The Best Value in Formative Assessment

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Ready-made benchmark tests cannot substitute for day-to-day formative assessment conducted by assessment-literate teachers.

Recently a school leader asked us to provide an example of a good test item on a formative assessment and then show how that item would be different when used on a summative test. He wanted to explain to his staff the difference between formative and summative assessment. His end goal was for teachers to develop assessments to measure how well students were mastering the content standards that would appear on the state accountability test before the test was given in the spring.

His question reflects the confusion many educators have about formative and summative assessment. This confusion isn't surprising: Definitions of formative assessment abound, resulting in multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings. And in part because of these varying definitions and views, practices labeled as formative assessment in schools today vary widely.

One result of No Child Left Behind has been a surge in student testing—much of it voluntary, going well beyond what federal law or state assessment systems require. Many schools and districts administer tests with names like *benchmark*, *short-cycle*, and *interim assessments* to predict student performance on high-stakes tests and to identify students needing additional help. This increasingly popular level of testing has contributed to the widening scope of what is called formative assessment.

Testing companies in the K–12 education market, seeking to support the trend toward more testing, sometimes advertise products as "formative assessments." This adds to the confusion by encouraging the idea that it's the test itself that's formative (Chappuis, 2005).

In reality, this level of testing is often little more than a series of minisummative tests, not always tightly aligned to what was taught in the classroom. There is nothing inherently formative in such tests—they may or may not be used to make changes in teaching that will lead to greater student learning.

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The Difference Between Summative and Formative

What is formative assessment, then? First, it's not a product. That was the central misunderstanding of the administrator who asked for an example of a good formative test item. Even though assessments will continue to be labeled *formative* or *summative*, how the results are used is what determines whether the assessment is formative or summative.

To begin, let's look at summative assessment. In general, its results are used to make some sort of judgment, such as to determine what grade a student will receive on a classroom assignment, measure program effectiveness, or determine whether a school has made adequate yearly progress. Summative assessment, sometimes referred to as assessment *of* learning, typically documents how much learning has occurred at a point in time; its purpose is to measure the level of student, school, or program success.

Formative assessment, on the other hand, delivers information *during* the instructional process, before the summative assessment. Both the teacher and the student use formative assessment results to make decisions about what actions to take to promote further learning. It is an ongoing, dynamic process that involves far more than frequent testing, and measurement of student learning is just one of its components.

Summative Assessment Used in Formative Ways

Almost any assessment instrument can be used for summative or formative purposes, but some, by design, are better suited to summative use and others to formative use. For example, state assessments, although they may also have some limited formative use, are designed to provide accountability data and to compare schools and districts. Because their primary purpose is summative, the results may not be communicated in ways that teachers and students can easily interpret and work with. Further, the results are often delivered months after the administration of the tests. For these reasons, such state tests usually do not function well in a formative way: They can't contribute much information to guide day-to-day instruction or help determine the next learning steps of individual students.

Benchmark assessments, either purchased by the district from commercial vendors or developed locally, are generally meant to measure progress toward state or district content standards and to predict future performance on large-scale summative tests. A common misconception is that this level of assessment is

automatically formative. Although such assessments are sometimes intended for formative use—that is, to guide further instruction for groups or individual students—teachers' and administrators' lack of understanding of how to use the results can derail this intention. The assessments will produce no formative benefits if teachers administer them, report the results, and then continue with instruction as previously planned—as can easily happen when teachers are expected to cover a hefty amount of content in a given time.

Teachers also select or develop their own summative assessments—those that count for a grade. Compared with state and district tests, these classroom assessments can more readily be adapted to formative use because their results are more immediately available and their learning targets have been more recently taught. When teachers know what specific learning target each question or task on their test measures, they can use the results to select and reteach portions of the curriculum that students haven't yet mastered. Carefully designed common assessments can be used this way as well.

Students, too, can use summative test results to make decisions about further study. If the assessment items are explicitly matched to the intended learning targets, teachers can guide students in examining their right and wrong answers in order to answer questions such as these:

- What are my strengths relative to the standards?
- What have I seen myself improve at?
- Where are my areas of weakness?
- Where didn't I perform as desired, and how might I make those answers better?
- What do these results mean for the next steps in my learning, and how should I prepare for that improvement?

For students to make maximum use of these questions to guide further study, however, teachers must plan and allow time for students to learn the knowledge and skills they missed on the summative assessment and to retake the assessment. Lack of time for such learning is one of the biggest hindrances to formatively using summative classroom assessments.

Assessment *for* Learning

When teachers assess student learning for purely formative purposes, there is no final mark on the paper and no summative grade in the grade book. Rather, assessment serves as practice for students, just like a meaningful homework assignment does. This is formative assessment at its most valuable. Called

assessment *for* learning, it supports learning in two ways:

- Teachers can adapt instruction on the basis of evidence, making changes and improvements that will yield immediate benefits to student learning.
- Students can use evidence of their current progress to actively manage and adjust their own learning.

Assessment for learning can take many different forms in the classroom. It consists of anything teachers do to help students answer three questions (Atkin, Black, & Coffey, 2001):

Where am I going?

- Give students a list of the learning targets they are responsible for mastering, written in student-friendly language.
- Show students anonymous strong and weak examples of the kind of product or performance they are expected to create and have them use a scoring guide to determine which one is better and why.

Where am I now?

- Administer a nongraded quiz part-way through the learning, to help both teacher and students understand who needs to work on what.
- Highlight phrases on a scoring guide reflecting specific strengths and areas for improvement and staple it to student work.
- Have students identify their own strengths and areas for improvement using a scoring guide.
- Have students keep a list of learning targets for the course and periodically check off the ones they have mastered.

How can I close the gap?

- Give students feedback and have them use it to set goals.
- Have students graph or describe their progress on specific learning targets.
- Ask students to comment on their progress: What changes have they noticed? What is easy that used to be hard? What insights into themselves as learners have they discovered?

When students use feedback from the teacher to learn how to self-assess and set goals, they increase ownership of their own success. In this type of assessment environment, teachers and students collaborate in an ongoing process using assessment information to improve rather than judge learning. It all hinges on the assessment's ability to provide timely, understandable, and descriptive feedback to teachers and students.

Feedback: The Key Difference

Feedback in an assessment *for* learning context occurs while there is still time to take action. It functions as a global positioning system, offering descriptive information about the work, product, or performance relative to the intended learning goals. It avoids marks or comments that judge the level of achievement or imply that the learning journey is over.

Effective descriptive feedback focuses on the intended learning, identifies specific strengths, points to areas needing improvement, suggests a route of action students can take to close the gap between where they are now and where they need to be, takes into account the amount of corrective feedback the learner can act on at one time, and models the kind of thinking students will engage in when they self-assess. These are a few examples of descriptive feedback:

- You have interpreted the bars on this graph correctly, but you need to make sure the marks on the *x* and *y* axes are placed at equal intervals.
- What you have written is a hypothesis because it is a proposed explanation. You can improve it by writing it as an "if … then … " statement.
- The good stories we have been reading have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I see that your story has a beginning and a middle, just like those good stories do. Can you draw and write an ending?
- You have described the similarities between _____ and _____ clearly in this paper, and you have identified key differences. Work on illustrating those differences with concrete examples from the text.

In contrast, the feedback from a summative assessment—whether given in the classroom or in a larger context—tells teachers and students who made it to the learning destination and who didn't. The assessment's coded, evaluative feedback—*B+*, *84%, Meets Standards, Great Job, Proficient*, and so on—does not identify individual student strengths and areas needing improvement. It does not offer specific information for course correction.

Advantages of Formative Classroom Assessment

Although all formative assessment practices have the potential to increase student learning, assessment for learning in the classroom offers a number of distinct benefits:

- The timeliness of results enables teachers to adjust instruction quickly, while learning is in progress.
- The students who are assessed are the ones who benefit from the adjustments.
- The students can use the results to adjust and improve their own learning.

When we try to teacher-proof the assessment process by providing a steady diet of ready-made external tests, we lose these advantages. Such tests cannot substitute for the day-to-day level of formative assessment that only assessment-literate teachers are able to conduct. The greatest value in formative assessment lies in teachers and students making use of results to improve real-time teaching and learning at every turn.

References

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