FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Making It Happen in the Classroom

MARGARET HERITAGE

Foreword by James W. Stigler

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1 Introduction

This book is about the everyday work of teachers in classrooms. It is intended for teachers and for those who support the work of teachers, and it is about making formative assessment practice an integral part of the classroom, any classroom—elementary, middle, or high school—and in any subject area: the arts, social studies, math, language arts, science, physical education, design and technology, and so on. The book is also intended for all teachers, regardless of their stage of implementing formative assessment. Those teachers who are just beginning to think about formative assessment—why do it and what it looks like in practice—will be able to use the book as a starting point, while those who are further along in implementing formative assessment in their classrooms can use it to refine and develop their knowledge and skills further.

BRIDGING THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

For some readers of this book, the idea of formative assessment will require a paradigm shift. For those who think effective teaching is all about a stand-and-deliver approach, where teachers lecture to students to "give" them the knowledge they need and then test them to make sure they have "got it," then the contents of this book will represent a considerable shift in thinking about how to do business in the classroom. For others, it will be a less dramatic change. Whatever perspective readers bring, bear in mind that this book is about research into practice, not just a collection of "cool" ideas about teaching and learning.

The book builds bridges between the theory and research about formative assessment and its actual practice in the classroom. The theoretical and research base is wide and deep. It ranges from Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's now famous 1998 review of studies of formative assessment, to literature on the effects of feedback on learning, to the role that assessment can play in motivation and self-regulation. The book translates this theory and research into actual classroom practice. For the most part, the practices described are those of current teachers with varying levels of experience and

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who are at various stages of implementation. The examples of practice from these teachers are not intended as "counsels of perfection," but rather as examples readers can reflect on and learn from as they think about formative assessment in the classroom.

Any and all of the teachers represented in this book would say they are committed to formative assessment as a way to improve teaching and learning. They would also say they recognize assessment and the teaching process as inseparable; one cannot happen without the other. They would most likely comment that the skillful use of formative assessment is not something acquired overnight. Instead, it is a long process of learning, trying things out, and reviewing and refining—in short, of continuously engaging in a process of reflective practice. These teachers would also say that they are willing to change what they do, willing to take risks and make mistakes they can learn from, and willing to learn with, and from, their colleagues.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 introduces formative assessment as a process and describes the elements of the process that are the focus of subsequent chapters. It is a process of formative assessment that is applicable to all classrooms in all subject areas. The theoretical and research base underpinning each element is described in terms of the contribution that each one makes to improved student learning.

Chapter 3 takes the broad view and focuses on where formative assessment fits within the big assessment picture. The chapter addresses a range of assessment sources available to teachers, all of which have a particular purpose and can be used in different ways to support curriculum planning, teaching, and learning. It locates formative assessment as the assessment closest to daily teaching and learning in classrooms.

In Chapter 4, the focus is on learning progressions, learning goals, and criteria for success. Learning goals and success criteria drive the entire formative assessment process and need to be clearly articulated by teachers and clearly understood by students. The chapter draws from a paper on learning progressions by Heritage (2007) and stresses the importance of having clear conceptions of learning in place from which teachers can identify learning goals and success criteria. The central message of the chapter is the importance of identifying the learning goal first (rather than the activities, which teachers may be tempted to do) from the learning progression, and then specifying the criteria for success. Selecting formative assessment strategies to match the goals and criteria can only be done when the goals and criteria are clearly identified.

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Chapter 5 deals with selecting formative assessment strategies, interpreting evidence from formative assessment, and how the interpretation of evidence leads to instructional action. In a seminal paper in 1989, D. Royce Sadler established the essential purpose of formative assessment as the means to identify the "gap" between a learner's current status in learning and some desired educational goal. This chapter shows how teachers can use formative assessment strategies to close the gap and keep learning moving forward. The chapter also treats the evidence that teachers get from formative assessment as feedback for teaching, that is, feedback they can use to feed forward into instructional planning.

In their review of studies of formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998b) concluded that when formative assessment is combined with quality feedback, improvements in learning occur. Chapter 6 considers the feedback that students receive externally from their teachers and peers, and internally through their own self-monitoring during the course of learning. The chapter describes the contribution of external feedback to learning, what kind of feedback is effective and what is not, and provides plenty of examples of feedback. The chapter also considers the effects of self-assessment on learning and the skills students need to successfully engage in this activity.

Implementing formative assessment requires teachers to have specific knowledge and skills, and Chapter 7 focuses on what these are. It begins with a discussion of the kind of classroom culture teachers need to establish for formative assessment, and then details the knowledge and skills needed for formative assessment. Among the knowledge is content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge of what psychologists call metacognition. The diverse range of skills teachers need include interpreting evidence, matching instruction to the learning needs to close the gap, and skills in providing feedback to students that move learning forward. In addition to specifying the requisite skills and knowledge, the chapter also offers suggestions about how they can be developed.

Teachers cannot develop the skillful use of formative assessment on their own. They need the help of colleagues and administrators. The final chapter of the book, coauthored with Caroline Wylie from the Educational Testing Service, builds on Chapter 7 by examining specific structures and practices that can be established within a school to help teachers develop and deepen formative assessment in their classroom. The chapter also addresses the kind of leadership that administrators need to provide, and that teachers should expect, to ensure they have the necessary support to engage in the work.

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CHANGES IN PRACTICE

As already noted, for many teachers implementing the process of formative assessment in their classrooms will require some change in how the business of teaching and learning is conducted. For some, the change will be significant; for others less so—but some change will happen, for sure. This book is about and for teachers who engage in reflection and ongoing professional learning to make changes in what they do to benefit their students. We end this introductory chapter with some of those teachers' voices, specifically the voices of teachers from Syracuse City School District in New York, who have been working intensively for the past two years to become skillful users of formative assessment in their classrooms. Here they reflect on their journey:

Erin: Formative assessment makes my teaching much more efficient. I'm not teaching the unit for two months because they're still not getting it! Some units we've taught in the past that we've talked about today took us *weeks* and *weeks* to teach. Now they're taking us two weeks and everyone's getting it! . . . Our whole room is improving. We still have kids who are struggling, but they've made progress on that learning progression.

Maryanne: Formative assessment is not more work, it's better work.

Sharon: I used to do more, but now I do less. Because so much evidence is gathered with formative assessment, I may do two or three very targeted tasks in an 80-minute class rather than "lots of good stuff." Now I work hard to save time for student reflection rather than filling every minute with activity. I take every opportunity to assess my students in various, formative ways. I'm not asking them for three of four different pieces of paper at the end of class so I can tell them if they "got it." Now, they may only produce one piece of written evidence in their learning; I have other ways of assessing them now that can inform me of where they are throughout the lesson. I can address misconceptions more quickly and push their learning farther with timely feedback.

Shawn: I used to do a lot of *explaining,* but now I do a lot of *questioning*. I used to do *a lot of talking,* but now I do *a lot of listening*. I use to think *about teaching the curriculum,* but now I think *about teaching the student*.

(Shawn's emphases)

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Melanie: I used to think that formative assessment was just the assessment teachers use to figure out if students understood the lesson or not, but I now think that formative assessment is a process which is a series of planning, reflection, and feedback by the teacher and the student. This process seems to be something I have been missing from my own teaching.

Sharon: I feel like formative assessment has helped me enter into a partnership with students with regard to learning. It has helped me demystify the classroom for kids. The transparency that sharing learning goals and success criteria creates allows for so much growth for both teacher and student. The students know I am there because I have a goal for them to reach and I want them to succeed. They also know I take every opportunity (written work, conversations, response boards . . .) to gather evidence of what they know. Formative assessment has not only changed me as a teacher, but I believe it has changed the students as learners.

Enjoy the journey!

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