**Formative Assessment Strategies for Every Classroom: An ASCD Action Tool, 2nd Edition**

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Section 1: What Is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment refers to the ongoing process students and teachers engage in when they

1. Focus on learning goals.
2. Take stock of where current work is in relation to the goal.
3. Take action to move closer to the goal.

The best formative assessment involves both students and teachers in a recursive process. It starts with the teacher, who models the process for the students. At first, the concept of what good work "looks like" belongs to the teacher. The teacher describes, explains, or demonstrates the concepts or skills to be taught, or assigns student investigations—reading assigned material, locating and reading materials to answer a question, doing activities or experiments—to put content into students' hands. For example, the teacher shares the aspects of a good descriptive paragraph and tells students how their work compares to the ideal. Gradually, students internalize the learning goals and become able to see the target themselves. They begin to be able to decide how close they are to it.

A student's self-assessment process marks the transition to independent learning. When students monitor their own learning and make some of their own decisions about what they need to do next, they are using metacognitive skills. These are important skills in their own right. Learning how to learn—that is, learning the metacognitive skills that will ultimately contribute to lifelong learning—begins with specific acts of self-assessment. Students learn how to monitor their own performance first with respect to specific learning goals they understand; for example, they learn to check sentences for specific comma faults or to check math problems for specific errors. These specific acts of self-assessment during the formative assessment process are critical building blocks as well as strategies for achieving the immediate learning goals. Gradually, students begin to be able to monitor more and more aspects of their work at once.

This process is the essence of learning—the continuous process of assessing one's own mastery of content and skills, and discerning and pursuing next steps to move forward toward a goal. The goal may exist only as an objective in a teacher's lesson or unit plan at first, but as students focus on their work, see and monitor their progress, and understand both *what* they are learning and *how* they learn, they become full participants in formative assessment and true learners.

**Not For Grading**

Formative assessment is *not* used for grading. Students need—and deserve—an opportunity to learn before they are graded on how well they have learned. Formative assessment is used before instruction, to find out where students are, and during instruction, to find out how they are progressing. The fact that the results of formative assessment are not used for grading makes it even more useful for learning, especially for less-able students. They are free to pay attention to figuring out how they are doing and what they need to work on without worrying about a grade. There is some evidence that good students use all information, including graded work, formatively. This is not the case for students who experience negative feelings after failure. These feelings get in the way of processing additional information about their learning. For such students, the value of feedback is lost, overshadowed by the low grade.

Some experts call assessment before instruction "diagnostic" assessment and reserve the term "formative" for assessment during instruction. Others use "diagnostic" to mean the kind of assessment that, whenever it occurs, gives information to teachers to inform specific lesson plans, the main idea being that diagnostic assessment identifies student weaknesses for teachers to address. Because an important aspect of formative assessment is that both teachers and students use the information, this action tool will use the term "formative assessment" to mean collecting any information, before or during instruction, that can be shared with students and used for improvement.

**The Relationship Between Formative And Summative Assessment**

Formative and summative assessment should both serve the same learning goals. This is how they are connected. The assessments students use as they develop, practice, and learn should be based on the same knowledge and skills they will ultimately demonstrate for a grade.

Formative assessments give a teacher information about how long to "form" and when to "sum." Some students simply need more practice than others to master knowledge or skills. If formative assessment information says students' work is close to the learning target, those students obviously don't need as much practice and are ready to demonstrate achievement on a summative assessment. Such students can then be given enrichment work related to the learning target or use their time for some other work.

Formative assessment information can come from questioning and discussion with students, from their work (quizzes, assignments, homework), or from direct observation of students doing their work. The tools in this manual are designed to help with this exchange of information by focusing students on aspects of their work and putting those observations on paper where they are easy to see and discuss. When students and teachers routinely share information about the quality of student work relative to the learning targets, learning improves.

In *Understanding by Design*, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) show how formative assessment is an essential part of teaching and learning. They emphasize planning instruction and assessment around desired understandings. These desired understandings are the learning targets that should focus both formative and summative observations.

**Benefits of Formative Assessment**

Research on the use of formative assessment has shown that when teachers practice good formative assessment and students participate in it, both achievement and motivation increase.

The effects of good formative assessment on achievement can be as much as .4 to .7 standard deviations, the equivalent of moving from the 50th percentile to the 65th or 75th percentile on a standardized test. These effects exist at all levels—primary, intermediate, and secondary—and are especially noticeable among lower achievers.

The reasons for these effects are numerous. Formative assessment helps identify what students can do with help and what they can do independently. Participating in formative assessment involves students in active learning, keeps them on task, and focuses them on learning goals. Formative assessment, especially peer evaluation and self-evaluation, helps students with the social construction of knowledge. But more important, formative assessment allows students to receive feedback on precisely what they need to do to improve. It shows them what to do next to get better.

**Motivational Benefits**

The effects of formative assessment on motivation are a little more complicated. Feedback is a message, so the effect depends not only on the information itself but also on the characteristics of the people who send (teachers) and receive (students) the message. One student may hear a helpful, clear description of how to improve a paper with gratitude, while another may hear the same feedback as just another confirmation of how stupid he is. Covington (1992) talked about "motivational equity," saying that while no two children come to school with equal academic abilities and backgrounds, there is no reason that they should not all have access to equally motivational feedback. The trick is to find out what is motivating for each student. When it's right, it's the best part of teaching and learning. As one teacher said, "To our students it's personal. We are influencing their learning process."

Student self-assessment satisfies both motivational and achievement needs. Students who can size up their work, figure out how close they are to their goal, and plan what they need to do to improve are, in fact, learning as they do that. Carrying out their plans for improvement not only makes their work better but helps them feel in control, and that is motivating. This process, called self-regulation, has been found to be a characteristic of successful, motivated learners.

Student use of formative assessment varies according to students' developmental levels. Younger children can and should participate in evaluating their own work, but they need to be taught how to do that. Research suggests that younger children may focus only on neatness and other surface characteristics of work when they first do self-evaluation. With instruction and practice, however, they learn to focus on the learning target.

Students also have individual differences in their preferences for and use of teacher feedback. Some students may need instruction about how to use feedback and how to do self-assessment. Students who have never experienced self-assessment may at first claim that feedback is solely "the teacher's job." Research suggests, however, that once students realize that information from both teacher feedback and their own self-assessment can help them improve, they will process material more deeply, persist longer, and try harder. In short, they will become more self-regulated learners.

For unsuccessful learners, feedback must deal with negative feelings first, to break the cycle of failure. For these students, formative assessment can help identify specific next steps they can take to do better. Once the students see they are making progress toward achievement, they are more likely to think it is worthwhile to continue. Thus, for unsuccessful students, formative feedback should begin with statements of accomplishment and small, doable steps for improvement.

**References**

Covington, M. V. (1992). *Making the grade: A self-worth perspective on motivation and school reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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