

COMMENTARY

Formative Assessment—A Process, Not a Test

By W. James Popham

I love hyphens. Always have. Always will. If used properly, hyphens make things easier to read. This is because hyphenated words let readers know there's something still coming in a phrase that's being read, so the reader should hold off a bit before deciding on the meaning of what's being read at that instant.

For an illustration, ask yourself which of these two sentences is more easily understood:

(1) The teachers were dismayed with the test takers' indifference.

(2) The teachers were dismayed with the test-takers' indifference.

Upon reading the first sentence, many readers will initially conclude that the teachers were dismayed with the test itself rather than with the nonchalant attitude of students taking the test. In the second sentence, however, the hyphen between "test" and "takers'" makes it apparent the teachers' dismay was directed toward students' indifference, not toward the test.

Currently, the absence of a hyphen can seriously muck up the meaning of an instructional approach that's capable of benefiting thousands of students. I refer to formative assessment or, more accurately, to the formative-assessment process. My contention is that the absence of a hyphen between "formative" and "assessment" inclines educators to accept an inaccurate conception of an instructional approach which, when properly employed, helps boatloads of children. When "formative assessment" is inaccurately thought of as a kind of test, however, it can turn out to be of little value to students.

For today's educators to get clear-headed about what is meant by the formative-assessment process is particularly important. This is because the formative-assessment process, when used by teachers, leads to substantial gains in students' learning. If teachers are confused about the meaning of this potent process, then the likelihood of their using it properly will surely be diminished. It's tough for teachers, or anyone else, to employ something correctly when they don't fundamentally understand it.

Happily, we now have available about four decades' worth of empirical evidence attesting to the instructional dividends of the formative-assessment process.

Recent reviews of more than 4,000 research investigations show clearly that when this process is well implemented in the classroom, it can essentially double the speed of student learning. Indeed, when one considers several recent reviews of research regarding the classroom formative-assessment process, it is clear that the process works, it can produce whopping gains in students' achievement, and it is sufficiently robust so that different teachers can use it in diverse ways, yet still get great results with their students.

Briefly, let's review what this thing is that appears to work so wondrously. Using everyday language, the formative-assessment process involves teachers' and/or students' use of assessment evidence to make adjustments in what they're doing. This assessment evidence can be gathered in a variety of ways—from traditional written tests to a wide range of informal assessment procedures, such as securing students' self-reports of their own understanding of an issue.

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This process revolves around the use of assessments to collect evidence, and then the employment of such evidence by teachers and/or students to decide whether they need to adjust what they are doing. The formative-assessment process uses assessments as an integral tactic to determine whether any adjustments are needed.

When teachers are told, inaccurately, that formative assessment is a kind of test, this is akin to telling a would-be surfer that a surfboard is the same as surfing. While a surfboard represents an important ingredient in surfing, it is only that—a part of the surfing process. The entire process involves the surfer's paddling out to an appropriate offshore location, selecting the right wave, choosing the most propitious moment to catch the chosen wave, standing upright on the surfboard, and staying upright while a curling wave rumbles toward shore. The surfboard is a key component of the surfing process, but it is not the entire process.

Similarly, an assessment is an important part of the formative-assessment process, but it is only that—a part of the formative-assessment process. The entire process involves decisions about when to test and what to test, selection or construction of suitable assessment procedures, judgments about whether assessment-elicited evidence should lead to adjustments, and choices about the nature of any adjustments. Assessments are a key component of the formative-assessment process, but they are not the entire process.

Why is it, then, that so many American educators regard formative assessment as a type of test? This widespread misconception often springs from a contrast between "formative assessment" and "summative assessment." Although, loosely speaking, this distinction between the summative and formative functions of educational assessment makes sense, clarity crumbles when teachers are told that "a formative assessment" is a particular kind of test.

“Summative assessments” are regarded by many educators as the tests used to make evaluative judgments about a completed instructional sequence. The most obvious examples of summative assessments these days are the large-scale accountability tests administered annually by states to appraise the effectiveness of their schools and districts. But summative assessments can also refer to classroom assessments such as an end-of-course exam that a teacher might use to determine how well the teacher’s students have learned what the teacher was trying to teach.

“Formative assessments” are typically thought of as those along-the-way classroom tests that teachers create to help them and their students get a fix on how well students are learning what they are supposed to learn. Today, a number of commercial vendors describe their “interim tests,” or their standardized tests administered every few months, as incarnations of “formative assessment.”

Whether it’s a novice surfer contemplating a wave or a classroom teacher considering the formative-assessment process, confusion about what’s to be attempted will definitely deter progress. When teachers are told that they should employ “a formative assessment,” they have been misled.

That’s because it’s not the test per se that is formative or summative. It is the use to which the test’s results are put.

When we employ phrases such as “a formative assessment” or “a summative assessment,” we are simply being sloppy with our language. Unfortunately, many educators truly believe formative assessment refers to particular kinds of tests that will—based on ample research evidence—improve kids’ learning. This simply is not so.

If we are to promote use of the formative-assessment process, it’s crucial that more educators accurately understand the process in the way that empirical studies have shown it works best. If research-ratified versions of the formative-assessment process are used widely by teachers, then many more students will learn better and faster. But if formative assessment is regarded as nothing more than a specific sort of test, its impact is apt to be trivial.

How this important educational drama unfolds may depend, at least a bit, on the way we use our hyphens.

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