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## Effects of formative assessment on the learning-to-learn skills of teacher training students

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### Abstract

This paper presents some of the results of a broader research project on how formative assessment affects the development of specific and generic competences in teacher training subjects at higher education level. The aim of the paper is to describe the impact of formative assessment on the development of learning-to-learn skills, in a sample of 143 students on teacher training bachelor's degrees at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia. The results are from a quasi-experimental pre-post study, without a control group and follow-up, that used a quantitative method. Formative assessment was implemented in four subjects of the bachelor's degrees in Teacher in Primary Education (MEP) and Teacher in Early Childhood Education (MEI), in the second semester. At the start and end of each subject, students were asked to complete an ad hoc questionnaire to assess the effect of formative assessment on various competences, including learning-to-learn. The degree of independence and awareness that students perceived about what they had to learn increased significantly, but there were no significant differences in the level of demands on themselves. Therefore, the results suggest that formative assessment could increase students' independence and awareness about learning.

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### 1. Introduction

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Teacher Training (MIF), promoted by the Catalan Agency for Management of University and Research Grants (AGAUR). The aim of the project was to study formative assessment as a teaching strategy for developing students' generic and specific competences (Ramírez, Pla, Arumí, & Señé, 2015). Among the various goals of the research, the objective of this paper is to present the effect of formative assessment on the development of learning-to-learn skills, and to describe the main strategies used by students to become more autonomous, aware and demanding.

The research was carried out during academic year 2014–2015 at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia with a group of seven lecturers on various subjects in the bachelor's degrees in Teacher in Primary Education (MEP) and Teacher in Early Childhood Education (MEI). The lecturers also acted as the researchers. During the first semester of academic year 2014–2015, the lecturers reached agreement on the meaning of formative assessment. On the basis of this definition, they specified the means, techniques and instruments of formative assessment, and finally drew up an *ad hoc* questionnaire to identify pre-post changes. During the second semester of academic year 2014–2015, formative assessment was implemented in some subjects. The concept and methods are described below.

## 2. Formative assessment in higher education

Brown and Pickford (2013) consider that the expression “formative assessment” is highly controversial and does not correspond to one, commonly accepted concept in the literature. According to the areas of work of the *Red Nacional de Evaluación Formativa y Compartida en Docencia Universitaria* (Spanish National Network of Formative and Shared Assessment in University Teaching), which is coordinated by López-Pastor, formative assessment is a process that forms part of the teaching-learning experience. It is focused on gathering information continuously to generate feedback for students, so that they can modify and make decisions about the learning process, and have the opportunity to improve. López-Pastor (2009) stresses that assessment should be disassociated from the concept of “grading”, and instead considered part of the students' learning process. The meaning of formative assessment was the first aspect on which the research group reached an agreement. Two requirements were determined that were considered essential to the implementation of formative assessment. First, feedback had to be provided on assessed tasks, so that students would know that they had improved before they submitted their final assessment tasks (Cauley & McMillan, 2010). Second, formative assessment meant that students must always be familiar with the assessment indicators before starting a task or providing evidence of learning. According to criteria of the *Red Nacional de Evaluación Formativa en Docencia Universitaria* and specifically a paper by Hamodi, López-Pastor and López-Pastor (2015), the meaning and implementation of means, techniques and instruments of formative assessment were determined, and a document was created to ensure coordination between the lecturers (Arumí, Plà, Ramírez, & Señé, 2015).

As Palacios Picos and López-Pastor (2013) explained, in the last decade initial teacher training has experienced a progressive change in the method used for classroom teaching, in line with the profile of innovative teachers (Pétriz, 2007). Therefore, the aim was to help students to better develop generic skills, and learning-to-learn in particular.

### 2.1. Learning-to-learn and formative assessment

As explained by Carretero and Fuentes (2012), learning to learn is the capacity to reflect on the way you learn and act accordingly, self-regulating the learning process by using suitable, flexible strategies. These authors consider that learning to assess oneself is essential to learning-to-learn, and therefore students must be given the explicit responsibility for learning.

Hortigüela-Alcalá, Salicetti-Fontseca, Hernando-Garijo and Pérez-Pueyo (2015) proposed that university students need to have experiences that help them to develop the independence needed to learn-to-learn. According to these authors, student independence is a key factor in learning to learn, and is one of the four pillars that should support education in the twenty-first century, as stated in the Delors Report (Delors, 1996). Hughes and Mighty (2010) pointed that teachers should create learning contexts conducive to help students develop essential skills rather than focusing on covering content, so that they can uncover and think over the content for themselves. It is essential to lead students to achieve a personal understanding and create an appropriate atmosphere in where students can share what they are learning in order to develop skills for independent and lifelong learning.

Carretero and Fuentes (2012) identified four main aspects that are directly related with the capacities defined in learning to learn: 1) propose learning objectives, grasp the demands of the tasks, and respond appropriately; 2) use

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