The Bridge Between Today's Lesson and Tomorrow's

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Formative assessments can improve both teaching and learning, if you follow these ten principles.

There's talk aplenty in schools these days about formative assessment. That's encouraging, because formative assessment has great potential to improve both teaching and learning. Listening to the conversations sometimes, however, reminds me that it's easier to subscribe to a word than to live out its fundamental tenets.

I see formative assessment as an ongoing exchange between a teacher and his or her students designed to help students grow as vigorously as possible and to help teachers contribute to that growth as fully as possible. When I hear formative assessment reduced to a mechanism for raising end-of-year-test scores, it makes me fear that we might reduce teaching and learning to that same level.

Formative assessment is—or should be—the bridge or causeway between today's lesson and tomorrow's. Both its alignment with current content goals and its immediacy in providing insight about student understanding are crucial to helping teacher and student see how to make near-term adjustments so the progression of learning can proceed as it should. I worry when I hear educators say they have purchased formative assessments to give once a quarter or once a month to keep tabs on student achievement. These assessments are not likely to be well aligned with tomorrow's lesson, nor are they able to provide feedback rapidly enough to influence daily instruction.

The best teachers work persistently to benefit the learners in their charge. Because teaching is too complex to invite perfection, even the best teachers will miss the mark on some days, but in general, teachers who use sound formative assessment aspire to the following 10 principles.

1. Help students understand the role of formative assessment.

Students often feel that assessment equals test equals grade equals judgment. That association leads many discouraged students to give up rather than to risk another failure. It causes many high-achieving students to focus on grades rather than learning, and on safe answers rather than thoughtful ones.

It's important, then, for teachers to help students understand that assessments help them learn and that immediate perfection should not be their goal. Teachers can communicate this message by telling students,

When we're mastering new things, it's important to feel safe making mistakes. Mistakes are how we figure out how to get better at what we are doing. They help us understand our thinking. Therefore, many assessments in this class will not be graded. We'll analyze the assessments so we can make improvements in our work, but they won't go into the grade book. When you've had time to practice, then we'll talk about tests and grades.

It's essential for teachers to help learners both understand and experience the reality that sustained effort and mindful attention to progress feed success. That belief needs to be a cornerstone ethic in the classroom.

2. Begin with clear KUDs.

The first step in creating a worthy formative assessment occurs well before the teacher develops the assessment. It happens when the teacher begins to map out curriculum. At that point, the teacher asks the pivotal question, "What is most important for students to *Know, Understand*, and be able to *Do* as a result of this segment of learning?" Absent clarity on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills for a unit or lesson, the curriculum wanders. But with clarity about KUDs, the teacher is able to focus curricular decisions squarely on what matters most for student success.

KUDs also lay the groundwork for pre-assessment and ongoing assessment. A pre-assessment provides a "dipstick check" of student status as a unit begins. It need not be wholly comprehensive, but rather should sample student standing in relation to the material so the teacher has a reasonable approximation of who may experience difficulty, who may show early mastery, and who may bring misunderstandings to the unit of study. Other formative assessments will follow regularly and often, and together they will form an image of a student's emergent development.

Alignment between KUDs and formative assessments—and later, between formative assessment results and instructional plans—is imperative if formative assessment is to fulfill its promise.

3. Make room for student differences.

The most useful formative assessments make it possible for students to show what they know, understand, and can do; therefore, it's useful for teachers to build some flexibility into formative assessments. For example, a student who is learning English may be able to draw and label a diagram of the relationship between density and buoyancy but not write a paragraph explaining it. The prompt, "Use an example from your experience to illustrate the idea that a person's culture shapes his or her perspective," is more likely to draw a meaningful response from a broader range of students than the prompt, "Explain the relationship between culture and perspective." Likewise, asking students to illustrate how fractions are used in sports, music, cooking, shopping, building something, or another area they are interested in is more likely to be revealing than asking them simply to explain uses of fractions. In formative assessments (as in summative ones), it's acceptable—and often wise—to allow students some latitude in how they express what they know, understand, and can do. Assessment formats and conditions can vary as long as all forms of the assessment measure the same KUDs.

4. Provide instructive feedback.

Although formative assessments should rarely be graded, students do need useful feedback. Comments like, "Nice job," "I enjoyed this," or "Not quite" don't help learners understand what they did well or how they missed the mark. Feedback needs to help the student know what to do to improve the next time around. For example, it's helpful for a teacher to say, "The flow of your logic in this section is clear, but you need additional detail to support your thinking." It offers a student little guidance if the teacher simply says, "Not quite there yet," or "Weak effort."

When feedback serves its instructional purpose, students are clear about the learning targets at which they are aiming, and they understand that assessments show how they are doing in reaching those targets. They trust that teachers will use the assessments to help them achieve, and they know that there will soon be follow-up opportunities for them to use the feedback in improving their performance.

5. Make feedback user-friendly.

Feedback should be clear, focused, and appropriately challenging for the learner. As teachers, we sometimes feel our job is to mark every error on a paper. Not only is that practice time-consuming, robbing us of time we could more potently use for instructional planning, but a sea of "edits" without clarity about which comments matter most, how they connect, or what to do next is likely to evoke a negative response from a student.

To realize its power, feedback must result in a student thinking about how to improve—the ideal is to elicit a cognitive response from the learner, not an emotional one (Wiliam, 2011). It's seldom useful to send students a message that their work is stellar or that their work is dreadful. Praise and shame shut down learning far more often than they catalyze it. It's more fruitful to straightforwardly share with students their particular next steps in the learning process, based on goals that are clear to teacher and student alike.

The teacher sees where a student is in a learning progression and points the way ahead for that student. In other words, feedback is differentiated, pointing each learner toward actions that are challenging but achievable for that learner.

For example, a teacher who is working with students on using sources to support an opinion provides criteria for the effective use of resources for this purpose. In writing an opinion piece, some students may have difficulty synthesizing ideas from multiple resources. A second group of students may synthesize proficiently but rely solely on obvious interpretations of text. To move ahead, the first group of students needs specific guidance on how to synthesize ideas from resources. The second group needs direction in plumbing ideas more deeply. Both groups will receive feedback in the area of using resources to support an opinion, but their feedback will focus on aspects of the skill set that move them to their next step in development.

6. Assess persistently.

Formative assessment should permeate a class period. A great teacher is a habitual student of his or her students. A keen observer, the teacher is constantly watching what students do, looking for clues about their learning progress, and asking for input from students about their status.

These teachers walk among their students as they work, listening for clues about their understanding, asking questions that probe their thinking, taking notes on what they see and hear. They ask students to signal their level of confidence with the task they are doing with thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or thumbs-sideways, for example, to gain a sense of how the class as a whole is faring. They ask students to write answers to questions on whiteboards or to respond with clickers so they can get an in-process sense of how individual students are coming along.

They use start-up prompts to see what students learned from last night's homework. They use exit cards to assess student understanding as a class ends. They spot-check student work with an eye to seeing how students are progressing with a particular skill. They talk with students as they enter and leave the classroom, at lunch, or while waiting for the school buses to leave. They solicit and are alert to parent input about their students' strengths, attitudes, work habits, and goals.

It isn't really so much that these teachers use formative assessments *often*. It's that they do so *continually*—formally and informally, with individuals and with the group, to understand academic progress and to understand the human beings that they teach. For these teachers, formative assessment is not ancillary to effective teaching. It is the core of their professional work.

7. Engage students with formative assessment.

Time was when doctors examined patients, made diagnoses, and provided treatment plans with limited conversation about their observations or alternative courses of treatment. More recently, physicians have learned that outcomes improve when patients and doctors exchange information and examine treatment options together.

It's easy for teachers to stick with the traditional classroom paradigm that casts them in the role of giver and grader of tests, diagnoser of student needs, and prescriber of regimens. Things go much better, however, when students are fully engaged in the assessment process.

Students benefit from examining their own work in light of rubrics that align tightly with content goals and point toward quality of content, process, and product—or in comparison to models of high-quality work that are just a bit above the student's current level of performance. They benefit from providing feedback on peers' work, as long as the feedback is guided by clear criteria and a process that enables them to provide useful suggestions.

Students also need to be involved in thoughtfully examining teacher feedback, asking questions when the feedback is not clear, and developing plans that specify how they will use that feedback to benefit their own academic growth. Students who are consistent participants in the formative assessment process should be able to say something like this:

Here are four goals I'm working on right now. In this piece of work, here's evidence that I'm competent with the first and third goals. If we look at my work from a month ago and then at this most recent piece, I can show you evidence of my progress with the second goal. I can also tell you two things I'm going to work on this week to make sure I become more confident and more skilled in working with the fourth goal.

8. Look for patterns.

The goal of reviewing formative assessment is not to be able to say, "Six students made *A*s, seven made *B*s, ten made *C*s, and so on." Neither is the goal to create 32 lesson plans for 32 students. Rather, it is to find patterns in the students' work that point the way to planning classroom instruction that both moves students along a learning continuum and is manageable.

Patterns will vary widely with the focus of the assessment. In one instance, a teacher may see some students who have already mastered the content, others who are fine with computations but not word problems, still others who know how to tackle the word problems but are making careless errors, and another group that is struggling with prerequisite knowledge or skills.

In another instance, a teacher may find that one group of students can provide causes of an event but no evidence for their reasoning, while other students are able to provide both causes and evidence. In still another case, a teacher may see students who understand the general idea being assessed but lack academic vocabulary to write with precision, while other students are using appropriate academic vocabulary. The possibilities are many, but the goal is to look for clusters of student need and plan ways to help each group of students move ahead.

9. Plan instruction around content requirements and student needs.

There is little point in spending time on formative assessment unless it leads to modification of teaching and learning plans. In other words, formative assessment is a means to design instruction that's a better fit for student needs, not an end in itself.

On rare occasions, formative assessment will indicate that everyone in the class needs more practice with a certain skill or more engagement with a particular understanding. Much more frequently, however, formative assessment points to a need for differentiated instruction during at least some of an upcoming class period, in homework, or in both. John Hattie (2012) says that teachers must know where students are and aim to move them "+1" beyond that point; thus the idea of teaching the class as a whole is unlikely to pitch the lesson correctly for all students. This is where the skill of teachers in knowing the similarities across students and allowing for the differences becomes so important. (p. 97)

An assessment is really only a formative assessment when teachers glean evidence about student performance, interpret that evidence, and use it to provide teaching that is more likely to benefit student learning than the instruction those teachers would have delivered if they had continued forward without using what they learned through the assessment (Wiliam, 2011).

10. Repeat the process.

Formative assessment is more habitual than occasional in classrooms where maximizing each student's growth is a central goal. In such classes, it simply makes no sense to teach without a clear understanding of each student's development along a learning

trajectory. It is wasteful of time, resources, and learner potential not to make instructional plans based on that understanding. Assessment of each learning experience informs plans for the next learning experience. Such an assessment process never ends. A classroom is a system with interdependent parts—each affecting the other for better or worse. The learning environment, quality of curriculum, use of formative assessment, instructional planning, and implementation of classroom routines work together to enhance student learning—or, if any of the elements does not function effectively, to impede it. Fruitful use of formative assessment is an essential component in the mix.

References

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