

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: A MAGIC BULLET WAITING TO BE USED

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Classroom formative assessment is a surefire way for teachers to improve their students' learning. Yet, despite massive evidence indicating that this test-based instructional approach works, too few teachers are currently using it. How come?

Before digging into the potential reasons that formative assessment is being seriously underused in our nation's schools, let's agree on what formative assessment is. Consonant with the findings of an enormous amount of careful research conducted over the past four decades, most proponents of this assessment-illuminated instructional approach have agreed on a definition. Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics. It is not a *kind* of test but a way of periodically employing tests to determine how well students have learned something and then looking at the test data to decide what classroom-based changes might support better learning.

Recent reviews of related research covering more than 4,000 investigations confirm that formative assessment works—big-time. One reviewer concluded that formative assessment, implemented well, can effectively *double* the speed of student learning. Certainly, doubling the speed of students' learning is an aspiration worthy of pursuit.

This is what the formative assessment process typically looks like. First, a teacher identifies an important *target curricular aim* that students should master. This can be a body of significant *knowledge*, such as the origin and meaning of the Bill of Rights, or an important *cognitive skill*, such as essay writing or hypothesis testing. Next, the teacher isolates key *building blocks* that students must definitely master on their way to achieving the target curricular aim. There might be only a handful of building blocks for a short-term instructional sequence but more such building blocks for extended-duration instruction. The entire sequence of instruction for promoting students' mastery of a given curricular aim might take just a few weeks, or it might require several months of instruction.

Toward the end of the instruction aimed at each building block, the teacher typically uses a teacher-made test or some other kind of performance evaluation to see if the students have mastered that skill or body of knowledge. If they have, *yahoo!* Instruction moves on to the next building block. But if they haven't, the teacher makes an adjustment in the planned instruction and tries a different approach to teach the tough-to-master building block. Based on the test data, students, too, might alter the ways they are trying to learn what's embodied in the building block.

Take a step back, and it becomes clear that formative assessment is a classic ends-means strategy—something human beings have been successfully employing since our earliest days on the planet. If a desired end (a target curricular aim) is not being attained by the means chosen to achieve it (a teacher's instructional approach or a student's learning approach), another means is selected to do the job. The habit of conducting ongoing checks on students' progress at key points and making adjustments when progress is stalling leads to more effective instruction and surer learning outcomes.

So why is something that works so wonderfully well, and has been highly touted in education circles for more than a decade, used by so few of today's teachers? Opinions about this vary, and mine may be miles off the mark. Yet, my suspicion is that many teachers who have tried to employ the formative assessment process simply found it to be too much trouble.

There is no denying the work involved. The process calls for carefully analyzing what a target curricular aim's enabling building blocks are, sequencing the building blocks in a logical learning progression, developing and administering assessments to determine students' building-block mastery, and determining from students' performances whether instructional adjustments are needed. And then, if adjustments are required, the teacher must figure out how to modify the planned instructional approach to better promote building-block mastery. It is easy to see why all this trouble can rapidly extinguish even a well-intentioned teacher's enthusiasm for formative assessment.

If I am correct about why formative assessment is underused, the potential solution strategy might be boiled down to one word: *prioritization*. If classroom teachers commit to using the formative assessment process only when pursuing a handful of their most important curricular aims, they can lower their risk of burning out, stick with the process, and reap the research-ratified rewards. When the learning-boosting power of formative assessment is trained on the highest-priority learning outcomes, everyone benefits—students especially.