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## Searching for Clarity on Formative Assessment

**Is formative assessment 'just good teaching' or something more specific?**

By **Catherine Gewertz**

If you ask five teachers what formative assessment is, you're likely to get five different answers.

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Oh, one might say, that's when I give my Friday quiz or my end-of-unit test. Another will say it's the feedback she gets from handheld devices that record, in real time, what students have learned. Many will tell you that formative assessment is just about any tool or strategy that helps them find out what students know as they're learning. Some teachers will say that it's "just good teaching."

Even in a field of professionals devoted to helping students learn, misunderstandings about formative assessment abound. The name of the practice might contribute to the confusion: The word "assessment" makes many teachers think of one-time or recurring events, rather than the continuous feedback loop that many argue must characterize good formative practice.

"There is a lot of confusion about the topic, so it often gets implemented in very different ways, leading to very different educational outcomes and a lot of crossed wires among those attempting to implement or even discuss it," said Gregory J. Cizek, the co-author, with Heidi L. Andrade, of *The Handbook of Formative Assessment*, which was published in 2009.

"We all have different definitions," said Joan Herman, who studies formative assessment as a senior research scientist at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, & Student Testing at the University of California, Los Angeles. "I don't think the definitions are necessarily in conflict, but because they highlight some parts of the process and not others, it potentially contributes to this Tower of Babel."

Definitions of formative assessment vary, but few disagree about its central characteristic: its power to yield information about what students are learning while they're learning it. Beyond that,



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it gets fuzzy. Fast.

Formative-assessment purists insist, for instance, that student work gleaned from those strategies should never be graded, or carry other stakes for students. Others see no problem—and some benefits—in grading such work.

Some will argue that gathering evidence of learning in real time is formative assessment. Others counter that it's not formative assessment unless the teacher uses what he or she learned to adjust instruction to students' needs.

### **Formative Assessment Definitions**

Cizek, a distinguished professor of educational measurement and evaluation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, sees three camps of thought on formative assessment. One views it simply as "quick, actionable assessments" that provide teachers with information along the way, like "mini-benchmark or mini-summative tests," he said.

The second camp embraces that concept but adds a twist: Teachers don't just gain insight into their students, they also learn about their own instructional practice, too. From formative assessment, teachers see what they should reteach or teach next and what strategies worked and didn't work.

Another viewpoint on formative assessment has a profoundly different primary emphasis: teaching practices designed to help students understand what their learning goals are, figure out how far they are from those goals, and what they must do to get there.

Proponents of that view of formative assessment believe that the metacognitive, self-regulation, and self-evaluation skills students learn benefit them for a lifetime.

Research suggests that formative assessment, done well, can deepen student learning. But exactly how much is still a matter for debate. A widely cited 1998 review of 250 studies on formative-assessment strategies, by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, found significantly positive effect sizes but later research offered a more mixed picture on the strategies' effectiveness.

Part of the difficulty in gauging formative assessment's promise is measuring it effectively, said CRESST's Herman. Direct observations of large numbers of teachers are expensive, and relying on teachers' own descriptions of their work gets mired in subjectivity. And a lot of the core of the practice—the sense teachers make of students' responses, in real time—is invisible, she said.

Herman's studies show that teachers struggle to master formative assessment.

"Even though all teachers were experienced and had previously taught the target content, few were able to use student explanations on open-ended items to interpret student understandings and/or misconceptions," Herman and her co-authors **write in a 2010 paper, which examined 40 elementary school science teachers' use of formative-assessment strategies**. "Teachers' ability to formulate specific next steps for teaching and learning was even more limited. Certainly such findings raise important questions about ... teacher capacity to use assessment to promote learning or to bring the vision of formative assessment to fruition."

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## Hope for Consensus

Even though many teachers still have far to go to master formative assessment, and differing definitions of it can be confusing, many experts find hope in what they see as a landscape of increased attention to the practice and consensus around its meaning.

"I really do think that most teachers understand formative assessment to be something that takes place during the process of instruction and is immediately used to inform subsequent instruction," as opposed to interim or benchmark tests, which are typically more standardized and take place at planned, specified junctures, Herman said.

That still leaves open a vast territory for disagreement, however.

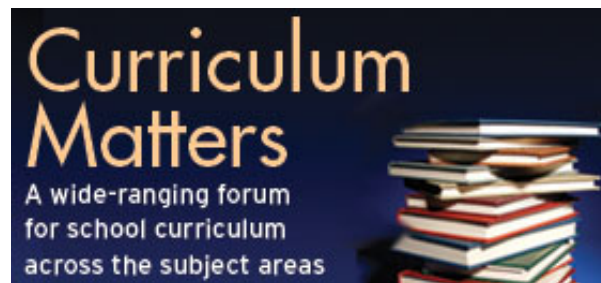
Even the formative-assessment experts argue about whether good practice can include a more "top down" approach, in which a teacher plans specific junctures in instruction for collecting evidence of student learning, or whether the only good formative assessment happens "from the bottom up," in the moment, with teachers watching and probing for student understanding.

More than a few educators and scholars will tell you that using the word "assessment" to name the practice is misleading. Formative assessment is nothing more than good teaching, they'll argue.

Good teaching, perhaps, but teaching in ways that the field itself is still struggling to define and verify.

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