

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Making
It
Happen
in the
Classroom

MARGARET HERITAGE

Foreword by James W. Stigler



Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>James W. Stigler</i>	
Acknowledgments	ix
About the Author	xi
About the Contributor	xiii
1. Introduction	1
Bridging Theory, Research, and Practice	1
Overview of the Chapters	2
Changes in Practice	4
2. Assessment With and for Students	7
The Process of Formative Assessment	10
Determine Learning Goals and Define Criteria for Success	10
Elicit Evidence of Learning	11
Interpreting the Evidence	12
Identifying the Gap	12
Feedback	13
Adapting and Responding to Learning Needs	14
Scaffolding New Learning	14
Close the Gap	14
Classroom Culture	15
Theory Into Practice	15
Formative and Summative Assessment	18
Summing Up	19
Reflection Questions	20
3. It All Depends on What the Data Tell You	21
The Big Assessment Picture	22
Appropriateness for Purpose	23
Making Sense of the Data	24
Different Assessments for Different Purposes	26
Different Grain Sizes	26

Taking Action	28
Where Does Formative Assessment Fit In?	28
Putting It All Together	30
Summing Up	36
Reflection Questions	36
4. The Drivers of Formative Assessment:	
Learning Goals and Success Criteria	37
Learning Progressions	38
Developing a Learning Progression for Reading	40
Developing a Learning Progression for Mathematics	42
Learning Goals and Success Criteria	44
Identifying Learning Goals and Success Criteria	45
Revising Learning Goals and Success Criteria	51
Communicating Learning Goals and Success Criteria to Students	53
Summing Up	55
Reflection Questions	55
5. Formative Feedback for Teaching	57
Generating the Evidence	57
Quality Feedback for Teaching	58
Revisiting the Teachers	59
Curriculum-Embedded Assessment	70
Technology Tools	71
Helper Practices for Formative Assessment	71
Planning Instruction and Assessment	72
Who Is Assessed and When?	73
Interpreting Evidence	74
The “Just Right Gap”	74
Differentiating Instruction	75
Building a Repertoire	76
Summing Up	78
Reflection Questions	78
6. Formative Feedback for Learning	79
Teacher Feedback	80
Types of Teacher Feedback	81
Timing of Feedback	83
Feedback as Instructional Scaffolding	83
Feedback and Self-Regulation	84
Examples of Teacher Feedback	84
Using the Feedback	90
What About Grades?	90
Student Feedback	91
Peer Feedback	91

Feedback From Self-Assessment	93
Summing Up	97
Reflection Questions	97
7. Implementing Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Be Able to Do?	99
Creating the Classroom Culture	99
Classroom Management	101
Teacher Knowledge	101
Content Knowledge	103
Knowledge About Metacognition	105
Pedagogical Content Knowledge	105
Students' Previous Learning	107
Assessment Knowledge	108
Teacher Skills	110
Interpreting Evidence	110
Providing Feedback	112
Matching Instruction to the Gap	113
Teaching Peer Assessment	114
Teacher Attitudes	115
Summing Up	116
Reflection Questions	116
8. Developing and Deepening Formative Assessment Practice	117
<i>E. Caroline Wylie and Margaret Heritage</i>	
A Daunting Prospect?	117
A Professional Culture for Change	118
Professional Development to Support Teachers' Use of Formative Assessment	119
Planning for PLCs	120
The Content of the PLCs	123
The Role of School Administrators	128
Summing Up	131
Reflection Questions for Teachers	131
Reflection Questions for Administrators	132
References	133



1

Introduction

This book is about the everyday work of teachers in classrooms. It is intended for teachers and for those who support the work of teachers, and it is about making formative assessment practice an integral part of the classroom, any classroom—elementary, middle, or high school—and in any subject area: the arts, social studies, math, language arts, science, physical education, design and technology, and so on. The book is also intended for all teachers, regardless of their stage of implementing formative assessment. Those teachers who are just beginning to think about formative assessment—why do it and what it looks like in practice—will be able to use the book as a starting point, while those who are further along in implementing formative assessment in their classrooms can use it to refine and develop their knowledge and skills further.

BRIDGING THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

For some readers of this book, the idea of formative assessment will require a paradigm shift. For those who think effective teaching is all about a stand-and-deliver approach, where teachers lecture to students to “give” them the knowledge they need and then test them to make sure they have “got it,” then the contents of this book will represent a considerable shift in thinking about how to do business in the classroom. For others, it will be a less dramatic change. Whatever perspective readers bring, bear in mind that this book is about research into practice, not just a collection of “cool” ideas about teaching and learning.

The book builds bridges between the theory and research about formative assessment and its actual practice in the classroom. The theoretical and research base is wide and deep. It ranges from Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam’s now famous 1998 review of studies of formative assessment, to literature on the effects of feedback on learning, to the role that assessment can play in motivation and self-regulation. The book translates this theory and research into actual classroom practice. For the most part, the practices described are those of current teachers with varying levels of experience and

who are at various stages of implementation. The examples of practice from these teachers are not intended as “counsels of perfection,” but rather as examples readers can reflect on and learn from as they think about formative assessment in the classroom.

Any and all of the teachers represented in this book would say they are committed to formative assessment as a way to improve teaching and learning. They would also say they recognize assessment and the teaching process as inseparable; one cannot happen without the other. They would most likely comment that the skillful use of formative assessment is not something acquired overnight. Instead, it is a long process of learning, trying things out, and reviewing and refining—in short, of continuously engaging in a process of reflective practice. These teachers would also say that they are willing to change what they do, willing to take risks and make mistakes they can learn from, and willing to learn with, and from, their colleagues.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 introduces formative assessment as a process and describes the elements of the process that are the focus of subsequent chapters. It is a process of formative assessment that is applicable to all classrooms in all subject areas. The theoretical and research base underpinning each element is described in terms of the contribution that each one makes to improved student learning.

Chapter 3 takes the broad view and focuses on where formative assessment fits within the big assessment picture. The chapter addresses a range of assessment sources available to teachers, all of which have a particular purpose and can be used in different ways to support curriculum planning, teaching, and learning. It locates formative assessment as the assessment closest to daily teaching and learning in classrooms.

In Chapter 4, the focus is on learning progressions, learning goals, and criteria for success. Learning goals and success criteria drive the entire formative assessment process and need to be clearly articulated by teachers and clearly understood by students. The chapter draws from a paper on learning progressions by Heritage (2007) and stresses the importance of having clear conceptions of learning in place from which teachers can identify learning goals and success criteria. The central message of the chapter is the importance of identifying the learning goal first (rather than the activities, which teachers may be tempted to do) from the learning progression, and then specifying the criteria for success. Selecting formative assessment strategies to match the goals and criteria can only be done when the goals and criteria are clearly identified.

Chapter 5 deals with selecting formative assessment strategies, interpreting evidence from formative assessment, and how the interpretation of evidence leads to instructional action. In a seminal paper in 1989, D. Royce Sadler established the essential purpose of formative assessment as the means to identify the “gap” between a learner’s current status in learning and some desired educational goal. This chapter shows how teachers can use formative assessment strategies to close the gap and keep learning moving forward. The chapter also treats the evidence that teachers get from formative assessment as feedback for teaching, that is, feedback they can use to feed forward into instructional planning.

In their review of studies of formative assessment, Black and William (1998b) concluded that when formative assessment is combined with quality feedback, improvements in learning occur. Chapter 6 considers the feedback that students receive externally from their teachers and peers, and internally through their own self-monitoring during the course of learning. The chapter describes the contribution of external feedback to learning, what kind of feedback is effective and what is not, and provides plenty of examples of feedback. The chapter also considers the effects of self-assessment on learning and the skills students need to successfully engage in this activity.

Implementing formative assessment requires teachers to have specific knowledge and skills, and Chapter 7 focuses on what these are. It begins with a discussion of the kind of classroom culture teachers need to establish for formative assessment, and then details the knowledge and skills needed for formative assessment. Among the knowledge is content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge of what psychologists call metacognition. The diverse range of skills teachers need include interpreting evidence, matching instruction to the learning needs to close the gap, and skills in providing feedback to students that move learning forward. In addition to specifying the requisite skills and knowledge, the chapter also offers suggestions about how they can be developed.

Teachers cannot develop the skillful use of formative assessment on their own. They need the help of colleagues and administrators. The final chapter of the book, coauthored with Caroline Wylie from the Educational Testing Service, builds on Chapter 7 by examining specific structures and practices that can be established within a school to help teachers develop and deepen formative assessment in their classroom. The chapter also addresses the kind of leadership that administrators need to provide, and that teachers should expect, to ensure they have the necessary support to engage in the work.

CHANGES IN PRACTICE

As already noted, for many teachers implementing the process of formative assessment in their classrooms will require some change in how the business of teaching and learning is conducted. For some, the change will be significant; for others less so—but some change will happen, for sure. This book is about and for teachers who engage in reflection and ongoing professional learning to make changes in what they do to benefit their students. We end this introductory chapter with some of those teachers' voices, specifically the voices of teachers from Syracuse City School District in New York, who have been working intensively for the past two years to become skillful users of formative assessment in their classrooms. Here they reflect on their journey:

Erin: Formative assessment makes my teaching much more efficient. I'm not teaching the unit for two months because they're still not getting it! Some units we've taught in the past that we've talked about today took us *weeks* and *weeks* to teach. Now they're taking us two weeks and everyone's getting it! . . . Our whole room is improving. We still have kids who are struggling, but they've made progress on that learning progression.

Maryanne: Formative assessment is not more work, it's better work.

Sharon: I used to do more, but now I do less. Because so much evidence is gathered with formative assessment, I may do two or three very targeted tasks in an 80-minute class rather than "lots of good stuff." Now I work hard to save time for student reflection rather than filling every minute with activity. I take every opportunity to assess my students in various, formative ways. I'm not asking them for three or four different pieces of paper at the end of class so I can tell them if they "got it." Now, they may only produce one piece of written evidence in their learning; I have other ways of assessing them now that can inform me of where they are throughout the lesson. I can address misconceptions more quickly and push their learning farther with timely feedback.

Shawn: I used to do a lot of *explaining*, but now I do a lot of *questioning*. I used to do *a lot of talking*, but now I do *a lot of listening*. I use to think *about teaching the curriculum*, but now I think *about teaching the student*.

(Shawn's emphases)

Melanie: I used to think that formative assessment was just the assessment teachers use to figure out if students understood the lesson or not, but I now think that formative assessment is a process which is a series of planning, reflection, and feedback by the teacher and the student. This process seems to be something I have been missing from my own teaching.

Sharon: I feel like formative assessment has helped me enter into a partnership with students with regard to learning. It has helped me demystify the classroom for kids. The transparency that sharing learning goals and success criteria creates allows for so much growth for both teacher and student. The students know I am there because I have a goal for them to reach and I want them to succeed. They also know I take every opportunity (written work, conversations, response boards . . .) to gather evidence of what they know. Formative assessment has not only changed me as a teacher, but I believe it has changed the students as learners.

Enjoy the journey!

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These types of assessment – formative assessments – support learning during the learning process. Since formative assessments are considered part of the learning, they need not be graded as summative assessments (end-of-unit exams or quarterlies, for example) are. Rather, they serve as practice for students, just like a meaningful homework assignment. Formative assessment is assessment as learning. In other words, feedback is used to improve learning. One important tip from our best-selling book *Mindful Assessment*, is that when a number is provided, the learning stops: " a parent teaching a child to cook would never say, "That was 74 percent." With this in mind, think of formative assessment as not necessarily identifying what was done well or correctly. Instead, it places focus on what opportunities there are to improve. Formative assessments are rooted in the idea that you cannot learn something in a focused, concentrated way without having a realistic idea of where you're starting from. Teachers will use these types of assessments at the beginning of a class or of a new unit to help guide their instruction. Why should I use a formative assessment? Teachers aren't the only ones who should take advantage of these best teaching practices. In the classroom, that means formative assessments take place during a course and summative assessments are the final evaluations at the course's end. That's the simple answer, though. To really understand formative vs. summative assessments, we have to dive into the details. Video: [Formative vs. Summative Assessments. What Are Formative Assessments?](#) Formative assessments are evaluations of someone's learning progress in a classroom. Common formative assessments include