

Does This Count?

Lee Ann Jung

We can fix gaming-for-grades school cultures by changing our understanding of formative classroom work.

Okay, everyone. You'll have 30 minutes for this portion of the activity. Be sure to check in with your shoulder partner before you get started to summarize the instructions." Ms. Barton scans the room as she asks, "What questions are there before we get started?"

Kevin raises his hand. "Does this count?"

Everyone in the class quiets and looks to Ms. Barton for the answer.

Ms. Barton sighs, knowing there is no right answer to this question. On the one hand, this particular activity is designed to be a formative activity, one that deepens her students' learning through collaborative experience and that also gives her information on where each of her students is in their grasp of the material. But she knows that as soon as she says, "This one is formative," many of her students will disengage. Some won't give their best effort, and some won't give any effort at all. Last year, she tried making the formative tasks just a small part of the final grade, but this didn't work, either. Besides, she knew that by making it part of the final grade, she was turning formative tasks into summative tasks.

Ms. Barton's quandary is not unusual. Many educators struggle with how to engage students in learning without attaching that effort to a grade. Measurement experts and most educators agree that students' academic grades should be kept separate from measures of perceived effort, engagement, or timeliness. But how do we move toward the goal of all students' being engaged in learning, giving effort, and being conscientious about performance and deadlines without attaching grades to those behaviors? This is the million-dollar question for improving grading practices.

What Do We Celebrate?

Ask any teacher what makes a great student, and you'll likely hear the words *engaged, curious, kind, gives effort, motivated, organized, globally minded, critical thinker, compassionate, and cooperative*.

But then take a look at the school office, entrance, and halls. Think about awards and graduation ceremonies. What is it that we celebrate? Do we see awards and trophies for the qualities we think of when we imagine a great student? Or are there more celebrations of performance? Banners wave in the halls showing the colleges and universities to which students were admitted. Polished trophies displaying athletic conquests line glass cabinets. And honor rolls and class ranking lists reward those with the highest academic grades. These academic grades are also front and center in the electronic gradebooks that students—and their families—access, sometimes daily.

Academic performance is a part of the everyday discourse in schools. When students walk across stage at graduation or assemblies, we adorn in decorations those with the highest academic performance and celebrate the person with the highest GPA as the "best." Despite what our lofty and altruistic mission and vision statements say, we show what we really value by what we celebrate.

Is it any wonder, then, that students ask if a task will count toward their grade? The institution of the school reinforces the gaming-for-grades behavior every single day, year after year. If we want to change how students see our assignments, we have to change what we celebrate. We need to put our money—or grade, as it were—where our mouth is, and measure and celebrate what we truly value.

Formative Doesn't Mean Informal

We can start by reconsidering how we define the term "formative assessments." While most people use the term "formative" to mean that the task is for practice and will be used to inform instruction and learning, there's also often an assumption that formative tasks are informal, whereas summative tasks are formal. But the notion of formality really has nothing to do with whether a task is formative or summative. If we want students to stop asking if work "counts," we have to use the terms correctly. Formative and summative are words used to describe how the assessment is functioning—how we use the information from the assessment (Black, 2013). If formative assessment is designed to open "opportunities for using that evidence to develop a learning dialogue" (Black, 2013, p. 169), then students benefit when all of our assessments are used formatively, until the opportunity for learning is over.

Using data summatively—that is, to summarize learning—should only happen when we need to report learning, typically at the end of reporting periods. Those grades should only become "fixed" at the end of the academic year. With this mindset, we don't really have to have formative tasks and summative tasks. We can have a formative period of time and summative points in time. The formative period happens over the entire school year, with only a small portion of the year, mostly at the end of terms, spent on summative assessment (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. Using Data Formatively Vs. Summatively

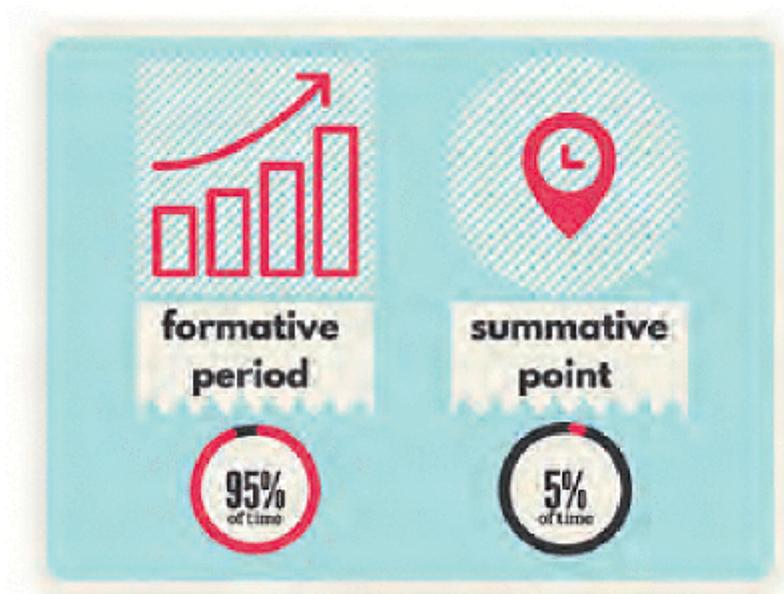


Figure by Lee Ann Jung

The implications for this shift mean that every test, activity, check-in, paper, and project is, in fact, used formatively until the end of the year (even if we pause to use some of this evidence summatively at reporting periods). And every bit of information, formal or informal, is considered an important data point that we can use to summarize learning at the end. This gets us out of the game of categorizing what "counts," because it *all* counts.

This approach also prevents us from only including formal tests and final exams or projects in the final grade. At the end of the academic year, we have the task of summarizing where each student is on a set of standards, proficiencies, or competencies. Have you ever taught a student who you knew understood the content and had the skills down but who performed poorly on the big test or project? When we see summative as a point in time rather than a type of task, we are free to use all types of evidence, formal and informal, to make a decision on how to summarize where a student is. If we know the student understands, but they demonstrated their understanding better informally than on the test, then the test wasn't a good measure of that student's understanding.

To Score or Not to Score—That's Not the Question

But how does this address the problem of student motivation with nongraded work? Although it may feel like students need to have grades to be motivated, decades of research have taught us that, in fact, feedback is an effective motivator in the absence of a grade (e.g., Butler & Nisan, 1986; Dweck, 2000; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). Students perform better, are less anxious, and are more focused when they receive personal feedback that is detailed, clearly shows where they are now and where they need to be, and offers confidence that they can achieve the expectation.

And yet scores, of a sort, on student work or performance can serve an important function during the formative period. They can help us to condense data into something more manageable. Qualitative data—all the feedback, comments, and thoughts we have about a student's work—is much richer with information than a symbol. But sorting through pages of narrative is not efficient or practical for making instructional grouping decisions or determining where supplemental instruction or intervention is needed. It's much easier to quickly scan the column of a gradebook to identify all the students who are struggling with a particular standard.

So, what do we do? Do we add a score or only provide feedback? Really, to score or not to score is not the question. The questions are: (1) For what understandings and skills would it be helpful to reduce information to a number or letter, and (2) Do I need to show these numbers or letters to a student? Reducing data to a symbol may help us organize and make decisions, but we do not always have to display these judgments to students. In this way, we can have the best of both worlds: efficiency of reduced data and detailed, descriptive feedback with no grade for students.

Growing Pains

For young students who have never experienced traditional grading, making the shift to "everything is formative, everything counts, and you won't see a grade" is not so difficult. For them, there have been no carrots and sticks associated with feedback on learning, and there is no ingrained understanding of grades as the motivator. But for the majority of older students, who are accustomed to receiving grades in competitive environments, taking the incentive of a seen grade away can lead to a temporary dip in engagement. This isn't because grades were such great motivators. The dip, rather, is compelling evidence that we have not supported intrinsic motivation in our students. When we hear, "Does this count?" it's clear there is work ahead to undo years of using grades as rewards and punishments.

Not adding a score does not mean we are ambiguous about where students are in meeting the expectation. To the contrary! We provide clear, descriptive feedback that fully informs students both of where they are toward meeting the expectation as well as what steps are needed to get there. But we do so with words and conversations rather than numbers and letters.

We also have to devote attention not only to academic expectations, but to the human qualities we say we value. In schools where behaviors are included in some way on report cards, it's often the case that focus is given to those behaviors only at the time grades are due. But if we are reporting it in some way, we must teach it, assess it, and give regular feedback on it. Making this explicit connection between behaviors we value and what we measure and celebrate can ease the growing pains schools feel as they shift to better measurement practices.

To be successful in our assessment and grading efforts, we have to share these roles with our students. Assessment and grading should be something we do with, not to, students. Our goal is to support students in finding reinforcement from within—in the feelings they have when they learn, accomplish, engage, persevere, are responsible, and are kind. This intrinsic motivation is the key to the engagement we all crave in our students. In the long run, their ability to assess their own learning, know how they learn best, develop strategies to improve, and believe that they can achieve is what will make them successful.

Not the grades.

Reflect & Discuss

- > What is the balance of formative and summative assessments in your (or your school's) grading practice?
- > How can you improve the feedback you give students to ensure they know exactly what they need to do to meet their goals?
- > Do you agree that formative activities should play a greater role in informing grading? Why or why not?

References

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