

TRANSFORMATIVE ASSESSMENT



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POPHAM

Transformative Assessment

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Preface



This is a book about classroom assessment, but it's not about giving tests. Really, it's a book about instruction, because classroom assessment can fundamentally transform the way a teacher teaches.

The foregoing paragraph, though modest in length, sets forth what some might regard as a meaningfully immodest aspiration. Any time an author predicts that a book can help bring about a *fundamental transformation* in anything, you're usually dealing with an author in need of reality therapy. Why do I claim this book about classroom assessment can trigger a fundamental transformation in someone's teaching? I do it because I believe that claim to be stone-cold true.

This book about the transformative power of formative assessment is written not for scholars but for educational practitioners, the teachers and administrators who staff our schools. If you are a teacher, here are the sorts of questions I hope you will be able to answer after reading this book:

- “What is formative assessment?”
- “Should I try to use formative assessment with my own students?”
 - “If I decide to use formative assessment, how can I do so in a way that is *most likely* to benefit my students?”
 - “Are there different variations of formative assessment I should implement in certain situations?”
 - “If I use formative assessment appropriately, will my students’ scores on external accountability tests improve enough so that I can stop taking tranquilizers?”

These questions are important ones. But the most important question waiting for you to answer is this: “*Should I set out to fundamentally transform my instructional approach with a significant infusion of formative assessment?*”

Just so you won’t be blindsided later on, I’ll make my bias known now. Yes, I think you most definitely *should* try to transform your instructional approach by incorporating formative assessment. I think you should do this because your students will almost certainly benefit as a result. And benefiting students is why most of us went into the education game in the first place.

Before you start digging into the book’s seven chapters, I want to give you a brief overview of what’s coming. In Chapter 1, we’ll cover not only what formative assessment actually is but also why it is receiving so much attention these days from educators throughout the world. In Chapter 2, we’ll look at the key to well-conceived formative assessment: *learning progressions*, the carefully sequenced sets of subskills and enabling knowledge that students need to master on their way to mastering a more distant curricular aim.

With this foundation information established, it’s on to Chapters 3 through 6, each of which focuses on a different application—or “level”—of formative assessment available for educators’ use. Why subdivide formative assessment into different levels? That’s a reasonable question. Put simply, there is considerable confusion among educators regarding the nature of

formative assessment. Many are still confused by how formative assessment bears on the day-to-day activities of teachers, students, and school administrators. So, for clarity's sake, it seems prudent to break out formative assessment into functions that are fundamentally distinguishable from one another:

- Level 1 calls for teachers to use formative assessment to collect evidence by which they can adjust their current and future instructional activities.

- Level 2 deals with students' use of formative assessment evidence to adjust their own learning tactics.

- Level 3 represents a complete change in the culture of a classroom, shifting the overriding role of classroom assessment from the means to compare students with one another for grade assignments to the means to generate evidence from which teachers and students can, if warranted, adjust what they're doing.

- Level 4 consists of schoolwide adoption of one or more levels of formative assessment, chiefly through the use of professional development and teacher learning communities.

After you've become familiar with this four-level split, you can decide if you wish to keep those levels distinct or, instead, lump them together into one formative-assessment glob. It's totally your choice.

In the final chapter of the book, we'll deal with the real-world limitations of formative assessment, and then I'll send you off into the sunset with an epilogue, followed by a collection of resources that represents most of the important articles and books on the topic. As fair warning, many of these articles and books were written *by academics for academics*, and some are so stuffed with citations of other writers' work that they end up being downright difficult to read. I've indicated, with the adroit affixing of a star, those resources I regard as being especially useful to practitioners.

As I wrap up these prefatory remarks, I want to alert you to a key theme you'll encounter more than a few times in the pages ahead. Here it is: *Don't let pursuit of the instructionally perfect prevent you from reaping the rewards of the instructionally possible.*

As an enthusiastic supporter of formative assessment, I hope to convince you to join me in my boosterism. If you're a teacher, I hope you will use formative assessment in your classroom. If you're an administrator, I hope you'll encourage teachers to use formative assessment in their classrooms. But, as is true with almost any instructional intervention, it is possible to install formative assessment procedures that are too elaborate and too time consuming. Instructional interventions like those rarely survive for long; in their "perfection," they become aversive and likely to be abandoned. Better by far to adopt less perfect but more palatable approaches. Students who routinely experience the classroom benefits of less-than-perfect formative assessment will be better off educationally than will students whose teachers have discarded formative assessment because "it's too darn much work."

When, in April 2007, I spoke with representatives of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) about doing this book, we concurred that there was not only enormous interest in formative assessment throughout the community of educators but also wide-ranging confusion about what formative assessment actually is. Accordingly, when I signed up to write the book, I agreed to "really haul" so that Auntie ASCD could get the book out to the field as soon as possible and perhaps head off some misuse of this potentially powerful instructional approach. I appreciate the efforts of ASCD's superlative editors (Katie Martin's editorial ministrations were, in a word, magnificent) and production staff to get the book into print and into educators' hands in a hurry. As usual, I am in debt to my friend and word processor nonpareil, Dolly Bulquerin, for hustling right along with me. Because I was hurrying, my typically opaque handwriting was even sloppier than usual. Dolly's decryption skills were especially insightful. They had to be!

WJP

CHAPTER	Formative Assessment
1	Why, What, and Whether
<p>[Chapter Preview]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why formative assessment is garnering so much attention • What formative assessment is and what it isn't • The case for using formative assessment 	

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT WORKS! THIS PHRASE, OR SOME paraphrased version of it, is voiced with increasing frequency in many parts of the world. But *why* are more and more of today's educators touting the instructional virtues of formative assessment?

Most observers credit British researchers Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam with kicking off today's worldwide interest in formative assessment. In 1998, Black and Wiliam published two important works: an article in the journal *Phi Delta Kappan* and an extensive review of empirical research studies focused on classroom assessment. In their *Kappan* article, Black and Wiliam

(1998b) argue that formative assessment, properly employed in the classroom, will help students learn what is being taught to a substantially better degree. They support this argument with evidence from their research review (1998a), a meta-analysis in which they conclude that student gains in learning triggered by formative assessment are “amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions” (p. 61).

Once educators realized there was ample evidence that formative assessment really was an effective way to improve student learning, it wasn't long before they began investigating the implications and asking the all too obvious follow-up question: If formative assessment could improve student learning in the classroom, couldn't it *also* improve student test scores on external accountability tests? Considering that so many educators are now figuratively drowning in an ocean of accountability, it's not surprising to see formative assessment cast in the role of life preserver. If it is true that drowning people will grasp at straws in an effort to stay afloat, it is surely as true that they will grasp even more eagerly at “research-proven” straws.

This is not to suggest that all advocates of formative assessment see it primarily as a strategy to fend off pervasive accountability pressure. Many believe that formative assessment will simply help educators do a better job of teaching. These educators might even point out that Black and Wiliam's research synthesis focuses primarily on the classroom dividends of formative assessment and devotes little attention to its potential role in raising external test scores. And many more, if not most, formative assessment proponents choose neither camp exclusively. They believe it can have a positive effect on both students' in-class learning and students' subsequent performance on accountability tests.

All right, that's the *why* underlying today's ever-expanding interest in formative assessment. Now it's time to take a close look at the *what*: What formative assessment actually is and what it isn't.

What Is Formative Assessment?

Because there has been so much attention lavished on formative assessment lately, most of today's teachers and administrators have at least a rough idea of what it is. If you asked them to explain it, they might tell you it involves testing students in the midst of an ongoing instructional sequence and then using the test results to improve instruction. By and large, this explanation is correct.

But a “by and large correct” explanation just isn't good enough when it comes to formative assessment. As you'll see in later pages, formative assessment is a potentially transformative instructional tool that, if clearly understood and adroitly employed, can benefit both educators and their students. Mushy, “by and large correct” understandings of formative assessment will rarely allow the fullness of this assessment-based process to flower. That's why I'm now asking you to join me as I dig for a while into the innards of formative assessment.

Historical and Etymological Underpinnings

There is no single officially sanctified and universally accepted definition of formative assessment. Educators have drawn our use of the term *formative* from Michael Scriven's (1967) groundbreaking essay about educational evaluation, in which he contrasts *summative evaluation* with *formative evaluation*. According to Scriven, if the quality of an early-version educational program is evaluated while the program is still malleable—capable of being improved because of an evaluation's results—this constitutes *formative* evaluation. In contrast, when a mature, final-version educational program is evaluated in order to make a decision about its continuation or termination, this constitutes *summative* evaluation.

Scriven's insightful split of two program-evaluation roles was widely and rapidly accepted by educational evaluators. Although