



Experience (Plus Training) Makes the Best Teachers

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Recently, I differentiated formative assessment from benchmark—or interim—assessment, then described some appropriate uses of the latter. Now let's look at why formative assessment, an integral part of instruction, may be in short supply in our classrooms and discuss what we can do about it.

First, because of accountability pressures, teachers may substitute practice on test questions like the ones used in high-stakes accountability tests for good formative assessment. Educators may also turn to products that are called formative, but which are, in fact, summative. While both behaviors might be explainable, if they get in the way of the important instructional practices of formative assessment, educators are, in effect, shortchanging their students.

Formative assessment takes many forms, from ungraded quizzes to student and teacher questioning to observation of class work. According to a large body of research, good formative assessment practices can lead to significant gains in achievement. For formative assessments to be effective, however, they must possess these three key attributes:

- ◆ They occur while instruction pertaining to the desired learning outcome is still going on.
- ◆ They yield accurate, rich diagnostic information or descriptive feedback.
- ◆ The feedback leads to adjustments to instruction that foster better achievement of the desired learning outcome.

Interestingly enough, educators have turned to the testing community for help with formative assessment, triggered perhaps by the presence of the word “assessment,” but also because they recognize the power of testing to influence instruction. In reality, formative assessment fits better in the domain of curriculum and instruction than in that of testing. Done properly, it is part of instruction, which leads us back to teachers.

Teachers need a repertoire of formative assessment techniques, an understanding of the processes proven by research to enhance student learning, and knowledge of content and pedagogy so they can effectively practice good formative assessment. While there's no substitute for experience in allowing teachers to hone their skills, training is essential. There are many areas in which teachers should receive professional development, including but not limited to effective feedback, questioning, observation/record keeping, and student self- and peer-assessment. In future editions, I'll discuss how these and other skills relate to improved teaching and learning. After all, that's the outcome that matters.

What do you think? Let me know at twocents@measuredprogress.org.



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