

Supporting Teachers at Four Stages of Formative Assessment Learning

All learning begins with what a learner knows. This fundamental concept is as true for students as it is for teachers. A challenge in leading formative assessment is to be able to simultaneously hold out a vision for what is possible for students and teachers while also knowing how to support teachers as they make progress towards meeting that vision. This resource provides an overview of how teacher learning often develops in formative assessment, and explores ways for leaders to listen for, and respond to teachers, as they progress from emerging to maturing and consolidated learning in formative assessment.

Entry Point to Begin Learning Formative Assessment

The term formative assessment has a range of different connotations, so it is no surprise when educators come to their learning with multiple definitions. We use the term formative assessment as originally conceptualized by Black and Wiliam (2009):

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (p. 9)

As teachers enter into this work, they typically lack understanding of formative assessment, and may not have any knowledge about the potential for changes to their own role, or for students. Depending on teachers' experiences, they may consider formative assessment as an event (a test, which might occur more often than other assessments); as something done by teachers to students; as something that they already do, or, as "just good instruction". And, when models are shared at this stage, those new to formative assessment often see "just good teaching" and are not yet able to tease out how specific formative assessment practices supported student learning outcomes in those models.

The leader's role at this stage is to help teachers come to an understanding of what formative assessment is, and is not. There is an added complication when leaders enter into the work without having had time or learning opportunities to form their own vision of formative assessment and determine how it will benefit their students and teachers. Leaders, at this stage, share that they feel more comfortable if they are slightly ahead of their teachers, so that they can be ready to lead faculty discussions that clarify what formative assessment is, and is not.

Emerging Learning

During emerging learning, teachers' primary focus is on the application of specific formative assessment practices, such as writing and sharing Learning Goals, providing effective teacher feedback during a lesson, or ways to engage student peers in discourse. Teachers at this stage are likely to focus their inquiry, and request feedback, on changes to their instructional practices without a sense of what might be changing for students. Seeing shifts in the student role at this stage can be quite challenging, as teachers focus on developing technical expertise in core strategies.

Teachers at the emerging level may continue to have misconceptions about formative assessment that, if left unresolved, can hinder progress. As the definition comes to be understood, teachers may share

personal concerns, particularly related to values or beliefs they have about teaching and learning. These may include:

- personal beliefs about their role as teacher (teacher as expert, teacher as in control of learning processes);
- a belief in systems that promote student compliance (homework practices, grading policies); or
- worries that developing instructional practices that shift the student role may encourage behavioral issues or reduce learning time.

Leaders play a key role in helping teachers at this stage come to understand the school and district vision for formative assessment, and in providing ongoing opportunities for teachers to explore what this vision will mean in their own context. This requires opportunities for teachers to explore ideas that may appear simple, but in fact represent significant shifts in how they consider their role in the classroom. Formative assessment is, ultimately, about how students and teachers work in partnership to use current evidence of learning to guide next steps in learning.

The power of formative assessment is rooted in the use of evidence. To use evidence, a number of practices must shift. One relatively easy lift for teachers is to develop tasks and activities, or questioning routines, through which there is more visible evidence of learning. Ultimately, students will be using evidence too, and to do that, teachers will need to learn how to incorporate each aspect of the feedback loop during daily lessons. Leaders can support teacher growth in this stage by **having teachers explore how formative assessment strategies are used synergistically within a lesson**, and how engaging students in these strategies is a first step towards their own use of evidence to direct learning. In districts or schools that have a significant focus on accountability and compliance, teachers will also need to know what new conditions will be established to ensure a safe environment for this learning.

Leaders who support teachers through this stage learn how to recognize and support teachers as they “let go” of their role as “provider of expertise”, and shift towards new ways of having students engage in and direct their own learning. For example, at this stage, teachers often create and post Success Criteria, but do not provide students with time to explore them in order to internalize them as the lesson begins, nor are the Success Criteria used by students to evaluate their progress. Similarly, teachers often learn one “strategy” at a time when they begin learning formative assessment, such as writing Learning Goals or giving descriptive feedback, but use that strategy only as a teacher-directed activity. **The leaders’ role is to provide feedback that helps teachers consider how the student role will shift as they adopt formative assessment.** Leaders’ feedback may focus on how students are involved with each new “strategy”, for example, as teachers are developing new routines to provide descriptive feedback during learning, leaders can also prompt them to ensure that there is time for students to apply the feedback, either independently or with peers.

Maturing Learning

As teachers advance in learning formative assessment, two primary shifts often take place. First, teachers seek to better understand how the specific formative assessment practices *connect within a lesson* to advance learning. At the same time, teachers begin to explore changes in the student role. In this stage, teacher questions may be focused on how individual practices complement one another to strengthen implementation (e.g., how can I deepen evidence collection routines aligned with the lesson Success Criteria?), and on ways that formative assessment can enhance student learning (e.g., what are the right models and scaffolds to use so that students refer to the Success Criteria when they self-assess?).

During maturing learning, many schools and districts are challenged by a lack of exemplars that showcase *what is possible for students* when using formative assessment. Teachers benefit from seeing

models that clearly articulate changes to the student role at their grade level, content area or within their school context. **Leaders play an important role in celebrating successful implementation, sharing changes in how teachers and students are engaged in learning, and creating opportunities for teachers to give and receive feedback.**

Keeping the focus on how students learn in formative assessment benefits teachers at this stage. Professional learning should focus on developing models of how students learn across a range of grade levels and subject areas, and ways to support a learning culture that creates a safe and trusting environment in which students can learn. Teachers benefit from peer observations, school visits and collaborative reflections that deepen understanding of shifts in the student role. Formative assessment practices that directly involve students typically take teachers significant time to learn and do well. Even simpler instructional shifts, such as eliminating ego-involving feedback, or moving away from telling students if they are “right or wrong”, change only with significant reflection, focus and effort.

During the maturing learning stage, teachers benefit from exploring ways in which students *increase ownership of their own and their peers’ learning*. Teachers report being motivated by student shifts related to student identity, motivation and self-regulation. Daily noticing and sensemaking is particularly helpful as teachers begin to connect changes in instructional practice with changes in student actions, and frequent informal feedback supports teachers to deepen their focus on daily formative practices.

At this stage, leaders report that teachers may begin to notice and reflect on how student peers engage with learning in new ways. Teachers at this stage might talk about how students:

- accurately assess where they are in their learning aligned with Learning Goals
- let others know when they don’t yet know something
- support peers during learning even when not prompted to do so
- refer one another back to the Success Criteria to guide next steps in learning
- ask one another to reconsider an idea
- listen carefully to one another and communicate respect for new ideas
- lead peer dialogue
- engage actively with structures for peer feedback
- engage with one another more equitably during learning (not attending to cliques or social structures that traditionally hinder peer dialogue)

Consolidating Learning

As teachers move towards consolidating their learning, their focus shifts to better understand the *quality of student thinking that is demonstrated during lessons*. During this stage, teachers may work to improve their own content knowledge and to develop new routines that leverage the student role in learning. Teacher learning goals may include using formative assessment practices to increase how students learn complex academic content, or deepening student-led practices that support student self-regulation and metacognitive skills. As teachers gain expertise, they often wonder about how to measure impact, or better meet equity goals.

As teachers’ learning moves into the consolidated stage, they are able to articulate how formative assessment provides a framework through which students can move towards agency and autonomy. Teachers engage in more discourse with students that explore how they are learning, and identify new ways for students to give feedback on, or co-construct, lessons. Self-regulation skills become an integral aspect of instruction, and teachers strengthen models for peer learning.

At this stage, teachers benefit from engaging in inquiry cycles, learning with and from peers, developing model lessons and demonstrating classroom practices. Teachers at this level may take on an ambassador role in formative assessment and may be able to give feedback, sharing and articulating core principles of practice and how they are actualized in the classroom. **Leaders play a role in nurturing and supporting teachers at this level, forming ways for them to engage with other teachers at the district or school, and participating in peer groups that can continue to promote and accelerate learning.** There may also be opportunities for teachers who have developed expertise to share this work on a broader scale, doing cross-district, state-level or national leadership work to spread formative assessment.