

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

From Chapter 1 of *Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom*

When teachers join forces with their students in the formative assessment process, their partnership generates powerful learning outcomes. Teachers become more effective, students actively engage to become assessment-capable, and both become intentional learners.

We can use the metaphor of a windmill to visualize the formative assessment process and its effects. Just as a windmill intentionally harnesses the power of moving air to generate energy, the formative assessment process helps students intentionally harness the workings of their own minds to generate motivation to learn. Propelled by the formative assessment process, students understand and use learning targets, set their own learning goals, select effective learning strategies, and assess and regulate their own learning progress. As students develop into more confident and competent learners, they become motivated and “energized” to learn, increasingly able to persist during demanding tasks and regulate their own efforts and actions when they tackle new learning challenges.

When a windmill whirls into action, its individual blades seem to disappear. The same thing happens to the six elements of the formative assessment process. These interrelated elements are the following:

- Shared learning targets and criteria for success
- Feedback that feeds learning forward
- Student self-assessment and peer assessment
- Student goal setting
- Strategic teacher questioning
- Student engagement in asking effective questions

As teachers and students actively and intentionally engage in learning, the individual elements unite in a flurry of cognitive activity, working together interdependently. Their power comes from their combined efforts.

What Is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment is an active and intentional learning process that partners the teacher and the students to continuously and systematically gather evidence of learning with the express goal of improving student achievement. Intentional learning refers to cognitive processes that have learning as a goal rather than an incidental outcome (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989). Teachers and their students actively and intentionally engage in the formative assessment process when they work together to do the following (Brookhart, 2006):

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

The primary purpose of formative assessment is to improve learning, not merely to grade or to audit it. It is assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning. Formative assessment is both an "instructional tool" that teachers and students "use while learning is occurring" and "an accountability tool to determine if learning has occurred" (National Education Association, 2003, p. 3). In other words, to be "formative," assessments must inform the decisions that teachers and students make minute by minute in the classroom. Figure 1.1 compares the characteristics of formative assessment and summative assessment.

Figure 1.1. Characteristics of Formative and Summative Assessment

Formative Assessment (Assessment <i>for</i> Learning)	Summative Assessment (Assessment <i>of</i> Learning)
Purpose: To improve learning and achievement	Purpose: To measure or audit attainment
Carried out while learning is in progress—day to day, minute by minute	Carried out from time to time to create snapshots of what has happened
Focused on the learning process and the learning progress	Focused on the products of learning
Viewed as an integral part of the teaching-learning process	Viewed as something separate, an activity performed after the teaching-learning cycle
Collaborative: Teachers and students know where they are headed, understand the learning needs, and use assessment information as feedback to guide them and adapt what they do to meet those needs.	Teacher-directed: Teachers assign what the students must do and then evaluate how well they complete the assignment.
Fluid: An ongoing process influenced by student need and teacher feedback	Rigid: An unchanging measure of what the student achieved

Formative Assessment (Assessment <i>for</i> Learning)	Summative Assessment (Assessment <i>of</i> Learning)
Teachers and students adopt the role of intentional learners.	Teachers adopt the role of auditors, and students assume the role of the audited.
Teachers and students use the evidence they gather to make adjustments for continuous improvement.	Teachers use the results to make final "success or failure" decisions about a relatively fixed set of instructional activities.

Here are some examples of the formative assessment process in the classroom:

- A teacher asks students in her 6th-grade social studies class to form pairs to generate three strategic questions that will help them better meet their learning target of describing how erosion has produced physical patterns on the Earth's surface that have affected human activities.
- Before a lesson on creating a family budget, a consumer science teacher states the learning target for the lesson and asks the students to paraphrase it.
- In a high school English class, students use a rubric they generated as a class to plan their essays, monitor their writing, and edit their drafts to meet the success criteria for a high-quality essay.
- A teacher gives a 1st-grade student feedback on what she did correctly in her attempt to draw the life cycle of a frog. Then, the teacher gives the student a strategy to use to improve the accuracy of her drawing before she turns in her final sketch.
- A middle school student decides to use a story map to plan his short story depicting life in the Victorian era. It will help him reach his goal of improving the organization and sequencing of his story.

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<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/120005/chapters/The-Lay-of-The-Land@-Essential-Elements-of-the-Formative-Assessment-Process.aspx>