



LEARNING POINT

What is gathering evidence of student understanding?

The formative assessment process involves continually collecting and using evidence to inform teaching and learning. A teacher needs to gather accurate and complete information about students' current understanding in order to make informed instructional decisions and provide feedback to advance student learning.

A variety of strategies can be used to gather evidence of student understanding. What is important is that the teacher gathers evidence that is aligned with a clear learning target and uses it to move student learning forward. It is also essential that students are active agents in collecting and using evidence of their own understanding as they reflect on their learning, revise or modify their strategies, and inform their future learning decisions.

Gathering evidence of student understanding defined

Gathering evidence of student understanding in the formative assessment process occurs when the teacher provides multiple and varied opportunities to gather information about where students are in the learning process. The information is gathered with the intention to inform the potential modifications to teaching and learning strategies.

Applications to practice

There are various ways for a teacher to gather evidence of student under-

“PRACTICE IN A CLASSROOM IS FORMATIVE TO THE EXTENT THAT EVIDENCE ABOUT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IS ELICITED, INTERPRETED, AND USED BY TEACHERS, LEARNERS, OR THEIR PEERS, TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT THE NEXT STEPS IN INSTRUCTION THAT ARE LIKELY TO BE BETTER, OR BETTER FOUNDED, THAN THE DECISIONS THEY WOULD HAVE TAKEN IN THE ABSENCE OF THE EVIDENCE THAT WAS ELICITED.”

Black & William, 2009, p.43

standing during a lesson, and several different ways should be used (to most accurately assess students). The best way for a teacher to start to elicit evidence during instruction is to use what they already do, rather than trying to add several new evidence collection strategies to current practice. Over time, a teacher can gradually increase his or her repertoire.

Three instructional routines support teachers in gathering evidence of student understanding during instruction:

1. Gathering evidence through academic dialogue
2. Gathering evidence through observation and examination of student work
3. Gathering evidence through conferences and one-on-one conversation

These instructional routines are further discussed below.

1. Gathering evidence through academic dialogue

Eliciting evidence of student under-

standing focuses on gathering information about student thinking and understanding. This involves more than simply “checking for understanding.” The most important aspect for the teacher is to gather information about what the students are actually thinking and why.

Academic dialogue allows the teacher to gather information about what students understand about the subject matter and different strategies they may use. When students engage in academic dialogue, they publicly communicate their ideas, they work to help one another, they explore ideas, make connections, and reveal their thinking. This provides valuable evidence about student understanding. The teacher will need to provide significant support to create a classroom culture in which all students engage in equitable academic dialogue. It will also be beneficial to provide time for classroom discussion with clear routines as well as to explain the purpose and expectations to students.

2. Gathering evidence through observation and examination of student work

A teacher will want to gather multiple examples of student learning to develop a full account of student understanding. There are many ways for the teacher to observe student thinking and gather evidence:

- concept maps
- student writing
- presentations
- videos
- portfolios
- collaborative work
- drawing
- graphic organizers
- investigations, and
- problem solving.

The teacher can gain important information from observation as students engage in learning opportunities. Then, analysis of student work products can provide additional evidence to inform instructional decisions to guide student learning. For analysis of the work, a teacher may use a checklist, rubric, or other metric that includes criteria for successful attainment of the learning target. The success criteria and learning target guide the instructional and learning decisions about when, how, and how much evidence of student understanding will be gathered – of value to both students and the teacher.

The teacher should plan opportunities to observe and gather student work in order to obtain information about

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the students’ level of understanding in relation to the learning target. Students should also reflect on the learning target and success criteria as they engage in the learning process.

3. Gathering evidence through conferences and one-on-one conversations

Teachers can create regular opportunities to conference and speak one-on-one with students about their current understanding and progress toward learning targets. This allows the teacher to gather specific evidence of student understanding regarding a learning target and, when appropriate, to provide immediate feedback to move learning forward.

The teacher may ask probing questions about observations and student work samples to gather further information from the student. Students can describe their learning tactics and ask questions of the teacher during this time. The questions students ask also provide evidence of their understanding.

For example, in one elementary classroom, the teacher meets individually with students during reading

workshop. The students bring their reading folders containing student goals, work samples, and post-it notes with different reading strategies they have received from their teacher during conferences. The teacher may have the student share about previous strategies used, ask questions about current work, and describe next steps in his or her learning.

Similarly, in a high school math class, a teacher may conference with students to review their progress in a particular unit, identify areas for growth and areas of strength, and set goals for the upcoming weeks. During these conferences, the teacher is able to gather specific information about a student’s level of understanding as well as the student’s motivation, attitudes, and self-assessment regarding the content.

While gathering evidence, the teacher may use “triangulation” of all three ways to gather student data (such as products, observations, and conferences) to provide a more consistent, reliable, and clearer picture of student understanding.

Teachers also elicit evidence of student understanding through activating prior knowledge, questioning, and self- and peer assessment. These topics are covered in depth in other ALN Learning Points.

When a teacher regularly gathers information about student understanding, the teacher is then able to provide timely feedback to support students’ attainment of the learning targets and adjust instruction accordingly.

References

Black, P. J., & Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5-31.

TO LEARN MORE

Formative assessment: What do teachers need to know and do?

Margaret Heritage. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(2), 140–146.
www.pdkmembers.org/members_online/publications/Archive/pdf/k0710her.pdf

What do we mean by formative assessment?

ALN Learning Point (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2016).
<http://bit.ly/LP-FormativeAssessment>

Using formative assessment to enhance learning, achievement, and academic self-regulation

Heidi Andrade and Margaret Heritage (Routledge, 2018)
www.routledge.com

The Michigan Assessment Consortium’s Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI’s professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan’s professional educators.