

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment refers to a wide variety of methods that teachers use to conduct in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or course. Formative assessments help teachers identify concepts that students are struggling to understand, skills they are having difficulty acquiring, or learning standards they have not yet achieved so that adjustments can be made to lessons, instructional techniques, and academic support. The general goal of formative assessment is to collect detailed information that can be used to improve instruction and student learning *while it's happening*. What makes an assessment “formative” is not the design of a test, technique, or self-evaluation, per se, but the way it is used—i.e., to inform in-process teaching and learning modifications.

Formative assessments are commonly contrasted with summative assessments, which are used to evaluate student learning progress and achievement at the conclusion of a specific instructional period—usually at the end of a project, unit, course, semester, program, or school year. In other words, formative assessments are *for* learning, while summative assessments are *of* learning. Or as assessment expert Paul Black put it, “When the cook tastes the soup, that’s formative assessment. When the customer tastes the soup, that’s summative assessment.” It should be noted, however, that the distinction between *formative* and *summative* is often fuzzy in practice, and educators may hold divergent interpretations of and options on the subject.

Many educators and experts believe that formative assessment is an integral part of effective teaching. In contrast with most summative assessments, which are deliberately set apart from instruction, formative assessments are integrated into the teaching and learning process. For example, a formative-assessment technique could be as simple as a teacher asking students to raise their hands if they feel they have understood a newly introduced concept, or it could be as sophisticated as having students complete a self-assessment of their own writing (typically using a rubric outlining the criteria) that the teacher then reviews and comments on. While formative assessments help teachers identify learning needs and problems, in many cases the assessments also help students develop a stronger understanding of their own academic strengths and weaknesses. When students know what they do well and what they need to work harder on, it can help them take greater responsibility over their own learning and academic progress.

While the same assessment technique or process could, in theory, be used for either formative or summative purposes, many summative assessments are unsuitable for formative purposes because they do not provide useful feedback. For example, standardized test scores may not be available to teachers for months after their students take the test (so the results cannot be used to modify lessons or teaching and better prepare students), or the assessments may not be specific or fine-grained enough to give teachers and students the detailed information they need to improve.

The following are a few representative examples of formative assessments:

Questions that teachers pose to individual students and groups of students during the learning process to determine what specific concepts or skills they may be having trouble with. A wide variety of intentional questioning strategies may be employed, such as phrasing questions in specific ways to elicit more useful responses.

Specific, detailed, and constructive feedback that teachers provide on student work, such as journal entries, essays, worksheets, research papers, projects, ungraded quizzes, lab results, or works of art, design, and performance. The feedback may be used to revise or improve a work product, for example.

“Exit slips” or “exit tickets” that quickly collect student responses to a teacher’s questions at the end of a lesson or class period. Based on what the responses indicate, the teacher can then modify the next lesson to address concepts that students have failed to comprehend or skills they may be struggling with. “Admit slips” are a similar strategy used at the beginning of a class or lesson to determine what students have retained from previous learning experiences.

Self-assessments that ask students to think about their own learning process, to reflect on what they do well or struggle with, and to articulate what they have learned or still need to learn to meet course expectations or learning standards.

Peer assessments that allow students to use one another as learning resources. For example, “work shopping” a piece of writing with classmates is one common form of peer assessment, particularly if students follow a rubric or guidelines provided by a teacher.

In addition to the reasons addressed above, educators may also use formative assessment to:

Refocus students on the learning process and its intrinsic value, rather than on grades or extrinsic rewards.

Encourage students to build on their strengths rather than fixate or dwell on their deficits. (For a related discussion, see [growth mindset](#).)

Help students become more aware of their learning needs, strengths, and interests so they can take greater responsibility over their own educational growth. For example, students may learn how to self-assess their own progress and self-regulate their behaviors.

Give students more detailed, precise, and useful information. Because grades and test scores only provide a general impression of academic achievement, usually at the completion of an instructional period, formative feedback can help to clarify and calibrate learning expectations for both students and parents. Students gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of them, and parents have more detailed information they can use to more effectively support their child’s education.

Raise or accelerate the educational achievement of all students, while also reducing learning gaps and achievement gaps.

Reform

While the formative-assessment concept has only existed since the 1960s, educators have arguably been using “formative assessments” in various forms since the invention of teaching. As an intentional school-improvement strategy, however, formative assessment has received growing attention from educators and researchers in recent decades. In fact, it is now widely considered to be one of the more effective instructional strategies used by teachers, and there is a growing body of literature and academic research on the topic.

Schools are now more likely to encourage or require teachers to use formative-assessment strategies in the classroom, and there are a growing number of professional-development opportunities available to educators on the subject. Formative assessments are also integral components of personalized learning and other educational strategies designed to tailor lessons and instruction to the distinct learning needs and interests of individual students.

Debate

While there is relatively little disagreement in the education community about the utility of formative assessment, debates or disagreements may stem from differing interpretations of the term. For example, some educators believe the term is loosely applied to forms of assessment that are not “truly” formative, while others believe that formative assessment is rarely used appropriately or effectively in the classroom.

Another common debate is whether formative assessments can or should be graded. Many educators contend that formative assessments can only be considered truly formative when they are ungraded and used exclusively to improve student learning. If grades are assigned to a quiz, test, project, or other work product, the reasoning goes, they become de facto summative assessments—i.e., the act of assigning a grade turns the assessment into a performance evaluation that is documented in a student’s academic record, as opposed to a diagnostic strategy used to improve student understanding and preparation before they are given a graded test or assignment.

Some educators also make a distinction between “pure” formative assessments—those that are used on a daily basis by teachers while they are instructing students—and “interim” or “benchmark” assessments, which are typically periodic or quarterly assessments used to determine where students are in their learning progress or whether they are on track to meeting expected learning standards. While some educators may argue that any assessment method that is used diagnostically could be considered formative, including interim assessments, others contend that these two forms of assessment should remain distinct, given that different strategies, techniques, and professional development may be required.

Some proponents of formative assessment also suspect that testing companies mislabel and market some interim standardized tests as “formative” to capitalize on and profit from the popularity of the idea. Some observers express skepticism that commercial or prepackaged products can be authentically formative, arguing that formative assessment is a sophisticated instructional technique, and to do it well requires both a first-hand understanding of the students being assessed and sufficient training and professional development.

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