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Ten Tips for Writing Common Formative Assessments

Posted by [Bill Ferriter](#) on Friday, 04/04/2014

One of my favorite books about assessing student learning is [Common Formative Assessment: A Toolkit for PLCs at Work](#) by Kim Bailey and Chris Jakicic.

In 140 pages, Bailey and Jakicic succeed in making a process that is fundamental to driving student learning -- and yet



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fundamentally intimidating to teachers -- approachable.

Each chapter is full of essential background knowledge and practical suggestions that helped me to feel more comfortable about what formative assessment should look like in my classroom.

Here's ten tips that I pulled from Common Formative Assessment that might help to strengthen the assessment practices of your learning teams:

Remember that getting information quickly and easily is essential. Assessment data is only valuable if (1). you are actually willing and able to collect it and (2). you can act on it in a timely manner. That simple truth should fundamentally change the way that you think about assessments.

Write your assessments and scoring rubrics together even if that means you initially deliver fewer common assessments.

Collaborative conversations about what to assess, how to assess and what mastery looks like in action are just as valuable as student data sets.

Assess ONLY the learning targets that you identified as essential. Assessing nonessential standards just makes it more difficult to get -- and to take action on -- information quickly and easily.

Ask at least 3 questions for each learning target that you are trying to test. That allows students to muffle a question and still demonstrate mastery. Just as importantly, that means a poorly written question won't ruin your data set.

Test mastery of no more than 3 or 4 learning targets per assessment. Doing so makes remediation after an assessment doable. Can you imagine trying to intervene when an assessment shows students who have struggled to master more than 4

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learning targets?

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Clearly tie every single question to an essential learning target. Doing so makes tracking mastery by student and standard possible. Your data sets have more meaning when you can spot patterns in mastery at the target -- instead of just the question -- level.

Choose assessment types that are appropriate for the content or skills that you are trying to measure. Using performance assessments to measure the mastery of basic facts is overkill. Similarly, using a slew of multiple choice questions to measure the mastery of complex thinking skills is probably going to come up short.

#sheeshArne

When writing multiple choice questions, use wrong answer choices to highlight common misconceptions. The patterns found in the WRONG answers of well-written tests can tell you just as much as the patterns found in the RIGHT answers. Fill your test with careless or comical distractors and you are missing out on an opportunity to learn more about your kids.

When writing constructed response questions, provide students with enough context to be able to answer the question. Context plays a vital role in constructing a meaningful response to any question.

Need proof? Find the parents of a teenage daughter who asks, "Can I go to the mall with some friends tonight?" How much you want to bet that they are going to ask a few questions before saying yes? I know I will!

[#sorryReecie](#)

Make sure that higher level questions ask students to apply knowledge and/or skills in

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new situations. A higher level question that asks kids to apply knowledge in the same way as they have practiced before becomes a lower level question really quickly.

The beautiful part of all of these tips, y'all, is that they are easy to understand AND easy to integrate into your process for developing common formative assessments.

So whaddya' waiting for?

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Jessica Cuthbertson commented on April 4, 2014 at 11:38am:

Tips and Tricks - ELA

Thanks, Bill for this handy list of tips and tricks for formative assessment creation and data collection (I feel like you just saved me both time and \$\$ on another professional read in my ever-growing stack! :)

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As an ELA teacher most of our assessments are constructed responses -- and while this gives us great information, they are somewhat more time consuming to grade and we have to be really careful in our question/prompt that we are assessing what we mean to assess (especially with respect to a critical reading skill that we're asking kids to demonstrate via writing when there may be a gap in between a student's reading/writing ability).

I love the first tip especially :), and think PLC's often forget this and make assessments so robust that by the time the data is collected and evaluated the teaching opportunity is lost. I also like the "3 question" rule as it's something I think we forget and students are penalized if it's a one-off, make-or-break question.

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Lisa Plichta commented on July 7, 2014 at 4:06pm:

Great tips!

Oddly, I don't recall learning the term "formative assessment" 15 years ago in my undergrad education program, nor was there training on how to compose effective tests. In the beginning, I simply (and blindly) used the tests provided by the textbook company, trusting that "they" knew what they were doing and went from there. Regardless of how my students performed on those tests, we moved on. Even when I began writing my own tests, I did them on my own, and based them on the only tests I had known.

Obviously, we are in a new place in education, but because of where I started, I have felt challenged and at times

overwhelmed by the notion of assessment--both formative and summative. Through professional development efforts at my school, we are now working collaboratively to understand and improve both types in order to drive instruction. I feel relieved to recognize that much of what I have been incorporating in class are tips included on your list above and I am encouraged by the ones I was unaware of. Thank you for sharing! I plan to pass this on.

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