

Understanding the CCSSO Definition of Formative Assessment

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In 2006, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed and adopted the following definition of formative assessment:

Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to help students improve their achievement of intended instructional outcomes (CCSSO, 2008).

As you reflect on the definition, it is helpful to think of formative assessment as an *action*, something you *do* rather than something you give to students. Formative assessment is something students *should be actively engaged in doing* rather than being passive recipients.

There are four key words in the definition. The first is “**process.**” Formative assessment is a process rather than a product. This means that a test is not a formative assessment. Yes, a “test” can be used within the process, but focusing on formative assessment as a “test” is limiting. A review of the literature shows the most compelling and often quoted research comes from *Assessment in the Classroom*, a 1998 study by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam. Their research reviewed over 140 studies of assessment in classrooms and was based on “all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (p. 7).

So, what is the process? The process includes:

- sharing clear learning targets and the criteria for success, which are ways students can know they are successful;
- eliciting evidence of learning during instruction using a variety of strategies and activities;
- determining gaps in learning based on the evidence (this may or may not be documented) and the established criteria for success;
- providing students feedback on where they are in the learning process; and
- taking action to adjust instruction by determining the next steps, adjusting the target, or moving to the next target.

This is a continual process that occurs minute by minute, day by day (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005).

The second key word is “**during.**” Formative assessment does not take place after instruction is completed and you expect students to be able to demonstrate their level of achievement. Formative assessment occurs during instruction when students should be expected to make mistakes. Teachers should plan ahead and anticipate the mistakes

students will make and have a plan for addressing misconceptions and gaps in understanding.

Why plan ahead? Teachers must understand the goal that all students are expected to master. This includes understanding the cognitive level of mastery or level of precision. Prior to instruction, it is important to know what the ultimate goal is and how it will be measured using summative assessment. However, caution should be taken so that teachers do not *teach to the test* or just *teach the test*. In order to reach the ultimate goal, teachers must break down the Big Idea that will be measured on the summative test into smaller, more reachable objectives that must be reached during the learning process. These steps can be used to scaffold learning.

Let's take for example, the Big Idea, "Students must demonstrate that they can swim." If learning to swim is the Big Idea, then it is important to break this down into smaller skills such as arm strokes, kicks, breathing techniques, turns, dives, and floating. As you may be aware there is usually a priority or hierarchy of skills. For example, one would most likely learn to float prior to learning how to dive.

During the planning stage, teachers must continue to break down the skills until they have identified targets that students can reach within a lesson or two. For example, let's consider the target, "The student will demonstrate proper hand placement when doing the arm strokes for the freestyle." What reminders should the teacher provide to help the student be successful? With hand placement, students may keep their fingers spread apart when they first begin swimming the freestyle. However, to be successful, the students must keep their fingers together so that the water does not go through the fingers. Therefore, this would be included in the criteria for success.

One could give students a test to determine if the student has met all of the criteria for successful hand placement and assign a grade. But, how will this impact a student's motivation? Is it worth the instructor's time to stop instruction and assign a grade for each task or activity along the way? At the end of the day, will it be important to measure each individual skill or is it more important to measure the swimmer's overall ability to perform the stroke? The third key word, "**feedback**," helps to answer these questions.

Not all types of feedback are equally important or useful to improve student learning. Let's consider the student who is learning how to swim. Suppose the learning target is to demonstrate the proper technique to do the arm stroke in the freestyle. As the student is learning, if the instructor just says, "try harder," or constantly gave the student a grade on his/her performance, how would the student be impacted? "Try harder" at doing what? Why keep trying if every time a mistake is made it is evaluated, judged, and possibly deemed inadequate? What if during the learning process you gave the student a test that mimicked the "Big Swim Test"? Would you expect the student to pass?

Now imagine instead that the student is given a chance to make mistakes without judgment. The student is expected to make mistakes and is allowed time to grow before being given a graded assessment of his/her ability. During this learning process, students

are provided descriptive feedback that is related to the criteria for success. The descriptive feedback can come from the teacher, a peer, or the student. By sharing with the students the criteria for success and modeling descriptive feedback, the teacher will help the students learn to self-assess and take responsibility for learning.

This leads us to the fourth key word, “**students.**” It is important for students to be engaged in their learning by participating in formative assessment. This participation allows students to be able to answer three questions (Sadler, 1989): Where am I going, Where am I now, and How do I close the gap? The teacher alone cannot close the gap for the student. The student must be a partner in the learning process.

In conclusion, I hope this paper has brought you a better understanding of the CCSSO definition of formative assessment. Please think about this definition the next time you hear the words “a formative assessment” or “formative assessments.” Formative assessment is not something you purchase or develop to give to students, but a process that teachers must incorporate into all classrooms and learn to do more effectively. “Rather than providing teachers with more tests, leaders at state, district, and school levels should invest in a coordinated effort to establish structures and provide resources that support effective professional development. This investment is a long-term project that should not be shortchanged. The payoff will improve student learning, and that is surely worth it” (p. 145, Heritage, 2007).

References

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