

# Assessed into form: The discourse of formative assessment in teacher Facebook interaction

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The aim of this article is to examine how the discourse of formative assessment is perpetuated and transformed in a Facebook group where teachers and other agents meet for discussions and to share advice about teaching methods. Drawing on concepts from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1993), the study shows how teachers position themselves as successful and devout practitioners of formative assessment, while perpetuating central concepts such as self-regulation and peer assessment. Additionally, the results show how teachers' voices intermingle with private actors seeking to align formative ideals with requirements for certain goods and services. In light of these findings, the relation between formative discourse and discourses of marketization and performativity seems dialectic rather than oppositional. It is proposed that the resulting interdiscursive mix pushes teachers towards adopting market-oriented identities, foregrounding not only the assessable behaviors of students but also those of their teachers.

Keywords: teacher's profession, marketization, formative assessment, critical discourse analysis, social media

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## **Introduction**

Formative assessment is an educational discourse which has swiftly gained considerable traction on national and international levels. Advocates often position formative assessment as a learning-centric way to increase students' achievements, and as an alternative to practices focusing on tests and grades. The stance taken in this article is that formative assessment must be researched as a discourse, in terms of the work it does on the identities adopted by teachers and students, and how it relates to overall thrusts towards performativity and marketization in education. Such research is lacking at this point. This article contributes by investigating social media where educa-

tional discourses are quickly introduced, transformed and perpetuated, more specifically, a Facebook group dedicated to assessment for learning. The purpose of the study is to investigate how participants position themselves in relation to formative assessment, how the interaction reflects interest from the private sector and how practices of formative assessment are aligned with other practices.

### **Assessment for learning: a (per)formative view**

This section will give a brief outline of what characterizes assessment for learning as a discourse, and how it may be understood in relation to developments towards greater measures of performativity in education.

Meta-analyses from Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998), as well as from John Hattie (2008), make strong claims that formative assessment practices have a positive impact on school achievement. This gives shape to an evidence-based view on teaching development, where feedback is seen as a central component in establishing the learner's place in relation to given criteria. The ultimate goal is self-regulated learning processes. It is advocated as a way to promote student achievement and autonomy nationally by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2013) as well as internationally by OECD (2005; 2008).

Important contributions to the recontextualization of formative practices in Sweden have been made by Christian Lundahl (2011) and Anders Jönsson (2009). Their work draws heavily upon a framework presented by Marnie Thompson and Dylan Wiliam (2008), which models the following strategies:

- clear delineation of criteria
- organizing learning situations where signs of learning are displayed
- feedback promoting further learning
- self-assessment
- peer assessment

The stance taken by Thompson and Wiliam is a learner-centric one; the learner is actively constructing her knowledge while participating in the learning situations designed by the teacher (2008, p. 5). The framework is built on evidence-based research within math and science education, and places a great deal of trust in technologies such as checklists, rubrics, traffic

light models and “no hands up” for mapping how the learners process the content. A survey study by Hirsh and Lindberg (2015) shows how these strategies and techniques feature prominently in research on formative practices.

Research on the implementation of formative practices in Sweden is scarce (see Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015) and predominantly performed by scholars advocating or participating in implementing these practices, or alternatively having a special interest in one of the above mentioned key strategies. A thesis by Magnus Levinsson (2013) falls into the former category, but also investigates challenges teachers experience when implementing evidence-based research. The results show that formative assessment may meet resistance by students, and that tensions arise due to teachers’ different interpretations of what constitutes successful formative practices. Levinsson stresses that these findings contrast with expectations of swiftly improving achievement expressed by politicians and other decision makers. Andrea Balan and Anders Jönsson (2014) strongly advocate formative practices based on the strategies described by Thompson and Wiliam (2008), while also describing difficulties of implementation such as time constraints, reluctance among teachers to involve students in assessment practices, increased workload, and resistance among high-achieving students. Alli Klapp, researcher in assessment and grades, admits that the label formative *assessment* might obscure the distinction between learning-centred formative practices and traditional, behavioristic counterparts primarily concerned with grades and tests (Klapp, 2015, p. 157). A useful critique reflecting similar concerns is offered by Ingrid Carlgren (2015, s. 252), professor in pedagogy at Stockholm University. Carlgren warns against a pseudo-pedagogy where assessable behaviours are transformed into educational content, leading to teaching practices being colonized by assessment practices. Consequently, teachers are registering accomplishment instead of building knowledge practices around educational content, while students are “acting like they know” after minimal engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Carlgren (2015, s. 48) invokes Foucault, arguing that self-regulation is a new hidden curriculum with the student’s internalised gaze replacing the teacher’s.

As assessment for learning is perpetuated as a powerful way for teachers to boost students’ achievements, the relationship between formative practices and *summative* practices, foregrounding educational outcomes, seems dialectical rather than oppositional. It is the view of this article that the thrust

towards assessment for learning must be considered in light of the thrust towards *performativity*. Performativity is understood as a pervasive commoditized view of education, foregrounding transactional values in accordance with market logics (Beach & Dovemark, 2007). Stephen Ball (2009) describes the role of private actors in mediating educational policy, by selling school improvement while perpetuating the necessities and endless benefits of changed practices and identities. This process is described as *re-culturation* (Ball, 2009), enacted by networks which blur the line between public and private actors. The widespread reliance on specific materials and ICT-solutions in implementations of formative assessment is of particular relevance here (Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015). Ball (2003) further argues that performativity not only defines what teachers do, it changes who they are. When public service is aligned with methods, cultures and ethics associated with the private sector, teachers are encouraged to adopt calculating, value-adding and self-improving identities and practices. In his examination of how the mode of organization influences teachers' professional stances, Anders Fredriksson (2011) argues that a market orientation makes teachers easier to control as their basis for employing their professional judgement erodes. Further effects on teachers are shown in an interview study by Lundström and Parding (2011, p. 68), indicating that performativity pressures teachers to display their work externally, while also promoting flexibility and alignment with the school's desired profile over long-term considerations.

## Method, data and ethical considerations

The researcher followed the Facebook group "Bedömning för lärande" (Assessment for learning), where a sample of texts were collected at various points during 2015. The analysis also includes a text describing criteria for a yearly salary negotiation in a Swedish school, mainly used for juxtaposing the findings in the Facebook group. An overview of the material is displayed below.

Texts	Number
Facebook posts in "Bedömning för lärande"	19
Hyperlinked texts	10
Criteria for salary negotiation	1

The Facebook posts forming the basis of the analysis are public ones, where participants purposely make their views, experiences and positions available for scrutiny. For this reason, the participants have not been informed of the research being conducted. However, the participants may not have anticipated that their interaction in social media could be analyzed in academic contexts (Fjell, 2010; Kozinets, 2002). Therefore, names of individual actors, as well as links to web pages where their identities are retrievable, are omitted to prevent unnecessary exposure. The same consideration has informed the decision not to include the captured Swedish text in the results, instead relying on the researcher's translations into English.

This article does not claim to offer a comprehensive netnographic account (cf. Kozinets, 2010) of the discursive practices taking place there. Rather, following the tradition of critical discourse analysis, a small sample of texts were selected with attention to how their discourses reflect as well as construe social practice (Fairclough, 1989; 1993). Relevant features of the social practice, such as the discourse of formative assessment along with developments towards performativity and marketization, has been described in the previous section. As assessment for learning is perpetuated by national as well as international education agencies, it is viewed as centrally embedded the educational *order of discourse*, which Fairclough (1993) describes as the totality of discursive practices within an institution. Fairclough links the term closely to hegemony: Orders of discourse limit the endless potential of discourse. Another valuable analytical concept is *interdiscursivity* (Fairclough, 1993), which concerns how a discourse, such as formative assessment, may be appropriated or colonized by other discourses to further specific agendas.

The selection of texts was not random or intended to be representative for the interaction as a whole, but guided by the analytical interest in how participants position themselves in relation to formative assessment, how the interaction reflects interest from the private sector and how practices of formative assessment are aligned with other practices. While this article does not attempt to generalize the findings, the general interpersonal orientations towards formative assessment displayed appeared frequently during the various times the group was actively researched, as did the involvement of private actors.

The CDA framework leaves generous room for incorporating social theories (Fairclough, 2010), and in this study Bourdieu's notion of *game* (Bour-

dieu & Wacquant, 1992) has been useful for understanding how actors act according to their vested interests. Finally, Foucault's notion of a panoptic gaze (Foucault, [1975] 1995) has been of value not only to understand the practice of formative assessment (cf. Carlgren, 2015) but to grasp the significance of actors positioning themselves in relation to educational discourses in public social media.

In accordance with the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2011), the texts were analysed by means of systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2014; Holmberg & Karlsson, 2006; Martin & White, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2007). An exhaustive presentation of this framework is not possible within the confines of this article. However, analyses of evaluative language (Martin & White, 2005), comprised by *affect*, *judgements* (of people) and *appreciation* (of things) have been useful to study how the participants position themselves towards formative practices, while analyses of elaborations of experiential meaning within the clause, by use of *circumstances* (Holmberg & Karlsson, 2006, pp. 102-107; Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 95), has been of value for showing how formative practices are aligned with other practices.

## Results

Despite the scarcity of research, there can be little doubt about formative practices having a strong influence on how teachers in Sweden view and enact their profession. The public Facebook group "Bedömning för lärande", using the acronym BFL (Assessment for leaning, AFL), has close to 25 000 followers. Many posts share success stories about working with formative assessments, seemingly with the purpose of positioning the writers as successful practitioners. Two examples are given below:

Feeling satisfied when a few students in grade 3 approach me after they are done with their stories and say: - Is it ok if we read each other's stories and give feedback on them?

*Excerpt 1, Teacher's Facebook post*

Our seventh-graders practice AFL by giving each other formative feedback on the case about illegal poaching of elephants etc. Focused, involved and concentrated work.

*Excerpt 2, Teacher's Facebook post*

Positive *affect* (“feeling satisfied”; excerpt 1) and *appreciation* (“focused”, “involved”, “concentrated”; excerpt 2) are coupled with experiential meanings describing the school work. A close tenor with the other participants in the group is aimed for with formulations such as “our seventh-graders” (excerpt 2), presuming familiarity. The prominent featuring of peer assessment practices reflects one of the five key strategies described by Thompson and Black (2008) as well as Lundahl (2011).

Some of the posts are of a revelatory nature, positioning formative assessment as a profound transformation of teaching practices. One sample is shown below (excerpt 3).

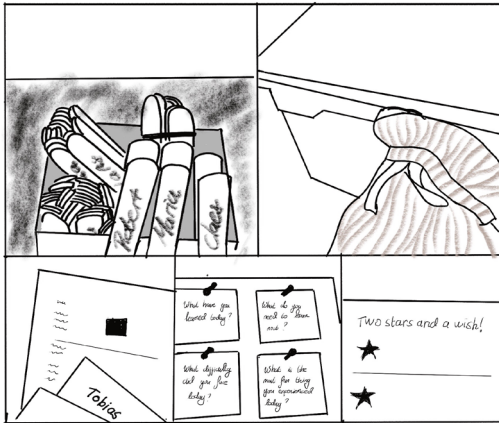
Transmission pedagogy is dead. Long live teacher-led, student-active teaching! I tweeted this heading a few days ago. I’ve agonized over this blog post since then. I have twisted and turned ...

*Excerpt 1, Teacher’s Facebook post*

This text in is a hyperlink to a blog post, with the first two declaratives constituting the headline of the text. The notion of “transmission pedagogy” is implicitly evaluated negatively, and contrasted with a “teacher-led” and “student-active” counterpart. Selections of repeated first-person pronoun themes (“I”) and mental processes such as “agonize” and “twisted and turned” show a profoundly subjective stance to the subject matter, invoking the reader’s alignment with professional choices by presenting them as a matter of heart and soul. The connection to formative assessment becomes clear in the hyperlinked text, published on the participant’s private blog, as it references “Dylan Wiliam’s research” and focuses on peer group practices resulting in them “having fun” together. The learning activity is described as “meaningful”, “pleasurable” and even “magical”. The participant opts for a position not just as a successful practitioner, but a *devout* one.

Sometimes, the sharing of competence and skills relating to formative practices coincides with driving traffic to hyperlinked pages. The word “tips” is commonly used as an informal word for pieces of advice. The following post (excerpt 4) concerns the more material aspects of formative assessment, with a contributor showing an assessment for learning “tool

box”. Relevant features of the original photo have been traced in the representation below.



*Excerpt 2, Teacher's Facebook post*

The post says, “Pictures from the AFL box”, and is followed by a link to the contributor’s own Facebook group, where further “tips” are promised. Among other things, the picture shows differently coloured plastic sticks used by students to signal that they need help, are uncertain or that they do not understand. This is a way of practising the “no hands approach” (Thompson & Wiliam, 2008), enabling

the teacher to monitor student comprehension at a glance and act accordingly. In addition, the “two stars and a wish” peer feedback form, also featured in Thompson and Wiliam (2008), is displayed.

Posts like these were frequent in the Facebook group during the time of research. While the one in excerpt 4 seems to be a matter of a teacher sharing advice with colleagues, many other posts offering “tips” are produced by private actors who transform public funds into private capital by selling educational services. The interaction of the Facebook group, and the discourse of formative assessment, is thus influenced by marketization. This is illustrated in excerpt 5.

Hi!  
I'm going to do a survey of advice on different teaching techniques (methods, models, techniques and digital tools). First off the blocks are how you can work with mind maps in teaching. A tip a week will be presented both by a movie clip and in a summarized text. The movie clip will be up after the weekend.

*Excerpt 3. Private actor's Facebook post*

This is a frequent contributor in the group, who often acts as an information broker presenting quite extensive surveys of different formative tools and practices. According to its web page, the company supplies education for furthering school development.

Under the heading “formative assessment” on this web site, the following definition of the concept is made (excerpt 6):



A changed view on knowledge, technological development and access to information and digital tools have created new opportunities to work with assessment. Along with research findings from for example John Hattie, Helen Timperley and Dylan William, new demands are placed on education and the development of a new approach to grades and assessment in school.

Formative assessment is an approach which may be used to develop the teacher's assessment competence and a way of working with school's fundamental knowledge mission. The assessment may be used as a tool in the students' learning process and may, with support from digital tools, make the learning assessment processes visible.

Dylan William have developed five key strategies within formative assessment which, supported by digital tools, may make goals for learning clear, make learning visible and give effective feedback. The digital resources for learning may also, together with the key strategies, be used for activating students as learning resources for each other and also take responsibility for their own learning.

*Excerpt 4, Private actor's hyperlinked web page*

The errors in the text reflect similar ones in the Swedish text. Lack of orthographic polish aside, it effectively manages several things: Formative assessment is described in terms of the now familiar key strategies and is sourced, not incorrectly, to people with plenty of personal capital in the educational space. Crucially, formative assessment is also colonized by a discourse of technological development and changing views on knowledge. Linguistically, the first paragraph employs the ahistorical present tense, paratactic structures and non-human agency, features identified by Fairclough (2010) as common in discourses of globalisation and change. In addition, digital tools are construed as a *circumstance of means* for enacting formative assessment ("supported by digital tools"; "with support from digital tools"), establishing an interdiscursive relation between formative assessment and digitalization. This relation, of course, serves to necessitate the services provided by the actor. A similar interdiscursive mix is apparent in the post below (excerpt 7), reflecting the involvement of a different private actor.

Digital tools are real handy in formative assessment. Even with simple digital solutions, it's possible to get going with making learning visible and activating students as a resource. 10 simple tips here:

**Digital tools: super tips**

It's possible to use digital tools in a structured and appropriate way, for example for flips, language developing practices and formative assessment which give good results!

Again, digital tools are connected to formative practices as a circumstance of means: “[e]ven with simple digital tools”. A prosody of positive *appreciation* is also notable in the text, with wordings such as “real handy”, “structured”, “appropriate” and “good results”. The link leads to the poster’s web page, and it becomes evident that he gives

*Excerpt 5, Private actor’s Facebook post*

courses for a company providing services for teachers’ professional development. He describes himself as being a fan of “teaching methods and practical IT-solutions which work in practice” and using methods such as “the teaching/learning cycle, EPA, RT and formative assessment”. EPA is an acronym which translates as “alone, in pairs, everyone” relating to “The Big Five”, an influential concept introduced by Göran Svanelid (2011), claiming to distil abilities present in all the subjects across the curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). As for the concepts of the teaching/learning cycle and reciprocal teaching, these will not be explored further other than to note how pervasive, but quite different concepts, are brought into unproblematic relations with each other, united in how they necessitate digital tools.

As the analysis nears its end, the reader is asked to bear with a departure to a different discursive practice which, nonetheless, is highly relevant for the discourses investigated. It concerns a criterion for a yearly salary negotiation for teachers within adult education in a Swedish municipality, marking the only criteria related to quality and goal attainment in the teacher’s own practice. It was valid during a time of heavy implementation of practices relating to ICT and AFL (excerpt 8).

The teacher is skilled in his or her profession. S/he can see what the student needs and take correct measures for the student to receive it. The teacher should also improve his or her own work by documenting what s/he does and planning for how teaching may be improved, with a focus on the formative (AFL) approach and pedagogical development within ICT.

*Excerpt 6, criterion for salary negotiation*

Linguistically, documentation and ICT/AFL are seamlessly linked to improved teaching by being construed as *circumstances of means* (by documenting ...) and *accompaniment* ("with a focus on [AFL and ICT]) in the relevant clausal structures. The criterion for documentation is quite insidious as it has the effect of assessing how teachers make themselves assessable, in other words, how readily they place themselves under a panoptic gaze (Foucault, [1975] 1995). Thus, what is assessed here is not content knowledge, teaching skills or actual outcomes in student achievement. Rather, it is a quite *formative* assessment of alignment with ongoing top-down projects of professional development. Considering how current reforms for increasing teachers' salaries are geared exclusively towards staff members deemed particularly skilled, the influence of such criteria, as well as the discourses brought to bear upon them, is likely to increase.

## Discussion

The purpose of this article has not been to take issue with the original intentions of formative assessment about providing feedback with useful information about progress in relation to educational goals. Rather, the purpose has been to analyze how an educational discourse, such as formative assessment, may be transformed within a social practice characterized by developments towards performativity and marketization.

So, what may be gleaned from this small investigation centered on teacher interaction in social media? The field of investigation is ephemeral, and most of the participants are unlikely to have major roles in shaping it. Nevertheless, this article claims to have showed a *game*, in the Bourdieuan sense, in which the participants express *illusio*, a vested interest (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 116), by positioning themselves as successful and sometimes devout practitioners of formative assessment. The interactions analysed in the Facebook group reflect and aid in construing the order of discourse articulated by institutions such as The National Agency of Education and OECD, regarding the desirability of formative assessment. The key strategies defined by Thompson and Wiliam (2008) feature prominently in the interaction, along with materials necessary to carry them out, which is in line with previous research (Hirsh & Lindberg, 2015).

A significant finding in this study is how a discourse of the employment of digital tools, proliferated by actors with commercial interests, engages in processes of colonization and appropriation in relation to formative assessment and other educational practices. In this interdiscursive mix, the distinction between teachers' voices and other, more enterprising ones, are far from clear-cut; rather, they constitute the flow of discourse on apparently equal terms. Thus, the network-driven re-culturation processes described by Ball (2008; 2009) seem to come into play, not only through organizational collaboration, but also by interactions between individuals in the social media space. The adoption of "calculating, value-adding and self-improving identities and practices" (Ball, 2003) can be seen quite clearly in the views, attitudes and experiences voiced by the studied participants.

The result has shown how formative practices are aligned with ICT and also the notion of abilities across the curriculum. All of these carry implications for teaching regardless about the educational content being taught. If the interaction in the Facebook group reflects a more widespread concern with subject-neutral concepts within educational discourse, it seems necessary to ask whose interests are being served. In relation to marketization (Ball, 2008; 2009), subject-neutral concepts are very *marketable* ones as they can be applied to all subjects. They also seem easily *assessable* ones, as qualities can be identified in teaching without engaging with disciplinary knowledge, and thus may factor powerfully into performative demands for teachers to show their work externally (Ball, 2003; Lundström & Parding, 2011).

As for the teachers, it is important to note that sustained participation in a Facebook group necessitates a very real investment of time, along with a willingness to share advice and professional (bordering on personal) experiences publicly in written form. In other words, they are subjecting themselves to a panoptic gaze of assessment, formative or not. If teacher assessment criteria such as the ones exemplified above become widespread, the investment may be well-placed. How teachers' professional identities are shaped by prevailing educational discourses, as well as by the new fields of professional interactions available to them, is a question that surely merits further attention. In light of this study, showing teachers publicly projecting themselves as meritoriously formative, further pushes towards market-oriented identities seem likely (Fredriksson, 2011; Lundström & Parding, 2011).

This article will conclude by raising some questions regarding the work formative practices might do on students and teachers alike. Here, I would argue that subjection to formative assessment means always being receptive to feedback and sensitive to current demands. It also promotes a continuous and never-ending search for improvement and opportunities for collaboration, in line with what Carlgren (2015) describes as a new hidden curriculum. Perhaps most importantly, it means a constant state of *transparency* as to what is achieved or understood in relation to prescribed forms of displaying knowledge, in Foucault's words ([1975] 1995, p. 201), "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power". As the results of this study show, it is a state the students will very likely share with their teachers.

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