

## **Scenarios on the Use of Formative Classroom Assessment**

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While the research on the use of formative assessments is compelling, the practice seems mindboggling and overwhelming to well-intentioned teachers. Popular retorts arise when a staff is encouraged to begin using more formative assessments: "How could I do that? We don't have that much time for each unit of instruction;" or "If I don't grade it, kids won't do it;" or "But if I did that, then I'd have to be prepared to differentiate based on the results, and that would be a consistent management nightmare." Despite these seemingly insurmountable roadblocks, teachers across North America have heeded the research and are discovering incredibly successful ways incorporate formative assessments into their curriculum, instruction, and assessment design efforts.

To begin, it is important to clarify that everything students might say, do, or create has the potential to be formative because it can provide information about how much they understand (Leahy, Lyon, Marnie, and William, 2005), which helps us diagnose student needs, plan the next steps of instruction, and facilitate student learning and improvement. The challenge in good formative assessment is to see how we can best utilize the key processes and student information that is already at our disposal. The following scenarios are offered as a 'picture' of what it could look like. Each of the scenarios has the capacity to be used in any educational setting, K – 12, post – secondary, etc.

### **Formative Assessments with Tests**

#### *Scenario 1 – The Pretest*

In Mr. Jacques's classroom, the learning targets are posted on the classroom wall. Each week, Mr. Jacques points to the chart of targets and reminds the students of which targets they are currently working to master. Each time he begins a new unit of instruction, Mr. Jacques creates a pretest and he posts the relevant learning targets at the front of top of the pretest. The pretest is set up so that each learning target is listed as the 'header' to that section of questions; students always know how the questions they are asked to answer connect to the targets for that section. Mr. Jacques then gathers the data from the pretest by individual student for EACH target of the assessment. He uses the information he gathers to differentiate his process, products, and content throughout the unit of instruction. Students in his classroom maintain a portfolio with a list of their learning targets (mirror image of the poster on the wall) on the front cover of the portfolio. They keep their pretest results in their portfolios and work to gather evidence that they are mastering the targets and are ready for the summative assessment.

#### *Scenario 2 – The Review*

Two days prior to a final test for a unit, Señora Muñoz creates 'laundry day' in her classroom during which students prepare to 'clean up' whatever it is they still might not understand. On that day, students enter the classroom to find different laundry jugs in 4 corners of the room. Each jug represents a different stage in their level of readiness for the test:

- **Tide** – students select this detergent if they believe the tidal wave of information might drown them. In the Tide corner the learning activities involve a comprehensive review of the information and/or an activity that might help the learners experience the information in a different way. Students from the Cheer group often times hang out here to mentor and find creative ways to represent the information that their peers might better understand.
- **Gain** – students select this detergent if they understand the basics of the concepts taught, but seem to be missing some of the nuances or finer details. Learning activities in this corner involve investigation as students identify the details around which they are unsure and then examine the text, homework examples, internet sources and other classroom resources to gain their answers.
- **Bold** – students select this detergent if they are fairly confident they will pass the unit exam, but still have a few niggling questions. Often times, Bold activities involve creating possible review activities for future classes or test questions for the teacher to

consider and then challenging each other, as they might in a game show, with completing their own activities.

- **Cheer** – students select this detergent if they are certain they will be successful on the exam. Cheer activities involve enrichment activities to extend and refine their learning. One such activity involves helping the students in the Tide section. Interestingly, a majority of the students in this category select the option of helping those in the Tide category.

Using their homework as 'evidence' as to where they belong, students select the appropriate corner and move toward the laundry jug where they find the appropriate worksheets or activities or instructions to support their continued growth. Students work on these activities for two days and then they take the test. Because "laundry day" is an established practice in Señora Muñoz's classroom, students come prepared with an understanding of which jug they will visit for that particular unit of study and they get right to work with addressing the responsibilities laid out for that detergent. None of the work generated in these few days 'counts' in the gradebook and students readily accept the opportunity to increase their chances of success on the test.

#### *Scenario 3 – Goal setting (after the test)*

When Mr. Fabri returns scored tests back to his students, he always engages them in a self-analysis of their results. Students identify which learning targets they mastered on the test and which learning targets they did not master. Students then select the target areas requiring their attention and create a learning goal and plan of action to address their gaps. Students are welcome to partner with others who are still trying to master those same learning targets. In their plan of action, students identify their own learning exercises or activities that will help them master the content and ultimately 'prove' their readiness to retake that part of the exam (e.g. some additional practice questions from the text book or worksheets). With their goal statement and new evidence of learning in hand, students 'qualify' to retake the relevant part(s) of the test. Students do not retake the entire test (unless needed) and the part(s) of the test that they do retake will offer different test questions that link directly to the target area in question. Unless the majority of the class requires additional time and support, Mr. Fabri continues moving forward to the next unit, and those retaking parts of the test either conduct their work as 'extra' homework on their own, or they visit his classroom before or after school for additional help.

#### *Scenario 4 – The Final before the Final*

Ms. O'Malley gives her final exam two weeks in advance of the end of the term. Those students who do not pass the exam then spend the next two weeks identifying and closing their gaps as they prepare to retake the test (different test, same learning targets). Those students who pass the exam, move to enrichment activities. To her surprise and delight, many students who pass the exam the first time choose to coach a student who did not pass as their extended learning opportunity.

### **Formative Assessments as Quizzes**

#### *Scenario 5 – Multiple Quizzes*

In each unit of study, Ms. Weiss gives 4 un-graded quizzes. The quizzes are scaffolded sequentially to 'build up' to student success on the unit test. The quizzes are scored (though not included in the unit grade) so that students can identify where they need more study and where they are already successful, and so that Ms. Weiss can continue to gauge where she will need to spend more time and energy with her instruction to help students be successful on the unit test. Using this approach, Ms. Weiss has been able to document significant gains in student achievement in her classroom, nearly closing the achievement gap entirely with 96% - 98% achievement ratings in all of her units of study.

#### *Scenario 6 – Monday Quizzes*

A team of teachers has agreed to give a quick 5-point quiz every Monday aimed at the targets of their learning for that week of study. At the end of the day, the team gathers to sort all of the student quizzes from their various classrooms into 3 piles: 1) students clearly don't understand it; 2) students clearly understand it; and 3) it remains unclear if students understand it. At that

point, team members select one of the piles and create a series of learning activities or experiences to support the learners represented in that pile. On Tuesday, teachers reenter their classrooms with 3 differentiated options in their hands and students discover the activities they are to accomplish that week relative to their learning needs. In this scenario, students remained in their individual classrooms and teachers monitored all 3 groups at once. (Variation: In some cases, if schedules align, students move to different classrooms for the week based on their learning needs.) The team of teachers moves about the room throughout the week with student names on their clipboards and monitor student changes in learning readiness with a + (student has it), - (student still does not have it) and ? (still questionable). The team touches base quickly at the end of each day for quick problem solving to help the learners in their room who are not mastering the content prior to Friday's summative assessment.

### **Formative Assessments as Homework**

#### *Scenario 7 – Homework that Varies*

Ms. Zargapour has discovered that reteaching something that was learned incorrectly the first time is more challenging than starting from the point of questions. Each day then, when she assigns homework, she establishes 3 pathways: "I'm going to assign 10 problems tonight. If you are doing the homework and at the end of 10 problems you are confident that you have mastered the content, then go ahead and generate 3 questions you think I should use on the test to check your learning. If you are doing the homework and you are not certain you have them all right, then try 3 – 5 more problems and see if you can figure it out. But, if you are doing the homework and you are frustrated and confused, then stop answering the problems and instead create a list of your questions regarding your hurdles so I can help you tomorrow.

#### *Scenario 8 – Homework as Optional*

In Mr. Ngum's classroom, all homework is optional. He tells the students that they don't have to do it – it's just there to help them practice so that they will do well on the test. He reminds them that at the end of the unit, there will be a summative assessment which will count as their grade for the unit. He then suggests that if they do not feel confident in their test-taking abilities, they should go ahead and do the homework and keep it in a portfolio in the classroom. If after the test, students discover that they did not do as well as they would have liked, they can go back to their portfolio and seek *evidence* that they had mastered the content and he will use that evidence to adjust their test score (without requiring them to retake the test). For the several years he has used this process, Mr. Ngum has noticed a 100% turn in on all homework by all students. It seems many are concerned about their test taking abilities.

#### *Scenario 9 – Homework as Qualifying*

Ms. de Souza's classroom is very diverse. She realizes that her learners return home to very different environments and levels of support for their homework and she has decided it is as unfair to continue to expect the same level of quality from kids who live in stressful circumstances as it is to assume 'deep understanding' from kids who live in homes with overinvolved parents willing to provide the right answers. Because she believes in 'practice,' Ms. de Souza assigns homework each day, but it is not graded. Instead, she uses it as a 'ticket' to enter her classroom. Those who hand her their homework qualify to sit down and immediately begin answering the 5 questions on the board at the front of the room. She discovered that this was a great 'settling' strategy that got her learners immediately on task for the day while she took roll call. They score the 5 questions immediately and then go through each question, discussing the answer and checking to see how many got it right, what the misunderstandings were for those who got it wrong, etc. Ms. de Souza uses that data to inform her instruction for the rest of the period. Sometimes a student might not have the homework done (though mostly now they make the attempt because they understand the value of the system she has in place to support them) and in that case she decided it is not helpful to make them explain *why* they don't have it done. Instead, she still wants to learn from them regarding their understanding of the materials – so, 'ticketless' students enter the classroom, take out a sheet of paper, and immediately begin doing the missed homework or writing up a list of questions regarding the confusion that stopped them from completing the homework. Either way, Ms. de Souza is engaging these learners in

clarifying their knowledge base so she can continue to interact with them and support their learning needs.

### **Formative Assessments During Class**

#### *Scenario 10 – Personal Communication*

Ms. Tanaka believes it is important to ask her learners daily to check in on their level of understanding regarding the content she has been teaching. To do that, she uses some quick and ready strategies following the introduction of a major concept or at the end of a class period so that each day she checks in at least once with all of her learners. She uses the responses they give her to help her decide where she should focus her energies the next day for that class period. Because she understands that students grow bored quickly with the mundane, Ms. Tanaka uses a variety of strategies to gather her information:

- **Ready, Set, Show** – When Ms. Tanaka calls out “ready, set, show,” students immediately know to hold up a single finger if they feel terribly confused, two fingers if they believe they are starting to understand it, and three fingers if they think they have mastered the content.

- **Exit slips** – Periodically, especially when the subject might be a little more touchy or embarrassing for students, Ms. Tanaka will ask students to take out a piece of notebook paper and write a quick note about 1 point of pain, 2 questions they still have and 3 points they want to remember based on the lesson they just had. This is always done at the end of class and students have to hand Ms. Tanaka the exit slip in order to leave the classroom.

- **Plus/Delta/Next** – Sometimes Ms. Tanaka facilitates a quick (5 min) large group conversation at the end of the day asking the learners what they feel they need to change about their learning that day (delta) and what they liked or gained for their learning that day (plus) and what they suggest they still need (next).

- **4 Corners** – on a day when it might be clear that students are not grasping the content or that movement would be a good idea, Ms. Tanaka calls for 4 corners. Students move to the corner (corners are clearly labeled and maintain that consistent label with each use) that best represents how they feel about their learning in the moment. Their task once they arrive in the appropriate corner is to generate questions with their peers in that corner (quickly – they only get about 2 minutes total) about what they are learning and then to ask those questions in an effort to try to stump the teacher. Ms. Tanaka has found that the questions they ask truly reflect the level of understanding she would anticipate from each of the corners:

- **Stop!** (corner 1) – I am totally confused
- **Slow Down** (corner 2) – I understand some of it but couldn't pass a test today
- **Keep Moving** (corner 3) – I'm getting it and I wish we wouldn't have too much homework about it
- **Let Me Help** (corner 4) – I understand it and could teach it to my friends

Each corner then reports out their questions. Ms. Tanaka has observed that the questions they ask seem to inform the thinking of the other groups, generating good class discussion and a healthy sense of collaboration.