CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING

2ND EDITION

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

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Preface

It's breathtaking (and a bit intimidating) to witness the changes in education in this century. The most obvious change, of course, is the role technology has assumed in classrooms. Where once we talked about enhancement, now we recognize that technology is an essential tool for communication and collaboration. Less apparent, at least on the surface, is the way in which data has become an essential element in any conversation about teaching and learning. Most schools have a data room to display information, and nearly every school is required to report these data annually to the community. And our profession's focus on post-secondary outcomes is causing all of us to consider what happens to our graduates after they leave high school.

But educators recognize that the devices in a classroom, the results on the state achievement test, and the college- and career-readiness standards can't equip them with the information they need to figure out what to do in the next five minutes. Only formative assessment practices can deliver timely data about what students understand. Without formative assessment data, teaching is aimed at the middle. We'll never know which students were ready for a stretch, and which needed reteaching. Unfortunately, too often formative assessment has been reduced to two or three district benchmark tests, with little attention given to the data that surround us every day.

Seeing the Data Each Day

Talented educators know that the opportunities for fine-grained analysis of student learning are all around us. Each time we host a discussion with students, examine a child's writing, or listen closely to a question, there's a chance to assess formatively. But these possibilities are wasted if there isn't intention. Wise teachers know that discussions, writing assignments, and such are not compliance checks. They are to teachers what paint is to an artist—the medium we work in. It's how we paint our own picture of the learning in front of us.

We have organized the book to highlight each of these media: oral and written language, questions, projects, and performances. We include tests as a formative assessment method because they can be used to inform future instruction if used intentionally. And finally, we discuss the need for common formative assessments and consensus scoring as a means for facilitating the thoughtful conversations among educators about student learning.

Much has changed in the field of formative assessment since the first edition of *Checking for Understanding* was published in 2007, and we have tried to incorporate these practices into this book. As technology has taken on greater importance, we see teachers use devices such as audience response systems to gather formative assessment data. In addition, we have revised the common formative assessment chapter to reflect the regular practice of teachers who gather to examine student data. As well, we have integrated newer instructional routines, such as the use of close reading and text-dependent questions, in order to better reflect newer approaches for developing college- and career-ready students.

The second edition of *Checking for Understanding* has given us the opportunity to contextualize this work within a Framework for Intentional and Targeted Teaching™. The practice of checking for understanding doesn't operate in isolation, but rather is an essential element for a gradual release of responsibility instructional framework. It is also a vital facet for providing feedback to students, and a means for gathering and analyzing data. Therefore, we have consolidated practices discussed in other ASCD publications, notably our work on guided instruction, formative assessment systems, data analysis, and quality instruction.

We are as excited as you are about the innovative practices we are witnessing in classrooms across the globe. As we move forward, our collective challenge is in keeping pace with change while retaining the time-honored practices that have served generations of learners so well. How will we know what practices should be pursued and what should be abandoned? By checking for understanding, of course!

Why Check for Understanding?

Checking for understanding permeates the teaching world. If you doubt that, consider the last lecture you heard. Whether the lecture was about chemical reactions, the great American novel, or the causes of World War II, the person speaking most likely checked for your understanding several times during the lecture by using such common prompts as "Any questions?", "Did you all get that?", "Everybody understand?", or "Does that make sense?"

Rather than respond to these questions, most learners will sit quietly, and the lecturer doesn't know whether they understand, they are too confused to answer, they think they get it (but are off base), or they are too embarrassed to show their lack of understanding in front of others. Such general questions are simply not sufficient in determining whether or not students "get it."

Additionally, students aren't always self-regulated learners. They may not be aware of what they do or do not understand. They sometimes think they get it, when they really don't. If you doubt this, consider how often you have heard students comment, "I thought I knew this stuff, but I bombed the exam."

Much of the checking for understanding done in schools is ineffective. Thankfully, there are a number of ways to address the situation. We've organized this book, and the ways that teachers can check for understanding, into larger categories, including oral language, questioning, writing, projects and performances, tests, and

schoolwide approaches. In this chapter, we'll explore checking for understanding in terms of what it is, what it is not, and how it links to other teaching initiatives.

What Is Checking for Understanding?

Checking for understanding is an important step in the teaching and learning process. The background knowledge that students bring into the classroom influences how they understand the material you share and the lessons or learning opportunities you provide. Unless you check for understanding, it is difficult to know exactly what students are getting out of the lesson. In fact, checking for understanding is part of a formative assessment system in which teachers identify learning goals, provide students feedback, and then plan instruction based on students' errors and misconceptions. Although the focus of this book is on strategies for checking for understanding, it is important to know how these strategies are used to improve student achievement as part of a more comprehensive system. Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified these phases as feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward. Note that checking for understanding is an important link between feed-up and the feedback students receive as well as the future lessons teachers plan.

Feed-up: Clarifying the purpose. The first component of a comprehensive formative assessment system involves an established purpose, objective, or learning target. When students understand the goal of the instruction, they are more likely to focus on the learning tasks at hand. When the goal "is clear, when high commitment is secured for it, and when belief in eventual success is high," student effort is amplified and achievement increases (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 260). Having a purpose isn't new, but it is critical to the implementation of a formative assessment system because when teachers have a clear purpose, they can align their checking for understanding strategies with their intended outcomes. For example, when an established purpose relates to comparing and contrasting characteristics of insects and arthropods, students know what to expect in the lesson and the teacher can plan instructional events such as shared readings, collaborative learning, and investigations to ensure that students focus their attention on this content. Similarly, when the established purpose is to persuade a reader using argumentation and facts, the students have a clear sense of what is expected and the teacher can plan instruction. In sum, a clear purpose is a critical component of an effective feedback system.

Feedback: Responding to student work. The second component of a comprehensive formative assessment system, and the one that is more commonly recognized, relates to the individual responses to their work that students receive from teachers. Of course, these responses should be directly related to the purpose and performance goal. The best feedback provides students with information about their progress or success and what course of action they can take to improve their understanding to meet the expected standard (Brookhart, 2008). Ideally, feedback occurs as students complete tasks so that they can continue to master content. If learning is the goal, teachers should not limit feedback to a summative review but should rather provide formative feedback that students could use to improve their performance. For example, in a unit of study on writing high-quality introductions, Kelly Johnson provided her students multiple opportunities to introduce topics using various techniques such as humor, questions, startling statistic, direct quotation, and so on. For each introduction they produced, Dr. Johnson provided feedback using a rubric so that students could revise their introduction and use that information on their next attempt. She did not simply note the mechanical errors students made but rather acknowledged areas of success and provided recommendations for students to focus on in their next drafts.

Feed-forward: Modifying instruction. The final component required for creating a formative assessment system involves using data to plan instruction. Feed-forward systems involve greater flexibility in lesson planning, because teachers can't simply follow a script or implement a series of lesson plans that are written in stone. This is the formative aspect of checking for understanding and one that is often missing. When teachers examine student work, whether it is from a daily checking for understanding task or a common formative assessment tool, they can use that information to plan instruction and intervention. For example, students in a 3rd grade class completed a collaborative poster in response to a word problem. One of the groups had a problem that read: *Six students are sitting at each table in the lunchroom. There are 23 tables. How many students are in the lunchroom?* The students in this class knew that they had to answer the question using words, numbers, and pictures. Not only did the students with this problem do it wrong, but nearly every group had the wrong answer. Given this information, the teacher knew that she needed to provide more modeling for her students about how to solve word problems. The feed-forward, in this case, required a whole-class reteaching.