

Formative assessment: An enabler of learning

Formative assessment can be a powerful day-to-day tool for teachers and pupils. [Margaret Heritage](#) explains

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT is often misconstrued. Routinely, it is conceptualised as a “test” or an “instrument” that is more fine-grained and administered more frequently than other types of assessment. This formulation misses its documented power for improving pupil learning. When formative assessment is conceived as a practice implemented by teachers, in collaboration with their pupils, then its promise as an enabler rather than an evaluator of learning can be realised.

The essential purpose of formative assessment as a practice is to move pupils’ learning forward while their learning is still in the process of developing. This stands in contrast to other forms of assessment, which evaluate learning after a period of teaching. Formative assessment practice operates as a feedback loop in which both teachers and pupils can play active, distinctive, yet complementary roles in enabling learning by consistently working to build and consolidate pupil understanding and skills during the course of a lesson.

The teacher’s role

Formative assessment is only effective when teachers are clear about the intended learning goals for a lesson. This means focusing on what pupils will learn, as opposed to what they will do, which is often where teachers are tempted to start. To achieve maximum transparency for pupils, teachers share the learning goal, or actively create it with pupils, at the beginning of the lesson. In addition, teachers communicate the indicators of progress toward the learning goal or determine them in collaboration with the class. These indicators serve as signposts for both teachers and pupils about progress during the lesson.

With clarity about the goal and indicators, teachers can then decide how they will gather evidence of emergent learning. There is no single way to collect formative evidence because formative assessment is not a specific kind of test. For example, teachers can gather evidence through interactions with pupils, observations of their tasks and activities, or analysis of their work products. However, there are two important points about evidence collection. First, whatever method teachers use to elicit evidence of learning, it should yield information that is actionable by them and their pupils. Second, evidence collection is a

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systematic process and needs to be planned so that teachers have a constant stream of information tied to indicators of progress. At the same time, of course, teachers will also be collecting evidence ad hoc – those unplanned, spontaneous moments when pupils do or say something that give an indication of where they are in relation to the lesson goal.

Feedback

Feedback is a crucial component of formative assessment, and has two aspects. First, feedback obtained from planned or spontaneous evidence is an essential resource for teachers to shape new learning through adjustments in their teaching. If teachers use evidence effectively to inform their teaching, it will render previous



assessment information out of date: pupil learning will have progressed and will need to be assessed again. Teaching can again be adjusted to make sure that learning is on track. For this reason, a constant stream of evidence from formative assessment is necessary during lessons.

Second, feedback that the teacher provides to pupils is also an essential resource so the pupils can take active steps to advance their own learning. In reality, the feedback to pupils can be understood as teaching action. As the extensive literature on feedback suggests, teacher feedback is most beneficial when it assists pupils to understand their current learning status and provides hints, suggestions, or cues for them to act on. It is this, rather than offering general praise or total solutions, that enables pupils to assume a degree of responsibility for their learning.

The teacher’s role also involves helping pupils develop the skills to make metacognitive judgments about their learning in relation to the goal being aimed for, and to establish a repertoire of strategies to regulate their own learning.

The pupils’ role

The pupils’ role in formative assessment begins when they have a clear conception of the learning target. Just as the teacher is



What we know

- Formative assessment is not a kind of test.
- Formative assessment practice, when implemented effectively, can have powerful effects on learning.
- Formative assessment involves teachers making adjustments to their teaching based on evidence collected, and providing students with feedback that helps them advance their learning.
- Students participate in the practice of formative assessment through self- and peer-assessment.

collecting evidence in relation to the goal, so too are the pupils through self-assessment, a separate, but complementary feedback process. In self-assessment pupils engage in metacognitive activity, a hallmark of effective learning. Metacognitive activity involves pupils in thinking about their own learning while they are learning. In this process, they are generating internal feedback that tells them when they need to make adjustments to their learning strategies. These adjustments might include, for example, drawing a diagram to help in the understanding of a mathematical problem, or determining that

more research is needed to be able to analyse historical events, or re-reading a text to clarify the meaning.

The pupils' role ideally also includes peer-assessment. In peer-assessment, pupils give feedback to their classmates that is intended to be constructive and help them make progress towards the lesson goal. Peers assess each other's learning against the same indicators that they use to check on their own learning when they are engaged in self-assessment. Peer feedback has a number of advantages both for those pupils providing the feedback and for those receiving it. It involves thinking about learning and can deepen pupils' understanding of their own learning goal and progress indicators in the context of someone else's work.

The final point about the pupils' role in formative assessment is that they actually use the feedback. It is important that pupils have to both reflect on their learning and use the feedback to advance learning. One teacher summed up the changes she made to ensure that this time was preserved in her lessons:

"I used to do more but now I do less. Now I work hard to save time for student reflection rather than filling every minute [of the lesson] with activity."

Overall, the feedback loop is fuelled by three convergent sources of feedback: from teachers, peers, and the pupils themselves. However, the successful provision and use of this feedback is dependent on the nature of the classroom climate in which the learning is taking place.

Classroom climate

An essential aspect of formative assessment is classroom climate. Three particular elements are key. First, power and responsibility in the classroom is not just the teacher's prerogative, but is distributed so that teachers and pupils work together to share responsibility for learning. Second, the classroom has to be a safe place. Pupils must be able to ask for help, regard errors as sources of new learning, and admit difficulties or problems without fearing that these actions will diminish them in the eyes of their teachers or their peers. Instead, they need to know that such behaviours are desirable and are characteristic of effective learners. Finally, it means that the relationships in the classroom must be supportive and collaborative, characterised by mutual trust among teachers and pupils.

Conclusion

The important thing about formative assessment is that it is not a test, nor an instrument, but rather an approach to teaching and learning that uses feedback as its centrepiece in a supportive classroom context. Formative assessment is a practice that empowers teachers and pupils to give their best to enable learning. In the end, the success of formative assessment as an enabler of learning depends on the knowledge and skills of teachers to implement this approach in collaboration with their pupils, not on test developers.

About the author

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Further reading

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Hattie J and Timperly H (2007), The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77, 81–112.