

What Teachers Need to Know About the Formative Assessment Process



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Teachers face many demanding responsibilities. They are tasked with cultivating young minds and building students’ academic competencies, yet the contexts in which teachers teach can make this seemingly straightforward task exceptionally difficult. Teachers typically work with large groups of 25-30 or more students at the same time. In the higher grades, teachers may work with students for an hour or less each day. Teachers must also respond to calls that they could do better. Consequently, teachers may hear about formative assessment and think, “Well, that’s just one more thing I’m supposed to be doing.”

However, formative assessment is not just another “thing” that teachers should add to their current practice. Rather, formative assessment is a comprehensive approach to teaching that combines best practices into a coherent process in which both teachers and students ask themselves three questions:

- 1) What are we supposed to be learning?
- 2) What is our current progress toward the learning goals?
- 3) What should we do next to close the gap between where we are currently and the learning goals?

Once teachers and students have begun to ask these questions, they are well on their way. But this general framing is only a fraction of what teachers must know about formative assessment to effectively enact the practices associated with these questions. Indeed, there are many things that teachers should know about the formative assessment process.

How do we define formative assessment?

First and most importantly, teachers should start with a good foundation of what formative assessment means. While tests, quizzes and other assessments can be used *formatively*, when we say “formative assessment,”

we are referring to an ongoing process rather than an isolated event such as a test or other on-demand indicator of performance. The formative assessment process involves several distinct practices that work together in concert to promote robust student learning. Being a distinct yet integrated set of practices is the formative assessment process’s key feature; however, that feature also makes it more difficult to understand, communicate to others, and put it into practice.

Components and elements of the formative assessment process

In order to help teachers enact the formative assessment process well, the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program has organized the formative assessment process into five foundational *components* in which 13 *elements* are embedded. Table 1 illustrates how the FAME program has organized the formative assessment process.

Table 1: FAME Components and Elements

Guiding Questions	FAME Components and Elements
<p>Where are we (teacher and students) going?</p>	<p>Planning</p> <p>1.1—Instructional Planning: planning based on knowledge of the content, standards, pedagogy, formative assessment process, and students</p> <p>Learning Target Use</p> <p>2.1—Designing Learning Targets: the use and communication of daily instructional aims with the students</p> <p>2.2—Learning Progressions: connection of the learning target to past and future learning</p> <p>2.3—Models of Proficient Achievement: examples of successful work for students to use as a guide</p>
<p>What does the student understand now?</p>	<p>Eliciting Evidence of Student Understanding</p> <p>3.1—Activating Prior Knowledge: the opportunity for students to self-assess or connect new ideas to their prior knowledge</p> <p>3.2—Gathering Evidence of Student Understanding: use of a variety of tools and strategies to gather information about student thinking and understanding regarding the learning targets from all students</p> <p>3.3—Teacher Questioning Strategies: the intentional use of questions for students to explain their thinking or to connect their idea to another student’s response</p> <p>3.4—Skillful Use of Questions: a focus on the purpose, timing, and audience for questions to deliver content and to check students’ understanding</p>
<p>How do we (teacher and students) get to the learning target?</p>	<p>Formative Feedback</p> <p>4.1—Feedback from the Teacher: verbal or written feedback to a student to improve his or her achievement of the learning target</p> <p>4.2—Feedback from Peers: feedback from one student to another student about his or her learning in relation to a learning target</p> <p>4.3—Student Self-Assessment: the process in which students gather information and reflect on their own learning in relation to the learning goal</p> <p>Instructional and Learning Decisions</p> <p>5.1—Adjustments to Teaching: teachers’ daily decisions about changes to instruction</p> <p>5.2—Adjustments to Learning: students’ use of feedback for improvement</p>

Source: *Developing and Implementing the Formative Assessment Process in Michigan: A Guide for Classroom and Student Success*, Michigan Department of Education and Measured Progress, 2012 and *Developing and Implementing the Formative Assessment Process in Michigan: A Guide for Classroom and Student Success, Supplemental Training Tools, Launching Into Learning*. Michigan Department of Education and Measured Progress, 2014.

Teachers will likely recognize and have experience with most (if not all) of these components and elements. So, in some ways formative assessment is familiar, which leads to the second thing that teachers should know—formative assessment will be familiar to teachers, yet it will require them to re-envision their practice.

Potential challenges to effective use of the formative assessment process

This duality of formative assessment leads to two potential challenges. The familiarity of formative assessment may lead teachers to think that they are already “doing” formative assessment because they enact several of the components and elements in isolation. However, they might not have integrated the components and elements into a complex and coherent set of complementary practices that advance student learning. Alternatively, teachers might get discouraged because they think that enacting the formative assessment process as it is described in books or seen in videos is just too far out of reach.

When teachers react in either of these ways, they should remember that the formative assessment process is demanding and will require considerable study and reflection accompanied by trial and error with the support of colleagues. Intentionally integrating the components and elements of the formative assessment process takes study, practice, and reflection; teachers should take a long-view approach rather than the quick-fix approach promoted at more traditional professional development sessions.

Consider the difficulty and complexity involved as teachers develop capacities related to enacting the formative assessment process. Namely, they must learn to carefully plan for instruction that:

- establishes clear learning targets in the context of the bigger picture of where student learning is on the trajectory of disciplinary knowledge,
- activates students’ prior knowledge,
- gathers evidence of student understanding,
- asks skillful and timely questions,
- provides students with feedback,
- makes time for students to assess themselves and their peers, and
- requires students to act on feedback to improve their learning.

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That is a lot to ask of any anyone. Teachers come to realize that they have much to learn, so they should be patient with themselves and remind themselves that true excellence in formative practices will be challenging and require time.

The role of students in the formative assessment process

The third thing teachers need to know about formative assessment is that the role of the student will change. Any teacher can tell you that there are some times when teachers are more committed to the task of academic development than the students themselves are. Critics of schools have often lamented that students are “passive” learners who sit and receive information from the teacher and then regurgitate it back to the teacher on tests.

The formative assessment process makes new demands on students that will likely be as difficult for them as enacting the new instructional practices are for teachers. Thus, teachers will have to cultivate a classroom climate conducive to student engagement in the formative assessment process. This will involve teachers explaining, modeling, and guiding practice as students learn to:

- analyze learning targets,
- connect with their previous knowledge,
- answer questions thoroughly and thoughtfully,
- receive and respond to teacher and peer feedback,
- analyze their own work and the work of peers, and
- take actionable steps to improve their mastery of learning targets.

The improvement in student learning that occurs when teachers and students engage in the formative assessment process makes the extensive learning, experimenting, adjusting, and reflecting well worth the effort.

Support is available

Finally, and perhaps most critically, teachers should know that they do not have to develop their formative assessment practices on their own. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has supported the FAME program for more than a decade to spread the use of the formative assessment process throughout Michigan. During this time, MDE has provided extensive professional learning and developed helpful resources designed to assist teachers as they get started and develop their practices over time.

Furthermore, the FAME program enables teachers to learn about the formative assessment process and develop formative assessment practices in close collaboration with their colleagues. That is why the FAME program enlists Learning Teams rather than individual teachers interested in learning more about the formative assessment process. In addition, over the course of the past decade, MDE has curated an exemplary set of resources geared to help teachers as they embark on their formative assessment journey.

For teachers just getting started with formative assessment, the road ahead is both challenging and rewarding. However, the experience of FAME participants can encourage other teachers to go forth diligently and not lose heart when challenges emerge. The improvement in student learning that occurs when teachers and students engage in the formative assessment process makes the extensive learning, experimenting, adjusting, and reflecting well worth the effort.

How can I learn more about the formative assessment process and about FAME?

Visit the FAME website at FAMEMichigan.org to learn more about the formative assessment process. The website offers information about FAME and the formative assessment process along with comments from formative assessment experts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Do?** by Margaret Heritage. *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2007 <http://tinyurl.com/Heritage-Kappan>
- Learning Point: **What constitutes a high-quality, comprehensive, balanced assessment system?** Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2016. <http://bit.ly/BalancedSystem>
- Learning Point: **What do we mean by Formative Assessment?** Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2017. <http://bit.ly/LP-FormativeAssessment>
- Presentation video: **Supporting Teachers Statewide in the Formative Assessment Process**, Margaret Heritage. www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/event/assessment-learning-network-2017-18-event-4 (scroll down to view video about the formative assessment process)

