

## Staying Focused on Formative Assessment

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I have two fears about formative assessment: First, unless we're careful, it will become a buzz phrase lost to the cacophony of jargon that surrounds every teacher, generating indifference. Second, there are many educators, including whole school districts, who think they are incorporating formative assessment when they are not. This spreads cynicism on what should be a very healthy and non-negotiable tool of learning. Let's do what we can to make sure these fears don't see the light of day.

True formative assessment is not safe or passive; it provokes. It compels a response in the teacher and student. *"You earned a 92%, Joel,"* says the teacher as she passes back test papers. *"Better than most of the class."* Here, there's no spark that ignites further contemplation. There's no specific feedback, no invitation to engage with the results or the material any further. The assessment was instructionally inert.

*"Let's explore this section here,"* says the teacher, pointing to the middle of the student's lab write-up. *"You claim that you identified all dependent and independent variables, but I couldn't find any mention of the water's salinity. Can you help me find it? If we look at this and find you forgot about salinity, what will you have to adjust in the lab in order to prove you understand the roles of independent and dependent variables?"*

In this second example, the feedback is contextualized and the student is given the opportunity to revise his thinking and subsequent performance in light of that feedback. There's no comparing student's to other students, and there's no giving tests just to have enough grades in the gradebook. This assessment is an opportunity for progress, not a declaration of deficiency.

Notice, too, in the second example the focus on the standards or learner outcomes. This is key. In my own classes over the years, I noticed that students who repeatedly struggled were the least likely to know where they stood against the lesson's goals. Students who did well were more likely to know the lesson's goals and where they stood individually against them. Frequent formative assessment provides this awareness. When I provided struggling students with knowledge of the lesson's goals and their personal progress towards them each week, their learning improved.

Colleagues have asked me to show them an example of both a formative and a summative assessment so they know how to design each kind for their own classes. In response, I show them the same assessment task. It's not the format that makes an

assessment formative or summative; it's when we give the assessment and how we use the data from it that makes it formative or summative.

Formative assessments are used during the course of learning, and summative assessments are completed after the learning is done. We could use an official final exam as a formative assessment during the unit of study if the teacher used the scores on the exam to adjust later instruction, and, after taking it, the student could go back, learn from his mistakes, and take a new exam to better demonstrate his updated competencies. Formative assessments are purposeful and on-going checks for understanding that result in teachers revising instruction based on assessment data and students learning more ways to learn as a result of the experience. Just as importantly, teachers give students opportunities to pursue those new strategies.

Because of their immediate applications to the current learning sequence, most formative assessments tend to be shorter than summative versions, but not always. They assess focused areas of the curriculum. This way teachers can consider their results quickly as they make weekly and sometimes daily instructional decisions. Half-to one-page quick-writes, exit cards, oral responses to clarifying questions, thumbs-up/down, buttons pressed on audience response system "clickers," metaphor/analogy generation, completing graphic organizers, observing body language and facial expressions, practice problems/sentences, skill demonstrations, and think-alouds are all examples of useful formative assessments.

Summative assessments can use these same tools, of course, but they often involve incorporating many different elements from instruction, and as a result, they tend to encompass more curriculum and take longer to consider, but again, not always. Summative assessments can be just as cut-to-the-chase short as formative assessments, and formative assessments can require students to weave together complex understanding and applications, just like summative ones. The difference is to what degree the assessment shapes subsequent instruction and student growth.

Formative assessment almost rivals the quality of the teacher when it comes to its positive impact on students' learning. For many of my own students, it has been formative assessment that creates the most transformation, particularly with diverse populations. Summative assessments have had dramatically less effect on individual progress. Unfortunately, many teachers and school districts spend an undue amount of time designing and emphasizing summative assessments when they have the least amount of impact on students' learning. It's the in-route assessments that change everything, so much so, that we should be able to see formal formative assessments listed in our daily lesson plans. If we don't see them there, the lessons aren't as powerful as we think they are.

Of course, there are many *informal* formative assessments such as observations, asking individual questions, and spur-of-the-moment journal prompts that we include each day, but we can't leave formative assessment to chance; it has to be strategic. This last suggestion – spur-of-the-moment formative assessments -- contradicts statements by assessment expert, Dr. James Popham, whose books I highly recommend. Popham says that formative assessment is a deeply planned process and

never done impulsively. In my experience, however, we can't forego great evidence of students' development that comes from assessment tasks that occur suddenly to teachers in the midst of teaching just because they weren't planned in advance.

Ideas for formative assessments usually come from teachers breaking down the standards or outcomes required in the summative assessments. This means we should design the summative assessments first, basing them on the standards or outcomes. Then, we break off smaller pieces of those summative tasks/prompts to use for our formative assessments during instruction. Here are some examples:

Summative Assessment: The student will translate a paragraph written in English into Spanish successfully, accounting for correct vocabulary, verb conjugation, sentence structure, and other nuances of the Spanish language.

Formative Assessment Samples: The student conjugates regular and irregular verbs, translates single sentences, defines vocabulary terms, identifies errors in others' translations and corrects them, justifies pronoun/verb/noun/adjective sequences – and receives descriptive feedback about his performance with each element.

Summative Assessment: The student will simplify equations such as,

$$2(y + 5) = 20$$

$$2y + 10 = 20$$

$$2y = 10$$

$$y = 5$$

Formative Assessment Samples: The student will record the proper sequence of the Order of Operations, use Order of Operations to solve sample problems, explain each property: associative/distributive/commutative, combine like terms, isolate the variable to one side of the equation, plug in the value for the variable in the original equation to see if it works, and use the multiplicative inverse or reciprocal to create a 1 as the coefficient of the variable – and the student receives descriptive feedback about his performance with each element.

Anything can be broken down into focus areas for formative assessments and by tying them closely to summative assessments, we create a clear picture of students' readiness and what we need to provide next in their development. Students will have to think of novel applications of a concept on the final exam? During instruction, we provide frequent formative assessments dealing with "curve balls" in applying the concepts. Students have to write a compare-and-contrast essay? We give them ample formative assessments on each portion of essay writing – drafting introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, transitions, revisions, as well as assessing their capacity to identify substantive similarities and differences. The idea is to be open to the teaching role of formative assessments in students' lives.

Formative assessment isn't graded. It can be marked, but not with marks normally associated with evaluation, such as letter grades or percentages. If we have to grade it for some reason, we make sure it isn't included in the final, summative report of students' performance against standards, i.e. academic achievement grades on report cards. In order for formative assessment to be effective, students must feel free to explore content without fear that their first and continued wrestling with new ideas are the final declarations of their proficiencies with those ideas. This not only diminishes learning, it's unethical because the grade is inaccurate. Letter grades and percentage are associated with final declarations of mastery, not the early and on-going explorations of students moving toward that mastery.

Some teachers may jump on this claim and state that students won't do assignments if they aren't graded. My response to this issue is four-fold:

1) We *can* comment on these assessments, just not letter grade them. Students are given very clear feedback that will serve them better than an abstract symbol ever will. These comments can be recorded somewhere for documentation of progress purposes.

2) We can change our assignments. We can make them compelling enough to warrant students' investment of time and energy. If this is a struggle, find someone to help you think creatively about them.

3) Students want to be productive; they're wired that way. When they are not productive, there's something going on we need to investigate and help resolve: time management issues? parental disputes? parents lost their jobs? auditory processing issue? learned helplessness? intimidation? poverty? test anxiety? When students struggle to complete work, it's usually not for unimportant reasons.

4) Grades are poor motivators. It's a mistake to think that students do tasks simply because of a lure or threat of grades. The instructional power of formative assessments is too important to diminish it because we felt compelled to put a grade or percentage on a formative experience. We should be strong enough to keep formative assessment instructional.

Formative assessment requires teachers to update their record-keeping. This may require changes in how we record the data we gather. If we haven't thought about them yet, it may be time to invest in a clipboard or two with empty class matrices attached on which we record observations about students under multiple columns. Some teachers' electronic PDA's have the capacity to do this observational note-taking on students as well. You might consider buying a case of good-size Post-It notes and using them to record observations during class that you can later transfer to your lesson book for planning or place into running records on your computer.

An emphasis on formative assessment also translates into a focus on student self-assessment. The teacher is only one person (usually), and in order to provide the timely and helpful feedback associated with formative assessment, the assessment can't be limited to the teacher's one time funnel or from the teacher's one perspective.

The student himself and his peers will need to do a lot more of it. If this is new for us, we'll need to get up to speed on the variety of ways students can self-assess and peer critique.

Though it's been around since early civilization, Paul Black and Dylan William put formative assessment on the radar scope in our modern times with their publication, *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment* (1989). In their study of research, they concluded that formative assessment is the basis of all successful teaching, no matter what subject is taught. They also made the case that improving formative assessment during weekly instruction improves students' learning (whether this translates to improved standardized test scores is another matter as standardized tests do not always generate valid inferences of solid learning). Of particular importance today: academically struggling students – for whatever reason they struggle – have the most dramatic gains when teachers employ frequent formative assessment in their teaching, according to Black and William's study. There's more than enough rationale in the research to warrant continued energy spent on formative assessment.

Just like most important elements in sound instruction, formative assessment is first a mindset. As such, it is a purposeful act that requires planning. Teachers who are assessing formatively have no problem with principals who ask without warning, "What evidence from assessments do you have for making this decision regarding instruction?" Teachers don't worry about such questions because they think this way all day long; their instruction is based on serious thinking about what they know of their students. A basic tenet of this mindset is that teaching and learning are interactive, not one-way streets. Students learn how to learn for themselves using teacher and classmate connections, and teachers adjust instruction in light of evidence gathered in assessments.

Now we have to make a decision: Do we do whatever it takes to keep formative assessment on our radar scope this school year, or do we let it slip into the land of wishful thinking, only to be brought to life during teacher evaluation cycles? There's enough going for it, including its real impact on students' personal lives, to keep our scope sharply focused on formative assessment. Let's do it correctly, and let's still the education-speak cacophony with formative assessment's clear high notes – 'critical elements of successful instruction.

Great resources on formative assessment:

Black, Paul; William, Dylan. "Inside the Black Box" study --  
<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbla9810.htm>.

[Borich](#), Gary D.; Tombari, [Martin L.](#) *Educational Assessment for the Elementary and Middle School Classroom* (2nd Edition), Prentice Hall, 2003

Fisher, Douglas; Frey, Nancy. *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for your Classroom*, ASCD, 2007

Marzano, Robert. *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work*, ASCD 2006

National Center for Fair & Open Testing , <http://www.fairtest.org>

Popham, W. James. *Transformative Assessment*, ASCD, 2008

[Stiggins](#), Richard J. *Student-Involved Classroom Assessment* (3rd Edition), Prentice Hall, 2000

Wormeli, Rick. *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessment and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*, Stenhouse and NMSA Publishers, 2006