

Formative Assessment begins with Noticing

Formative assessment is defined as the process used by teachers and students to notice, recognise and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning.

-Cowie and Bell, 2001

Formative assessment can be considered a pedagogy of noticing and sensemaking. The act of noticing while learning is underway, of paying attention to what our students are saying, doing, feeling, and how they are interacting, is a skill that takes discipline. With so much going on in a classroom, to keep a few things in mind and note when and how they occur, is a tremendous undertaking. It takes daily practice. We may think it comes naturally, but in fact, our minds are often on what is coming next, our to-do list, or some distracting student behavior. So we have difficulty noticing what's happening right now with our students' learning.

As an example from our research, teachers who began attempting to notice students' use of language during science lessons found it very challenging! They would set their intention to notice when students said a certain type of word, such as connectors (*and, but, because*). Yet, they found that the lesson would suddenly be over and they had forgotten to listen for those words. In the beginning, it didn't matter that they had modeled the words' use and made a plan to see what contexts students were using them in - they just couldn't do it. To be fair, these teachers were juggling their efforts to notice language and science content at the same time. They found that the focused attention required for noticing any specific behavior or type of language was more demanding than they expected. But the good news is, they got better over time with regular practice.

Teachers learning formative assessment benefit from committing a few minutes a day to intentional noticing while class is in session. Eventually, teachers may notice specific indicators of students meeting the success criteria, or student actions indicating agency, but as beginners, teachers choose something small and specific to pay attention to that gives them information about their students' learning. The one caveat is to focus on what they want to see vs something they don't. For example, it is not helpful to choose to look for moments when students are off task or disrupting the lesson.

Teachers hone their noticing skills by choosing to focus on an expression of learning, such as utilizing feedback to make revisions in writing, providing an explanation of how quantities are grouped to count collections in math, or instances of using prepositions when speaking in English. Before long, this daily practice starts to permeate into the rest of instruction, going a long way towards supporting effective implementation of formative assessment, students' evolving learner identities, and creating a learning culture in tune with students.