

## Formative Assessment in the Real World

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In many ways, the world we all live in has become one big formative assessment. Consider a purchase of an item via the Internet and you are asked to complete a consumer survey. When you return to the website, a list of "potential items" for you to purchase appears, based on your prior purchases. This same dynamic is in play in the classroom when teachers seek meaningful information about their students' learning to inform the differentiated path of instruction. As [Dean Deanna Sands](#) observed in her blog post, formative assessment is a process. This multistep process, to gather information about student growth, progress and engagement, is critical to the art and science of teaching and learning.

In my 33 years as an educator, I identify the topic of "assessment" as one of the major areas where I have observed teacher growth, as well as overall growth in the education field. Early in my career, assessment included standardized tests, end-of-unit tests and teacher observation. Goals for students were based on these three assessments, which were more summative in design. Typically, very little was done with the information when a unit of instruction was completed. (An "innovative" application of "mastery learning" attempted to use formative assessment, but fell short in regards to higher levels of learning on Bloom's Taxonomy.)

That is not what classrooms look like today. Formative assessment is the foundation for quality teaching. It is on-going and fluid, building from data set to data set to guide a teacher's instruction for groups of students, as well as individuals.

I offer a glimpse into what this looks like in practice from a 3rd-grade classroom I recently observed in my district. The teacher started a reading lesson by letting students know that they'd be detectives gathering evidence to identify the more "needy" character, Charlotte or Wilbur, in the book *Charlotte's Web*. This seemed simple enough, but how the teacher managed her formative assessment of the students' grasp of the concept, as well as ownership for their reading, was quite demanding.

Students gathered their evidence and wrote it down on their iPads through a shared Google document. They discussed their ideas and debated their positions, while also posing clarifying questions to one another. The teacher made note of the key points of conversations she observed and recorded these in a Venn diagram. When it came time for students to articulate their conclusions in the large group, the teacher surveyed them using a show of thumbs held close to their bodies, to let the students respond in a more private manner. She recorded their responses, then led them through deeper questioning and application of Charlotte's and Wilbur's characteristics to a real life situation they had read about earlier in the week. The lesson ended with students performing a "quick write" in their journals about their concluding opinion and evidence to support the opinion. When the students left the classroom for lunch, they had to present their journals and answer the question, "What evidence was the most important to support your conclusion?"

With this 30-minute lesson, the teacher had a wealth of information from which to understand her students' learning and to develop and design the next reading lesson. This is the dynamic classroom Dr. Sands advocates, and it is the classroom that all of our students deserve. In his book, *Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading*, Robert Marzano notes that the more accurate information teachers have about a student's progress or the performance of the total class, the better the teachers' judgments will be regarding meaningful instruction. Assessment should be on-going and fluid, but most importantly, it should connect to the work our teachers do in the classroom every day to result in quality learning for our students.

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