

Mastering Formative Assessment Moves

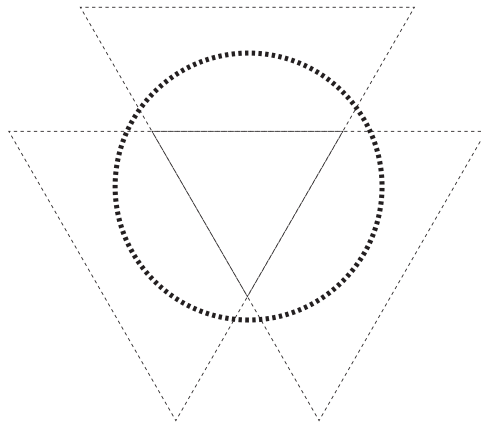
*7 High-Leverage Practices
to Advance Student Learning*

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Foreword by John Hattie

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Introduction

Why a book on formative assessment—now? Hasn't it all been said before? Everyone knows that formative assessment (FA) in the classroom makes a difference in students' lives and produces better outcomes, right?

For decades the research community has known that formative assessment or formative evaluation (as it is called in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia), stands at the center of effective instruction. Hattie (2012) and others remind us that assessing for learning makes a real difference in student outcomes. Powerful, tangible results come from teachers who are assessing and reassessing student learning—minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day.

If Rick Stiggins (2002) and other educational researchers know it works, and teachers acknowledge its practical uses in classroom assessment, why are we still talking about “assessment for learning” all these years later?

The Challenge

The paradox is that most of the “hard” data we have on the powerful effects of formative assessment on student achievement is built around the unglamorous work and sustained understanding and use of “soft” data in the classroom. We know that exit slips, word webs, gallery walks, peer feedback, quick writes, pair-shares, and a host of other techniques generate the soft, difficult to quantify data needed to make instructional decisions on the fly. Only by carefully attending to this classroom-level data can we hope to provide better feedback to our students.

We wrote this book to raise and address these essential questions: What if the “formative” aspect of classroom assessment isn’t that visible or easy to do after all? What if “assessment for learning” looks a lot like what everyone else calls “good” teaching? What if FA is just another fancy way to talk about “checking for understanding”?

It is true. Deep formative assessment practices blur the line between instruction and assessment. Most people associate assessment with quizzes, homework, and test events: the “stuff” of classroom assessment and evaluation. But assessment for learning occurs *during* our lessons. FA practices are interwoven into teaching segments and each invites an exchange of information between teachers and students. To those who are unfamiliar with the complexity and intricacies of the dance, it can be hard to know what we are observing in the formative assessment-rich classroom. Moves are invisible; dynamics are undetected. Hence the familiar reply to this literature: “Aren’t we just talking about good teaching?”

Formative assessment—the moves, strategies, and daily tactical adjustments used to check for understanding—seem obvious to those who are effective teachers. The careful, sustained observation of FA “moves” can seem like a black box (Black & Wiliam, 1998) to those who are interested in traditional classroom assessment. It takes a trained eye to know what to look for and how to evaluate and coach formative assessment-driven instructional practices.

In our roles as educators—teaching at the university, supervising clinical placements, and working in professional development contexts—we have discovered through trial and error that the formative assessment story is hard to tell. The basic narrative is that it works, try it, it couldn’t hurt. Although by now extensive research shows that assessment for learning has benefits that accrue to a diverse group of learners, the fact remains: we don’t always know *which* practices are most effective, *when* to enact them, and *why* a particular combination of moves actually worked for a particular student in a particular classroom.

Take the example of feedback, a hallmark of the formative assessment lexicon. We know that best formative feedback practices must be specific, addressable, timely, ongoing, and content-rich (Wiggins, 2012). But many teachers, school counselors, paraprofessional staff, and administrators don’t have a clear idea of what these terms mean or how to best observe them, let alone coach others to improve. Moreover, grading and accountability policies often place competing demands on teachers’ time, energy, and available resources for enacting best practices in classroom assessment and evaluation.

Part of the challenge with the formative assessment story goes beyond finding mutual agreement of terms and definitions or the adoption of a particular expert's framework. We venture a more provocative explanation regarding the many barriers to becoming a formative assessor. This book takes a look at those challenges and opportunities by breaking down "high leverage" practices, as we dive deeper and explore how different moves are connected.

We hope you will agree: the biggest challenge to assessing formatively during instruction is to recognize a new stance—toward oneself and one's students. We are all learning to become formative assessors. We each have a stake in moving the work of assessment for learning forward. There is no single correct path on this journey but there is a complex continuum of development and growth—for teachers, by teachers, and with teachers building their professional knowledge and skill base.

Teachers as Learners

Our book puts the focus on the development, growth, and journey of those who are learning to become formative assessors, whether new to the profession or not. We honor the prior knowledge of all teachers, that they are struggling to assimilate and accommodate new concepts and information, and that the gap between where they are with classroom assessment routines and where they want to be with formative assessment best practices is real. Of course, beliefs about grading, standards, and testing are also a part of the teachers' prior knowledge; each conditions how we build new and replace old mental models of classroom assessment. We speculate, after working for nearly a decade with preservice teachers, that what we call "teacher learning progressions" are just as important as student ones (Shavelson et al., 2010).

We have written this book to help you walk the walk and not to merely talk the talk of formative assessment. The formative assessor is not solely a teacher who transmits knowledge to students and this book is not written in the spirit of a sit-and-get session or a step-by-step program to immediate success. Rather, we wrote it to guide you toward the professional vision of being a lifelong learner, thus the emphasis on the journey and becoming (rather than on being) a formative assessor. We want you to feel that sense of aspiration and promise that comes from discovering new skills, powers, and capacities to learn about FA moves.

As you read ahead, we also want you to imagine yourself more and more as a formative assessment “guide on the side” for your students. You are becoming, with a little coaching chapter by chapter, a formative assessment guide who is opening up new worlds of classroom learning and communication, where people exchange ideas, give one another feedback, solve problems, and face difficult subjects with intentionality and care.

We predict that you and your students will feel frustrated, get stuck, and wonder why you can’t just get back to normal routines in classroom assessment (what we call “doing school”). After all, we all know there are times when “doing formative assessment” is a lot harder than handing out a quiz, collecting homework, or administering the unit test. Posing questions is messy. Probing for deeper responses is time-consuming. Tagging student ideas can be risky. Pausing for “think time” may become awkward and counter-productive.

The difficulty of making formative assessment moves can be compounded by concerns, especially when well-regarded strategies and practices fail to bring about an immediate, positive, or visible change in classroom dynamics. Beginning teachers sometimes get uncomfortable and nervous. Mentor teachers and university supervisors are not always convinced about the power of formative assessment. Principals and administrative staff may continue to wonder: *Why are you asking why so much? The kids are shouting out and are still too noisy. No one seems to be listening. The room looks and feels chaotic when everyone goes to the whiteboard. Too many want to speak at the same time. Do you really have time to make that word web and call all students to the board to add their ideas with sticky notes?*

Part of the challenge is agreeing upon a new frame. In this book, we argue that it’s time to see ourselves—all teachers, school counselors, administrators, and staff—on a continuum of growth in understanding and practicing formative assessment moves. It’s time to address, support, and coach one another—as we make progress—with this highly complex, nuanced set of instructional practices that are also assessment practices. We must move beyond the expert–novice divide that reinforces a deficit approach where some teachers are more literate about classroom assessment than others. Rather, we propose that there are trajectories of moves and progressions of practice in the world of formative assessment. Some known, others not as much. The key is to uncover and discover where one is.

Becoming a formative assessor means finding one’s own zone of proximal development—with students and with colleagues—and embracing the journey.

Toward a New Formative Assessment Frame: One Move at a Time

If formative assessment is a process (not merely an event or tool) that occurs during instruction, then we should be able to map the “FA moves” that bring it to life in our classrooms.

We maintain that how teachers, new and experienced, can grow in their formative assessment practice will depend in part on the coaching, feedback, and adjustments available to guide the teaching and learning experience. As you read along with us, imagine these FA moves are major units of instruction on how to master formative assessment; inside each chapter we’ve offered some lessons, examples, and “do now” activities to support your learning. But you will inevitably discover, along with us, how unique and particular practices fit best into your own classroom and school.

Our teacher-driven learning progressions framework consists of a set of seven interrelated instructional moves, each with its own distinct trajectory, bottlenecks, and occasional pitfalls.

Let’s take a moment and revisit the essential question that drives our story: what makes assessment formative and how do we know when we witness it? Is assessing formatively an impossible ideal in a world of standardized testing? Is assessment for learning an over discussed, passing fad that obscures the real work of mastering the subject and making the grade? Does *doing formative assessment* well mean we should stop assigning points to quizzes or spend more time collecting exit slips rather than uploading grades each night? Hardly.

Doing formative assessment in today’s culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse classrooms depends greatly on teachers’ and students’ use of academic language—producing language, taking in language, and sharpening language skills (Hakuta, 2013). Some conceptualizations of formative assessment are more explicit than others in their focus on language use. Ours puts a premium back on verbal and non-verbal feedback—real-time exchanges—among teachers and students.

Our concept of formative assessment is based on the notion of teacher learning progressions that are enacted during instruction—a set of *FA moves* we call *priming, posing, pausing, probing, bouncing, tagging, and binning*. See Figure 1 for the FA moves a teacher can orchestrate in myriad combinations.

Each FA move lends itself to sustaining a deeper focus on the development of academic language for all students, which is critical to fostering equity in, for example, STEM learning and teaching. *Doing FA* means teachers initiating and

orchestrating openings for scientific and mathematical reasoning and investigations (CCSSI, 2010). A primary goal during these FA-driven lessons is to keep the dialogue among the teacher and students flowing, with just-in-time *moves* that promote conscious, strategic uptake of student thinking that can be used to make instructional decisions during the lesson (Duckor, Holmberg, Rossi Becker, 2017).

Whether teaching elementary, middle, or high school, FA is more than “checking for understanding.” Formative assessment as we conceptualize it helps teachers to learn more about students’ understandings and to productively respond to those understandings (not merely “misconceptions” or “wrong” answers) during class. We think of FA as a dynamic pedagogical process among students and teachers. It requires acts of planning, instructing, and reflecting on soft data to make better decisions.

It will be clear as you make progress through each chapter that our conceptualization of FA moves, like Sadler’s (1989), places a premium on feedback loops in classroom talk, the building up of repertoires of auditory and verbal skills, and providing instructional space for students to use academic language and register as they work together in real-time. Like Shepard (2009), our definition contrasts with those who orient formative assessment toward high-tech products, data mining, and interim testing events. We also agree with Linqunti (2014) and his colleagues that assessing formatively should emphasize real-time instructional processes and the uses of actionable feedback.

For those of you who’ve been at this work for a while, it is worth noting that our moves-based conceptualization of classroom formative assessment relates to Dylan Wiliam’s framework, in particular, how teachers can engineer effective classroom discussions and present tasks that elicit evidence of learning (Wiliam, 2007). We recognize the significance of classroom discourse in laying groundwork for effective feedback, especially how teachers can consciously pose questions that serve various purposes and provide a “window into thinking” (p. 1,069).

These seven FA moves, as we call them, create opportunities for *all* students to interact productively and persistently with higher-order thinking. In combination with the teacher’s subject preparation and content knowledge, the FA moves can help teachers make sense of what students know, make connections among ideas, and facilitate the process of learning in more transparent, visible ways (Heritage, 2007, 2010).