to gain qualifications in order to gain access to or rise within regulated career structures. Certificates of achievement, for example in First Aid, and even mainstream academic qualifications might be awarded at the end of adult education programmes, but learners' aims were not in many cases connected with work. The incorporation of adult education into the Learning and Skills sector in 2001 changed this significantly. One effect is that opportunities for learning 'for its own sake' have diminished considerably, as they are harder to align with recent political focus on education's role in improving business productivity and national prosperity, measured in economic terms (Flint 2005).

Fourthly, adult education has always been taught and managed by an extremely heterogeneous workforce, motivated by a diverse range of purposes, and with diverse educational and career backgrounds. Until recently, there has been little concern to develop consistent standards for teachers through professional conditions of employment, professional training programmes, qualifications and entry criteria. It is worth noting that the vast majority of tutors in adult literacy and numeracy programmes are on casual, part-time or sessional contracts.

Although adult education has these features in common, its main characteristic has been diversity of content, form, clientele, teachers' formation and training, and organisational base.

For most of its history, it has been largely outside the formal arena of state policy, funding and regulation. Instead, its energy, impetus and development has derived mainly from voluntary and/or political organisations. However, higher education extramural departments and local education authorities have also been important providers of education specifically for adults, adopting many of the principles of adult education evident in other contexts.

These characteristics mean that, in contrast to the dominant role of summative assessment in formal education, formative assessment in the guise of principles and practices discussed below is central to the informal and unconscious development of tacit skills. Indeed, if tacit dimensions contribute to effective learning in formal and informal contexts, formative assessment ensures that this tacit dimension is not lost:

'Educators and policy makers] have to accept and understand the large role played by tacit knowledge in all parts of our lives and avoid the delusion of hyper-rational interpretations of professional action. If people's tacit personal knowledge and implicit learning are devalued, their confidence will diminish and their use of, and interest in, more formal learning will also suffer'. (Eraut 2000)

From this perspective, the place of adult education at the informal end of the learning spectrum, and its relative historical freedom from the normative effects of policy targets and institutional structures offers important insights into effective learning in the widest range of contexts.

Such insights are likely to be discernable in informal modes of learning, as well as in models of learning radically different to those in formal, institutionalised contexts. These might include notions of learning without teachers, learning collectively, learning 'for its own sake', learning without certification and qualifications, learning outside institutions, and learning at any time of the day, night or year. Eraut argues that a focus on informal, non-institutionalised learning suggests that effective attainment depends on assessment processes that are present in all forms and instances of learning, not just in courses providing credentials for the employment market. These modes of assessment, often integral to the learning process, are essentially formative rather than summative in nature.

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4.   THEORISING ADULT LEARNING

Relative independence from government policy, non-compulsion and relative freedom from institutional constraints have had important effects on ideas about effective teaching approaches in adult education. In turn, as discussion about the 'spirit' and the 'letter' of formative assessment shows above, implicit and explicit theories of learning that derive from these structural characteristics is likely to have strong but subtle effects on the ways in which teachers and students carry out formative assessment. Five distinctive features of adult education affect ideas about pedagogy, learning and assessment.

First, the diversity of institutional bases for adult education, generally independent of government and national organisational frameworks, has produced two characteristic features of provision across the country: variability both in volume and in content, and fragility and lack of stability. Until the 1944 Act, no authority was legally required to provide opportunities for adult learning. It was mostly provided either by local education authorities, university extra-mural departments, or voluntary organisations such as the Workers Education Association. After 1944, the responsibility laid on Local Education Authorities was to ensure 'adequate' provision, the precise meaning of which was never defined. This has resulted in enormous variations across the country, and at different times, in the political support and resources dedicated to it (Fieldhouse and associates 1996, Tuckett 1991, Tuckett 1995).

Furthermore, at times of cuts in local authority budgets, lack of definition has led to cuts to adult education budgets, sometimes with very little notice, in order to protect services for which legal responsibility is unequivocally defined. Schedule 2 of the 1992 Act enshrined a division between provision which supported economic objectives (most of these were qualification-bearing courses) and objectives described as 'leisure'. Programmes defined as 'Schedule 2' achieved more stable funding from this moment on: the rest remained vulnerable to the vagaries of local policy priorities. Historical fragility of provision has led much of the literature on adult education to take an advocacy role, focussing on issues of equity, access, curriculum, sustainability and wider benefits to society, and less strongly on pedagogy.

Second, the complex, often unpredictable range of experience and expertise in typical adult education classes has led to a focus on aspects covered less often in ideas about school-based teaching and learning. For example, the pedagogical implications of dealing with diverse backgrounds, needs and purposes, combined with voluntary participation, implies a very different relationship between teacher and learner to that in schools where attendance is compulsory and learners are organised by age, measures of ability, and often by social background too. Pedagogy in adult education is exemplified by the notion of 'student-centred learning', a concept that resists precise definition, but which appears regularly in the literature on adult education. It is open to diverse interpretations and uses from a range of theoretical and political perspectives, not all of them mutually compatible.

Third, adult education in the form of classes and programmes does not encompass the full range of learning undertaken by adults. They also learn by correspondence courses or on line, informally among friends, perhaps through clubs and associations, and independently by themselves, perhaps by reading, or through films, TV and the internet. As Field observes, the political adoption of 'lifelong learning' has given these activities more prominence (2006). The range, diversity and informality of such activities means that many adults do not see them as 'learning' and therefore do not see the need for assessment. Instead, they are merely things that they do, through which they may learn, whether or not they are conscious of it as learning.

Broader kinds of learning, which depend more or less completely on the motivation and application of individuals or groups of learners, and may well be without a clearly identified teacher, have attracted some researchers to learning theories that do not assume the necessity of an institutional base, a framework of regulation, or the presence of a teacher. Such theories present formal education as part of a spectrum of activities, some of which are driven solely by the energy and motivation of the learner. This pull has also resulted in an emphasis on the nature of the relationship between teacher and learner, and a view of the learner as an active agent of their learning rather than a passive recipient. These perspectives have important implications for formative assessment.

Fourth, the necessity for adult learners to seek programmes of study that are appealing and relevant, historical freedom from control of the curriculum, and widespread recognition of the value of adults' life experiences, have all reinforced a research and practical focus on the relationship between teacher and learner. Questions of status and authority, control of

learning, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, have consistently been raised as potential areas of conflict or negotiation between teachers and learners, and between different learners as well.

Permanent, if often muted, struggle has led many adult educators to highlight the importance of dialogue between learners and teachers as an essential element of adult learning, and much more important than in other phases of learning. This position is itself in continual tension with the alternative view, in which the teacher and the curriculum have ultimate authority which the learners submit to, which is perhaps more characteristic of traditional schooling, training for work, and higher education.

A fifth theme currently dominating literature on adult education in Britain is a focus on evaluating and measuring outcomes. This is partly a result of the powerful political shift towards preferential funding on the basis of external qualifications, and quantitative measures for accountability and evaluation of provision. Many commentators argue that learning for adults has wider benefits than can be measured by qualifications, and that groups and individuals traditionally resistant to participation in learning are even less likely to change this attitude if all that is available is tied down to qualifications and external assessment.

Questions about outcomes and assessment have long been contentious: a 1979 study commissioned by the UK government (Charnley and Jones 1979) aimed to find ways of evaluating the contemporary adult literacy campaign based on 'objective' criteria for success, but argued that the conceptual complexity of the field and the wide range of stakeholder perspectives and purposes, made this aim highly problematic, if not impossible. It is now possible to see this finding as an early demonstration of the validity of the 'risk society' analysis and its implications (see for example **Jansen and Van der Veen 1996**, **McNair 1996**), and the need for radically updated, democratised mechanisms for public accountability in education (**Merrifield 1998**).

One crucial strand in this discussion draws attention to the unintended implications of using accumulated outcome measures for the purposes of evaluating the performance of teachers and institutions. For example, Black and Wiliam warn that research into school effectiveness shows that this sets up feedback mechanisms that can lead to teachers adapting their classroom practice to service short-term performance indicators rather than their learners' longer-term needs - in short, to spend less time on formative assessment and more time on 'teaching to the test' (1998). Yet, even where formative assessment is an official goal in a qualification, funding, accountability and regulation of assessment by awarding bodies had a profound effect on teachers' practices by prioritising the raising of achievement through grades. This led strong forms of coaching to the criteria (Ecclestone, 2002; see also Torrance et al, 2005).

In the light of policy makers' strong interest in Black and Wiliam findings that formative assessment practices are the most powerful ways to improve and sustain learning, researchers in adult education are asking whether similar processes are taking place within post-compulsory learning. This debate has been particularly intense in the context of adult literacy, language and numeracy programmes which, since 2001, have been the focus of an intense, high-profile policy initiative to fund 'Skills for Life' programmes that lead to externally-assessed multiple choice tests (see **Derrick 2004**, Lavender 2004).

Another important report is Torrance et al (2005), which investigated the effects of and attitudes towards different forms of summative assessment across a range of post-compulsory qualifications. Its findings echo concerns about the danger of formative assessment practices being used primarily to serve summative objectives, defined by the transparency of official objectives and assessment criteria:

'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 o help learners meet them, is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved. We have identified a move from what we characterise as assessment of learning, through the currently popular idea of assessment for learning, to assessment as learning, where assessment procedures and practices may come completely to dominate the learning experience, and 'criteria compliance' come to replace 'learning'. This is the most significant challenge facing the Learning and Skills sector: balancing the explicitness of learning objectives and instructional processes against the validity and worthwhileness of learning outcomes' (Torrance et al 2005).

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5.   TEACHER THEMES

5.1   Dialogue between teachers and learners

Learning through dialogue is a major theme in the literature on adult learning, though it appears with a wide variety of nuances and emphases. For **Knowles (1983)**, dialogue is both practical and political:

- it recognises the centrality of the status of the learners as adults and enables the exposition and utilisation of their accumulated experience and knowledge for the benefit of everyone in the group;
- it is through dialogue with the learners themselves that the teacher can best discover how to differentiate (or perhaps 'personalise') the learning programme so that the diversity of needs and purposes among any group of learners can be addressed;
- since adults are seen by Knowles to be less concerned with subject-knowledge than with the need to tackle specific tasks, dialogue enables teachers to orient the learning programme towards those particular tasks.

Politically, **Hostler (1986)** agrees that if we see adults as autonomous and self-directing, they have a right to participate in decisions that affect them. In relation to learning, participation cannot be achieved without discussion and dialogue between all the members of the group. A vision of groups as models for democratic practice through discussion and debate is one of the longest-established elements of a major, influential tradition in British adult education,

originating in the corresponding societies and 19th century socialist movements (see Williams 1993, Fieldhouse and associates 1996).

Yet, a utilitarian shift is very evident in recent writing, where similar modes and espoused values of learning and participation are recommended for effectiveness rather than democratic propriety (see for example **Boud 2000**, **Ivanic 1996**). The earlier focus on democratic discussion and debate was content-focussed, aiming to share experiences and accumulated knowledge of the topic in hand. In contrast, a recent focus is on discussion of learning itself, and of the ways in which it can be evaluated and developed. This emphasis is seen not just as a means of improving attainment but, variously, as capacity-building for the future (eg **Boud 2000**), as a means of addressing anxiety or lack of motivation about learning (**McGivney 1996**, **Eldred et al 2005**), and/or as a way of building autonomy (**McNair 1996**).

This marks an important shift because the earlier focus in adult education was a democratic process of deciding the 'what' of a particular course and maximising knowledge and experience as resources for a group to draw on. Recent studies are more concerned with promoting participation in order to make any learning process more effective, in terms both of accountability to taxpayers and to individual learners themselves. Dialogue is therefore either a democratic, political act or a means to an end, affecting fundamentally the spirit and the letter of dialogue as part of formative assessment. Writers reviewed here either treat dialogue as central to all teaching and learning or see it serving particular pedagogical objectives.

Alexander (2004) claims that learning is a social process where 'the true direction of learning is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual' (Vygotsky in Alexander, 2004). For him, teachers are not merely facilitators, secondary to the process as theories of andragogy would have it, nor mere transmitters of learning. Instead, learning is a process with teachers and learners as interactive participants: both learner engagement and teacher interventions are essential. Nevertheless, Alexander believes that 'what learners say is more important than what teachers say', implying that dialogue enables teachers to facilitate future planning of the learning process on the basis of their interpretation of what learners say. As Alexander's focus is primarily on the education of children, this is an argument for dialogue based on its efficacy for school learning rather than its political desirability; however, he also points out that if it is effective for children's learning, then it will also be for adult education, including the education of teachers. Alexander characterises dialogic teaching as collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful, viewing knowledge as problematic and open rather than given and closed.

In a similar vein, **Marr (2000),** argues that:

'A sociocultural educational perspective sees learning as induction into 'discourses' or 'communities of practice' through interaction with more expert others. At the heart of any discourse is the language and symbols that carry its special meanings. To become a member of the discourse one must begin to learn its language' **(Marr 2000).**

In relation to numeracy teaching, Marr argues that students need opportunities to learn the language of mathematics through talking and dialogue in order to support subject learning, as well as to improve their capacity for learning, autonomy or motivation. She argues that learning activities that provide access to and practice in subject discourse are more pressing in mathematics than other subjects, because of the relative absence of explanatory written texts available to students:

'Whereas most other subject areas rely on an extensive canon of write prose (to be found in textbooks, encyclopaedias and school libraries) to provide the impression of stability and permanence to knowledge, this is noticeably absent in mathematics. Textbooks tend to be pastiches of repetitive activities and fragments of knowledge' **(Marr 2000).**

This produces 'a heavy reliance on the teacher's verbal explanations to carry the knowledge and understanding of the subject. Reliance on the spoken mode begins to explain the 'catechistic' type of interaction so prevalent in mathematics classrooms' **(Marr 2000).** If transmission dominates mathematics in order to define and control the curriculum, it is not surprising that interactive, open-ended and investigative dialogic activities are relatively uncommon.

An influential figure is **Freire (1972)**, who confronts the 'banking system' where teachers deposit knowledge into passive learners, based on a static, positivist view of objective knowledge and power relations. For him, liberating education comprises shared acts of cognition, problem-posing and dialogue through which unequal power relations challenged and overcome. Dialogue portrays reality as a process of transformation, not a static entity.

From this perspective, teaching based on dialogue is ongoing formative assessment, where reflection and negotiation between all participants focuses on what is learned and how successful the process is. The programme content is neither a gift nor an imposition of bits of information deposited in the students, but rather an organised, systematised and developed representation of things that people want to know more about. Teachers engage in dialogue in order to understand learners' objective situation and to develop learners' awareness of that situation. Teachers have to develop materials and activities that enable learners to pose problems, to facilitate dialogue aimed at understanding the problems and moving towards solutions. Teachers therefore have to establish a learning context in which their authority is not oppressive, so that learning takes place on the learners' own territory, using dialogue and content led by them.

A Freirian perspective on teaching mathematics is provided by **Benn (1997a, 1997b)**, who argues that dialogue in maths teaching with adults is essential to overcome dependency and isolation, and that this can take the form of talking, reading, or writing. This suggests, implicitly, that teaching through dialogue is indistinguishable from continuous formative assessment. For her, traditional mathematics teaching epitomises Freire's concept of 'banking education', in which teaching consists of 'telling' the learners about knowledge taken as given and fixed. Instead, she argues that mathematics needs to acknowledge the social values it embodies, that learners should be empowered to create their own knowledge and that the mathematics curriculum should be concerned with the generation and solution of real-life mathematical problems and questions by learners. Teachers must 'walk the fine line of managing learning experiences in order to meet learners' expectations whilst sensitively offering challenges to develop a deeper conceptualisation of mathematics'.

Finally, dialogue is seen as being at the heart of democratic adult learning processes and a vital element of living in 'risk society'. **Jansen and Van der Veen (1996)** argue that freedom from traditional social and ideological bonds and regulation by the anonymous standardising rationalities of the state and the market requires individuals to take responsibility for their own lives in contexts in which all sources of information are potentially unreliable. From this perspective, experiential learning needs to be reframed so that expert knowledge and learners' experiences are subjected to critical and constructive group examination, through dialogue in which both have equal status. This view suggests that adult education has to relate closely to the daily hopes and worries of learners, and to further dialogue between conflicting experiences, interests and ideological images.

A very broad view of adult education within societies undergoing radical change therefore offers relatively undefined guidance about the specific role of the teacher.

Dialogue for more instrumental, clearly defined objectives highlights the open, indistinct picture outlined above. Commentators on dialogue for instrumental outcomes present

dialogue as the means by which teachers and learners research together problems of understanding and develop new knowledge and critiques of existing knowledge. This enables joint assessment of performances and a better understanding by teachers of learners' previous experiences: these two outcomes then allow for better planning and differentiation.

For example, **Ivanic (1988, 1996)** suggests that the teacher's quest to find out the nature of a problem in understanding either literary conventions or the rules of conventional punctuation, should be seen as a research project. This cannot be undertaken without the full participation of the learner, not just as research subject, but as researcher too, through dialogue. In the context of teaching writing, Ivanic argues that teachers should treat learner-writers as authorities, and that helping learners write what they mean necessitates talking, as a way of 'researching' the content and literary conventions the learner wants to use. Dialogue therefore facilitates co-operative formative and diagnostic assessment of strengths, weaknesses and barriers to learning and this is integral to teaching and learning. 'Most student and tutor pairs or groups talk a lot about the feelings and difficulties involved in writing. This sort of 'language awareness' is being more and more widely recognised as an essential component of learning. What is different… is to recognise these insights as 'research findings' as' knowledge' **(Ivanic 1988).**

Ivanic's later publication **(1996)** argues that non-standard punctuation is often based on perfectly logical thinking, and that standard punctuation is not in itself essentially logical. It is therefore crucial for teaches to discuss the thinking behind their mistakes with learners in order to help them understand standard punctuation. An instructive example of dialogue as formative assessment suggests that 'Introspection about strategies (for achieving the correct use of punctuation) is a useful teaching method in itself. Learners are thinking about meaning – they are logical even if they are mistaken.'

Dialogue is also a medium for collective assessment of a performance. **Moss (1995)** provides a detailed exploration of the role of the learner as writer using the teacher as editor, in language experience learning situations. The paper shows how feedback that edits individual students' own words is problematic both for creative writing and the pursuit of 'correct' use of English. However, the process of negotiation between a teacher and learner which aims to facilitate the production of a 'finished' but also authentic piece of work (central to formative assessment, and similar to the process of assessing a dramatic or musical performance), can be a powerful means of supporting future learning, confidence, and motivation.

In adult literacy education, **Mace (1979)** argues that dialogue between teacher and learner enables the teacher to understand as fully as possible the nature of the learner's previous experience of schooling and assessment. She uses extended quotations from adult literacy students to show the importance of schooling for their motivation to engage in formal learning and in forming their attitudes and ideas about assessment, and their perceptions of success. She implicitly recognises the notion of 'assessment careers' proposed by Ecclestone and Pryor (2003). She argues that teachers have to understand the particular ways this experience impacts on learning as adults in order to find effective strategies for individuals and the group. Again, this view of dialogue corresponds closely with ideas about diagnostic assessment of a very broad range of needs, experiences and starting points.

5.2   Feedback and marking

Turner and Watters' (2001) study of learners' views on achievement in non-accredited learning found they preferred the term feedback rather than assessment, which was seen to connote judgemental and unsympathetic attitudes. Feedback was highly valued, and this distinction is a matter not just of language but approach. Learners were more interested in why they were learning than how successful they were being. Feedback was seen as enriching learning rather than being an act of judgement.

As so much of adult learning historically has not been accredited, it is not surprising that feedback has been recognised in guidelines for teachers. **Hillier (2002)** discusses the importance of constructive and practical feedback in all kinds of assessment, summative as well as formative, rather than simply qualitative remarks. Feedback should therefore:

- focus on the issue, not the person;
- be specific, based on examples;
- enable teachers to mark examples of the work and relate these to an overall summary;
- be constructive and offer ideas to improve;
- check that the learner knows what to do next
- not make sweeping statements;
- not make negative comments without helpful suggestions;
- be too lengthy and detailed;
- not use red pen and cross large parts of the work out
- finish with a negative comment.

McGivney (1996) synthesises findings from a range of studies that agree that adults favour continuous assessment because it provides them with regular feedback, reveals how well they are doing and indicates areas that need improvement. Adults appreciate:

- specific instructions on what is needed in an essay;
- clear explanations of grading schemes;
- rapid turn-around in grading and returning assessments;
- practice in examination techniques and provision of model responses;
- frequent and regular feedback on performance.

Students with less success in previous education are less familiar with academic convention and the language of assessment, and want positive feedback that is detailed and constructive. The **Mary Ward Centre (2001)** provides a systematic guide to initial, formative and summative assessment aimed to support tutors of non-accredited programmes at the centre. It outlines an administrative system for monitoring, recording, and moderating assessments in such programmes, and provides a wide-ranging justification for such a system, based partly on the findings of a research study of the perceptions of learning and progress of students on uncertificated courses. Formative assessment is seen as ongoing informal (usually oral) feedback to individuals and groups and is distinguished from initial diagnostic assessment and summative assessment by not having to be formally recorded. The guide also provides 25 distinct methods for assessing learning.

Jenny Rogers' well-known book on adult learning (2001) has a chapter on giving feedback, in which she argues that:

'Giving feedback and criticism, praising and commenting, these are all so important in learning that the topic deserves a whole chapter to itself. Teaching adults is enormously complicated by the difficulty of 'criticising' an equal. Not giving the right quantity or quality of feedback is one of the main reasons why adult learning fails….' (Rogers 2001)

She links feedback strongly to progress in learning, without which 'adults lose interest'. She presents feedback as a key part of a learning cycle, which moves from Motivation to Performance, to Feedback, to Improved Performance, and back to improved Motivation. Feedback should be prompt, encouraging, give clear reasons for success or failure and constructive, practical guidance about how to improve. It should mostly be given privately, at least at first. Feedback should offer facts and descriptions of the performance, not opinions about it. Teachers should not simply give qualitative comments, even if they are positive, and they should resist the temptation to correct the work themselves. Finally, the process of determining what needs to be done next, to build on success or to correct mistakes, should be agreed with the learner. This is partly to ensure that they understand the teacher's advice, not least so that feedback will affect future learning positively. Rogers asserts that 'without feedback, learners cannot learn, and a tutor cannot be said to be teaching'.

Brookfield (1990) argues that teaching is about making judgements, however carefully objectives and criteria for success are defined. From this perspective, 'talking about non-judgemental teaching, non-directive teaching, or non-evaluative teaching, is conceptually nonsensical'. Useful assessment is constructive, specific, task-oriented, future-oriented, encouraging, given immediately, given regularly, justifiable, and educative in itself. Brookfield suggests improvements to assessment techniques: the collective assessment of experience, opening criteria to negotiation, getting students to assess their teachers' assessments and promoting self and peer assessment.

Hostler (1986) stresses the value of teacher feedback and provides guidelines for it but links the involvement of students in peer feedback to the development of learner autonomy. He argues that assessment should be an integral, everyday feature of teaching, not appearing as anything out of the ordinary, or raising any anxiety. He recommends involving students in their own assessment as a group, through mutual feedback, preparing presentations and demonstrations for other students, and role play. Hostler points out that mere observation often provides enough evidence for useful feedback.

Young (2000) reports on a small scale study of the effects of feedback on feelings amongst access students. She found that lecturers working with adults have to balance the need to provide feedback and assess work, with a concern to protect vulnerable students. All the students found the first assignment problematic, but thereafter there were great variations, related to varying levels of what Young depicts as 'self-esteem'. Students varied in their attitudes to receiving feedback, their perceptions of its messages and whether it was important to receive positive comments. For some students, feedback was 'only work'; others felt their whole sense of self was at stake.

We found very little work on marking adults' written work. Although written feedback on assignments is commonplace in higher and further education, homework which generates a need for formal marking is not widespread in adult education where there is an assumption, made explicit in the case of the **Mary Ward Centre (2001),** that there is only time for oral feedback. However, it is becoming more common, particularly in literacy, numeracy and language programmes, to provide individual tutorials, albeit short, and to use written records of comments on assignments, perhaps carried out in class time, as the basis for these. Record-keeping for the purposes of accountability has become widespread as programmes not leading to external qualifications now have to provide auditable evidence of students' progress.

Gardener's (1985) comments on marking reflect a Frierian perspective, where value is seen as being constructed by learners with the support of the teacher, rather than being imposed from outside. Marking in response to learners' work is seen as integral to the teacher's role. It needs to be future-oriented and constructive, and should be used to increase learners' skills and understanding of judgement, assessment and value, for more effective learning in the

future, and for empowerment. 'Marking for correctness should be as light as possible….marking for communication, meaning and shape should be as full as possible'. **Boud (2002)** comments on the authoritarian and 'final' language of feedback and marking:

'It is not only final vocabulary that is unhelpful for learning, but the very act of objectifying feedback. The picking up of a red pen is not just a metaphor for marking….to position ourselves as the ultimate authority, which we do when we speak or write as if we possess the truth which must be communicated to the student, is to create an unsurmountable barrier to communication….if we share our subjective response then the possibility of human interaction and dialogue is signalled. If we shout….then all is closed' **(Boud 2002)**

5.3   Questioning and checking learning

Classroom questioning extends teachers' understanding of the aims of diagnostic and formative assessment into an area that they usually construe as 'teaching'. **Alexander (2004)** draws together a number of school-based studies which see questioning as integral to effective teaching and a key element of a 'dialogue of enquiry'. Brown and Palincsar's notion of 'reciprocal teaching' offers four linked strategies structure discussion, evaluate new material and assess understanding: questioning to provoke discussion, clarifying to tackle problems in understanding, summarising what has been learned so far, and predicting the information that will follow (Brown and Palincsar 1989). Lindfors (1999) brings out the need for the 'dialogue of enquiry' to encompass challenge and disagreement as well as consensus. Barnes and Todd (1995) argue that teachers need to foster 'both the spirit and procedures of a 'joint enquiry' through which learners construct shared meanings from their different frames of reference (quoted in **Alexander 2004**).

In his discussion of the importance of dialogic teaching for learners of English as a second language, **Breen (2001)** reminds us that closed questioning can foreclose learning. He surveys a range of feedback techniques and distinguishes between different kinds of classroom talk: between learner interactions in which their discourse is 'woven into the teacher's text', (as in the case of questions to the whole group - an example of effectively closed dialogue) and interactions in which learners frame their own discourse. He argues that supporting the capacity to develop this learner-centred discourse, for example about their own learning, is a key element of effective language teaching. **Rogers (2001)** also warns against closed questions, suggesting that questions beginning 'show me', or 'how', or 'why' are more likely to help assess whether the learner has absorbed the learning point. She identifies four types of questions to avoid: double questions which confuse, leading questions which suggest the answer the teacher would like to hear, 'advice in disguise' questions which can prevent learning and create opposition in the student's mind, and rhetorical questions which imply contempt or ridicule towards any answer than the one implied. On the other hand, Rogers offers guidelines for powerful questions: that they are very short and simple, perhaps only 6 or 7 words, and that many of the best questions start with 'what', obliging the student to find their own words and which cannot be answered with 'yes' or 'no'.

Swain et al (2006) report on a study aiming to develop teachers' ability to assess the mathematical understanding of adult learners and to integrate formative assessment into routine practice through observation and questioning. They point out that it is one thing to ask the right questions, but another to know what to do with the responses: 'more effort needs to be spent in framing questions that are worth asking, exploring issues which are critical to the development of learners' understandings, followed up by activities that provide opportunities to extend these understandings. In this way, teachers shift their main role from presenters of content to facilitators exploring ideas that the learners are involved with.' The project suggested that questions might be challenging (how/ why did you do that?), checking (do you know what a denominator is?), uncovering thinking (can you explain this pattern?), offering strategies (have you thought about using smaller numbers?), functional (have you got a

ruler?), or re-assuring (are you happy with that?). Sometimes a 'devil's advocate' question (are you sure?) was useful. As the project developed, teachers began to think beyond the questions themselves, to issues such as giving the learners time to answer, being able to act on the responses to move learning on, and how to encourage students' questions, both to the teacher and to each other, raising the interesting idea that students might be taught questioning techniques too, thus developing their own discourse for understanding learning, at the same time as improving their subject learning.

This might be seen as an example of the 'double duty' that **Boud (2000)** sees an essential characteristic of sustainable assessment. Similar points are made by **Hodgen and Wiliam (2006)** who offer examples of questions that could be used to achieve these aims in a mathematics classroom. They also point out, however, that:

'Of course, questioning is more complex than simply generating questions. Responsive questioning – responding in the moment to pupils' ideas – is very complex. There are no easy answers to this, but teachers in [our research project] found collaboration – sharing, talking about and reflecting upon questioning with other teachers – to be a very valuable way of increasing their repertoire of questions and their ability to use these questions in the classroom' **(Hodgen and Wiliam 2006)**

5.4   Summative assessment tools used formatively

The distinction between formative and summative assessment, and the spirit and letter of 'assessment for learning', discussed above, has led some commentators on formative assessment and adult learning to make the case for more attention to be paid to formative assessment or for changes to be made to the 'high stakes' achievement context in order to support teachers in carrying out formative assessment activities (see for example **Derrick 2004**).

Others take a more pragmatic view, seeing summative assessment as an inevitable, essential element of publicly-funded educational provision which does not prevent formative assessment. Among these are **McGivney (1996),** who does not distinguish explicitly between formative and summative assessment in her study of adult student 'drop-out', though, as we have seen, students favoured what she calls 'continuous assessment' as opposed to 'end of year examinations', which were seen as threatening and judgemental. **Rogers (2002)** argues that formative and summative assessment are not distinct processes in principle: what matters is what assessment is used for, though this view may unduly reflect the situation as it was earlier, when most adult education was not subjected to formal summative assessment. **Fordham et al (1995)** also take the view that if assessment is learner–centred, then summative or formative assessment are equally important and useful. They argue that 'if we are concerned only with measuring progress, we tend to look only for evidence that can be quantified, such as statistics, grades and percentages. If learning is assessed in both qualitative and quantitative ways, the information produced is more complete and more useful.' This does not exclude formal testing methods, so long as learners are treated as adults. They maintain that assessment should be discussed with learners themselves, and that this process will materially contribute to their learning. They suggest that progress profiles enable learners and teachers to record aims and measure progress against them in a constructive, direct way and argue that learners themselves should decide how their progress should be measured.

Boud (2000) is also critical of the dominance of summative assessment, but for slightly different reasons. His view is that the key function of all assessment, whether formative or summative should be to build learner capacity for the future. The purposes of assessment should be extended to include the preparation of students for what he calls 'sustainable assessment'. This encompasses the abilities required for assessment activities that accompany

learning throughout life in formal and informal settings. Boud therefore argues that all assessment activities should do 'double duty' by supporting the present learning programme as well as increasing learners' understanding of assessment processes and their abilities to engage in future self-assessment. A key feature of assessment procedures and systems is the extent to which they are 'future-oriented' and therefore contribute to 'sustainable assessment' practices.

Ecclestone (2004a) is concerned that formative and summative assessment do need to be distinguished conceptually so as to avoid confusion in practice. She introduces the idea that different procedures and forms of summative assessment have different effects on both teaching and learning practices in the classroom, and on our understanding of the role and nature of assessment. She points out that the transition from formative to summative assessment is increasingly blurred, particularly in programmes where summative results accumulate from coursework and assignments. This leads to the widespread belief that formative assessment is synonymous with 'continuous assessment' or courses without end examinations. She suggests that formative assessment is either too narrowly conceptualised as feedback on students' work, or target-setting in relation to summative criteria, or on the other hand too broadly conceptualised as pedagogy to encourage reflection amongst learners about their learning. To counter these misconceptions, she offers a list of research-based principles for assessment designed with diagnosis and formative feedback in mind:

- Diagnostic assessment should focus on a person's potential, not on fixed traits
- Learners need their own diagnostic skills to become independent and able to judge their own work
- Learners need to know how to 'internalise the criteria', by knowing how to distinguish between high-quality and poor work
- The notion of 'closing the gap' (Sadler 1989) between where the learners are and the quality of work they are aiming for is crucial to internalising the criteria
- Information gained by teachers from formative diagnosis does not become feedback until it makes a difference to learners' performances
- Learners have to engage proactively with feedback in order to understand what it means to get better
- Feedback is neither diagnostic or formative unless learners can act on it, without action, feedback remains a summative statement of achievement or weakness **(Ecclestone 2004a)**.

Ecclestone's work, notwithstanding her 'realist' position on the need to make firm distinctions between formative and summative assessment practices, is based on a very detailed picture of the interrelationship between pedagogy, organisational imperatives, and the requirements of political and bureaucratic systems demanding more or less information for accountability and performance measurement. She challenges teachers to strive to maintain the highest levels of pedagogical creativity in spite of widespread technical and professional barriers and misunderstandings she identifies as:

- Written and oral feedback to learners which they don't understand
- Too much feedback, covering such a wide range of points that learners lose heart
- Feedback that merely confirms learners in their existing sense of themselves as learners, so that they see no need to act upon it
- What meeting the standards really means in detail is understood by teachers tacitly and informally, rather than made visible, collectively discussed and reviewed continually
- The pressures of achievement targets can render formative feedback as little more than instrumental advice on how to 'pass the test'
- Many teachers' unwillingness to take part in development activities

- Learners often see formative advice as summative confirmation of shortcomings or achievement
- Learners' attitudes towards and confidence in classroom questioning activities is highly differentiated depending on their past experience and their ideas about their ability
- Learners may respond differently to feedback at the beginning of a learning programme and at the end
- Learners may not see self- or peer-assessment as legitimate if they see assessment as part of the teacher's job **(Ecclestone 2004a).**

Beveridge (1999) suggests that external summative assessment (especially criterion-referenced assessment) requires education to be accountable to learners and can help demystify assessment for students who have been labelled failures in the past. She argues that the apparent contradiction between the instrumental objectives of competence and the liberal values of discussion and critical enquiry may be more imagined than real. Funding regimes increasingly demand the former, but the critical and creative autonomy of the educator can also promote the latter.

5.5   Planning and differentiation

Most commentators on formative assessment within adult learning confirm that a key benefit is to support future planning of teaching and learning, and provide more information to enable the teacher to 'differentiate' these plans to suit individual learners in groups that are often highly differentiated by age, ethnicity, first language, previous experience of learning, motives for attending. From a Freirian perspective, **Degener (2001)** argues that:

'Program assessment would take place on a regular basis, not only at the end of the semester. Teachers and administrators would get feedback from adult learners at the individual and group levels. This feedback would be used to refine the program structure and the class instruction continually. As students' needs change, so would the program. Students would be able to see how their input affects the program and would thus see themselves as active participants. Programs might also develop formal structures, such as a student board….' **(Degener 2001)**.

Klenowski (1995) shows that 'the introduction of the skills of self-assessment offers another dimension to the current learning environment, providing students with opportunities to take increased responsibility for a more active role in their own learning.' Her study suggests that if self-assessment is to optimise student autonomy and self-direction, it needs to be fully integrated into the learning process rather than treated as a 'bolt-on' element. This suggests the importance of developing a classroom 'culture' conducive to this kind of learning.

Mace (1979) argues that teachers cannot plan effective learning for each individual learner unless they have worked as hard as possible to understand what knowledge and experience they each have, what they feel confident and unconfident about, and crucially, their feelings about their previous experiences of learning and assessment (referred to increasingly as their individual 'learning and assessment careers' (see for example Ecclestone and Pryor 2003). For **Ivanic (1996)**, formative assessment aids planning when teachers understand each learner's state of understanding of the content of learning: they need to find out more about the mental models of the subject learners bring to the learning situation, whether these are accurate or not. In relation to learning conventionally correct punctuation, this insight may only be revealed after complex interaction and dialogue with the learner: without this, planning is likely to be unfocussed and ineffective, and may even confirm the learner in their mistaken model of the issue.

5.6   Developing an atmosphere and culture conducive to learning

An aspect of effective formative assessment practice is referred to variously as the need for an appropriate 'atmosphere', 'classroom culture', or 'organisational environment', meaning a relaxed interpersonal climate in which learners are comfortable to interact, listen to others, even to disagree with or challenge others, including the teacher. All the commentators cited earlier highlighting the importance of dialogue in relation to formative assessment, see the creation of such an atmosphere as one of the most important roles of the teacher, though one group also recognise that there might be factors affecting the climate for interaction that are outside the teacher's control.

These characteristics are particularly true of settings for learning in the workplace, as discussed by **Evans (2002), Fuller and Unwin (2002),** and **Belfiore and Folinsbee (2004).** Each of these studies highlights the importance of the 'managerial environment' or 'management style' of the workplace: Belfiore and Folinsbee focus on the degree of involvement of workers in the training itself, and the management style of the workplace in relation to quality input from the workers, both of these being indicators of dialogic practice. Training is seen as more effective in terms of management objectives and sustainability if it starts with the realities of the workplace and individual workers, rather than a formal curriculum transmitted to passive trainees. Examples of ways in which improvements suggested by the employees demonstrate that they are critical thinkers and system analysts suggest that training and quality improvement processes should be participatory rather than teacher or manager-led and top-down.

Fuller and Unwin (2002) focus on how people learn from and teach others about work tasks. They argue that the act of learning to do one's job in the workplace is worthy of close attention, and that much of this learning takes place through explicit pockets of activity which use a range of pedagogical methods. It also argues that pedagogical skills can be found in all types of workplaces, at all levels in an organisation, and that they are not restricted by age. This study highlights the significance for effective formal and informal learning in the workplace, of the way training, development, and transfer of work skills is seen by management, whatever the intentions of teachers or trainers. Both factors make a difference to the degree to which social interactions can benefit learning.

Knowles (1996) and **Alexander (2004)** make the same point. Alexander argues that true dialogue entails challenge and disagreement as well as consensus. This works only if classroom culture has moved beyond the one-sided transmission relationship between teacher and learner. If this is the culture, then dialogic and challenging teaching may intimidate and inhibit some learners. Knowles' theory of andragogy implies a shift from teacher assessment of learning to a self-evaluative process, based on re-diagnosis. The teacher therefore needs to be skilful in establishing a supportive climate in which hard-to-accept information about one's performance can be looked at objectively.

5.7   Types of assessment
'Most learners did not want to take any exams and the overwhelming preference was for ongoing assessment....some form of assessment to measure and recognise learning gain was valued but most learners preferred this to be an ongoing process based on discussion and portfolio building supported by tutor feedback and individual reflection....people said they did not want to be exposed to the stress and pressure of tests and exams' (**Ward J and Edwards J 2002**).

None of the writers surveyed in this review argue that adult learning should not involve assessment of some kind. Almost all differentiate explicitly between formative and summative assessment, though they may not use these terms. What varies is how they understand this difference. Ward and Edwards distinguish between 'ongoing assessment' and

'exams', in terms of when the assessment takes place; secondly, they note that learners prefer assessment 'based on discussion and portfolio building supported by tutor feedback and individual reflection' to 'tests and exams', differentiating in terms of procedures. **Hillier (2002)** makes the same distinction about timing:

'Formative assessment occurs when you assess learning throughout a programme of learning. Summative assessment occurs at the end of a programme of learning, or a module of learning. Formative assessment helps you and your learners find out how much progress they have made during the course of a learning programme. Clearly, the longer the programme, the more use can be made of formative assessment' **(Hillier 2002).**

Hillier's chapter constitutes a comprehensive introduction to a wide range of assessment methods that are suited to different purposes. Implicit in her treatment, however, is the view that there are no inherent tensions in this range of activity: whatever the situation, the right approach to assessment, and the right methodology, is available and relatively straightforward. Ecclestone (2004a) contests this view, as we have seen, arguing that teachers need a clear understanding of the difference between the purposes of formative and summative assessment in order to resist system pressure to reduce formative assessment to a set of techniques that merely serve summative purposes rather than supporting deeper or wider learning, or improving motivation for learning in the future. The system pressures, she argues, are produced by the increasingly blurred transition from formative to summative assessment in programmes in which outcomes are achieved through course work and assignments throughout the course.

This situation makes the distinction between 'continuous' and 'summative' assessment invalid. Typically students on these courses can submit any number of drafts of coursework assignments for feedback from the teacher: this makes it very difficult for the teacher to be clear about their role: is feedback in these situations formative or summative? Providing students with information about the assessment criteria is a far cry from helping them achieve a deeper and autonomous understanding of what gives quality and authenticity to a particular piece of work **(Ecclestone 2004a).**

Discussion in this section highlights the importance of being much clearer about the purposes of formative assessment and the all-too easy slip between the spirit and letter, explored above.

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6.   LEARNER THEMES

6.1   Peer assessment and self-assessment

Commentators on self- and peer-assessment as elements in the formative assessment process vary in their focus. One group sees adult education as a process through learners aim to gain independence from the teacher, to become a wholly autonomous human being. In a limited sense, both **Knowles (1983)** and **Freire (1972)** share this belief, though for Freire the process cannot be achieved without being accompanied by a revolutionary change in society. Knowles sees the individual adult learner in some sense as an existentially incomplete person, and the purpose and potential of adult education as a means of achieving completeness, after which, for example, they have the means and the confidence to exercise their own independent judgements, on the basis of their own knowledge and capacities.

This perspective is also shared closely by **Carl Rogers (1993),** for whom the educated person is one who has 'learned how to learn'. Freire sees traditional education as a means of preventing people achieving existential adulthood and autonomy, by confirming them in their unconscious dependence. For each the issue of capacity to be self-directing and self-critical is an essential element of the desired state. **Boud (2000)** also has a focus on the future, in which present learners will be independent of the teacher, and will not need guidance to arrive at what they feel are satisfactory judgements. For all these writers, the issue is in an important sense a moral one, connected with our view of the rights of individual adults, connected, as **Hostler (1986)** points out, with the western conception of adulthood, originating in the European Enlightenment.

For **Jansen and Van der Veen (1996),** however, these ends are desirable not just for moral reasons but for practical ones: adult citizens living in 'conditions of modernity', that is, in 'risk society' (Beck 1992), are subject to much weaker ties of family, class, church, etc, than in traditional and pre-modern societies, which gives more freedom of choice and decision to each individual. 'This means that individuals become more 'self-responsible' for the planning and organising of their lives. Using a phrase of Beck, biographies become more 'self-reflexive', ie formerly socially conditioned biography transforms gradually into a more self-decided and self-organised biography.' However, accompanying this freedom from traditional ties and norms, is the emergence of ever-more complex institutions and procedures that become increasingly disciplining and uniform. A prime example is the growth of the complex systems of standards, training, verification and formal certification that in recent times has transformed traditional education. Jansen and van der Veen argue that people need education primarily to support life as autonomous individuals in this complex, changing world in which there are fewer and fewer familiar, trustworthy and reliable sources of information and support; they see new forms of adult education, particularly those that help develop judgement, capability, problem-identification and solving, as vital in this transition.

In the light of these political perspectives on the purposes of adult education, developing the capacity for self-assessment and peer assessment is more significant for educators than teaching an imposed curriculum. **Brookfield (1990)** agrees that ultimately there is no certainty about quality, that life (and teaching, and learning) is about making judgements. He

too sees the role of teaching and learning for adults as foregrounding these capacities, and argues that self-assessment and peer-assessment should be central elements of all learning situations. In particular he recommends encouraging students to critically evaluate the decisions and assessments of the teacher.

Klenowski (1995, 1996) focuses particularly on self-assessment as a critical component of effective learning. Her research was based on the assumptions that students' motivation is strengthened the more responsibility they are given for monitoring their own progress and devising their own strategies for improvement, that students learn by being active rather than passive, and that students are capable of being perceptive about each other's work. She sees self-assessment as essentially about judging the 'worth' of one's performance, and the identification of strengths and weaknesses in order to improve. Her research suggests that if formative feedback is to achieve the objective of making a difference to a perceived gap between actual and desired performance (Sadler 1989), rather than just giving information about it, then the information must be transformed into action through a process of self-assessment, in which something like **Ecclestone's (2004a)** 'internalisation of the criteria' takes place. During the research self-assessment was analysed and graded descriptively, and key dimensions, including the use by students of explicit criteria, the interactive dialogue between each student and the teacher, and the giving of grades by each students to their own work, were identified. The project found overall that this approach impacted significantly on pedagogy, and that the students took increased responsibility for decision-making. Teachers received valuable information about students' self-perceptions which supported improved planning. In her second paper, Klenowski acknowledges the difficulties in implementing such approaches within unsupportive political and administrative contexts.

Claxton (1993) examines the three aspects of self-assessment identified by Klenowski from the point of view of the development of learning-to-learn or 'learning acumen', which, he argues, comprises resilience, resourcefulness, reflectivity and responsibility. The minimal sense of self-assessment, in which students merely learn to monitor their performance in terms of externally-specified criteria, may raise attainment without improving learning acumen, and may even damage it. His position is that self-assessment is essentially an intuitive process. Learning to see self-assessment as 'marking one's own work' by applying a checklist of criteria prevents the development of this intuitive ability.

Both **Ivanic (1988)** and **Moss (1995)** see the development of self-assessment capabilities as a potential product of the search for authentic 'performance', in which a teacher may take the role of editor or facilitator or trusted critic, and help the creative process through promoting self-assessment. As Moss in particular points out, the danger is in failing to avoid the tacit or unconscious imposition of the teacher's values, rather than developing the student's own sense of 'what works'.

'Pupils can be asked to work through their ideas on what makes for a quality performance, apply that understanding and further refine it through peer assessment. In this way, sharing the criteria with learners becomes less about teachers stating objectives on the board and more about pupils being apprenticed into the guild' **(Marshall and Wiliam 2006)**

For Marshall and Wiliam, focussing mainly on school-based learning, peer- and self-assessment are key elements of pedagogy in the English classroom:

'Peer assessment is one of the main vehicles to promote self-assessment. Seeing how someone else has tackled the same assignment helps pupils reflect on their own performance. For this reason it is fairly common practice in English and has been one of the main starting points of the English teachers with whom we have worked [in our research project], for adopting formative strategies in their classrooms. They become more systematic, however,

and less ad hoc in the way in which they engaged pupils in peer assessment as a means of enhancing its impact' **(Marshall and Wiliam 2006).**

They point out that for this process to work successfully, the teacher needs to have constructed **'a safe environment in which pupils feel comfortable having others read their work, and in which collaboration and sharing of practice have become the norm. Some teachers encourage this by allowing their own performance to be critiqued….',** but they also need to have modelled good feedback themselves, both in the way that they have talked with the class and through their own written comments. **'Pupils need to se examples of good practice to be able to know what to do' (Marshall and Wiliam 2006)**

Finally, **Good and Holmes (1982),** in a book largely aimed at students of adult literacy, argue strongly for the involvement of learners in assessment of their learning, rather than the use of rigidly prescribed, supposedly objective tests. They see assessment of progress as something to be done by teachers and students together, through discussion, and that therefore a good learning relationship between them is important. However, following Kohl (1998) Good and Holmes believe that people can teach themselves, that a teacher is not essential, and that any person reasonably competent in reading can help anyone else learn. The book provides a range of techniques for self-assessment in the context of improving literacy, using a framework they call ASK in which the terrain of learning is seen as being made up of 'attitudes', 'skills', and 'knowledge'. They also provide a simple system of descriptive levels: 'beginning', 'not bad', and 'with ease', derived from Kohl (1998), to make self-assessment as straightforward as possible.

6.2   Learners' understanding of assessment and the language of assessment

The commentators referenced in the last section argue for the importance of self- and peer-assessment, not just in principle but in practice. Yet, **Ecclestone (2004a)** argues that all assessment practice has the potential to support learning or merely to record it. There is a critical difference between understanding the assessment process so as to use it instrumentally to achieve the short-term goal of certification, and 'internalising' it, in order to go beyond short-term objectives, support future learning, and build learners' capacity for autonomous and authentic judgements about the quality of their work, for themselves.

This difference is what **Claxton (1995)** suggests that **Klenowski (1995)** may be ignoring. Although many of the commentators reviewed speak of the importance of learners gaining familiarity with the tools of assessment as part of the process of building their capacity and autonomy, only Claxton, Ecclestone and **(Boud 2000)** seem clearly to articulate this issue – that the narrow aims of systems for assessment of learning can be served just as effectively (possibly more effectively) when students are involved in the assessment process, understanding the processes and the criteria, using self-assessment, peer-assessment, and so on.

This important and often overlooked argument shows that it is not student involvement per se that makes the difference but the nature and quality of that involvement. As Claxton points out, it is straightforward in principle to apply a checklist for the involvement of learners in assessment, and to use it for the purposes of assessment of learning, rather than assessment for learning (whether his judgement that Klenowski has ignored this possibility is justified or not). A key question for the field and for research is whether the instrumental use of processes such as self-assessment is actually inimical to authentic learning, learning for the future, etc, as Ecclestone and Claxton suggest, or whether the two perspectives can be sustained alongside one another as is implied by commentators who do not raise this issue.

Another way of illustrating this point is provided by **McNair (1996),** who discusses what he calls the 'learning outcomes movement' which has transformed further and adult education in

the UK over the past two decades by successfully arguing for assessment criteria to be made explicit, as part of the process of increasing and widening access and attainment. He asks how far this explicitness in principle supports learner autonomy. Learning outcomes are seen as a form of language, which on the one hand makes clear communication possible, but on the other defines limits and is the means by which societies and communities are excluded by power. But challenging this power is more than a matter of confronting traditional privilege – the attempt to make language more accessible, and widen the community, inevitably threatens its precision. The article concludes that explicitness alone is not enough to develop autonomy – the key question is not 'does my performance satisfy the criteria?' but 'do we agree that this is right?' McNair therefore concludes, with **Brookfield (1990)**, that authentic autonomy is inseparable from values, depends on the cultivation of the capacity for judgement, and is irreducible to standardised criteria or procedures, however liberal, democratic and well-intentioned.

Groves (2002) has a further telling critique of the 'learning outcomes movement', on the grounds that they assume that framing explicit assessment criteria is in principle unproblematic. He reports on an enquiry into the language of the course performance criteria, which all students surveyed found off-putting, 'jargonised' and hard to understand. Across a range of skill areas the criteria scored significantly higher on the Gunning Fog index of comprehensibility than a classic text of philosophy, Wittgenstein's Tractatus (1922). The report concludes that adult learners are encountering language written in the discourse of teachers, with institutional values embedded implicitly. Yet this language is presented as transparent and objective. He suggests that teachers should beware of inaccessible language for assessment criteria, and that the search for 'neutral', transparent language for this purpose is futile (according to Wittgenstein (1953) there is no such language). This is a fundamental problem, for as he points out:

'One cannot blame adult education teachers for following a trend upon which their jobs depend, and that seems so accountable, scientific (the term positivist comes to mind) and certain. It may be that all that is required is greater attention to clarity of course structures and terminology, but I would also suggest more thought needs to be given to holistic and 'problem-centred' assessment processes in which the meaning of language is rooted more explicitly in the contexts of use.' **(Groves 2002)**

Whether or not they make these points, most commentators agree that student involvement in the assessment processes, through using the tools of assessment themselves, is a necessary if not sufficient condition for authentic learning. These include **Fordham et al (1995)**, **Lindsay and Gawn (2005)**, and **McGivney (1996)**, who maintains further that students with less success in previous education have less familiarity with academic convention and the language of assessment, and that the benefits of authentic involvement in assessment for them are potentially even greater, though initially the process will have to be handled sensitively, a point also made by **Merton (2001).**

Finally, **Boud (2002)** argues that we need to develop a new language more appropriate for assessment for learning. He points to the damaging nature of what he calls (after Rorty 1989) the 'final' language of assessment: a vocabulary which uses terms such as 'good', 'right', 'rigorous', 'professional standards' and the like.

'Even though it is apparently positive, it is language that leaves no room for manoeuvre. It has the final say. It classifies without recourse to reconsideration or further data. And it does not allow for further possibilities. Not only are terms such as these, even more so in the negative or implied negative versions, damaging, but they are also empty rhetoric. They are contentless and communicate nothing of substance. From the point of view of formative assessment they do not provide any information which can be used directly to improve learning' (**Boud 2002**)

6.3   Improving motivation and confidence, autonomy, and citizenship

These themes are routinely linked, with varying emphases, by many reports on the beneficial effects of formative assessment activities in adult education. Typical of the majority of studies is **Hostler (1986)**, who asserts that we conceive adults as autonomous and self-directing, with a consequent right to participate in decisions which affect them: learning which recognises this also builds students' own confidence to participate, thus developing autonomy in a virtuous circle.

This philosophical argument is supported by a range of studies, including **Ward and Edwards (2002),** whose research on learners' perceptions of progress in literacy and numeracy learning found that learners related their progress to their ability to perform in real life contexts. Their confidence and skills to participate in learning processes developed as learning progressed, and this was more closely associated with the style of interactions between individual learners, the teacher and other students, combined with a sense of being better able to cope with real-life tasks, rather than with the acquisition of qualifications. **Swain et al's study (2006)** of adult numeracy classes, referred to in more detail earlier, found a direct link between the kinds of questioning teachers use to check learning, and improved learner motivation, verifying the findings of Black et al (2003) for the school sector.

In an earlier paper, **Swain (2005)** reports on a study investigating the ways in which numeracy learning has the potential to transform adult students' identities, which is linked conceptually to the notion of 'learning careers' (Ecclestone and Pryor 2003). The study found that 75% of the 35 students in the sample reported that they had changed in some way as a person through learning maths. The changes took different forms, the most common being increased self-confidence, and perceptions of greater independence and autonomy. These effects were linked in the study to participatory learning processes, the use of real-world contexts and materials. Some students were found to have developed pride and confidence associated with their numeracy studies, for many see mathematics as a signifier of intelligence. It is suggested that these changes are closely connected and shaped for individual students by their motivation, discussed in more detail below.

Clarke (1991), reporting on a small-scale qualitative research study investigating how students in ABE provision perceive the notion of autonomy in relation to their learning, argues that 'If independence is one of our aims, a learner-centred approach must be about a lot more than asking a learner what, and how s/he he wants to learn.' She then quotes Good et al (1981), who remind us that the capacity to be an independent learner is a development issue distinct from and additional to subject learning:

'The student needs to learn how to learn. This often implies changes in attitudes as well as techniques, and such changes can only be fostered over time, through debate, discussion, reassurance' (Good et al 1981).

Clarke notes that students may need support in coming to terms with a new 'educated' identity, and doubts whether highly-structured, competency-based approaches to literacy and numeracy learning allow for the time required for such formative processes. In her study, 80% of the students in the sample identified reducing their dependence on others to perform practical tasks as an important motivator for their attendance at programmes. There was little evidence to support Carl Rogers' view (1977) that the 'habit' of dependency was obstructing their application of their learning. The research also found little evidence of resistance to person-centred learning, except that the students tended to describe the teacher as an expert rather than as a facilitator. The students unequivocally aspired to a greater degree of autonomy in their lives, but this didn't necessarily imply that they wanted to be wholly

independent learners. They valued interactions and support both from the teacher and from other learners.

Whitty (1993), highlights the complex and sometimes contradictory role played by qualifications in relation to learner motivation: reporting on a small-scale survey of attitudes to certification among adult literacy students, she found that for 80% of the learners in the sample certificates were important to them, but that all them said that certification was not the only reason for studying – gaining independence and confidence in communications skills was seen as more important than certification by 80%, though many saw the certificate as helping with confidence.

The quest to find ways of measuring outcomes for uncertificated adult education programmes, and the fact that learners often cite 'increased confidence' as a key motivating factor, led to a research project into the nature and importance of confidence for effective learning (**Eldred et al 2005**), which worked with 350 learners in 41 groups in 8 different adult community learning organisations. The project developed and piloted a diagnostic tool intended to encourage reflection among learners about the nature of confidence, as well as providing a means of recording changes in confidence over time. A series of guidelines for teachers were developed, most of which highlight the importance of sharing information and feelings between learners through discussion, and through using purposeful dialogue so as to involve learners in planning and evaluating their learning.

The points made by Clarke, Whitty and Eldred et al, and the findings of their studies highlight the interrelatedness of learners' confidence, motivation and self-esteem, and the consequent complexity of the task of the teacher, particularly when their learners have not had positive previous experiences of education. **Derrick (2004)**, writing about the links between assessment and achievement in literacy, language and numeracy learning, points to evidence from a range of research studies that formative assessment approaches are essential if the real complexity and interrelationship of these issues is to be addressed:

'These studies have found that effective formative assessment contributes to the development of self-esteem and willingness to take on educational challenges among learners: this chimes with the experience of adult literacy, numeracy and language teachers, that the more learners can consciously link their classroom activities with everyday literacy, numeracy and language practices, the more effective their learning is. In this view, formative assessment can help learners develop consciousness, reflectiveness and articulacy about their learning and their everyday practice, not just to improve those practices, but as part of developing their capacity to learn in general' (**Derrick 2004**).

Derrick agrees with Clarke about factors in the framework within which teachers are working which inhibit their ability to work in this way, mentioning the heavy political and bureaucratic emphasis on summative assessment and measurable outcomes, the tendency for adult learners to enrol for multiple short programmes (in each of which bureaucratic and time-consuming assessment processes have to be repeated), and the evidence that tests used exclusively as summative assessment tools, can demotivate learners, particularly those who most need to be motivated and encouraged (**Derrick 2004**).

The most detailed treatment of these issues is provided by **Ecclestone (2002)**. She proposes a framework for theorising autonomy, motivation and formative assessment, drawing on a wide range of research studies from different psychological traditions, and in particular Prenzel et al (2000) on types of motivation, and Carr and Kemmis (1986) on autonomy. Six types of motivation are posited by Prenzel and his colleagues: amotivated (lacking any direction for motivation, from indifference to apathy); external motivation (learning takes place only in association with reinforcement, reward, or to avoid threat or punishment); introjected motivation (learning happens when learners internalise an external supportive structure, but

this is not self-determined); identified motivation (learning occurs not due to any specific incentive, but because it is recognised as important in attaining a goal the learner has set); intrinsic motivation (learning results from the perception that the incentives to be gained are intrinsic to the content or activity); and finally interested motivation (learning recognises intrinsic value, but also takes place 'in accordance with subjective and meaningful attributes assigned to the object or object-specific skill') (Prenzel et al 2000). She links this typology with three types of autonomy: procedural (involving the ability to effectively handle externally-originated systems of control, such as qualification frameworks, assessment criteria, etc); personal or practical autonomy (based on knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses, learning habits and potential choices for action and progression); and critical autonomy (for many the ultimate goal of education according to Ecclestone, because it links notions of democratic citizenship with the exercise of critical intelligence by individuals.)

These two spectra of theoretical constructs are finally linked by Ecclestone with a range of formative assessment activities, and the whole framework applied to a series of studies of different GNVQ groups. Her book concludes by examining the extent to which policy and practice in post-16 vocational education have created 'assessment regimes' rather than mere assessment models and in turn, 'assessment careers' which play a key role in the motivation and learning of post-16 learners over time. It looks at ways of improving formative assessment practices in colleges and offers recommendations for the design, assessment and implementation of assessment regimes, and finally discusses the implications of these findings for lifelong learning.

Five studies relate formative assessment practices, directly or indirectly, to the wider political debate about citizenship. **Alexander (2004),** talking about dialogic teaching and assessment for learning in schools (though he is clear that his discussion is applicable also to lifelong learners) argues that:

'The interactive skills which children begin to develop through effective dialogic teaching – listening attentively and responsively to others, framing and asking questions, presenting and evaluating ideas, arguing and justifying points of view – are also among the core skills of citizenship…. mastery of the… language, and the ability to express one's ideas, question the ideas of others, and hold one's own in conversation and argument are unambiguously conditions both of the educated person and the active and responsible citizen' **(Alexander 2004, 31-32).**

The arguments already cited from **McNair (1996)**, and **Jansen and Van der Veen (1996)** about the skills and capabilities needed by autonomous individuals faced with the uncertainties of 'risk society' are also clearly relevant to recent debates about citizenship, social responsibility and civic participation. **Merrifield (1998)** focuses on the potential of adult literacy programmes for supporting these skills and aptitudes through approaches to accountability that emphasise local mutuality and reciprocal negotiation about value, rather than reliance on impersonal and technocratic systems that accept abstract numerical indicators as sufficient measures of accountability. She argues that improved participation and citizenship will be one of the results of an accountability system based on the principle of mutuality: one that is negotiated between the stakeholders; that matches responsibilities with rights; and one in which every player knows what is expected of them and has the capacity to be accountable **(Merrifield 1998)**.

Finally in this section, **Ecclestone (2004b)** challenges commentators who seem to generalise about the 'vulnerability' of learners and prioritise warnings about damaging their 'self-esteem' over the need to challenge them with new knowledge and activities. She argues that an unhealthy pre-occupation with the emotional well-being of the student gets in the way of learning, with stultifying consequences for the learner and teacher alike, creating 'a new sensibility that resonates with broader cultural pessimism about people's fragility and

vulnerability'. Ecclestone is far from recommending 'an uncaring view of some people's lack of confidence or vulnerability'. Her challenge is to the facile notion, which she sees as sharply at odds with the resilience so powerfully advocated by Freire, that esteem should be conferred upon a passive learner by an education system more or less exclusively preoccupied with issues of identity and emotional well-being.

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7.   FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND LEARNERS OF ADULT LITERACY, NUMERACY AND LANGUAGE

Of the 57 texts surveyed in this review, 25 focus specifically on adult learning in either literacy, numeracy, language programmes, or on programmes that combine these subjects. The degree of compatibility between the two sets of texts is striking, and this suggests that the issues addressed in this review are primarily issues of pedagogy, and applicable in general terms to all subjects, levels and contexts of study. One idea that appears regularly throughout all parts of this literature, explicitly in the various Black Box publications, and also in Harlen's systematic study (2001) of the effects of assessment systems on learning, is that the deleterious effects of summative assessment processes on deeper learning and learner motivation are **more pronounced** in relation to learners at lower levels of attainment. It is therefore probable that for many learners of literacy, numeracy or language, there is evidence for two propositions:

- Any damaging effects of summative assessment processes that can be shown to exist are likely to be more potent for these learners

- Any benefits of formative assessment approaches are likely to be more pronounced in relation to these learners

It has been suggested that there may be further aspect of this particular observation, in relation to numeracy students: an international group of teachers of adult numeracy discussing this question felt that in the context of mathematics learning these effects might be even more strongly felt, as it is commonly (if mistakenly) held that mathematics is about eternal truths and can only be taught through a transmission approach in which learners are more likely to be treated by teachers as passive recipients of knowledge.

In short, nothing found in any of the texts surveyed suggests that there is any inconsistency with pedagogical implications between the needs of literacy, numeracy and language learners and those of other adult learners. Rather, there is a strong suggestion that formative assessment perspectives and practices might be even more strongly appropriate for these learners, both in terms of the benefits of using them, and the costs of not using them. Nevertheless, the tension between instrumental or engaged formative assessment is as crucial for these learners as for others.

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Harlen W 2001:

8.   SUMMARY

This review attempts to summarise the main messages for teachers from the texts surveyed. There was widespread congruence among the texts about the general range of approaches recommended and about the issues teachers need to understand and address. However, few if any of these texts are based on systematic research. The majority are either based on small-scale research studies, usually qualitative, or are handbooks or other training materials designed to support teachers professional development, or are 'arguments to policy'.

Almost all these texts make judgements and recommendations from the perspective of experienced practitioners. These guidelines, therefore represent primarily a distillation of practitioner wisdom and experience rather than the results of systematic research: this remains to be done. The degree of congruence between the wide range of writers, however, is an encouraging indication of the value and validity of their conclusions.

All these guidelines, potentially, can help teachers develop and improve formative assessment practices, on the assumption that this will not only improve student achievement and attainment, but also the capacity of students to learn effectively in the longer term, by developing their autonomy and motivation. However, there are a number of significant tensions and areas that need further insights and analysis if we are to help teachers and students develop effective formative assessment skills.

Clear understanding of the difference between formative and summative assessment

There is widespread confusion and disagreement at the level of official specifications, practical guidelines and academic research about the purposes and activities of formative and summative assessment. In adult education, these differences are also rooted in very different traditions and purposes: strongly political perspectives offer a more holistic, transformatory view of the purposes of formative assessment divorced from any need to certificate and

record summative achievement. In current contexts of strongly regulated assessment systems, formative assessment slides all too easily into continuous summative assessment against pre-defined targets.

Dialogue between teachers and learners
Teachers should structure learning as far as possible as dialogue between themselves and their students, and between students. Dialogue should be open-ended and exploratory rather than a series of routine exchanges, and encourage students to see themselves and their peers as architects and engineers of their own learning. How people learn, remember, approach problems, and evaluate their learning, should be an explicit and ongoing subject of this dialogue, along with formal assessment criteria and subject knowledge.

Communication skills
Teachers need continually to be evaluating, maintaining and extending their communication skills, with a particular focus on listening for empathy and understanding, and on questioning and feedback to develop learning, as well as on exposition, explanation and transmission of information. Communicative practices that work with one group may not work so well with another. Teachers must exemplify communicative practices that promote and develop learning and motivation.

Feedback and marking
Feedback, whether verbal or written, should focus on the task rather than the person. It should be constructive and practical, and be returned as soon as possible. The purpose of drawing attention both to excellence and to problems is to develop the learner's own understanding of quality and ability to distinguish it, whatever the subject and context. Giving grades or marks can demotivate students, especially those who are least confident, and particularly if the grades are made public and compared. Grades and marks that do not provide information or advice about how to improve performance should be avoided.

Questioning and checking learning
Teachers need to foster both the spirit and procedures of a 'joint enquiry' through which learners can construct shared meanings from the necessarily different frames of reference which each of them brings to the common learning task. Teachers should develop a repertoire of questioning techniques, and share ideas with colleagues to maintain and develop this repertoire. Double questions, leading questions, rhetorical questions and closed questions (those looking for a unique correct answer) discourage learners from reflecting on the problem, or from revealing that they do not understand it.

In this way, these kinds of questions can even foreclose learning and should be avoided. Much more useful are open questions that require students to find their own words. These might take the form of challenging (how/ why did you do that?), checking (do you know…?), uncovering thinking (can you explain this?), offering strategies (have you thought about….?), or re-assuring (are you happy with that?). Sometimes a 'devil's advocate' question (are you sure?) can be useful. In this way, teachers shift from being presenters of content to facilitators exploring ideas that the learners are involved with. Students can be encouraged to think and talk more by the right kind of questioning and listening, and this is likely to produce useful outcomes in terms of knowledge about the students' understanding and their pre-conceptions, as well as time for the teacher to think about responsive strategies, while they listen to their students.

Summative assessment tools used formatively
Even those commentators who see formative assessment as essentially in tension with summative assessment, nevertheless agree that summative assessment processes can be utilised to produce benefits for formative purposes. In general, this involves finding ways to get students to 'get beneath' and 'go beyond' the bald results of the summative assessment

processes and try to understand how they work and reflect on what they mean. A convenient way to do this is to get students to develop their own marking schemes and collectively to evaluate them, or to try in groups to construct 'perfect answers'. Again, a key element of this is that it is a group activity, conducted through dialogue with peers as well as with the teacher.

Planning and differentiation
Teachers should use formative assessment activities to find out more about their learners' motivation and understanding, so as to inform planning and differentiation, both in the long term and immediately. If these activities are not used to inform planning, some commentators say that formative assessment is not taking place: certainly an opportunity is being missed.

Developing an atmosphere and culture conducive to learning
Formative assessment activities depend for their effectiveness on students being relaxed and feeling secure enough to face challenges and take risks in asking questions or advancing propositions that may reveal their lack of understanding. A key part of the teachers' role is to create an atmosphere in which students are willing to take these risks. The main way in which this atmosphere is developed is through the behaviour of the teachers themselves, in terms of the way they ask questions of and respond to students, the extent to which they set up peer discussions and group activities, and the way they give verbal and written feedback.

Types of assessment
Teachers need to develop their understanding of both formative and summative assessment, so as to avoid the danger of formative assessment activities actually simply serving the purposes of accountability and certification rather than fostering deeper, sustainable learning.

Peer assessment and self-assessment

Developing the capacity for self-assessment and peer assessment through exercising these capacities as part of formal learning, is integrally related to the task of teaching of a curriculum, whether imposed or negotiated with learners. Self-assessment and peer-assessment should be central elements of all learning situations, and in particular, students should be encouraged critically to evaluate the decisions and assessments of the teacher.

Learners understanding of assessment and the language of assessment

The narrow aims of summative assessment can be served just as effectively when students are involved in the assessment process, understanding the processes and the criteria, using self-assessment, peer-assessment, and so on. It is not student involvement per se that makes the difference, it is the nature and quality of that involvement. The language of assessment criteria may be intended to be neutral, accessible and unthreatening, but in its concern to be precise, it often becomes highly technical and inaccessible to learners in practice. Encouraging learners to develop, discuss and evaluate their own assessment criteria and assessment materials, as well as collectively designing 'perfect' answers, will at the same time help them understand and critique the language of official assessment criteria.

Improving motivation and confidence, autonomy, and citizenship

Improving confidence in learning is a key aim of most adult students, who are mostly highly-motivated in principle to learn. 'Traditional' transmission modes of teaching in which students are seen as passive recipients of learning, are unlikely to be effective for many adult learners. More productive are approaches in which learners are active participants in the processes of learning, and particular in the assessment of those processes. Focussing on assessment and assessment of learning as key elements of the process can help develop motivation, confidence and autonomy, which may produce further benefits in terms of citizenship.

Learning for the future

Teachers should at all times aim to balance the short-term demands of summative assessment with a view to the needs of learners in the longer term. This implies focussing on the capacity of learners to plan, develop and evaluate their own learning and that of others. This can only be done by going beyond the immediate demands of the subject, and looking at the way assessment systems work. Modelling this as part of learning, by getting students to develop their own marking schemes and assessment criteria, for example, is one way of achieving this.

Tensions between the 'spirit' and 'letter' of formative assessment

Different traditions, political pressures for targets and professional confusion and disagreement about the purposes of formative assessment are creating tensions between the spirit of formative assessment as a way of engaging learners deeply with their learning in order to develop critical and cognitive autonomy, and the letter of formative assessment that uses the language of empowerment etc towards narrow, transmission of pre-defined targets.

Subject-specific formative assessment

There is strong evidence that it is possible to articulate and disseminate useful techniques and activities for formative assessment in literacy, numeracy and language programmes that take account of the particular skills and knowledge needed, the broader purposes of adult learning and the tensions highlighted in this review.

Further research

Detailed exploration of meanings, purposes and activities of formative assessment that develop specific subject skills and knowledge, and their effects on adults' motivation, engagement and autonomy is needed: the generic practices and activities here are easy to define but their effects in different learning cultures and on adults' learning careers are not yet

clear (see Ecclestone et al, in progress). In addition, evaluation of how formative assessment in adult literacy, numeracy and language programmes is affected by summative testing is also needed. Finally, research into the ways in which adult education teachers develop formative assessment skills and insights, in a context of a heavily casualised, part-time workforce is also needed.