

## Formative Assessment: Assessing for Learning

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To be successful, every teacher must use an array of assessments in his or her classroom. Some of these practices are used to assign grades, while others are designed for students to reflect on their own learning. Generally, assessment is divided into two main types: formative and summative. Any well-designed curriculum should include instances of both, and all assessments need to be aligned with learning goals and classroom instruction (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

Characterized broadly, formative assessment provides teachers with a powerful tool to help inform instruction and improve student learning. However, a multitude of misconceptions exist about formative assessment. Depending on the source of the definition, formative assessment can be used to refer to teacher, school, and district-created assessments, ranging from benchmark tests to weekly quizzes to entry questions. What qualifies as formative assessment? One district, for example, uses a computer program that tracks student progress on district-made benchmark tests given every two months. With a few clicks of the mouse, teachers can access individual student information, including graphs that break down student performance on specific standards. These benchmark tests have a certain utility in measuring the effectiveness of a teacher's instruction at points during the school year, but would be a poor substitute for ongoing classroom-level formative assessments.

Formative assessment is an action that teachers take during the teaching process, and is often inseparable from instruction (Tomlinson, 2008). Because it is used while students are learning a concept, assigning a grade to formative assessments can defeat the purpose of helping students improve—particularly when this improvement happens at different rates. Specifically, formative assessment is “a way of assessing students' progress, providing feedback, and making decisions about further instructional activities” (McMillan, 2011, p. 6). A recent synthesis of relevant literature on formative assessment conducted by Madison-Harris and Muoneke (2012) indicates that, despite various definitions, formative assessment commonly

- Is a systematic, continuous process used during instruction by teachers;
- Evaluates learning while it is developing;

- Is indivisible with instruction and integrated with teaching and learning;
- Actively involves both teacher and student;
- Provides a feedback loop to adjust ongoing instruction and close gaps in learning;
- Involves self- and peer assessment; and
- Informs and supports instruction while learning is taking place.

Benchmark tests lack most, if not all, of these elements—and as such, are more aptly classified as summative assessments, or assessments of learning up to a certain point in time. Benchmark tests are given after students are well into the learning process; these tests assess numerous concepts. They are separate from instruction, do little to inform instruction while it is taking place, and rarely include elements of self- and peer assessment.

To illustrate quality formative assessment, I'll offer a math example:

A middle school teacher poses two questions to her students at the end of class. The first question is a fact-based prompt asking students to supply a formula that they would use to solve for area. The second question poses a word problem for students. Students are asked to respond to these questions on a sticky note, which they stick to the door as they leave class. After briefly looking over and organizing her students' responses, the teacher then begins class the following day tailoring instruction to support the varying needs of all students.

In this case, the teacher is using formative assessment to refine her instruction by working to close achievement gaps for students who need support. Her assessment process is interdependent with her instruction, and she is evaluating learning while it develops, not after the learning process has already run its course. Effective formative assessment benefits teachers and students. Teachers can use assessment results, and other feedback from students, to drive instructional decisions and, in turn, to provide students feedback on their progress toward learning goals. Consistent feedback helps motivate students while gradually placing them in charge of their own learning. Although benchmark tests and other summative measures have their place, they lack the power of formative assessments to consistently transform teaching and learning.

## How Common Core State Standards Fit In

With the advent and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), formative assessment will be an even more valuable tool for student success. These standards were developed to provide states with a more rigorous, manageable set of standards on which to base their curricula. With the slogan of “higher, clearer, and fewer,” the developers of these standards express that they are hoping to better ready students for college or career pursuits (CCSSO, 2010). Further, the end-of-course summative assessments being developed for Common Core standards contain performance tasks, so that students will be required to apply the content they learn beyond simply recitation of facts. With the additional intellectual demands on students, it becomes vital that teachers provide feedback and check on student progress toward these standards, and that these formative measures align with summative assessments. Teachers must measure student progress against the new standards early and often to ensure learning experiences in the classroom move toward mastery of these rigorous standards.

As teachers, it is important to focus on practices that are most educationally valuable, particularly when demands levied upon educators seem to change from year to year. If used correctly, formative assessment strategies possess great potential to help students grow to meet even higher levels of expectations than in the past.

## References

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