

Planning to Support Student Agency through Formative Assessment: Understanding Key Instructional Routines

When teachers provide learning experiences for students, these not surprisingly, tend to focus on new disciplinary content. Yet to support deeper learning, these learning opportunities also need to address the skills students require to learn how to learn, that is, the skills of agency. Students gain agency when they develop an understanding of new content in conjunction with awareness of their learning status.

We have found that the most effective path to fostering agency in daily instruction is teaching students to use formative assessment practices. Formative assessment provides students with an inquiry and decision-making framework that they apply to their own, and their peers', learning. When using these practices, students ascertain where they are in their learning and determine where to go next. This ability to propel one's own learning forward, and support peers in doing the same, enables deeper learning in so far that it supports students to internalize a mental model of the discipline. This schema development is critical for moving beyond surface-level learning to deeply learn disciplinary content and skills.

To support students in developing agency, teachers utilize a series of instructional routines. These routines are outlined below. While they are listed in order, these practices do not need to be used sequentially, but instead require regularity and responsiveness to student learning needs.

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is an important initial strategy in supporting student agency. In this context, it is also a key tactic in supporting equity among students. Some students come to school with the skills of agency in place, but many do not. If students are not taught these skills explicitly, there is an ever-widening gap between those that have these skills and those who do not. Skills that students need to explicitly learn to increase their agency through formative assessment, include:

- Co-constructing success criteria,
- Using success criteria to gauge the status of their learning, e.g., by reviewing their own thinking and analyzing their work
- Determining next steps
- Working with peers to get/give feedback
- Setting personal learning goals

Modeling

Students need to know what these formative assessment practices look like in action before they can try them out on their own. Hearing explanations that explicitly describe how to do them is a first step, but not sufficient on its own. Teachers will want to provide frequent demonstrations to show how to carry out these processes for students to emulate. Modeling can be even more powerful when it includes think-alouds to give students insight into the internal considerations that inform the steps the teacher takes, e.g., describing their thinking while using success criteria to gauge the status of their learning. Another way to enhance modeling is to ask students to provide feedback using the success criteria as an interpretive framework. This means that the types of modeling will vary. In the first stage of learning for students, the model should be of exemplary practice.

As students develop expertise, teacher modeling can intentionally include less optimal practices (e.g., ones the teacher has noted students doing) that the students can identify and give feedback on with suggestions for improvement. Models can also come from other sources, for example, videos of other students using the formative assessment strategies. These videos can be shared with students, analyzed, and discussed. Teachers can also structure fishbowls in their classroom with some students demonstrating formative assessment practices and other students observing and providing feedback.

Practice Opportunities

The name of the game is practice, practice, practice. If it doesn't go as well as hoped the first time a teacher introduces a formative assessment process to students, it's important to keep a growth mindset, understanding that students are emergent learners and will improve with regular and repeated practice in low stakes settings. Students can, for example, practice and get better at noticing and making sense of evidence of learning, building awareness of their own thinking, and giving feedback to peers. These processes get more comfortable and easier as students shift their mindsets and develop the necessary skills. As mentioned above, it is helpful to start with explicit instruction and modeling for each formative assessment process/skill. Then provide students with step-by-step structured opportunities for practice. This creates the necessary conditions that enable *all* students to be successful and develop the prerequisite skills for agency and deeper learning.

Feedback

When students are learning a formative assessment skill, it is helpful for them, and for the teacher, to have success criteria specified for the particular formative assessment process they are practicing in addition to success criteria for the intended content learning. With success criteria articulated, teachers can give students feedback that is grounded in a shared understanding of what quality practice looks like. They also have the interpretive framework that enables them to give feedback that is descriptive, focused, based on evidence, and not centered on student ability.

For example, it is helpful to give feedback along the lines of,

- *I can see you were able to identify areas of strength as well as areas of growth for yourself that will help you advance your learning* (formative assessment skill), and,
- *You were very clear in how you described the key events that led up to WW2, though I was unsure from your description how these events affected one another* (content skill).

Conversely, it is not helpful to give feedback along the lines of,

- *You are good at assessing your learning, or*
- *You are not so good at writing.*

These last examples are considered ego-based feedback instead of feedback focused on the qualities of the work. The feedback process also should include opportunities for students to reflect on the feedback they receive and determine how they will use it to improve their practice.

Self-Reflection Opportunities

For students to improve in their formative assessment practices and deepen their learning, they need opportunities for self-reflection. As with feedback, self-reflection is most productive when done in relation to success criteria. Teachers can structure self-reflection opportunities to occur in lessons after students receive feedback, after engaging in a short period of learning new content and skills, and after participating in discourse with peers. Each one of these learning experiences is enhanced and deepened when followed up with structured opportunities for reflection. Teachers should build these opportunities into their lesson plans.

When students are given the tools to monitor their learning through self-reflection (including monitoring *learning how to learn* processes), they develop metacognition. Metacognitive processes in conjunction with analyzing evidence of learning are the drivers of agency and deeper learning. These skills do not come automatically to students, but like other formative assessment processes, require explicit instruction, modeling, practice opportunities, feedback, and social engagement in order to develop. With these skills, students can become self-regulated learners and plan next steps in their learning. Significantly, *all* students need to be given the opportunity to develop self-regulation through self-reflection, not just those who are more academically advanced or more compliant.

Social Learning

Students who practice a daily formative assessment inquiry cycle, or feedback loop, often express that they learn better with and from peers rather than from their teacher. They share that they appreciate exploring evidence together and getting feedback from one another because they can easily relate to one another's conceptualizations of disciplinary concepts. Primary ways that students engage in exploring evidence of learning together are through peer

feedback routines, group self-assessment, and discourse opportunities. In each of these participation structures, students do not start the processes with the answers, but come to them together through shared learning experiences. Ultimately, many students working in these contexts come to develop collective efficacy. With collective efficacy, students feel a sense of responsibility for, and a sense of agency regarding both their own learning and that of their peers'. They develop a sense of belonging that is the result of learning in the joint space created through dialogue and collaborative problem solving. Teachers can support these social learning processes by: 1) utilizing each of the strategies described in this document, 2) planning the intentional, structured opportunities for students to learn from one another in each lesson, and 3) letting go of legacy practices that situate the teacher at the center of learning, and exploring ways that move away from a primary focus on delivering academic content, to having a primary focus to coaching students as they explore and apply disciplinary knowledge and skills.