

## Staying Focused on Formative Assessment

By Rick Wormeli

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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." In this situation, 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 her thinking and subsequent performance in light of that feedback. There's no comparison of students, and there's no return of 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. 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.

## **Distinguishing Formative and Summative Assessments**

Formative assessments are used during the course of learning, and summative assessments are completed after the learning. We could use an official final exam as a formative assessment during the unit of study if we used the scores to adjust instruction, and, after making the adjustments gave students the chance to learn from their mistakes and then take a new exam to better demonstrate their updated competencies. Formative assessments are purposeful and on-going checks for understanding that result in teachers revising instruction based on assessment data and students discovering 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. Formative assessments

evaluate focused areas of the curriculum. In this way teachers can consider their results quickly as they make weekly and sometimes daily instructional decisions. Examples of useful formative assessments include 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.

Summative assessments can include these same tools, of course, but their focus is on broader themes and units from the curriculum. 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 students' growth.

For many of my students, formative assessment created 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 less impact on

students' learning than formative assessments. Because of the strong correlation between learning and good formative assessments, we should list them in our daily lesson plans. Without them, the lessons may not be as powerful as we think they are.

### **Informal but Precise Evaluation of Learning**

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.

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. 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:*** 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:*** 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 separated into focus areas for formative assessments. By tying the formative assessments to summative

assessments, we create a clear picture of students' readiness and what we need to provide next in their development. Will students need 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. Will 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 coming-to-know new ideas will be interpreted as their final demonstrations of proficiency. Using formative assessment inappropriately not only diminishes learning, it's also 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? A parent's job loss? Auditory processing issues? Learned helplessness? Intimidation? Family poverty? Test anxiety? When students struggle to complete work, there is usually an underlying and important reason.

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.

## **Keeping Track of Formative Assessments**

Formative assessment requires teachers to update their record-keeping. This may require changes in how we record the data we gather. It may be time to invest in a clipboard or two; we can attach empty class matrices attached and 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 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 and his peers will need to do a lot evaluation of learning. If this is a new approach 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, formative assessment leapt to the national radar screen when Paul Black and Dylan William published *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment* (1989). In their study of research, they concluded that formative assessment is the basis of 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 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 attention to formative assessment.

Like most important elements in sound instruction, formative assessment is first a mindset. 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 are always thinking about what they know about their students. A basic tenet of formative assessment is that teaching and learning are interactive. 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? Let's do it correctly, stilling 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,  
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