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Enhancing Student Learning
Create profound achievement gains through formative assessments.
By Rick Stiggins and Jan Chappuis
January 2008

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In recent years, we educators have expanded our thinking about what the assessment process can do; we have moved beyond using it simply to judge and grade achievement to using it to make changes in teaching that will lead to greater learning. We have come to refer to this as formative assessment. As this use of assessment has grown in recent years, it has taken on many labels: benchmark, common, short-cycle, and interim assessment. When used formatively, assessments help students grow rather than merely holding them accountable for their learning. However, in formative assessment as traditionally conceived, it is the teacher whose information needs are met. A useful analogy is to view it as a "global positioning system" for teachers to use to find out where students are now so they can adjust instruction to get them to the next level of learning. What's missing from this conception is an acknowledgment that students are crucial decisionmakers too, and that formative assessment must also meet their information needs.

Enlightening Students
The assessment information is about the students, yet often we have overlooked the control they have over their own learning. We have neglected the fact that students can benefit from a global positioning system too. When formative assessment is cast as a tool for students to use, educators call it "assessment for learning," as explained in a book we co-authored with others, Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right-Using It Well.

Both formative assessment and assessment for learning are intended to provide information early enough in the decision-making process to influence student learning. As traditionally conceived, formative assessment helps teachers group students more effectively and select appropriate instructional interventions. The teacher uses the assessment information. However, the litmus test of an effective assessment for learning is that it informs students about their own learning, helping them focus their learning energies where they are likely to be most effective. So formative assessment enlightens the teacher, while assessment for learning enlightens the student.

Formative assessments tend to focus on academic achievement standards, providing results that reveal which standards students are or are not mastering. By identifying this information, formative assessments help teachers refine instructional programs in ways that enhance student success. However, assessment for learning doesn't ask who is and isn't meeting standards. Rather, it asks how each student is doing on her or his journey up the scaffolding leading to each standard. It provides this information to students in terms that they can understand, in order to support their decision making through levels of proficiency

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leading to success.

Student Self-Assessment

Formative assessment, as commonly used, provides evidence of student learning more frequently than does annual, large-scale summative testing-every few weeks, for example. It has become popular in part because annual testing occurs far too infrequently to support learning at a level of precision that is possible with periodic formative assessment. Besides, it can function well for the teacher as information to be used for course correction. On the other hand, assessment for learning keeps students and their teachers in touch with understanding and achievement on a continuous basis, allowing them to know what specific actions they can take to improve the learning every day. For example, teachers can use assessment information on day-to-day learning targets as feedback to students, pointing out what they have mastered and what they still need to work on. Students can then begin to self-assess, mirroring the process their teachers have used in giving feedback.

In traditional formative assessment contexts, teachers conduct the assessments, keep records, and track student progress. But in assessment for learning classrooms, we understand that when students self-assess regularly and track and share their progress, their confidence in themselves as learners and their motivation to do well grows along with their rising achievement.

Formative assessments help teachers refine instructional programs in ways that enhance student success.

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