Formative assessment: An enabler of learning

Formative assessment can be a powerful day-to-day tool for teachers and students. Margaret Heritage **explains**

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IS OFTEN MISCONSTRUED. Routinely, it is conceptualized as a "test" or an "instrument" that is more fine-grained and administered more frequently than other types of assessment. This formulation misses its documented power for improving student learning. When formative assessment is conceived as a practice implemented by teachers, in collaboration with their students, then its promise as an enabler rather than an evaluator of learning can be realized.

The essential purpose of formative assessment as a practice is to move students' learning forward while their learning is still in the process of developing. This stands in contrast to other forms of assessment, which evaluate learning after a period of teaching. Formative assessment practice operates as a feedback loop in which both teachers and students can play active, distinctive, yet complementary roles in enabling learning by consistently working to build and consolidate student understanding and skills during the course of a lesson.

The teacher's role

Formative assessment is only effective when teachers are clear about the intended learning goals for a lesson. This means focusing on what students will learn, as opposed to what they will do, which is often where teachers are tempted to start. To achieve maximum transparency for students, teachers share the learning goal, or actively create it with students, at the beginning of the lesson. In addition, teachers communicate the indicators of progress toward the learning goal or determine them in collaboration with the students. These indicators serve as signposts for both teachers and students about progress during the lesson.

With clarity about the goal and indicators, teachers can then decide how they will gather evidence of emergent learning. There is no single way to collect formative evidence because formative assessment is not a specific kind of test. For example, teachers can gather evidence through interactions with students, observations of their tasks and activities, or analysis of their work products. However, there are two important points about evidence collection. First, whatever method teachers use to elicit evidence of learning, it should yield information that is actionable by them and their students. Second, evidence collection is a systematic process and needs to be planned so that teachers have a constant stream of information tied to indicators of progress. At the same time, of course, teachers will also be collecting evidence "on-the-fly" – those unplanned, spontaneous moments when students do or say something that give an indication of where they are in relation to the lesson goal.

> **"Power and responsibility in the classroom is not just the teacher's prerogative, but is distributed"**

Feedback

Feedback is a crucial component of formative assessment, and has two aspects. First, feedback obtained from planned or spontaneous evidence is an essential resource for teachers to shape new learning through adjustments in their instruction. If teachers use evidence effectively to inform their instruction, it will render previous assessment information out of date: student learning will have progressed and will need to be assessed again. Instruction can again be adjusted to make sure that learning is on track. For this reason, a constant stream of evidence from formative assessment is necessary during lessons.

Second, feedback that the teacher provides to students is also an essential resource so the students can take active steps to advance their own learning. In reality, the feedback to students can be understood as instructional action. As the extensive literature on feedback suggests, teacher feedback is most beneficial when it assists students to understand their current learning status and provides hints, suggestions, or cues for them to act on. It is this, rather than offering general praise or total solutions, that enables students to assume a degree of responsibility for their learning.

The teacher's role also involves helping students develop the skills to make metacognitive judgments about their learning in relation to the goal being aimed for, and to establish a repertoire of strategies to regulate their own learning.

The students' role

The students' role in formative assessment begins when they have a clear conception of the learning target. Just as the teacher

What we know

- Formative assessment is not a kind of test.
- Formative assessment practice, when implemented effectively, can have powerful effects on learning.
- Formative assessment involves teachers making adjustments to their instruction based on evidence collected, and providing students with feedback that helps them advance their learning.
- Students participate in the practice of formative assessment through self- and peer-assessment.

is collecting evidence in relation to the goal, so too are the students through self-assessment, a separate, but complementary feedback process. In self-assessment students engage in metacognitive activity, a hallmark of effective learning. Metacognitive activity involves students in thinking about their own learning while they are learning. In this process, they are generating internal feedback that tells them when they need to make adjustments to their learning strategies. These adjustments might include, for example, drawing a diagram to help in the understanding of a mathematical problem, or determining that more research is needed to be able to analyze historical events, or re-reading a text to clarify the meaning.

The students' role ideally also includes peer-assessment. In peer-assessment, students give feedback to their classmates that is intended to be constructive and help them make progress toward the lesson goal. Peers assess each other's learning against the same indicators that they use to check on their own learning when they are engaged in self-assessment. Peer feedback has a number of advantages both for those students providing the feedback as well as those receiving it. It involves thinking about learning and can deepen students' understanding of their own learning because they have to internalize the learning goal and progress indicators in the context of someone else's work.

The final point about the students' role in formative assessment is that they actually use the feedback. It is important that students have to both reflect on their learning and use the feedback to advance learning. One teacher summed up the changes she made to ensure that this time was preserved in her lessons:

"I used to do more but now I do less. Now I work hard to save time for student reflection rather than filling every minute [of the lesson] with activity".

Overall, the feedback loop is fuelled by three convergent sources of feedback: from teachers, peers, and the students themselves. However, the successful provision and use of this feedback is dependent on the nature of the classroom climate in which the learning is taking place.

Classroom climate

An essential aspect of formative assessment is classroom climate. Three particular elements are key. First, power and responsibility in the classroom is not just the teacher's prerogative, but is distributed so that teachers and students work together to share responsibility for learning. Second, the classroom has to be a safe place. Students must be able to ask for help, regard errors as sources of new learning, and admit difficulties or problems without fearing that these actions will diminish them in the eyes of their teachers or their peers. Instead, they need to know that such behaviors are desirable and are characteristic of effective learners. Finally, it means that the relationships in the classroom must be supportive and collaborative, characterized by mutual trust among teachers and students.

Conclusion

The important thing about formative assessment is that it is not a test, nor an instrument, but rather an approach to teaching and learning that uses feedback as its centerpiece in a supportive classroom context. Formative assessment is a practice that empowers teachers and students to give their best to enable learning. In the end, the success of formative assessment as an enabler of learning depends on the knowledge and skills of teachers to implement this approach in collaboration with their students, not on test developers.

About the author

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Further reading

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