

**TOM SHERRINGTON** October 14,

<https://teacherhead.com/2023/10/18/formative-action-a-brilliant-refreshing-take-on-formative-assessment-and-responsive-teaching/>

Formative Action: A brilliant, refreshing take on formative assessment and responsive teaching. [Formative Action: a brilliant teaching concept from @toetsrevolutie](#)

Recently I spent time with the Dutch team led by René Kneyber, [Toets Revolutie](#) where they shared their work on their concept **formative action** and the training programmes they run for schools. I first encountered this at the London ResearchEd in 2022 and it immediately made sense to me. The concept has been described extensively in Dutch and, with help from René, I posted a translation of their own blog so you can read it for yourself here:

In 2022, I had the pleasure of hearing René Kneyber and Valentina Devid from Dutch organisation [toetsrevolutie.nl](#) at the London ResearchEd event. They explained how the concept of 'formative assessment' or 'Afl'...

Here I'm going to explore my take on the process. In general terms, it's a reworking of the idea of formative assessment as described by Dylan Wiliam.:

[Revisiting Dylan Wiliam's Five Brilliant Formative Assessment Strategies.](#)

	learner is going	Where the learner is	How to get there
Teacher	Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions	Engineering effective discussions, tasks, and activities that elicit evidence of learning	Providing feedback that moves learners forward
Peer		Activating students as learning resources for one another	
Learner		Activating students as owners of their own learning	

In many of Dylan Wiliam's talks and publications he references five 'key strategies' that support the implementation of effective formative assessment. The five strategies each get a chapter in his excellent book *Embedding Formative Assessment*...

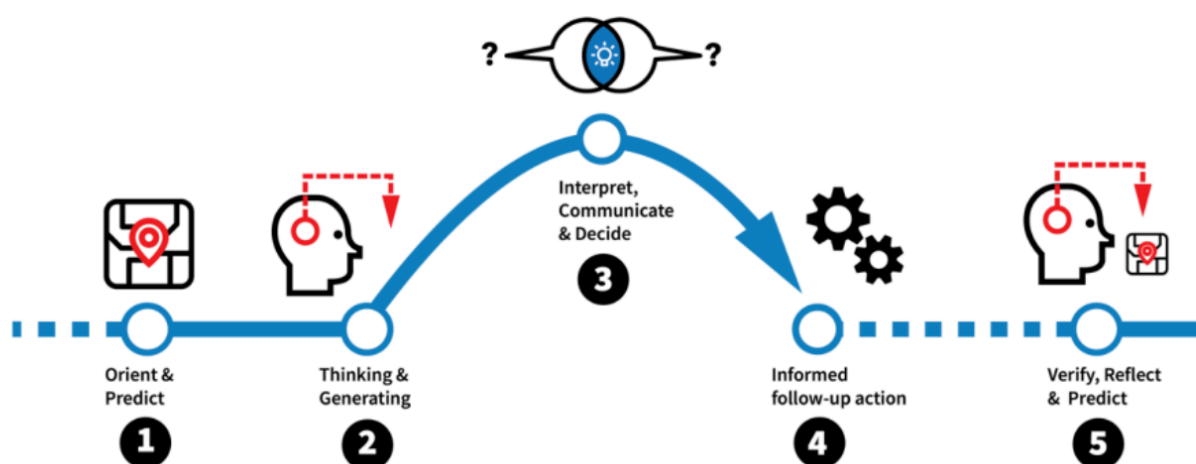
In a responsive teaching situation, teachers need to set and clarify learning goals, get students to engage and then elicit evidence of the learning so that teachers can and then adapt their teaching accordingly. The problem René had with this was that in Holland 'formative assessment' didn't translate. They couldn't get beyond the deeply held idea that Assessment = Testing. It wasn't compatible with that sense of a process that is truly formative, dynamic, real-time, leading to actions by students to improve

their learning. So 'Formative Action' is an attempt to reframe it so that these elements are more explicit.

*Formative action is a complex pedagogical skill that requires knowledge from a teacher on learning, curriculum design, pedagogical strategies and appropriate techniques and tools , and how to use them.*

*To clarify what is practically involved in formative action we have worked on a model.*

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## Step 1: Orient & predict

Formative action is a goal-oriented process. Before doing anything a teacher should do a thorough mental orientation by asking questions such as:

- What do I want to achieve with my students?
- What knowledge and skills do students need to get there?
- What information do I need to assess whether the prerequisite knowledge is available to take the next instructional step?

As a teacher you should also attempt to make a prediction about what kind of problems and misconceptions you expect to find.

The more thorough this first step is undertaken the more focused the following steps in the process of formative action will be.

After a successful step of orientation & prediction a teacher should have a clear picture of when and why a process of formative action is necessary.

## **Step 2: thinking and generating**

The student is encouraged (or encourages themselves) to think about something and to make this thinking – or the result of it – observable by generating something. Generating something could mean the classic example of mini whiteboards or a modern variant such as Padlet. But fairly, everything that can be observed can be functional for formative action: ranging from a written letter to a dance to pronouncing or writing down a sentence, from raising hands to vote to communicating using coloured cups.

Having said that however, this does not mean that everything that is observable is equally functional. For it to be functional, thorough and strategic preparation is required on behalf of the teacher. What typical misconceptions and common logical errors that impede the instructional process are you looking for? Which question or activity enables you to identify these easily? What is the easiest and fastest way to gain an overview of everything that the students generate? And if that is less important, how do you support students to gain a view of their own progress by themselves?

## **Step 3: interpret, communicate & decide**

Following this, the outcomes of the students' actions during the previous phase, the 'productions', need to be interpreted by someone. What do their productions mean? Can we move on, or are there any issues that get in the way of taking the next step of the educational process? And if so, which? Do the students show adequate understanding, or does it need improvement?

When a teacher sees a class full of mini-whiteboards, he needs to interpret all those varying answers. When he receives an Excel-sheet with results from an online app, he will need to interpret what all those numbers, colours and/or diagrams mean.

Students too need to interpret when they look at each other's – or their own – work. A classmate will have, for example, to interpret the quality of another classmate's letter. What is going well? What could be improved?

The interpretation of different productions can therefore lead to follow-up questions and – research. How did you get to that answer? What was your approach? Which answer option did you choose and why? The teacher can dig deeper in the Excel-sheet: which errors are most common? Which misconceptions are most common? What do you learn from this as a teacher? And what does this tell me as a student? This information leads to a decision about the most logical follow-up step. When a teacher takes that step, he can explain his choices.

## **Step 4: informed follow-up action**

After you have decided which action to take, it is important that you actually do so! It doesn't matter whether the conclusion was that the required prior knowledge was already present and you should therefore continue as fast as possible, or whether you will have to explain more or that more exercises need to be done, or whether the letters need to be revised, or that students need to train their stamina. It is of the utmost importance that the information retrieved in step 3 is indeed used, or else all reflection in the last step has been for naught.

## **Step 5: verify, reflect and predict**

Surely, we can never know whether a chosen follow-up action will truly lead to an improvement. That is why we will often have to ask a similar question or give a similar assignment. Did their understanding improve? Are things going better? Or is it getting worse? Based on this information the choice can be made to repeat a process of formative action until the desired level of understanding or control has been reached.

This is once again an important step. This can lead to the teacher experiencing success, because he sees the group perform better, but, more importantly, this can lead to experiences of success for the students. When they start to realise that going through a process of formative action leads to an improvement (together with those corresponding feelings of success), they are encouraged to engage again more wilfully in the future.

## **Finally**

In this blog, we have set out our most recent model of formative action. Of course there is much more to say about formative action and this model. We will be releasing our book with John Catt in the beginning of 2024 ([www.formative-action](http://www.formative-action.com)).