Fostering High-Quality Formative Assessment

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

The evidence shows that high quality formative assessment does have a powerful impact on student learning….Formative assessment is particularly effective for students who have not done well in school, thus narrowing the gap between low and high achievers while raising overall achievement.[1]

Teachers and policymakers alike cite formative assessment's potential to help teachers respond effectively to students' learning needs. [2] Research shows that formative assessment can be a powerful means of improving student achievement; it is assessment FOR learning, not assessment OF learning. Accordingly, it is important to know what formative assessment is, how it works, how to implement it in the classroom, and how to support it through policy decisions. It is even more important to be able to identify high-quality formative assessment and distinguish it from partial or under-conceptualized attempts at formative assessment. This policy brief explores myths about high-quality formative assessment, explains what its implementation looks like in the English Language Arts classroom, and suggests how educational policy can promote high-quality formative assessment that nurtures teaching and learning.

Common Myths about Formative Assessment

Myth: Formative assessment means giving ungraded assignments

Reality: Recognizing that assessment does not always mean giving students a grade is key to understanding formative assessment. Ungraded or "comments only" responses to students' work can be an important part of formative assessment. This is especially true if the responses give students clear suggestions about how they can improve. However, by itself, the absence of a grade does not constitute high-quality formative assessment.[3] It is the feedback students receive—timely, specific, and task-focused—from teachers or other adults, peers, or through structured self-assessment, not the absence of grades, that makes formative assessment high-quality.

Myth: The purpose of formative assessment is to improve teaching

Reality: What teachers learn from formative assessment can certainly help shape teaching decisions. Identifying areas where students are having difficulty as well as where they have clear understandings can lead teachers to change classroom practices in order to reach instructional goals. Formative assessment can also address curriculum development by helping teachers and instructional leaders develop strategies for improving student learning in an entire school or district.[4] However, changes in teaching and curriculum are not the central purpose of formative assessment. High-quality formative assessment always puts student learning at the center.

Myth: The purpose of formative assessment is to help students understand teachers' goals

Reality: One benefit of formative assessment is that it can help students learn more about the goals for a given lesson, unit, or course, but another advantage is that it helps students to evaluate their own learning more effectively. High-quality formative assessment helps students see how closely their own work matches a given goal, and this, in turn, enables them to understand and monitor their own learning. Students who are clear about what and how to learn in a given class become more motivated and engaged learners.[5]
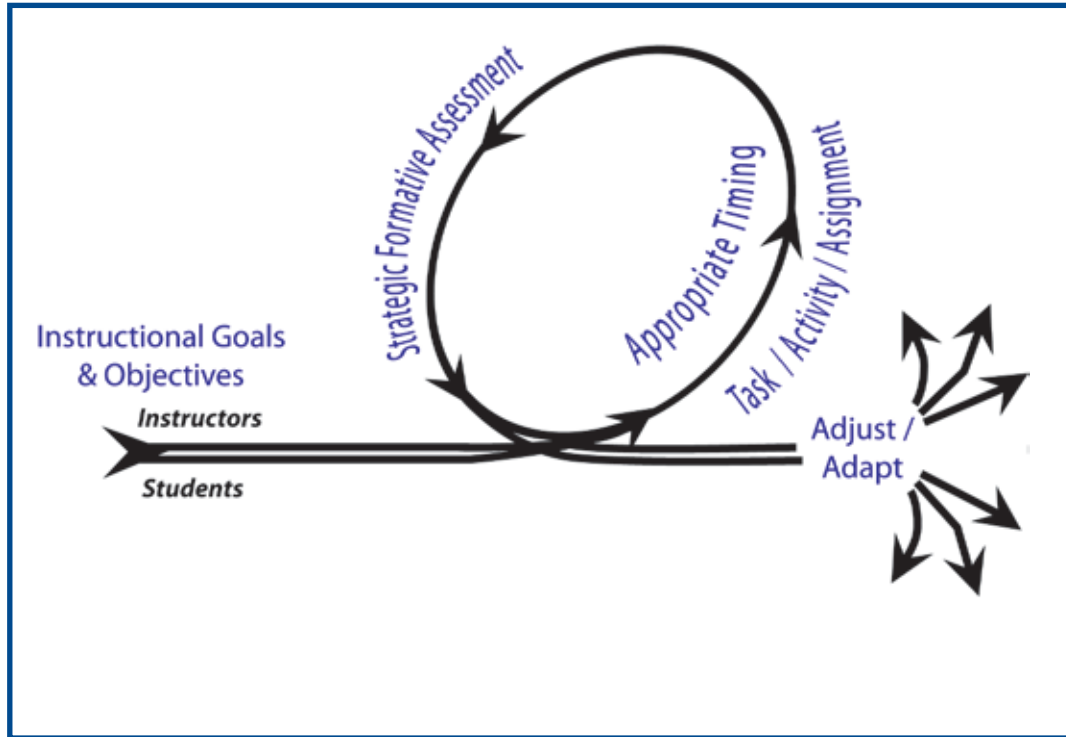

Myth: Formative assessment is subjective while summative assessment is objective.

Reality: Formative assessment occurs during the learning process while summative happens at the end, but formative assessment is equally objective. The difference lies in how evaluative instruments are used.[6] For example, a rubric that lists criteria for evaluating writing can be used formatively to help students understand what is expected and summatively to assign a grade. High-quality formative assessment avoids being subjective by focusing on the learning task.

Implementing Formative Assessment

High-quality formative assessment takes many forms, but it always:

❚ emphasizes the quality rather than the quantity of student work;

❚ prizes giving advice and guidance over giving grades;

❚ avoids comparing students in favor of enabling individual students to assess their own learning;

❚ fosters dialogues that explore understandings rather than lectures that present information;

❚ encourages multiple iterations of an assessment cycle, each focused on a few issues;

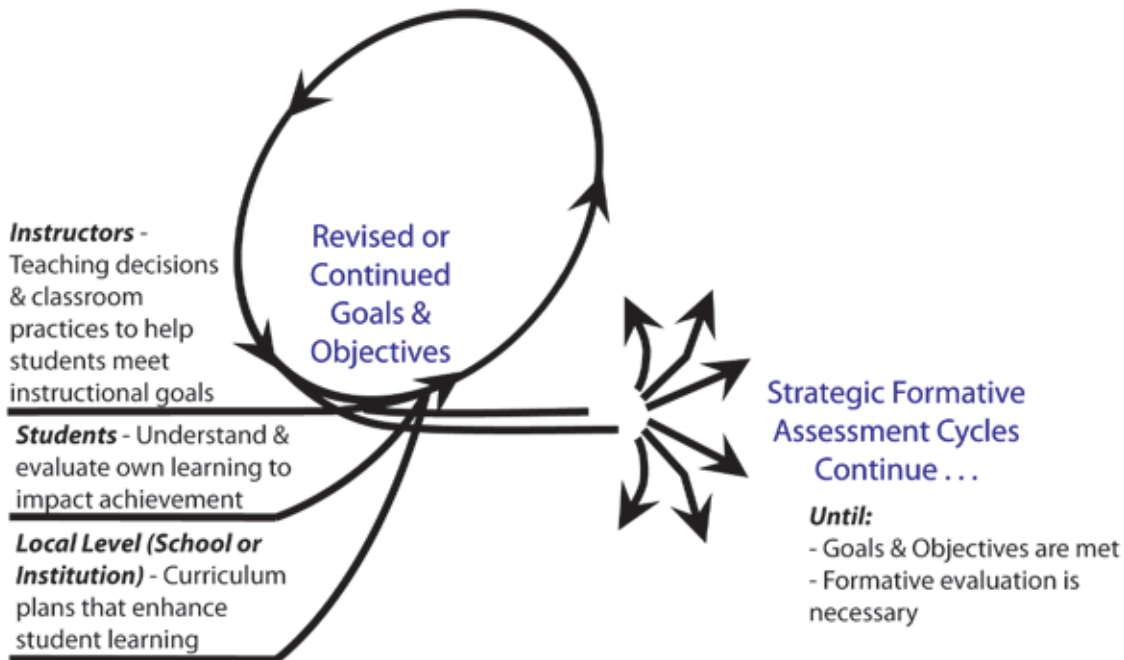❚ provides feedback that engenders motivation and leads to improvement. [7]

Research offers a number of guidelines for teachers who want to provide high-quality formative assessment, and these guidelines have implications for policy decisions. These include the most effective *timing* for this kind of assessment; the *forms* it can take; and the *advantages* it offers.

Timing

In general, timing should vary with the level of difficulty in the task students are being asked to accomplish, but in all cases students should be given ample time to attempt a task or problem on their own before formative assessment is introduced. In the ELA classroom, for example, this means that peer response or student-teacher conferences on drafts should be delayed until students have had enough time to develop their ideas and shape them into writing. [8]

However, students should be given more immediate formative assessment for new and difficult tasks so that they don't become too overwhelmed or frustrated. When they are asked to read a new genre or a particularly hard text, for instance, answering (either orally or in writing) teachers' questions about the text can provide a clear indication of students' comprehension. This, in turn, will enable teachers to clarify misunderstandings and help students identify what they still need to learn. Conversely, when students are carrying out a familiar or routine task, it is better to delay formative assessment so that students are not made to feel

Instructors - Teaching decisions & classroom practices to help students meet instructional goals

Students - Understand & evaluate own learning to impact achievement

Local Level (School or Institution) - Curriculum plans that enhance student learning

Revised or Continued Goals & Objectives

Strategic Formative Assessment Cycles Continue . . .

Until:
- Goals & Objectives are met
- Formative evaluation is necessary

incapable or intruded upon. If students regularly write in journals, for example, immediate teacher response to each entry can feel intrusive rather than helpful and hinder students' evaluation of their own writing.[9]

Forms

Whatever shape formative assessment takes, it should focus on the task rather than the student. For example, instead of saying "You are a great writer," a teacher who uses high-quality formative assessment will say "You used transitions very effectively in this middle section. See if you can do the same thing in the last section of the paper."   General praise about students' innate qualities or talents is not as helpful as careful attention to specific areas of strength in the work. [10]

High-quality formative assessment provides enough detail to give students a clear idea of what, why, and how they are to proceed as they continue to work on an assignment. However, such elaboration needs to be offered in manageable chunks so that students are not overwhelmed. Formative assessment of a draft, for instance, is much more effective when it focuses on a few specific features such as organization and transitions rather than identifying every possible revision a student might make. [11] This kind of high-quality formative assessment will reduce uncertainty between performance and goals, which is key in helping

students learn. Students can benefit from formative assessment that highlights areas of strength and affirms the value of making mistakes as part of learning.[12]

Advantages

For teachers, formative assessment helps identify students who are struggling with particular tasks or operating under misconceptions. This, in turn, can lead to improved instruction that addresses student learning.[13] Formative assessment also fosters student motivation, on-task behavior, and self-awareness. Accordingly, teachers can begin to see students as partners who are able to take more responsibility for their own learning .[14]

For students, formative assessment offers increased feelings of confidence and control. Students who experience high-quality formative assessment are more likely to transfer learning from one class to another because they understand the given area thoroughly and can relate new learning to what they already know. [15] In addition, formative assessment encourages students to engage in more complex thinking and problem solving and to hold higher expectations for their own learning.   It can help students to spend more time on challenging tasks, develop an ability to assess their own work, and become effective evaluators of the work of their peers. [16]

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the greatest challenge is to distinguish between high-quality formative assessment and assessment that is under-conceptualized or not fully developed. High-quality formative assessment includes:

◗ recognizing the need for varying assessment according to the difficulty of the task and the varying abilities of students;

◗ linking assessment to instruction so that both teachers and students benefit;

◗ adjusting assessment so that students move beyond just completing the work to actually excelling at it.

Policymakers need to recognize and affirm these features. Because research shows that many teachers do not know how to engage in high-quality formative assessment, effective policy will include provisions for professional development in this area.

Another policy challenge is to develop mechanisms of support for teachers who employ high-quality formative assessment in their classrooms.   For example, practices such as comment-only marking or peer- and self-assessment can contribute to high-quality formative assessment, but to the uninformed eye of, say, parents or community members, they can look like teachers shirking responsibilities. Policies that support high-quality formative assessment need to include explanations of how such assessment might look in the classroom and detail the benefits that will accrue from using it.

Of course, teachers can also address the policy implications of high-quality formative assessment. The English language arts teacher who writes a letter to parents or community members explaining her strategies for implementing formative assessment or documenting how formative assessment increased student learning can have a profound effect on the way her community comes to think about assessment more generally. This, in turn, can generate public and policy support for high-quality formative assessment that fulfills the primary purpose of assessment—to support high-quality learning.

Endnotes

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