

TRANSFORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

An
Inside Look
at Applying
the Process

in *Action*

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Introduction (and Reprise)

Not too long ago, I wrote a book about formative assessment (Popham, 2008). In that book's first paragraph, I said I would be describing a kind of classroom assessment intended to “fundamentally transform the way a teacher teaches” (p. vii), and as a consequence, the book's publisher gave it the title of *Transformative Assessment*. This book, the book you've just started to read, is a sequel to that earlier volume. In an effort to reduce confusion, I will refer to the earlier book as “*TA1*” and to this sequel as “*TA2*.”

Why a Sequel?

I've never written a sequel before. Oh, I've certainly revised books, especially textbooks, so that my publishers could sell updated versions of the books to those who want “the latest word.” But those revised editions aren't really sequels; they are updated, yet structurally similar, versions of an already written book. In contrast, *TA2* is a brand new book, with a mission that's different from that of its elder sibling. Let me explain.

As *Transformative Assessment* made its way into educators' hands, I found myself invited to make presentations and to direct workshops focused on how formative assessment could enhance teachers' effectiveness and improve students' learning. I was delighted to accept these invitations and, in 2009, I ended up making many such presentations throughout the United States, elaborating on the mission and content of *TA1* and spelling out what formative assessment is, what it isn't, how it is supported by solid research

evidence, and the ways in which teachers could be encouraged to start using it.

These sorts of professional development sessions afford great opportunities to get acquainted with one's colleagues, and I established e-mail communication with educators from many of those sessions, especially with the school leaders who had set up my presentations. At first, I picked up some useful insights about the way formative assessment was being accepted in these schools. But, as time went by, what I began finding out from those e-mail communications was troubling.

"Yes," my school-leader correspondents told me, "the teachers you met at our sessions were and still are quite supportive of formative assessment. But relatively few of our teachers are actually using formative assessment in their own classrooms." According to my contacts, the most prevalent obstacle to getting teachers to use formative assessment was *insufficient professional development time*. Teachers didn't feel they had the time they needed to consider procedures and issues associated with formative assessment. Right behind the obstacle of insufficient professional development time, though, was a desperate need for *models of formative assessment in action*.

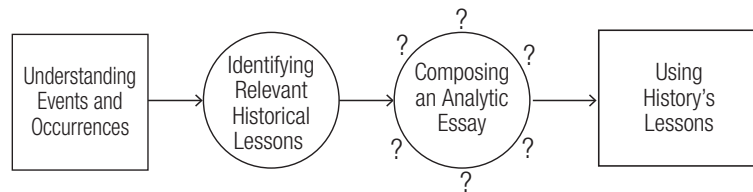
The Majesty of Modeling

For more than a year now, I've been polling local educators to get a better fix on what sorts of "examples" of formative assessment they want—what kinds of models would be most useful in getting them and their colleagues to give the formative assessment process a try. Most replied that they wanted videos of classrooms in which teachers and students were using formative assessment. And although I appreciated their suggestions, I think that what those educators were asking for isn't what they really need.

Perhaps you already know that formative assessment is *a planned process in which teachers or students use assessment-elicited evidence to improve what they're doing*. It calls for teachers and, in

initially developed several assessment items to measure students' mastery of the new history skill—"our target curricular aim." Jill noted that this item-development task had taken a bit longer than PLC members had anticipated, but it had been instrumental in ensuring that all members of the team could move forward with a firm idea about what the new "Using History's Lessons Skill" actually was. One of the administrator members of the PLC agreed, saying, "As a clarification technique, I thought it was wonderful."

Jill then projected a slide showing the developing learning progression, containing two "firm" building blocks and one still up for debate:



They had dubbed the first building block "Understanding Events and Occurrences," agreeing that students needed to know all of the 20 state-specified "events" and 40 or so "occurrences" within those events. Together, this would constitute a large and important knowledge-focused building block. Jill noted that students' mastery could be assessed with multiple-choice items requiring students to match events and occurrences. Follow-up assessment data on mastery might be gathered through short essays focused on describing the focal features of each event and each occurrence.

The PLC had also agreed on a second building block—a subskill focused on students' ability to select an occurrence within a historical event that is sufficiently similar to the situation embodied in a current-day societal problem. The PLC members dubbed this building block "Identifying Relevant Historical Lessons," and they had estimated that it would likely take between three and five weeks to teach. Assessment data on students' mastery might be collected via constructed-response test items to which students would need

Reflection Questions

1. What factors should a teacher consider when deciding whether to make on-the-spot instructional adjustments versus waiting a day or so to make an instructional adjustment? In which situations would a teacher be better off scrapping plans for an instant adjustment in order to work up a near-future instructional adjustment?
2. Why is it so important that the assessment evidence collected for a near-future adjustment be genuinely diagnostic?
3. Do you agree or disagree that pre-assessment, although important for a teacher's selection of curricular aims that mesh well with a particular group of students' prior learning and current capabilities, is not technically a part of formative assessment? What is the rationale for your position?
4. Think about how you might employ this application of formative assessment with one of your current units of instruction. Consider all the choice-points discussed in this chapter.