



LEARNING POINT

What is the relationship between ambitious teaching and formative assessment?

Ambitious teaching and ambitious learning generate evidence of what students understand and can do aligned with important disciplinary ways of thinking to feed rich formative assessment practices. In turn, responding to that evidence — whether by the teacher or the student — continues the cycle of ambitious learning.

Those two claims need further unpacking. First, what is ambitious teaching? A Learning Point that answers the question succinctly defines it as grounded in a deep understanding of subject matter and entails teaching practices that are interactive and discourse-based, and which enable students to engage in sense-making with others about what they are learning.

Another Learning Point answers the question: **What do we mean by formative assessment?** That document describes the formative assessment process as organized around three guiding questions: Where are we (teacher and students) going? What does the student understand now? How do we (teacher and students) get to the learning target? Answering these three questions requires planning to identify clear learning targets; eliciting evidence through a wide variety of sources during the course of learning; and responding to that evidence through feedback from the

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teacher, peer or student self-assessment, or instructional and learning adjustments (see “To learn more” sidebar on page 2).

Common point of connection

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Ambitious teaching requires teachers to stay focused on the core disci-

plinary ideas and analytic practices to help students learn to think, reason, and act like scientists, writers, and so on. Sometimes a learning target might focus on a more procedural aspect of the discipline such as fluency with multiplication facts for numbers less than 12. However, a teacher engaging in ambitious teaching and learning will help students connect procedural knowledge with an important mathematical practice such as using estimation to check on plausibility of answers, which can be more easily accomplished with easy recall of number facts.

Without clarity of learning goals, teachers are unable to develop learning experiences that help students

engage with the discipline or to create opportunities for rich student discourse. Similarly, without a clear understanding of where the learning is headed, a teacher is unable to understand the current status of student learning. Also, students will struggle with formative assessment practices such as self- and peer assessment without understanding the intended learning and what evidence of understanding looks like.

Braiding the strands

Ambitious teaching entails the transformation of teaching from a practice that assumes knowledge can be transmitted from teacher to student through telling, to one that recognizes that students need opportunities to make connections among ideas, to previous learning opportunities, and to the knowledge and ideas that they bring from their communities, cultures, and family experiences. In this context, formative assessment focuses on how teachers and students can elicit evidence of current learning to make informed decisions about next steps.

Most knitting yarns are made up of multiple strands twisted together.

Ambitious teaching and formative assessment are like two strands of classroom practice woven together such that the combination is greater than either one of them in isolation.

The metaphor is not a perfect one as most yarns are made up of multiple strands of the same yarn, rather than complementary yarns combined.

However, the twisted strands create a stronger yarn than just increasing the heft of one strand. In that way, the metaphor is helpful as combining these two classroom practices results in a stronger, more coherent whole than either one in isolation. Ambitious teaching without formative assessment could leave students and teachers unclear about whether learning was taking place. Formative assessment without ambitious teaching could result in a focus on learning that does not attend to the depth and richness of the discipline.



Teachers need to see examples of ambitious teaching and formative assessment enacted together and to consider their classroom practice from the perspective of both in order to identify their own learning needs. Collaborating with teacher peers strengthens teachers' disciplinary knowledge. Co-developing lesson plans that support student learning in the disciplines and identifying formative assessment opportunities that exist in the lesson can help both teachers and students elicit evidence to inform next steps.

To learn more

Learning Point: What do we mean by formative assessment, MAC 2017

<http://bit.ly/LP-FormativeAssessment>

Learning Point: What is ambitious teaching?

MAC 2022

<https://bit.ly/LP-AmbitiousTeaching>

Formative Assessment in the Disciplines: Framing a Continuum of Professional Learning, by Margaret Heritage and Caroline Wylie, Harvard Education Press, 2021.

For examples of ambitious teaching and formative assessment across the disciplines and suggestions for how to support teacher learning throughout their career www.hepg.org/hepg-home/books/formative-assessment-in-the-disciplines

Supporting Equity Through Formative Assessment in the Era of Covid-19,

by Margaret Heritage and Caroline Wylie. Teachers College Record, June 19, 2020

For a discussion of opportunities to support equitable formative assessment practice with remote and hybrid instruction www.tcrecord.org

Formative Assessment: Making It Happen in the Classroom,

by Margaret Heritage. Corwin 2021 (2nd edition).

For a rich description of formative assessment <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/formative-assessment>

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.