

# What Teachers REALLY need to know about **Formative Assessment**

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## Introduction

I sometimes start a workshop by asking teachers to think back to their own student days and their *worst* assessment experience. Everyone has a story.

I've heard about tests that had nothing to do with the assigned text or the instruction. I've also heard of teachers telling students about to begin a test that they were expected to fail it. The story I often share is about my first economics class at the University of Connecticut. Having no experience with the subject and finding that the classroom lectures didn't provide much illumination, I decided my best chance to pass the test was simply to memorize portions of the text and repeat them verbatim as my answers. When the professor called me into his office to accuse me of plagiarism, I explained my predicament and, fortunately, we were both able to laugh about it. I then received some extra help in understanding economic theories and statistics. So while this was my worst test experience, it was also my first taste of the effectiveness of formative assessment, although it would be many years before I came to understand it as such.

The word *assessment* comes from the Latin root *assidere*, which means "to sit beside another." Our best assessment experiences are usually the ones that reflect the word's roots

most closely; they are the times a teacher sits beside us to gather information about our progress and support our learning. The best assessments help us move forward. When my college economics professor and I finally sat side by side, he was able to understand what I did and did not know, and we were able to plan the next step together. That is formative assessment: the process of uncovering and understanding what students know in order to determine the best path to learning.

## Traditional Versus Formative Assessment

The traditional way to gather information about student learning is through summative assessment—a test, sometimes teacher-generated, sometimes common across classrooms and content areas, and sometimes standardized, given at the end of instruction for the purpose of measuring achievement. As teachers, we typically use the information from our tests to assign a grade and then move on to the next unit of instruction. As administrators and policymakers, we often use scores from standardized assessments to rank our school's or district's or state's achievement. These measures are valuable. They tell us where students have placed in the race, giving us a snapshot for comparative purposes. At this point, however, the race is over. In contrast, formative assessment gives teachers information that they can use to inform their teaching and improve learning while it is in progress and while the outcome of the race can still be influenced.

Formative assessment encompasses a variety of strategies for revealing students' understanding, allowing teachers to pinpoint and address any impediments to a student's progress. The process is much like a coach setting short exercises to assess a runner's stride, speed, and equipment and then making appropriate adjustments so that the runner can improve. Teachers use formative data to decide how much and what kind of learning, support, and practice a student needs to reach the goal. When formative assessment is employed before, during, and after instruction, both teachers and students have a measure of progress.

Achievement needs to be viewed not as a test-based number but as measurable growth over time. In this context, achievement means that students are working to improve their knowledge and skills. Different students

## CHAPTER 1

# The Fundamentals of Formative Assessment

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This chapter looks at the essential principles of formative assessment and provides a preview of best practice. Our focus here is both the content and context of formative assessment: its basic elements and some of the reasons it has risen to prominence and gained support as an effective means of improving student learning.

### Essential Principles

The information in this section has been gathered from numerous sources and aligned around three significant concepts: (1) formative assessment is student focused, (2) formative assessment is instructionally informative, and (3) formative assessment is outcomes based.

In an effort not to duplicate information available in other resources, I have condensed the elements and their definitions quite a bit. If you would like to read more about the fundamentals of formative assessment, I recommend “Working Inside the Black Box” (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, &

## Responding Instructionally to Multiple Intelligences

As we have seen, formative assessment strategies ask students to use a variety of formats in responding, encompassing a range of Gardner's intelligences. Figure 6.2 shows some formative strategies and the intelligence they call on. Based on the results of these assessments, teachers can choose to adjust instruction to correspond to specific intelligences and thus facilitate student learning. The results of assessment can also help in determining the format of future assessments.

## Assessing Across a Range of Student Products

When students are producing different products as a result of instruction that supports multiple intelligences and varied learning styles, the question arises of how assessment can be valid and reliable. Whatever the process and product, teachers should establish consistent standards and grading criteria for all students.

In Ms. Coates's class, students are studying medieval society and learning about a range of topics, from weapons to food to women's rights. Each

FIGURE 6.2		Multiple Intelligences and Formative Assessment	
Intelligence	Application	Sample Formative Strategies	
Verbal-Linguistic	Student writes it down and tells others	Minute Paper Journaling	
Spatial	Chart it: format ideas related to a specific term	Empty Outlines Graphic organizers	
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Demonstrate it	Model the steps Line-Up	
Logical-Mathematical	Count or measure	Color-Coding Clusters	
Musical	Put it to a beat	Create a rhythm haiku	
Interpersonal	Group work	Muddiest Point Bump in the Road	
Intrapersonal	Self-assessment	Journaling	