Using Learning Theory to Enact Real Formative Assessment

In their famous review on formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998) called for theory building, but they did not offer an integrative theory about how or whether various strategies from self-assessment, mastery learning, feedback, and motivation could be fit into a coherent whole. In research studies and meta-analyses since that time, many authors have cited references on formative assessment without recognizing when those references offered incompatible views of learning goals and learning theory.

In our recent handbook review, Bill Penuel and I argued that the effectiveness of any formative assessment approach depends on the adequacy of its underlying theory of learning. Adequacy may be judged by the value of learning goals as well as the sufficiency of evidence demonstrating means for reaching those goals, how well the model attends to motivation, participation, and identity as well as cognitive goals, and consequences of the model for equity.

We identified four relatively distinct approaches to formative assessment: 1) Data-driven decision making, 2) Strategy-focused formative assessment, 3) Sociocognitive formative assessment, 4) Sociocultural formative assessment. My talk focuses on the latter two approaches, arguing that they hold greater promise for supporting more ambitious and equitable, next-generation visions of teaching and learning.