

Formative Assessment and the Common Core: Blending the Best in Assessment

Beliefs about Common Core State Standards range from “They are built upon the most advanced thinking about preparing all students for success in college and career” (CCSS Initiative, 2010, p. 1) to “The Common Core initiative will have little to no effect on students’ achievement” (Loveless, 2013, p. 1).

Regardless of one’s beliefs, preparing for the Common Core requires educators to scrutinize them, analyze them, and then stock their instructional toolboxes with strategies that strengthen learning outcomes for all students. Formative assessment is one of the best tools for this purpose.

The Value of Formative Assessment

As an instructional strategy, formative assessment has been shown to be among the most effective (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Hattie 2008). The Council of Chief State School Officers, a founding group of the Common Core, states: “Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning and to improve student’s achievement of intended instructional outcomes” (Heritage, 2010, p. 3). The essential components of formative assessment include:

- Gathering evidence of learning through multiple strategies
- Engaging students in monitoring learning

- Informing learning through meaningful and descriptive feedback
- Advancing learning outcomes and progress towards standards
- Guiding curricular and instructional decisions

Every teacher wants students to achieve at their highest levels. But today’s students are more diverse than ever, bringing a range of backgrounds, abilities, and prior experience to the classroom. Formative assessment, as a process rather than a strategy, can support the needs of a range of learners, reduce gaps in learning, and help all learners make progress.

Blending Formative Assessment with the Core

Combining the Common Core with formative assessment informs teaching and learning on a minute-by-minute and day-by-day basis. Doing so guides the responses and interventions that help all students advance toward the learning targets. Smarter Balance and PARCC will offer through-course and interim assessment periodically during the academic year, but that may not be enough. Lorrie Shepard (2000) noted: “Assessment and instruction are often conceived as curiously separate in time and purpose” (p. 4). This separation can be minimized when formative assessment is routinely blended with the Common Core in ELA classrooms.

“Reading is a complex and purposeful process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, and their knowledge of the topic of the text, to con-

struct meaning with text” (Kucer, 2005, as cited on NCTE website, 2004). Learning to read and reading to learn go hand in hand. The Common Core’s emphasis on combining both strategies reflects the need to understand the intricate and interconnected process of reading and learning. Based on the Common Core, students are expected to use literacy skills to analyze texts, assess point of view, evaluate arguments, scrutinize evidence, conduct research, and engage in collaborative discussions. The Common Core ELA standards provide big-picture outcomes in reading literature and informational texts, writing, and speaking and listening. It is through curriculum design, lesson planning, and daily instruction that teachers will diagnose and respond to learning.

Progressions

The Common Core follows a sequence that builds students’ skills and knowledge as they move through the grades toward achievement of the anchor Standards. The emphasis of the Common Core on learning outcomes, rather than instructional methods, means that schools and teachers may take multiple pathways toward student mastery. As those paths are being de-

finied, keep in mind that achievement gains from summative assessment when combined with formative assessment have been shown to be higher than those from summative assessment alone (Wiliam, 2011). The broad scope of the Common Core means that pathways to the Standards must be clear and sequenced. The progression in Figure 1 shows a process for embedding formative assessments from preassessment to summative. A model for building these learning progressions throughout instruction, thereby extending and blending the Common Core, is shown in Table 1.

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In Practice

The framers of the Common Core describe the goals and targets but not the strategies for reaching them. The Core does not define everything a student is expected to know and do, nor does it describe all that should be taught. States, districts, and schools will decide how to design and

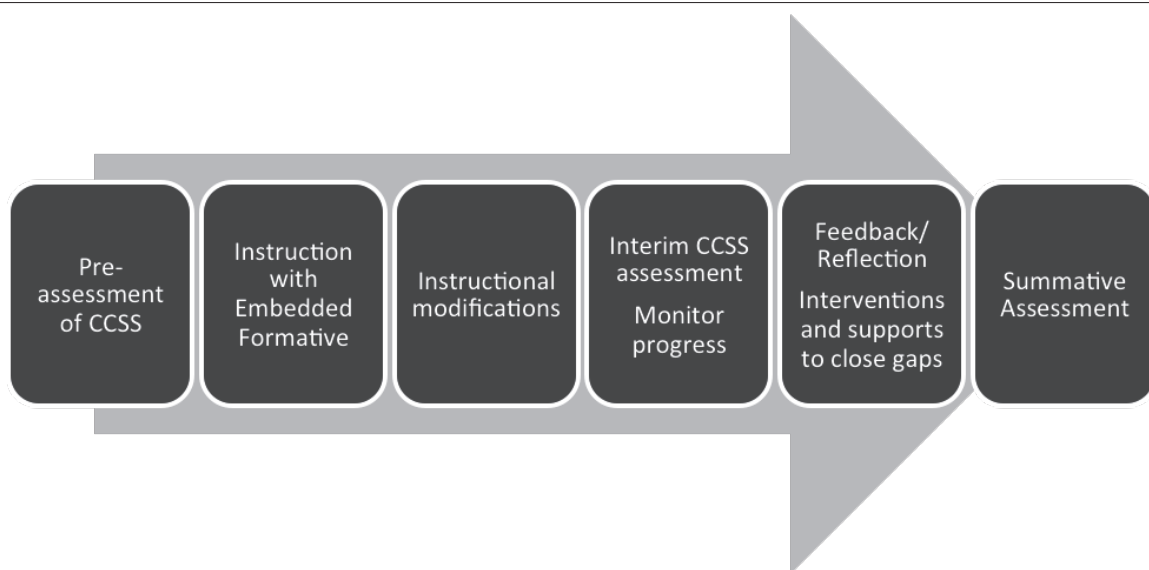


Figure 1. Sequence for embedding formative assessment in Common Core instruction

Table 1. Example of a Common Core to formative progression with formative strategies highlighted

ELA Anchor Standard	Determine central ideas, summarize key details
Reading Standard	RI.6.1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. W.6.2a-f: Write informative texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of content.
Instructional Strategy Preassessment	Visit a garden/greenhouse, bring in plants, or look at photos Group Q and A: Questions are posted on a board or passed around in a bin. One at a time, students pick one to answer. For example: name one plant shown and where have you seen it; describe what kind of care and environments plants need; explain why plants need different environments, what invasive species are, and which plants you think are native to our area? Formative: Teacher posts and tracks responses to monitor incoming knowledge.
Instruction with Embedded Formative Assessment	Webquest (use your own device or text): Individually, gather and record specific information in an empty outline (i.e., name of plant, botanical name, origin, preferred environment). Collaboratively, define invasive species and create a Venn diagram of local plants that are native vs. invasive (unsure in the overlap). 2-1 summary: In a round robin, students share two things they learned and one more thing they need to know in order to write a blog. Post the summaries. As a class, close read two articles with diverse viewpoints on invasive plants. Complete a summary sheet with key vocabulary, main ideas, facts used to support position, and similar text-dependent questions. Monitoring: Teacher supervises/advises students on empty outline and Venn diagrams, models close reading, reviews and provides feedback on summary sheets.
Modifications	Less complex text, underlining, annotating, partnering, and flexible grouping of students
Monitoring and Feedback with Supports	Student Engagement: Students write their blog and use a checklist to self-assess. Each blog must include 3 facts, 2 recommendations, and a conclusion. Peer review follows, using a rubric that elaborates on the checklist. Feedback: After revising, the student uses a rubric for self-assessment/reflection and submits it to the teacher for final assessment. During this process, teacher works individually or in small groups with student(s).
Assessments	Self-assessment with checklist: Includes 3 facts, 2 sources cited, focused summary, clear conclusion, position or urge to action, and attention to mechanics Peer review and editing Summative: Rubric assessment

Notes: To add a speaking and listening component (Anchor Standard 4), include a blog-aloud event in which students read their blogs to an audience and receive feedback from them. If technology is being emphasized, students can post their work on Edublog.com for feedback from a wider audience.

deliver curriculum. Instruction and classroom assessment will be the responsibility of teachers. In the example that follows, the teacher and class are composites of those I have worked with, and the ideas can be adjusted in sync with grade and ability level.

Ms. Laurence has been teaching middle level English for several years. She likes to change the readings, resources, and activities each year to engage her students and meet their needs, interests, and abilities. This lesson includes reading both literature and content for information. Building on the Common Core, Ms. Laurence develops a plan that includes learning about people and cultures around the world:

Common Core Standards

- RL.8.1 and RI.8.1: Cite textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL.8.2 and RI.8.2: Determine the central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text.

- W.8.7: Conduct short research projects to answer a question or solve a problem.

Ms. Laurence begins with a preview of learning. She distributes a learning tracker that describes each learning outcome and the actions students will take to achieve the Standard. An example of an abbreviated version is shown in Table 2.

Preassessment

The lesson starts with a KHA, a version of a KWL. In small groups, students brainstorm what they *know* about life in other countries, such as Afghanistan, India, China, or Africa, *how* they learned about it, and whether it is *like* or different from life in their own community. Students then watch a brief video or PPT on the meaning of “culture.” An illustrated Graffiti Wall follows, which students can use to display icons, traditions, foods, cel-

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Table 2. Abbreviated student learning tracker

Target	Action		
I know where we are headed and what I will need to know and do.	Preassessment What do I know about . . . ? How did I learn it? Is it like or different from my culture?		
I can use vocabulary accurately to describe the main idea of what I read.	Developing Understanding These are words I didn't understand when I started, and here's what I learned they mean: Example: <i>Terrifying</i> —To make deeply afraid		
I can select words and phrases that help me make sense of what I am reading.	What It Means What Angelo (the character) says: “We glued our faces to the window.” What it means: This idiom means it was so interesting that they couldn't take their faces away from the window.		
I will draw inferences from the text to help me read deeply.	Create a 3-Column Chart		
	Problem	What They Did	Evidence: Words and Actions

celebrations, art, and other information about the cultures they know. Students can check the accuracy of the postings using their BYODs (Bring Your Own Devices), and they can then decide what topics they need to learn more about.

Learning Strategies/Instructional Design

Ms. Laurence selects the story of the Lost Boys of Sudan and decides to use *Echoes of the Lost Boys of Sudan*, a graphic novel, as the primary reading. She supplements this with *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* for more accessible reading and *What Is the What*, a higher-level fictionalized version of the story.

While learning about the story of the Lost Boys, students alternate between independent reading, read-aloud sessions, and discussion. Questions include: “Why are they called the Lost Boys?” “What do these words mean?” “Why did the author pick this particular experience to include in the book?” As they read, the students flesh out their learning tracker, adding vocabulary and phrases to construct learning.

Embedded Formative Assessment

Ms. Laurence familiarizes the students with the Three-Column Chart. In the first column, she asks them to record problems the boys encountered. In the second column, students describe how the boys handled those problems. In the third column, they provide evidence and facts using words and actions.

Example of Teacher Feedback:

- Acceptable: You picked three main problems and by and large explained and supported them, but they would be improved with more detail about the interview by the immigration agent.
- Better: You picked three main problems and, overall, explained and supported them well. In the second one, add some detail to what they did (looked the immigration man in the eyes) and why (in Dinka, doing so was rude, but the American would consider it rude if you avoided eye contact).

Summative Assessment

Watch the movie *The Lost Boys*. Compare and contrast the events in the book to those in the movie. Answer fact-based questions about the situation in the Sudan and the experience of the Lost Boys.

Broaden and modify learning. Invite guests from other countries and extend research to learn more about a country or culture. For struggling readers, model thinking aloud, annotate the text as they read, and read small chunks of the text.

Extensions of learning. Describe global challenges and identify specific problems. Select one problem to solve and create an advocacy campaign.

Next Steps: Responding

As teachers gather information about students’ progress and identify gaps in learning, they need

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Authentic Learning through Organic Gardening

Similar to the activity shared in the article, the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Let It Grow: An Inquiry-Based Organic Gardening Research Project” invites students to learn about organic gardening by developing their own research questions, conducting research, gardening at their school, creating signs about their plants, and presenting their research to the class.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/grow-inquiry-based-organic-804.html>

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

to make decisions about how to respond. As with instruction, the type of assessment and the choice of response must be aligned with the Standard and each learner's abilities. Some formative assessments, such as bump in the road, guide the teacher's response as they identify obstacles to learning. Specific strategies, such as feedback, inform students of progress. Other strategies, such as a sticky notes and word walls, display individual student's understanding. These formative strategies give students a preview of learning and give teachers insights that can guide instruction: proceed as planned, adjust content, or use a different learning strategy.

There are numerous ways to respond to assessment data. Students can be flexibly grouped or adjustments can be made to pacing and resources. Content can be retaught with a different strategy or modality. Scaffolds and individual support can be provided. Enrichment and ex-

tended learning can also be provided for students who quickly grasp concepts and show mastery.

Moving Forward

Planning to include formative assessment in Common Core instruction will build short-cycle assessments that shed light on learning. These assessments can guide modifications to instruction and provide descriptive feedback to students. Clear targets, focused progressions, and routine embedded assessments can make a difference in learning outcomes. Table 3 shows promising and feasible responses to formative assessment and includes some examples of Ms. Laurence's responses.

Although teachers may lament that there is not enough time to add this to an already full schedule, in reality there is an imperative to combine formative assessment with the Common Core. This inclusion of formative assessment

Table 3. Strategies for responding to formative assessment

1. Determine response triggers: How many have to show mastery and at what level? (One accurate inference is the minimal expectation.)
2. Identify and respond holistically to prevalent misconceptions.
(In the preassessment Ms. Laurence notes that students equate culture with race. She selects videos from NatGeo, PBS, and Smithsonian on cultural differences to broaden her students' understanding.)
3. Decide who (individuals, various groups, whole class) needs more or less or different instruction and/or interventions. (For some learners, she selects three vocabulary words at each individual's ability level to get them started.)
4. Reteach using a different strategy or modality: aural instead of written, visual presentation rather than reading.
5. Select different instructional resources and technologies. (Ms. Laurence has preselected a range of writing, graphic illustrations, and media.)
6. Adjust content: more or less, deeper or shallower.
7. Change pacing of teaching and learning in response to students' emerging grasp of material.
8. Add scaffolds and supports such as graphic organizers, paired groups, extra time.
9. Split/chunk dense material and information into smaller subsets and frequently summarize them.
10. Provide exemplars.
11. Regroup responsively: Use flexible grouping for specific purposes. (Ms. Laurence groups those struggling with one inference with those who quickly identified three.)
12. Offer enrichment for skilled learners.
13. Work one-on-one or with small groups of students.
14. Set up lunch buddies, after school enrichment, and online extensions of learning.

must be done intentionally, with authenticity, purpose, and alignment. Teachers are at the heart of this change and play a crucial role in everyday learning outcomes. When teachers incorporate formative assessments and their daily practices are informed by it, everyone benefits. I encourage you to rise to the challenge and stretch your practice beyond the Core.

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Laura Greenstein has 30 years of experience in education as a middle and high school teacher and school leader in Montville, Connecticut. She is an adjunct professor at both the University of Connecticut and the University of New Haven, as well as an author of *What Teachers Really Need to Know about Formative Assessment* (ASCD, 2010) and *Assessing 21st Century Skills* (Corwin, 2012) and founder of the assessment network (<http://assessmentnetwork.net>).

New Guideline from NCTE: Formative Assessment That Truly Informs Instruction

Go to <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/formative-assessment> for the latest from NCTE.
