

The Student Role in Formative Assessment Practice: Self-Assessment, Peer-Feedback, and Discourse

There are three critical components of the student role in formative assessment practice. These are *self-assessment*, *peer feedback*, and *discourse*. Each of these is a key entry point for students to engage in using evidence to advance their own and their peers' learning. With these three processes, students gain confidence to be able to make decisions about the status of their own learning, to extend that learning, and to envision next steps.

Self-Assessment

In self-assessment, students begin developing the habit of mind to monitor their own learning while it's in progress. This is a fundamental shift away from relying on the teacher as the only arbiter of quality and the single decision-maker of learning status. While students may begin this process with simple self-assessment events (e.g., a checklist or quick write), the goal is for students to use these experiences to further develop skills at monitoring their own learning independently over time, to develop metacognition. To get to this point, students need to develop an ongoing, daily practice of noticing and sensemaking about their own learning. We know that metacognition is thinking about one's thinking - developing an awareness of one's own thoughts and one's level of understanding. This takes attention and practice. It is the cornerstone of formative assessment and the biggest lever in developing student agency.

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback is a similar process. It entails internalizing the success criteria and using it as the framework to evaluate the status of a peer's learning relative to evidence, e.g., what is said, done, made, or written. It takes work to get proficient at this process - to feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback, to provide input that's actionable without taking over another's thinking process, and to stay focused on concrete aspects of the work versus the skills and abilities of the person receiving feedback. Once students get comfortable and proficient with the feedback process, they come to seek out input from peers as their first choice. They also begin to expand their roles in each other's learning beyond assigned peer feedback events to support one another through sharing knowledge and developing their learning together. This creates a sense of group agency in classrooms that accelerates students' learning far beyond what each student could achieve individually.

Discourse

The social aspect of learning is most visible in the process of discourse. Discourse provides an important arena for students to extend their thinking, to make it visible, and to participate in a shared learning experience. A key attribute of discourse is a shift in focus from individual to collective meaning making. When students are aware of their role in this, they become more attuned to the rhythm of turn taking, the act of listening to their peers, and their responsibility to both contribute to the discussion and to leave space for others to do so. Discourse is different from many other forms of learning in the way it enables students to learn with and from peers and to contribute to the learning of the group.

As such, discourse is also an excellent source of evidence on student thinking. When students are engaged in discussions, they notice how others are thinking and then make sense of that evidence in relation to the learning goal. Students are also able to more easily uncover the status of their own thinking, as speaking aloud can engage their processes of metacognition. In this way, discourse in formative assessment classrooms become both a learning and assessment strategy.

We've heard many students say that through discourse, they learn better from one another than from the teacher, and that the opportunity to learn from peers as they share ideas and reflect back on one another, has become important to them. Supporting one's peers' learning is an important part of the discourse process, as well as a key outcome.