

Exploring Formative Assessment Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory

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Abstract

Formative assessment is a pedagogic practice that has been the subject of much research and debate, as to how it can be used most effectively to deliver enhanced student learning in the higher education setting. Often described as a complex concept it embraces activities that range from facilitating students understanding of assessment standards, to providing formative feedback on their work; from very informal opportunities of engaging in conversations, to the very formal process of submitting drafts of work. This study aims to show how cultural historical activity theory can be used as a qualitative analysis framework to explore the complexities of formative assessment as it is used in higher education. The original data for the research was collected in 2008 by semi structured interviews and analysed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. For this present paper three selected transcripts were re-examined, using a case study approach that sought to understand and compare the perceptions of five academic staff, from three distinct subject areas taught within a UK university. It is proposed that using activity theory can provide insight into the complexity of such experiences, about what teachers do and why, and the influence of the community in which they are situated. Individually the cases from each subject area were analysed using activity theory exploring how the mediating artefacts of formative assessment were used; the often implicit rules that governed their use and the roles of teachers and students within the local subject community. The analysis also considered the influence each aspect of the unit of activity had on the other in understanding formative assessment practice. Subsequently the three subject cases were compared and contrasted. The findings illuminate a variety of practices, including how students and staff engage together in formative assessment activities and for some, how dialogue is used as one of the key tools to do this. In conclusion, activity theory is considered a useful methodological framework both from a research perspective, as in this paper, and one that can be used as a tool for the reflective practitioner to promote change in pedagogic practices.

Keywords: *CHAT; Activity theory; Dialogue; Formative assessment*