
Research for the Classroom

Formative Assessment: Can You Handle the Truth?

It was one of those rare lessons: apparently perfect. In preparation for our study of *Romeo and Juliet*, my ninth-grade students had been engaged for the full hour-long period, interacting with the structure, purpose, and construction of iambic pentameter. I used their names to illustrate the characteristics of an iamb and then facilitated their deconstruction of the term *pentameter* to show that the complicated-sounding *iambic pentameter* refers to a concept that is easily accessible through the application of their prior knowledge.

I showed them simple examples (Michele, Michele, Michele, Michele, Michele) as well as nonexamples (Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan, Jon). In pairs, students wrote two lines of iambic pentameter (my example was, “I can’t believe I have to write this way!”) and then every student wrote one line independently.

With ten minutes left, I introduced the culminating assignment: to memorize one line of iambic pentameter. The line could be original or borrowed from the many we had heard, read, and written during class. I handed out index cards and instructed stu-

dents to clear their desks. As both a reinforcing closure activity and a formative assessment, I asked students to write the line of iambic pentameter they had memorized and give it to me on their way out—a “ticket out the door” activity. When the bell rang, I stood at the door and collected the cards as the students filed out.

Still standing at the door, I scanned the cards excitedly, certain that my class had achieved demonstrable understanding of this concept via my excellent lesson. My ego deflated, however, as I read through the index cards. Despite the option of using one of the model lines, only about one-third of my 24 students had written one line of iambic pentameter. The errors varied, but the results were clear. The majority of the students had not met my learning objective. How could that be? How could such a good lesson fail so miserably? And so obviously?

Facing the Truth

The key, for the purpose of this reflection, lies in the word *obvious*. Had I omitted the formative assessment, I would have remained blissfully ignorant of students’ lack of comprehension. Their confusion would have emerged at some point, but I would not have

been aware that this lesson alone had been insufficient for all students to develop an understanding of iambic pentameter.

This experience affected my students and me. For the students, the formative assessment resulted in an ongoing series of minilessons and quizzes that were more methodically scaffolded to move from identification to application. For me,

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the power of formative assessments became, well, obvious.

Current research upholds the significance of formative assessments in the classroom. Formative assessments are relevant to theory and practice; they offer positive possibilities with respect to both policy and pedagogy.

At the policy level, formative assessments offer a means to minimize the negative effects of high-stakes testing. The culture of high-stakes testing, epitomized by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, threatens to deprofessionalize teachers and alienate students. High-stakes tests can cause feelings of powerlessness in teachers and hopelessness in

students. Two recently published texts—which I discuss in the next section—assert that formative assessments provide a way for teachers to use testing data without allowing standardized assessments to dominate curriculum and pedagogy.

High-Stakes Testing and Formative Assessments

Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner's perspective on standardized assessments is apparent in the title of their book: *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Paralleling its use in warfare, *collateral damage* refers to injuries to innocents, regardless of the intent of the initiative. In their preface, Nichols and Berliner state that

The idea for this book originated . . . before NCLB, when David Berliner was studying the impact of high-stakes testing and concluded that high-stakes testing not only regularly failed to increase achievement but that it is a theoretically flawed endeavor, as well. In the fall of 2003, after NCLB required high-stakes testing in all our states, we extended the initial study to look further into the intended and unintended effects of high-stakes testing. This effort yielded two reports. One report showed that high-stakes testing does not increase achievement (and in some cases may erode it), while the other report documented how unintended outcomes of the high-stakes testing policy were detrimental to the education process. (xv)

Most of the text (approximately 180 of its 202 pages) is devoted to illustrating and theorizing the detrimental effects of high-stakes standardized tests on the processes of teaching and learning as well as

on teachers and students. To frame their argument, Nichols and Berliner invoke Campbell's Law:

Campbell's Law stipulates that "the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor" (Campbell). Campbell warned us of the inevitable problems associated with undue weight and emphasis on a single indicator for monitoring complex social phenomena. In effect, he warned us about the high-stakes testing program that is part and parcel of NCLB. (26–27)

Nichols and Berliner provide a compelling case that high-stakes testing is destructive. They certainly corroborate the experiences of educators, students, and parents whose feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are described and vindicated.

Feelings of vindication, however, do not substantially improve the experiences of students and teachers immersed in the culture of high-stakes testing. Fortunately, in the final 20 pages the authors present formative assessments as a prospect for optimism. Nichols and Berliner differentiate between assessments *of* learning and assessments *for* learning. Most tests currently used in schools are assessments *of* learning, that is, "tests designed to tell us *what* and *how much* students know at any one point in time" (184; italics in original). These types of assessments are defined as "summative." Formative assessments, on the other hand, are "used to *improve* teaching and learning" (184; italics in original). It is clear, then, that the test-

ing tool itself does not determine the nature of the assessment; it is the way the results are *used* that determines whether it is categorized as summative or formative.

The introductory anecdote from my classroom can illustrate this contrast. Had I simply scored and recorded the results of the "tickets out the door" without adjusting my instruction, the assessment would be summative. Because I used the assessments to alter my instruction, the assessment was formative. Naturally, in practice there is occasional overlap. When distinctions between formative and summative assessments involve scoring, summative assessments are generally connected with grades, while formative assessments are not. In practice, sometimes formative assessments are scored to provide feedback or motivation. However, the *primary* purpose of the assessment determines its nature. If an assessment is intended to be graded and recorded, rather than to inform instruction (for example, a unit test), it is summative. If an assessment is designed to provide feedback to improve teaching and learning (some quizzes or "tickets out the door," for example), it is formative. Even though such a quiz may be scored and recorded, its *primary* intent and use label it as formative. A quiz used only to punish or reward students for completing reading assigned for homework, however, is entirely summative.

Nichols and Berliner provide an excellent explanation of the characteristics of summative and formative assessments, and they argue for creating a balance between the two types. Currently, summative assessments, primarily in the form of high-stakes standardized tests,

dominate the educational landscape. Nichols and Berliner contend that reorienting educational accountability systems toward formative assessments will ultimately serve the needs of students. Their rationale is persuasive, offering a chance for educators to move away from frustration, through vindication, and toward edification.

Sherman Dorn's *Accountability Frankenstein: Understanding and Taming the Monster* also provides an examination of high-stakes testing. Taking a more historical and analytical approach, Dorn discusses how and why NCLB was adopted. Dorn is clear about the negative effects of high-stakes accountability systems; however, he is less inclined to vilify policymakers or politicians. Instead, he provides

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perspectives and rationales for decisions made by all stake-holders without obscuring self-interest or (intended or unintended) consequences. Dorn also suggests barriers that could hinder the implementation of common formative assessments, including some presented by teachers.

An accountability system based on formative evaluation is an exciting prospect for reasserting the expertise of classroom teachers.

However, there are political and organizational obstacles to this endeavor. Grounded in the assumption that high-stakes testing raises standards of learning, political opposition centers on the possibility of lowered standards. Organizational opposition, that is, resistance from educators, is often attributed to the perception that "frequent assessment for formative purposes is a greater paperwork burden, and they would need greater assistance with the logistics of frequent assessment" (Dorn 115). Dorn, however, sees this explanation as a smoke-screen for resistance that is grounded in the culture of schooling: "The culture of schools and the school year are at odds with formative evaluation" (115). Dorn argues that instructional planning is currently organized in blocks of time, rather than in instructional decisions. Using formative assessments to drive curriculum and instruction would require significant changes in the ways curriculum and instruction are conceived and applied.

While the systemic significance of formative assessment as a means to improve schooling is beyond the purview of most teachers, classroom applications of this excellent instructional tool lie within reach.

Implementing Formative Assessments

Once teachers are convinced of the value of formative assessments, they should consult Larry Ainsworth and Donald Viegut's plan for implementation. *Common Formative Assessments: How to Connect Standards-Based Instruction and Assessment* provides a brief foundation for this approach followed by what Ainsworth and Viegut de-

scribe as "a 'how-to' guide for educators and leaders on the topic of formative assessments *as they relate to other instruction and assessment practices*" (xiii; italics in original). Ainsworth and Viegut provide guidance in developing formative assessments in classrooms as well as a blueprint for developing common formative assessments for use in schoolwide and even districtwide accountability systems.

Like the authors of the texts mentioned earlier, Ainsworth and Viegut seek to help teachers find ways to use the data provided by standardized assessments in ways that improve instruction. High-stakes standardized assessments have reductive effects on the educational experiences of students and the professional identities of teachers. It is essential, then, for educators to consider the possibilities provided by formative assessments.

Conclusion: Acting on the Truth

The notion of a static, empirical "truth" can be contested. Truths, like all aspects of knowledge, are constructed in social settings and are affected by visible and invisible aspects of discourse. As a teacher, my perception of the iambic pentameter lesson, however, was different from the perceptions of the learners in my classroom, and it was the formative assessment that made this reality visible for me. In the face of my index-card evidence, I could not accept my perception as the "truth." Such is the power of formative assessment.

Although the revelation was powerful, the route to reach it was straightforward. Contemporary scholar-practitioners recommend

varied approaches to instruction and assessment. Ideally, significant objectives should be taught, and assessed, in numerous ways.

For example, I presented the concept of iambic pentameter by defining it, deconstructing its etymology, presenting examples, and presenting nonexamples. Assessments can be similarly diverse, addressing different learning styles and scaffolding learners into higher order thinking. Assessments that measured students' understanding of iambic pentameter involved

- defining the term (this can be student generated, matching, or a cloze activity);
- multiple-choice questions (students selected the line of iambic pentameter from at first two and then four possible answers); and
- the construction of their own couplets.

Versions of these assessments took place over several class periods, and each time I used the data to inform future instruction as well as to provide feedback to students. The assessments were easy to develop and provided me with a “bank” from which to select questions for the objective unit test.

As you plan and implement lessons over the next weeks, consider using formative assessments to gauge student learning. To start, review your objectives and choose one. (It can be frustrating and confusing to try to assess too many objectives at once.) Develop a quick assessment that students can complete at the end of class. The

assessment might be a multiple-choice question, but it is usually more effective to require students to generate evidence of what they have learned. Here are a few examples:

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to define an epic simile.
2. Students will be able to identify an epic simile in *The Odyssey*.
3. Students will be able to compose and illustrate an original epic simile.

Formative Assessments for Objective 1:

- Matching—Provide a set of literary terms (addressed throughout the unit) and definitions and have students match each term to its correct definition. (*Epic simile* would be one term.)
- Memorization—Have students write the definition of an epic simile.

Formative Assessments for Objective 2:


- Provide an excerpt from *The Odyssey* that students have already read and have students underline epic similes.
- Students copy epic similes from increasingly larger sections of already read text (“Find two epic similes in Book 9,” for example).
- Have students identify epic similes in excerpts that have not been read as a class or excerpts from other, unfamiliar texts.

These examples illustrate how formative assessments can be used to

inform and scaffold instruction. The first few times students might be required to identify epic similes that have already been introduced

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in class. As students become more proficient, assessments become more challenging. And as the lessons progress, teachers are confronted with data that reinforce or refute our understanding of student learning.

Formative assessments provide an exceptional opportunity for teachers to collect, analyze, and use data in meaningful ways. Collaboration is the next step in the process of improving instruction. Please share your attempts to use formative assessment to inform your practice. You are also invited to submit any of your experiences conducting mini-studies that changed your teaching. Together, we might reach the truth at last. (Sorry, I couldn't resist ending with a line of iambic pentameter.) 

Works Cited

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