



How performance assessments strengthen the formative assessment process and help promote student-centered instruction

This learning point considers the mutually strengthening relationship between student-centered classrooms, the formative assessment process, and performance assessments.

Common features of a student-centered classroom

For over a century, opinions have differed sharply about how teachers should structure learning opportunities. Over this time, the teacher-centered mode of instruction prevailed in most classrooms. In the teacher-centered approach, teachers stand at the front of the classroom and deliver content that has been “distilled” into facts and formulas that students are expected to memorize and repeat back to the teacher during classroom recitations and periodic quizzes and tests.

In contrast, in a student-centered classroom, teachers design and implement strategies so that students construct knowledge in a domain by participating in activities like those performed by expert practitioners. These activities might include experimenting, re-enacting, building models, writing, and other similar intellectual work.

Despite its appeal, teachers have found it very challenging to enact student-centered instruction. Although less of the visible burden of teaching falls on them, teachers have difficulty centering the responsibility for designing and implementing learning activities primarily on the students. Importantly, more than a vision of student-centeredness is required, and

Common Features of Teacher-Centered Classrooms	Common Features of Student-Centered Classrooms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers stand and deliver content. Learning in a discipline is mostly memorizing facts and formulas. Students demonstrate mastery of content by identifying correct responses or employing the correct formula. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers guide student construction of knowledge. Learning in a discipline mirrors the processes that experts in a discipline engage in to create knowledge. Students demonstrate mastery of content by successfully executing an activity authentic to the discipline.

potential disaster ensues if teachers simply remove themselves from the center of learning without any structures in place to transition to student-centered instruction (Gross, Giacquinta, & Bernstein, 1971).

Formative assessment process places students at the heart of learning

Student-centered instruction is not teacher-free instruction. Rather, student-centered classrooms require skillful planning and guidance. Specifically, teachers can enact formative assessment practices and, in so doing, place students at the heart of learning.

Notably, formative assessment is a process rather than a one-time assessment event. To provide greater clarity on formative assessment as a process, the Michigan Department of Education Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program has delineated five main

components of the formative assessment process. These components include:

- 1) Planning;
- 2) Learning Target Use;
- 3) Eliciting Evidence of Student Understanding;
- 4) Formative Feedback; and
- 5) Instructional Learning Decisions.

First, formative assessment is a **planned process** in which teachers think through when and how students will engage in learning, what support from the teacher is needed, when and how they will check for understanding, and how teachers can advance student learning based on what they are learning about students during the instructional activities.

Second, the formative assessment process employs **learning targets**, **success criteria**, and **examples of successful work** to help students and teachers highlight the academic content to be learned and how students will demonstrate mastery. Learning targets are a source of



daily classroom interaction. Teachers can also use learning progressions to help students locate themselves on a trajectory of mastery.

Third, teachers will involve students in activities salient to building disciplinary understanding (as opposed to memorization of factual material) and then **eliciting evidence of students' emerging mastery** of disciplinary content. Part of the work in this stage of the formative assessment process is helping students connect with what they currently understand, strategically gathering evidence of student understanding, and asking salient questions that require students to express their understanding and/or build on the understanding of others.

Fourth, the formative assessment process requires **feedback generated by teachers, peers, and self**. Formative feedback has two distinct features: 1) it focuses on the academic content and expectations for mastery from the learning target; 2) feedback is actionable and helps the student answer the question, "Based on the learning target standard and my own progress, what should I do next to further my understanding?"

Finally, the formative assessment process involves **teachers making instructional decisions** in response to their evolving knowledge of student understanding and **students taking next steps** in their learning based on the feedback they have received or generated.

Performance assessments strengthen the formative assessment process and promote student-centered instruction

Gagnon (2022) defines performance assessments as:

grounded in tasks that measure how well students apply their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to authentic problems to produce an original product or solution which is scored against specific criteria. [Conducting performance assessments] is a key process for producing both formative and summative evidence of student ability to apply their learning.

This definition provides insights into how performance assessment can strengthen

the formative assessment process and promote student-centered classrooms. Performance assessments require that students "apply their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to authentic problems" similar to a problem a practitioner would encounter. They align to big, complex learning goals (McTighe, 2014). The completion of an authentic performance assessment is educative for both the student and the teacher. As students engage in an authentic task (a hallmark feature of student-centered classrooms), they also surface evidence of their understanding (a hallmark feature of the formative assessment process).

As students complete the performance assessment, teachers can engage them by asking them to explain their thinking, having them assess themselves and peers against the requirements of the learning goal, and providing them with formative feedback. Teachers might also introduce (or reintroduce) an exemplar of proficient achievement for students to consider and reflect upon to improve their work. Finally, teachers consider students' demonstrated mastery as exemplified through the performance assessment to carefully plan for future learning. Students have the opportunity to act on self-assessment, peer-assessment, and teacher feedback.

Concluding thoughts

Well-functioning, robust, student-centered classrooms will not emerge merely from teachers "stepping to the side" and providing students with greater flexibility and choice. Rather, a student-centered classroom is a complex space and

teachers need resources and structures to help their classrooms become more student-centered.

The formative assessment process can provide critical structures so that learning is a cyclical process where teachers and students are engaged in a perpetual feedback loop surrounding learning of important disciplinary content. Performance assessments can that help bring life to big complex learning goals, elicit quality evidence of student understanding, provide feedback from several sources for students and teachers, and encourage students to make feedback actionable to improve their understanding.

References

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