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Best Practice: Formative Assessment Done Right

By Marsha Ratzel

Like many other concerned teachers, I've been reading the [Obama administration's blueprint](#) for how educational reforms should unfold. Most of the ideas revolve around using a national curriculum that emphasizes college preparation and implementing student assessment that goes beyond the bubble tests. While there are a few references to ongoing measurements, I see very little about the role of formative assessment in improving student learning throughout the year.

Formative assessments take place during the process of teaching and learning. They're classroom assessments designed by the teacher to help determine how much students are learning and what needs to be done next.

In some quarters of the school-reform debate, I'm beginning to hear talk about how districts, states, and the nation should standardize formative assessments so the process can benefit more students. Usually, these assessments give teachers a quick and not-so-scientific measure of learning by using a thumbs up or maybe having students write answers on whiteboard slates. The teacher glances around the room, tallies the feedback, and makes a quick expert judgment: Move onto the next idea, go back and do more instruction, or devote additional time to practice.

For me, formative assessment has become the most effective way to know which students are learning, which are stuck and where, and which students just aren't getting it at all. It's information I collect in any number of deliberate ways: listening to class discussions, glancing over a student's shoulder as he or she complete an in-class assignment, asking three exit questions, posing three opening questions, collecting papers for review, and so on.

These are things that don't normally end up in the grade book—they're little feedback loops signaling the amount of progress we're making toward the end goal. Typically I will jot down the names of students I need to give some one-on-one attention to the next day, or perhaps invite to a tutoring session before school.

[Grant Wiggins](#) says this about the feedback we give based on formative assessment: "Feedback is value-neutral help on worthy tasks. It describes what the learner did and did not do in relation to her goals. It is actionable information, and it empowers the student to make intelligent adjustments when she applies it to her next attempt to perform."

It's information for me, but just as importantly, it's information my students can use to achieve more and perform at higher levels.

I use the formative data in ways that are very familiar to practitioners. If I can tell that only chunks of students are learning, I re-teach. If I see that we've got it mastered, I move on. I pace myself to meet students' needs and try to make sure that everything I do in every lesson is targeting that end goal of mastery. Formative assessment—done right—is a very clear but subtle, ever-changing picture of what's going on with our students.

Grades Don't Guide Our Learning

I've also come to understand that ongoing classroom assessment is essential for students to become deeply involved in their own learning. Grades are no substitute. Grades don't tell them much about what they need to learn or what they need to do better. When students earn a "C," they may feel like failures, but they have little idea what to do to improve their skills.

Once I realized how little help a grade was for students, I changed things—big time! Now they get the feedback they need to gauge their own progress. Sometimes my feedback is on the content of the curriculum and sometimes on foundational skills.

For example, students were asked to describe Newton's three laws of motion. I wanted to offer them not only learning experiences with the laws but also time to communicate what they knew. We broke down the process into several steps that included:

- taking notes;
- summarizing the notes in their own words; and
- using examples of things that demonstrated the laws from the data in their science spirals (lab notes).

My formative feedback at each step of the way let students see how to improve their notes or summaries and whether they needed to look for more examples of the laws. From the first drafts I read, I could tell they had no idea how to write these kinds of descriptions. I had to create writing frames so that students could learn specific patterns of writing and how to use simple math calculations from their lab work to support their ideas.

These were steps that students could—and do—understand. I was able to give them very specific help on either the content of Newton's laws or the separate, but equally important, skill of communicating what they knew. They came to believe they would be successful on the end-of-unit test because they'd learned how to interpret the questions and answer them with a clear, written description supported by examples.

We Shouldn't Formalize Formative Assessment

I get worried when I read about systematizing formative data to measure students and teachers.

Given my Newton's laws example, how would any computer system be able to determine whether the student couldn't take notes, couldn't summarize, couldn't make inferences, didn't know the differences between the three kinds of motion, or just had trouble writing.

The whole nature of formative assessment is small measurements—a pinpoint evaluation of a specific skill or process you are teaching right now, where you need feedback rather immediately so you can make the next decision. Wholesale data collection is much more suited to evaluating programs—not how far along specific kids are in mastering a specific learning target.

The only reasonable exception to a single teacher/student use of formative data is when you are involved in a learning experience with other teachers. You can imagine situations where it would be beneficial to share and compare with a teacher in your grade level who has the same type of class—or a job-alike teacher in a different building.

Rick DuFour and **Rick Stiggins** have been speaking about common formative assessment like this for years and have helped thousands of teachers utilize this kind of balanced assessment to improve learning in their classrooms. This type of sharing exposes a teacher's strengths and weaknesses. It requires a huge investment in trust among the parties sharing the data. The whole point of revealing such information is to learn from each other and help improve teaching practices.

I firmly believe formative data are designed for small-scale sharing and feedback. It's not information to be amassed in some data warehouse. The data crunchers may long for that, but it's not in the best interests of kids.

Invest in Helping More Teachers "Get Formative"

I, for one, would love to see professional development dollars aimed at empowering more teachers to learn how to use formative assessment. Expand the idea that formative assessment should cover just the curriculum-related skills—stretch it to include *all* the student skills that are vital to the larger task of learning.

Our classroom assessment focus should include things like knowing how to read textbooks; answering questions based on the style of the question; being able to take notes; performing an Internet search and evaluating which sources will best help answer the question; summarizing passages of text; knowing how to collect evidence to support an idea, inference, or conclusion; writing clear summations of our work; and so on.

Formative assessment done well can help amplify the effectiveness of a teacher. It creates a synergetic loop of information flowing from teacher to student and back to teacher—then back to the student again. Teachers who master the use of formative assessment and feedback will know they are making a difference, and students will understand what they must do to be successful.

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