

Putting Testing in Perspective:

It's for Learning

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PREVIEW

Formative assessment informs instructional decision making by providing information about how and what students are learning.

Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning by engaging in self-assessment, reflection, goal setting, and monitoring and communicating their own progress.

To use formative assessment effectively, teachers must take part in a cyclical process that includes assessment, diagnosis, feedback, goal setting, and instruction and that involves students every step of the way.

Ever since Scriven (1967) and Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus (1971) articulated the distinction between summative and formative evaluation, *summative assessment* has referred to tests administered after learning is supposed to have occurred to determine whether it did. *Formative assessment*, on the other hand, has been used to describe assessments conducted during learning—those that inform teachers' instructional decisions along the way to student success.

Interest and investment in summative assessment has far outstripped formative assessment as layer upon layer of these tests have been used for classroom grading as well as local, state, national, and international testing for public accountability. The demands of No Child Left Behind have intensified the use and attention given to summative assessment because states are required to articulate their achievement standards and report annual evidence of the proportion of students meeting those standards.

Within the last few years, however, formative assessment has emerged as an increasingly prominent school improvement strategy. One reason for its increased use has been educators' realization that once-a-year standardized summative tests aren't likely to affect specific day-to-day, week-to-week, or even month-to-month instructional decisions. Summative tests typically fail to provide a picture of student learning with sufficient detail to tell teachers how to help individual students. State assessments often include items covering many standards summed to yield a single overall proficiency score, which in turn is used to judge the sufficiency of student learning rather than evidence of student mastery of individual standards. Such evidence can inform accountability decisions but is not very helpful in guiding learning at the classroom level. All of this has combined to deprive annual standardized tests of much-needed sensitivity to instruction.

Three Approaches

School leaders and assessment specialists have been working to deal with these inadequacies and make assessments more helpful. Strategies to increase formative assessment fall into three general categories, two of which, although perhaps an improvement, do not engage students in their own assessment and learning.

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More Frequent Testing

One approach is to increase the frequency of summative assessments from once to several times a year. Frequent testing can give notice of instruction that is not working and can inform programmatic decisions along the way to increase the proportion of students who meet standards. A few examples are the short-cycle assessments, the common assessments advocated by some leaders in school improvement, the benchmark tests and end-of-course examinations used in some districts and states, and the quarterly or monthly formative standardized tests offered by some test publishers.

From a slightly different perspective, state departments of education embrace this approach when they release old state tests for local practice. Some publishers of large-scale standardized tests offer test-item banks that are aligned with state standards for more-frequent local testing.

Educators who use this practice see the benefit of using summative assessments in formative ways. They can identify state standards not yet being mastered by examinees early enough to enable teachers to make adjustments to promote greater success. Similarly, they can identify students who are not progressing appropriately so support services can be provided.

Effective Data Management

A second practice comes from the belief that the key to success resides not with the evidence gathered, but in how that evidence is managed. Success through this approach is achieved by accumulating, summarizing, analyzing, and reporting assessment results with maximum efficiency. The more instruction can be based on achievement data, the more effective it will be.

So local school districts and commercial software companies create student-test-score warehouse and management

systems designed to deliver timely evidence into the hands of instructional decision-makers. Typically, the assessment method used is multiple-choice tests, again generated from item banks that are aligned with standards. The result is a score that is reflective of student mastery of standards. In this case, the intended users are teachers and school leaders working to examine test-score trends, identify gaps in student learning, and translate test results into conclusions about program improvements.

Assessment for Learning

A third approach to formative assessment contends that simply having access to more-frequent evidence of student mastery of state standards that is gathered from selected response tests and placed in the hands of teachers and principals, although potentially helpful, falls short of tapping the full potential of formative thinking. The alternative is to use many different assessment methods to provide students, teachers, and parents with continual evidence of student progress in mastering the foundations or prerequisites that underpin and lead up to state standards. This approach is called “assessment for learning.”

In assessment for learning, students understand what they are expected to learn at the outset of learning. They partner with their teacher to monitor and adjust their own progress and play a role in communicating evidence of their own learning to those who need to it. When consistently carried out as a matter of routine within and across classrooms, this set of practices has been linked to profound gains in student achievement, especially for low achievers (Bloom, 1984; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Meisels, Atkins-Burnett, Xue, & Bickel, 2003; Rodriguez, 2004).

An Important Distinction

The biggest difference between the first two formative assessment approaches and assessment for learning is that the former inform teachers about the current status of student achievement, whereas the latter also informs students about their own learning. Assessment for learning rests on the understanding that students are data-based instructional decisionmakers, too—a perspective all but ignored in our assessment legacy and in previous approaches to school improvement.

Another important difference is that traditional formative thinking tends to encourage more-frequent assessment of student mastery of the standards themselves, but assessment for learning focuses on the progress in student learning as students move day-to-day on the curricular scaffolding leading up to state standards. Assessment for learning reveals if and when students are mastering the foundations of knowledge,

Keys to Assessment

Listed below are the specific descriptions of a classroom in which the assessment process helps students learn. In each of the four keys to quality, at least one subentry identifies a specific strategy for student involvement in the process. For students to respond to assessment results in ways that keep them trying, they need to know that they are important assessment users, what the learning target is, how the assessment relates to those expectations, what the results mean, and how they can use those results to their own advantage.

ACHIEVEMENT EXPECTATIONS ARE SPELLED OUT IN A WRITTEN CURRICULUM THAT DESCRIBES CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE TARGETS FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS TO SEE AND UNDERSTAND.

- All achievement expectations are derived from state standards.
- Each standard is transformed into continuous progress curriculum maps that describe the ascending levels of achievement through which students progress within and across grade levels.
- Each classroom-level achievement target is labeled as a knowledge, reasoning, performance skill, or product foundation of its corresponding standard.
- Classroom-level achievement targets are translated into student-friendly language that is shared with students from the beginning of learning, along with models of strong and weak work, and reveals to students the continuum along which they will travel.

THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS USE ASSESSMENTS TO TRACK CONTINUOUS PROGRESS TO INFORM AN ONGOING SERIES OF INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS THAT SUPPORT LEARNING. THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS KNOW WHERE THEY ARE ON THE CONTINUUM OF LEARNING TO DETERMINE WHAT COMES NEXT; THEY DIAGNOSE NEEDS, SET GOALS, PLAN HOW TO GET THERE, AND TRACK PROGRESS.

- The teacher's work is cyclical: He or she assesses, determines needs, provides descriptive feedback, sets goals, provides guided practice, assesses, diagnoses, provides feedback, sets goals, and so forth.
- Students work with their teachers to keep track of and manage their own progress, which includes periods of self-assessment, followed by reflection and goal setting, and learning, followed by self-assessment and reflection.

TO SUPPORT LEARNING, CLASSROOM ASSESSMENTS YIELD ACCURATE INFORMATION ABOUT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT.

- Teachers build and use different assessment methods—including selected response, written response, performance assessment, and direct personal communication—depending on the kind of achievement to be assessed (e.g., knowledge, reasoning, skills, or products).
- The assessments are designed to be accurate and to sample student achievement with sufficient high-quality items, tasks, or exercises to minimize bias.
- Because of differences in the nature of the assessment process across methods, the various assessments yield different kinds of evidence, including scores, ratings, descriptions, and actual samples of student work.

RESULTS ARE COLLECTED, STORED, RETRIEVED, SUMMARIZED (OR NOT, AS APPROPRIATE), AND COMMUNICATED IN TIMELY AND UNDERSTANDABLE WAYS THAT DESCRIBE STUDENT PERFORMANCE TO THE STUDENTS, THE TEACHER, AND THE PARENTS ALIKE IN WAYS THAT RELATE THAT PERFORMANCE TO THE INTENDED LEARNING.

- Evidence and, therefore, feedback to students is always directly connected to the specific achievement target (or standard) to be mastered by each student.
- When students are the users, the evidence is communicated to and understood by them to encourage self-reflection and goal setting.
- Evidence reveals changes in student capabilities over time (e.g., growth and improvement) for students, teachers, and parents to see and understand.
- The system permits a constant flow of information about student achievement among students, teachers, and parents.

reasoning, performance skills, and product development capabilities that underpin state standards.

Student success does not hinge on more-frequent testing, what teachers and principals do with the results, or how efficiently data are managed, although these things can and do contribute to improved learning. Success also rests, at least in part, on what students themselves do with and about those results. The actions they take, and therefore their ultimate success at learning, will be determined by their emotional reaction to the assessment results. That response can be optimistic or pessimistic. An optimistic response leaves the learner ready to keep trying and informs him or her of what to do next. The learner has the desire to put forth the effort to keep trying. A pessimistic response leaves the learner feeling that the target remains beyond reach and that it's hopeless for him or her to continue trying to learn.

Traditional formative thinking tends to encourage more-frequent assessment of student mastery of the standards themselves, but assessment for learning focuses on the progress in student learning as students move day-to-day.

Assessment for learning is aimed at triggering an optimistic response to assessment results from the learner. It starts by providing students with a clear, student-friendly version of the achievement target to be mastered, as well as models of strong and weak work, to help inform learners about where the teacher wants them to end up. Then the teacher provides learners with descriptive feedback: That is, not merely grades or scores, but focused guidance specific to the learning target. This feedback lays a foundation for students to learn to self-assess and set goals. In this way, assessment for learning keeps students informed about where they are in relation to that agreed-upon definition of success. By teaching students how to improve one facet of success at a time, empowering students to improve the quality of their work one dimension at a time, and teaching them to monitor their own improvement over time, assessment for learning helps students close the gap between where they are now and where their teacher wants them to be.

But to use assessment productively in these ways, certain conditions must be satisfied. Achievement targets must be clear, all the way from state or local standards to student-friendly classroom achievement targets. Attention must be paid to the information needs of all instructional decision-makers, including students. Assessments must be accurate, producing dependable evidence of learning. The timing and nature of student involvement in assessment, record keeping,

and communication must be effectively managed by teachers. These are different responsibilities from what has been expected of teachers. But when implemented and managed well, assessment for learning can increase the sense of efficacy and professionalism of classroom teachers.

Seeking Assessment Synergy

To tap the potential of this way of thinking about assessment and student learning, educators must blend traditional formative assessment and assessment for learning. In short, they must go beyond administering more-frequent summative assessments of standards for the purpose of generating more data. Both the measurement community and the designers of information management systems must understand what teachers are trying to accomplish with assessment for learning and how that differs from accountability-oriented assessment, such as high-stakes tests or report card grades (i.e., assessments *of* learning), and how such systems can be used to support the classroom teacher. The currently emerging formative practices are important, but they serve different purposes than assessment for learning. To blend them so students benefit, the classroom level of assessment must begin to make its essential contribution.

There is no greater need in the development of effective, standards-driven schools than to create opportunities for teachers to learn how to create assessment for learning environments in their classrooms. Every student could and should have access to a learning experience that they help manage. Getting data into the hands of teachers to improve school programs with informed decisions will help. Getting data and information into the hands of students in structured and purposeful ways helps change formative assessment into assessment for learning. **PL**

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