Every Day in Every Classroom

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Any teacher can incorporate formative assessment into teaching routines. Here's how.

When students walk into a classroom that promotes learning through formative assessment, they notice. Mei notices the weekly learning goals posted on the board that help her focus. Ernesto enjoys the activities at the beginning of each unit that probe how much he knows about a topic; he understands that he will learn much more along the way. Casey feels secure knowing exactly how grades will be determined, and she is becoming good at assessing her own and her classmates' work using rubrics.

These markers of a formative assessment approach not only make day-to-day learning more fruitful for students like Mei, Ernesto, and Casey, but they also take the fear out of summative tests and annual standardized tests—the elephant in the room that frightens students and teachers alike. These learners don't fear the elephant because they've used multiple measures to track their progress on learning standards all year. They have trained the beast one standard at a time.

Because students have such a range of learning styles and needs, teachers need a repertoire of strategies to make formative assessment work. Before I administer a summative assessment, I pull the following strategies out of my bag of tricks—as I begin an instructional unit, during instruction, and even after I have finished direct instruction.

Before-Instruction Activities

These informal assessments can both help introduce a topic and give you a sense of students' baseline knowledge. In using entrance slips, students answer, individually, an instructionally appropriate question that gauges how much content they know and how deeply they understand the key concepts. For example, you might write on the board, "What are negative numbers?" or "Explain in a few sentences what you know about how the electoral college operates in presidential elections." Give students several minutes to write their answers and pass them in anonymously. If the majority already understands a concept, you'll know you don't have to reteach it.

A gallery visually displays the range of student knowledge so everyone gets a sense of what the whole group knows. Students might write their answers to a prompt on sticky notes and place them on the board or incorporate these answers into a visual design, such as making them "leaves" on a tree. Older students can write and post longer paragraphs detailing their viewpoints on contemporary topics. This strategy also gives you a feel for your students' opinions and their learning and communication styles.

Signaling is a quick way for learners to indicate the level of mastery they think they have of content. Students might hold up a green card to indicate "I'm clear and ready to move on" or a red card to indicate "I need more time." At a more complex level, students can indicate their depth of knowledge (one finger up means slight familiarity; five fingers up means expert status) or their position on an issue such as whether gun control laws should be strengthened (an open hand raised means "I totally agree"; a closed fist means "I totally disagree").

During-Instruction Check-Ins

In a formative assessment classroom, it's crucial to give students clear expectations of how learning will move forward and to check in with them on how it is progressing. To make expectations clear, I give students a one-page "workalong" sheet at the beginning of a unit (see fig. 1). A workalong spells out the competencies I will expect of learners and the sequence of major activities they will be engaging in (and be evaluated on). It includes a way for students to track their own progress. Preparing a workalong, and, especially, keeping it to one page, requires intensive planning; but the planning pays off. Students follow along as instruction progresses and get a sense of how their steps toward competence fit in with a larger plan.

I use a variety of fun check-ins during instruction. Bump in the Road is an on-the-fly practice in which you stop in the middle of a chunk of instruction to have each student jot down on a card (or send to you as a blog comment, write on the board, and so on) one thing that student is still confused about or is finding an obstacle to learning. The student may be confused about the difference between *mode* and *median* or be struggling with what makes a good lead sentence; whatever it is, students get a chance to let you know their bumps in the road. If you build this practice in as a routine in the middle of a long unit or class period—a kind of seventh-inning stretch—students will look forward to having a chance to clear up any mysteries and will not get overwhelmed.

A type of graphic organizer called Empty Outlines prompts students to record—and answer reflective questions about—information as they read or listen to a presentation. Filling in and reflecting on the material engages students and gives you a glimpse of what they are taking away from a lecture or reading. Following this up with a small-group review of the outline gives each student an opportunity to fill in missing or inaccurate information and adds an interactive element.

With a Q & A Mix-up, each student writes one or two content-related questions on paper slips of one color and the answer to each question on slips of another color. The teacher distributes answer slips among the class. Each writer asks his or her question aloud, and the student who believes he or she has the correct answer reads that answer slip aloud for verification by the author. As you listen in, you'll see which key concepts or content students still misunderstand, and you can reteach content in a more focused way to clear up confusions.

The point of these strategies is not just to measure students' progress, but also to give feedback and adjust instruction so you can provide more meaningful learning opportunities. The feedback you give students as part of these check-ins should be clear, related to learning targets, and full of specific recommendations for improvement (for example, "Your opening statement is grammatically correct, but it would be stronger if you grabbed the reader's attention with a prediction about the results of the main character's unusual behavior.")

When formative assessment is used well, educators begin by knowing what students are expected to know, understand, and accomplish. Instruction aligns with those expectations, and assessment aligns with instruction; teachers can then account for their own performance in the classroom by teaching in ways that reflect this alignment, gathering information on students' abilities, and responding to that information by adjusting instruction.

On the basis of data harvested through activities like these, teachers may choose to change the pace or depth of instruction or to customize content through varying some instructional processes and resources. A teacher might use heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping in ways that address learners' needs or provide interventions for some students, such as an abbreviated version of a vocabulary list or an alternative way to demonstrate knowledge on a major assessment.

For example, a math teacher might move quickly through material when her students show strong recall of place value but slow down when a Bumps in the Road check reveals students' struggles with word problems. When a teacher I worked with discovered that her new class was mostly auditory learners (compared to last year's kinesthetic learners), she changed from using group projects to delivering technology-infused instruction that provided more opportunities for listening to content.

After-Instruction Strategies

As Yogi Berra said, "It ain't over 'til it's over." Teachers committed to formative assessment often use strategies like nutshelling and 3-2-1 after instruction but before students take summative tests. Nutshellling requires students to distill the essence of their learning into a brief statement. 3-2-1 is a catchy way to prompt students to express something they've learned: It can be used in many ways, such as asking students to define three new vocabulary words, use two of those words in sentences, and identify one lingering point of confusion.

A sample test, administered creatively, can help students solidify shaky knowledge. When I taught a college-level course in human development to high school students, I wanted to be certain that students were prepared for the end-of-year test because we had covered a lot of material. As a probe, I had students take an end-of-chapter assessment in the college textbook that accompanied the course. While they worked on this practice test in class, their expressions indicated frustration.

Ten minutes before students turned in this practice test, I asked everyone to come up and write on the board the two questions that most confounded them. The same six questions showed up over and over. Without giving students the answers, I reminded them of the *context* in which we had gone over concepts related to these questions in class discussions and readings ("Remember the discussion we had last Thursday about the material in Chapter 4? Do you see any connections between the case study we discussed and this question you're struggling with?"). I saw recognition dawn on students' faces as they connected the puzzling questions to content and concepts we had read or talked about. This knowledge would now be more accessible to them during the "real" test.

Formative Assessment Transforms

Formative assessment is not an add-on or a product; it is a strategy that should be routinely embedded in all phases of instruction. All teachers can—and should—use strategies like those described here, and school leaders should support them. Formative assessment has been shown to be highly effective. Paul Black and Dylan

Wiliam[1] note that teachers who adopt formative assessment strategies see the equivalent of 10 to 15 percentile points of improvement in their students' achievement.

When we embrace formative practices, we transform assessment from a static method of measuring learning to a dynamic means of improving teaching. We make the benefits experienced daily by kids like Mei, Ernesto, and Casey available to all students.

Endnote

[1] Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan, 80*(2), 139–148.

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