



LEARNING POINT

Formative assessment(s) or formative assessment? The “s” makes a difference.

Confusing the term “formative assessments” with the term “formative assessment” is an easy mistake to make. After all, the two phrases differ by just one letter—an “-s.” However, while the spelling of the terms may be similar, the differences in the meanings are profound.

Formative assessments (with the “-s”), as they have become widely known, are actually periodic tests or quizzes meant to gauge students’ mastery of academic content after instruction has begun but before more comprehensive summative assessments are administered. These are more accurately called interim, benchmark, or interim benchmark assessments.

Formative assessment (without the “-s”), on the other hand, is a process of instructionally-embedded practices meant to fundamentally change how teachers and students interact in the presence of academic content. Here is the definition of a widely used formative assessment process:

“Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and supports students to become more self-directed learners.” (CCSSO FAST SCASS 2017)

As can be seen, formative assessment is a *planned process* both teachers and students use (daily) *while instruction and learning are taking place*. Students are engaged in academically-focused activities based on:

- selected learning targets;
- periodically elicited evidence of student understanding; and
- feedback from the teacher, peer, or the student themselves.

“The purpose of this Learning Point is to emphasize these important differences and encourage educators to reserve the use of the term “formative assessment” for descriptions of the *process* of monitoring and adjusting student learning while it is occurring daily in classrooms.”

This feedback is then used to adjust instruction and learning so that both the teacher and the students take action on the feedback to improve learning (See FAME Components and Elements At-a-Glance in “To learn more” on next page).

Despite these clear conceptual differences, confusion abounds. Publishing companies have labeled their products “formative assessments” and the name seems to have stuck. Educators now routinely refer to “formative assessments” or “common formative assessments” when talking about the interim benchmark tests or quizzes that are frequently administered after periods of instruction. The purpose of this Learning Point is to emphasize these important differences and encourage educators to reserve the use of the term “formative assessment” for descriptions of the *process* of monitoring and adjusting student learning while it is occurring daily in classrooms.

How much difference does one letter make?

The blurring of the two terms may have profound consequences for classroom practice. There is a substantial body of knowledge that indicates the positive impact of the formative assessment process on student learning and achievement. There is no such body of research indicat-

ing that interim benchmark assessments, whether called formative assessments or not, have such value in promoting and increasing student achievement.

If teachers conflate formative assessments with formative assessment, they may mistakenly think that they have enacted the practices associated with higher levels of student learning simply because they have administered a quiz or exam, even when they haven’t engaged students in the formative assessment process described above. There is nothing inherently “formative” about administering assessments more frequently, and there is no evidence to suggest that frequent testing, by itself, leads to improvements in student learning or their achievement. On the other hand, evidence indicates that using the formative assessment *process* does lead to substantial improvements in student learning. Research evidence also indicates that formative assessment is one of the most impactful interventions in education, *especially for low achieving students*. Again, these positive impacts do not accrue to the administration of interim assessments or quizzes.

The important thing to remember is that there is no magic in frequent testing, regardless of what one calls it. Formative assessment is a process not a product (i.e., not a test or a quiz). The formative

assessment process that holds so much promise to improve student performance and achievement cannot be easily packaged and sold to schools looking to improve student learning. As Stiggins and Chappuis (2006) indicated:

“We can’t buy assessments that will circumvent teachers’ need for deeper assessment expertise. Off-the-shelf assessments may be marketed as ‘formative assessments,’ but they don’t help teachers understand or apply the strategies that have been proven to increase student learning... They don’t show teachers how to make learning targets clear to students or how to help students differentiate between strong and weak work...They do not help teachers show students how to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, nor do they emphasize the motivational power of having students track and share their learning. They cannot substitute for the professional development needed to cause changes in assessment practice in the classroom.”

Formative assessment and student agency

Testing students periodically does nothing in and of itself to improve student learning or achievement. Rather, it is the process of formative assessment that promotes student achievement because it makes students active agents of their own learning who are:

- co-constructing learning goals;
- investing in academic activities;
- articulating their understanding of content;
- providing, receiving, and responding to feedback; and
- making decisions about the next steps in the learning.

Thus, the formative assessment process mirrors and honors the complexity of teaching and learning and thrusts the students into active roles in their own learning; it cannot be easily administered as a test or quiz. Formative assessment is a comprehensive process that cannot be implemented in isolated instances.

Furthermore, teachers can improve their enactment of the formative assessment process only through on-going professional learning activities (as noted by Stiggins and Chapuis), support of colleagues and coaches, engagement with peers, experimentation in the classroom, and careful and critical reflection.

Comparing Interim Benchmarks/Quizzes and Formative Assessment		
	Interim Benchmark Assessments and Quizzes (Often mislabeled as formative assessments)	Formative Assessment (Process of instruction)
What is it?	Tests and quizzes	Embedded process of instructional practices
How is it used?	Measure interim progress after learning has begun but before more comprehensive summative assessments are used	Engage students in a process of learning that includes setting learning goals, engaging in learning activities, eliciting evidence of understanding, providing feedback, and making instructional decisions
Who is the target audience?	Building/district administrators and teachers	Students and teachers
How is the information provided used?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Predict performance on the more comprehensive summative assessments before they occur ■ Identify content that needs to be taught or retaught before summative assessments are used 	<p>Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Consider feedback they have received from self, peers, and the teacher ■ Synthesize feedback from self, peers, and teachers to take actionable steps to move closer to mastery <p>Teachers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide students with opportunities for multiple sources of feedback (self, peer, teacher) ■ Provide opportunities for students to synthesize feedback to demonstrate their understanding

Conclusion

Educators are strongly urged to stop using the term “formative assessments” and instead, call these assessments what they are—periodic quizzes, interim assessments, and so forth—and reserve the term formative assessment for the powerful and impactful formative assessment process that promotes high levels of student engagement, learning, and achievement. Understanding and articulating these very different concepts demands the sharper contrast that the terms represent.

References

Definition by the Council of Chief State School Officers, Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers, State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards

Stiggins, R., & Chappuis, J. (2006). What a difference a word makes. *Journal of Staff Development*, 27(1), 10-14.

To learn more

Learning Point: What do we mean by formative assessment?
Michigan Assessment Consortium (2017)
<http://bit.ly/LP-FormativeAssessment>

FAME Components and Elements At-a-Glance
<http://bit.ly/FAME-CE-chart>

Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME)
www.FAMEMichigan.org

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.