



PROFICIENCY- BASED ASSESSMENT

process, not product



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Chapter 1

Beyond the Formative and Summative Divide

Providing formative assessment experiences for students is a growing practice that has many positive effects. Many teachers have been doing a wonderful job of learning formative assessment practices that have the intended benefit of providing teachers with information to adjust their instruction, and providing students with feedback on their learning so they can address their own learning gaps.

Throughout this book, we will uphold the vision of the formative assessment experts; however, we will challenge the way in which many of the formative assessment practices are actually implemented. Our intention is to introduce a new assessment model that successfully promotes healthy formative assessment practices that are *not* summative and a curriculum, instruction, and assessment structure that is flexible, progressive, and dynamic.

This book is designed to provide clarity regarding proficiency-based assessment and a professional development model to implement it with fidelity. In this chapter, we frame a summary of important elements of proficiency-based assessment and its relationship to teaching and learning, offering a synthesis to ensure communication is clear, consistent, and coherent. We hope this chapter will help *support* teachers and teacher leaders in learning, understanding, and implementing proficiency-based assessment. As the book progresses, we hope our work can also help institutionalize proficiency-based assessment in a way that builds on the good assessment work teachers, curriculum teams, and schools are already doing.

Recognizing the Need for Proficiency-Based Assessment

As we have worked within our own school and with teachers around North America, we have witnessed firsthand the important and significant changes that our profession is making with respect to testing and assessment. We are especially excited about the focus we see on developing more formative assessment experiences for students. At the same time, however, we have noticed that the conversation around formative and summative assessment is often reduced to generalities and catchphrases—“The difference between formative and summative is a lot like the difference between a CAT scan and an autopsy” or “The difference between a formative and summative assessment is in how the assessment gets used.” As we developed a commitment to formative assessment in our own school, we realized that if we hope to make significant and lasting change to current practices, we also need to change the conversation around assessment practices and teaching and learning. For assessment to drive instructional improvement and student learning in ways in which we hoped, we knew that we would need to move beyond the simple dichotomy of assessments as being either formative or summative.

Each and every day, educators are working tirelessly to move students through a guaranteed and viable curriculum (Marzano, 2003). However, the further we travel on this journey, we find ourselves lost in a labyrinth of new and different essential standards, objectives, and targets. If we are not careful, we can become easily confused by all of the jargon and terminology, and we can spend a lot of valuable time making wrong turns while spending countless hours developing curriculum frameworks, unit plans, and pacing guides.

Most schools and classrooms follow a fairly traditional curriculum, instruction, and assessment cycle. At some point near the start of the school year, teachers map the curriculum plan, and unit plans are developed and agreed on. Throughout the year, teachers implement instructional activities tied to the curriculum, and periodically, they assess students’ progress toward the curriculum standards and objectives. This traditional pattern of curriculum design, illustrated in figure 1.1, is often understood and implemented in a linear progression.



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graph LR; A[Develop Curriculum] --> B[Provide Instruction]; B --> C[Implement Assessment]
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Develop Curriculum → Provide Instruction → Implement Assessment

Figure 1.1: Traditional pacing layout for teaching.

We often hear teachers describe how in their experiences these three domains of their work are often applied as separate activities that don’t necessarily work in

concert with one another. This is certainly not new—historical practice and an ingrained way of thinking about curriculum, instruction, and assessment have, in many ways, married us to a view that teaching and learning is a series of separate elements, laid out on a linear time line.

To combat this traditional approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, many new ideas about instruction and assessment methods have emerged. Specifically, following the publication of the article “Inside the Black Box” (Black & Wiliam, 1998), formative assessment has become an accepted and essential tool in a teacher’s toolbox. While the benefits of formative assessment are many, we are finding that, more often than not, formative assessment is being interpreted as a separate and distinct experience from instruction that has the effect of perpetuating and simply extending the old linear progression of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as seen in figure 1.2.

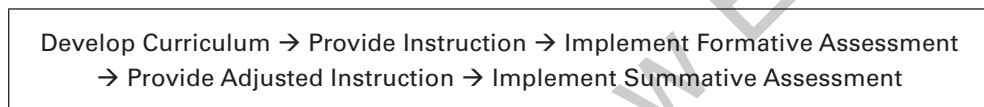


Figure 1.2: Traditional pacing layout for formative assessment implementation.

While this linear approach may feel natural and comfortable for some teachers, it creates learning gaps that both teachers and students can fall into. As it is difficult to do two things at once, teachers are often forced to choose between developing curriculum, providing instruction, implementing formative assessment, providing adjusted instruction, and implementing summative assessments. This forced choice causes formative assessment practices to go underutilized, be inappropriately applied, or both. The lines between formative and summative become blurred, and we find ourselves right back in a linear instructional model.

In some classrooms, teachers implement and students experience formative assessments in a manner that is similar to summative assessments. When this happens, teachers and students fall into teaching and learning gaps that force assessment to be thought of as a systematic verification or substantiation of learning. Therefore, assessment becomes a time-out from learning in order to verify learning. In this way, assessment pauses the learning process to see if learning has occurred or to prove learning has occurred.

While intending to provide formative feedback, teachers are often implementing formative assessment on the linear time line (figure 1.2). When teachers are *implementing* formative assessment, they are not really *facilitating* formative assessment experiences for students. When assessment becomes an *event*—something altogether different from students’ instructional experience and the teacher’s learning

intentions—we have lost the power of authentic and powerful formative assessment. Meaningful assessment experiences should be seamless and fully ingrained into instruction and students' learning experiences. Ideally, for the student, there would be no distinction; there would be no gap between the instructional and assessment experiences.

To achieve this ideal, assessment must be considered an instructional practice. As we discuss throughout this book, assessment, when done well, provides a unique and compelling portal through which to interact with students and their learning. We maintain that assessment is the *only* component in our teaching and learning practice that can simultaneously measure the rigor of the curriculum, prove the validity and effectiveness of instructional practice, promote authentic reflection, and calibrate and interpret student performance, learning, and achievement.

Understanding the Role of Proficiency

In the proficiency-based assessment model, we define proficiency as an intended state of competency that serves as a learning outcome. Since proficiency acts as *the* learning outcome and not as a *means to achieve* a learning outcome, a powerful balance among curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be realized. Identifying proficiency at the center of curriculum, instruction, and assessment has not been the traditional starting point for conversations among teachers when we dive into our curriculum work. In our experience, however, we have found great success when we are willing to rethink our traditional assumptions and we move proficiency-based assessment to the focus of our collaborative conversations and our teaching and learning practice. Utilizing proficiency-based assessment strategies supports teachers' efforts to bring harmony and congruence to their work on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and, most importantly, students experience the following benefits.

1. Students learn new strategies to reflect on their thinking and learning.
2. Students are more able to internalize feedback from others.
3. Students develop strategies to provide feedback on their own learning.
4. Students develop a more flexible knowledge around content and skills.

Proficiency-based assessment then becomes the process of creating, supporting, and monitoring student reflection and thought patterns to achieve an intended state of competency. It also allows us to assess whether the student is able to demonstrate proficiencies outlined in the curriculum and whether our instruction is facilitating learning.