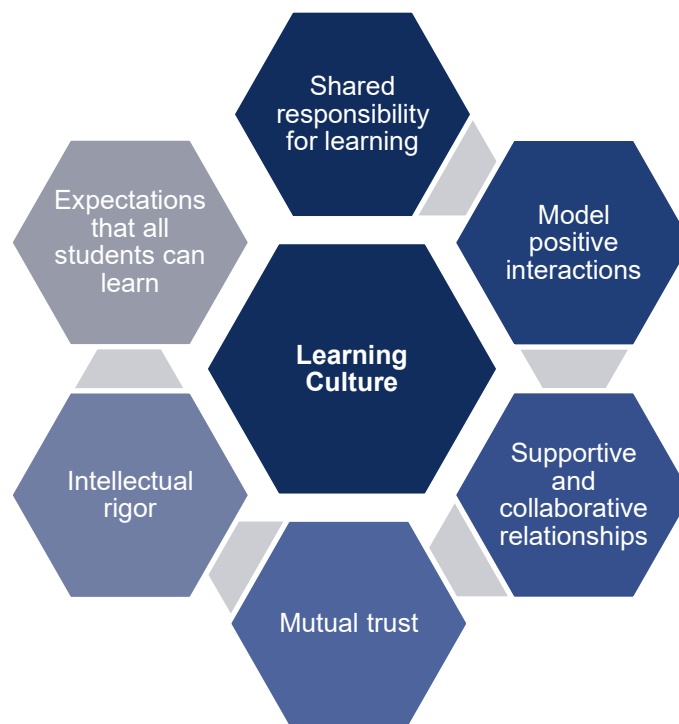


The Role of a Learning Culture in Formative Assessment

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The process of formative assessment depends on a classroom culture where students feel safe to say what they know and what they do not understand, to give and receive constructive feedback from peers, and to take risks in their learning. The teachers' role is to establish a classroom culture characterized by a recognition and appreciation of individual differences. In a classroom where students listen respectfully to each other, respond positively and constructively, and appreciate the different skill levels among peers, all students will feel safe in the learning environment to learn with and from each other.

The graphic below highlights six interdependent features of a learning culture that supports formative assessment.



Shared Responsibility: In formative assessment, teachers share responsibility for learning and assessment with their students. Since no one else can learn for them, students must take some responsibility for their own learning. When students understand learning goals and success criteria, and when they are supported by teachers to engage in self-assessment, ask questions of peers and provide feedback to each other, they are better able to make judgments about their own learning and decide on their own, or in collaboration with the teacher and peers, the action they need to take to move learning forward. Teachers support this by modeling transparency in their own learning, including sharing what they're currently working on in their formative assessment practice, how they self-assess, and a vision for their future learning. Teachers also consistently develop learning tasks that are set up as social and shared responsibilities among peers.

Positive Interactions: Gaining insights into student thinking through formative assessment means that students must be willing to share their thinking with the teacher and with each other. This requires a classroom culture where students feel safe to express where they are in their learning without fear of ridicule or sanctions. The models that teachers provide to their students through their interactions with them will be a significant factor in how the norms of respect and supportive interactions and behavior among the students is established. Teachers also support students' use of established norms through feedback on their use, noticing and responding when norms are followed, and raising the value they bring to learning. Establishing the classroom norms of listening respectfully to each other, revealing current thinking, and responding positively and constructively to each other will also enable the students to learn with and from each other.

Supportive and Collaborative Relationships: If students are going to learn with and from each other and be willing to give and receive constructive feedback about their learning, then the classroom culture needs to be characterized by supportive, collaborative relationships. Students must be able to ask for help, regard errors as sources of new learning, and admit difficulties or problems in learning without fearing they will be judged negatively by their teacher or peers. Instead, they need to know that such behaviors are desirable and are characteristic of effective learners. Once again, teacher modeling will play an important role in setting the stage for supportive relationships, as will the structures, opportunities and expectations for collaboration that the teacher provides. Teachers model how to use mistakes and frame failures and struggles as opportunities for growth.

Mutual Trust: Mutual trust is established in the classroom by students feeling that they are respected by their teacher and their peers. Teachers demonstrate respect and caring in not just how they talk to students, but how they listen to them as well. In the context of formative assessment, teachers need to demonstrate interpretive listening, attending closely to what the student is saying so as to understand the student's ideas. The behavior modeled by teachers will exert an influence on how students listen and respond to each other. Teachers model and communicate a worldview for students that supports the worldviews that each brings to the classroom. The supportive, collaborative relationships established in the classroom also lead to feelings of mutual trust between teacher and students and among students.

Intellectual Rigor: Related to how teachers convey respect and regard for their students is the level of challenge they provide for the students in their learning. Students need to feel that their teacher believes they can learn, and in classrooms where this is case, intellectual rigor, constructive criticism, and challenging of ideas exists for all students. Of course, formative assessment is the means teachers will use to know what level of challenge individual students are ready for so that can consistently move forward from where they are currently to a more advanced state of learning.

Learning Expectations: The intellectual rigor of the classroom, in addition to the verbal and non-verbal interactions between the teacher and students, will convey a message to the students that their teacher believes ALL of them can learn. This message is one that will encourage students to reach the high expectations that have been set for them and to achieve them in collaboration with their peers. Teachers also communicate to students that, as a community of learners, they share responsibility for one another's learning.