

## Reclaiming an Important Teacher Competency: The Lost Art of Formative Assessment

Christopher R. Gareis

Received: 8 August 2006 / Accepted: 4 September 2007 /  
Published online: 28 September 2007  
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2007

**Abstract** We live in an era in which standardized assessments play a necessary and important role in the mission of our public schools to provide equal and equitable educational opportunity to all students. However, our focus on summative accountability measures often has an eclipsing effect on the equally important role of formative assessment practices in the classroom. This article describes *why* and *how* formative assessment should be integral to classroom teaching, and it suggests the importance of focusing on teachers' instructionally-based, formative assessment competencies through our teacher evaluation systems.

**Keywords** Formative assesment · Assessment for learning · Teacher evaluation

We live in an era of accountability. You might even say that we live in the era of the standardized test, given the role that high-stakes assessments now play in the educational process. These tests have become our schools' "measures of success," "performance benchmarks," "value-added indicators," and a host of other business-like terms intended to equate quantitative test scores with learning. In more ancient parlance, you could say that standardized assessments have become *the coin of the realm*.

I do not intend to disparage the call for accountability. Neither do I intend to denigrate the role of standards in the curriculum nor the use of standardized assessments as *one* measure of learning. These play necessary and important roles in the mission of our public schools to provide equal and equitable educational opportunity to all students. My concern, however, is the eclipsing effect high-stakes assessments are having on teachers' constructive use of *assessment as an*

---

Core ideas from this article were originally published in *T/TAC Link Lines* (2006, February–March) and are printed here in an updated version with permission.

C. R. Gareis (✉)

The College of William and Mary, P.O. Box 8795, Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795, USA  
e-mail: crgare@wm.edu

*instructional strategy*. In our drive to summatively assess student learning, we may be forgetting *why* and *how* to formatively assess student learning in the classroom.

## 1 What is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment is not a new idea. Arguably, it has been around as long as teaching has. Socrates' *modus docendi* (that is, his "preferred way of teaching") was to question the learner. What we now call the *Socratic method* essentially amounts to using questions to assess understanding, to guide learning, and, ultimately, to foster critical thinking. More recently, Gronlund (2006) has written that formative assessment is intended "to monitor student progress *during instruction* [emphasis added]...to identify the students' learning successes and failures so that adjustments in instruction and learning can be made" (p. 6). Airasian (2001) has defined formative assessment as "the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information for the purpose of improving student learning *while instruction is taking place* [emphasis added]" (p. 421). Basically, formative assessment is any means by which a teacher figures out what students are getting and what they are not getting-in the classroom, for the purpose of teaching and learning, but not for purposes of grading.

## 2 What Evidence is there that Formative Assessment Matters?

While the concept of formative assessment itself is not new, what is new is the evidence of the extraordinary effectiveness of formative assessment in teaching and learning. Since the late 1990s, the Assessment Reform Group (1999) has gained considerable attention for its research in England, Canada, and the United States regarding the effectiveness of formative assessment. Among many findings, these researchers have concluded that improved formative assessment practices in classrooms typically yield gains in student achievement roughly equivalent to one to two grade levels in learning (Assessment Reform Group, 1999). The instructional power of formative assessment is echoed in the well-known meta-analysis of effective instructional strategies led by Marzano et al. (2001), which identified *providing feedback*—a central principle of formative assessment—as one of nine categories of instructional strategies that have statistically significant effects on student achievement. Indeed, Marzano and colleagues even quote a previous researcher as saying, "The most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback" (Hattie in Marzano et al. 2001, p. 96).

## 3 What Does Formative Assessment Look Like in the Classroom?

Frankly, everything students do has potential value as formative assessment. Assessments may include:

- Oral responses or written responses
- Physical performances or inactivity

- Completing practice worksheets or engaging in peer conferences
- Taking conventional quizzes or creating graphic representations of a concept
- Computing math problems on personal dry-erase boards or indicating the level of understanding with a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down.

Formative assessments take myriad forms in the classroom and are as unique to individual teachers as instructional styles. Yet, as with classroom instruction, there are several core principles that characterize the most effective formative assessment practices. Adapting from the Assessment Reform Group (1999), three basic principles of formative assessment follow:

1. Formative assessment is integral to instruction. Unlike summative assessment, which occurs after instruction, formative assessment is *part of* instruction. Consider it this way: If the intent of teaching is to get students to think, then the intent of formative assessment is to make students' thinking *visible* to the teacher. Formative assessment should help a teacher determine what the students are getting, what they're missing, and what needs to happen next. To provide this information to the teacher and students, formative assessment must be close in time to instruction. The teacher's aim in the classroom is to make *timely* decisions about the next steps of instruction based upon evidence of student learning that is available *right now*. Formative assessment can even serve *simultaneously* as an instructional strategy. For example, during a *K–W–L* activity, students write what they already know (*K*) about the topic at hand and what they want (*W*) to learn about that topic. These two prompts function not only as an anticipatory set for instruction, but also as a means for the teacher to determine students' current level of understanding. Then, after instruction, students describe what they have learned (*L*), which serves both as a reinforcing instructional activity and also as a timely assessment of learning.
2. Formative assessment requires constructive feedback. Too often we equate assessments with grades. However, conventional grading schemes, such as letter grades and percentages, are typically inadequate to the task of conveying meaningful information about the particular strengths, gaps, and next steps for students (Guskey and Bailey 2000). Effective formative assessment should be *honest, specific, and timely*. Generic or disingenuous praise (e.g., "Good work") can convey a false sense of mastery to a student who, in fact, has made fundamental and correctable errors in her work. Similarly, stock phrases and letter grades do not communicate specific elements of strength or shortcomings in a student's thinking or application of skills. Feedback that is separated from performance by days or even weeks of time (such as often happens with teachers marking major projects or tests and also with most standardized tests) become meaningless and, thus, largely useless to students. The teacher's purpose for providing feedback in formative assessment is to answer two questions for the student: (1) How am I progressing in achieving what I set out to learn, and (2) What do I need to do to continue my progress? Therefore, the teacher's feedback, whether written or oral, should on some level provide answers to these questions for the student.
3. Formative assessment fosters student involvement. When used effectively, formative assessment is sensitive to the role of motivation in learning. Teachers

and students come to value the fact that making mistakes is inherent to learning. Mistakes are not depreciatory events, and they do not affect final grades. Teachers come to articulate learning goals clearly, and students come to internalize the criteria for achieving those goals. Through formative assessment activities, students develop a host of tacit learning outcomes that few teachers would argue against. Namely, students develop the ability to ask meaningful questions, to respond constructively to feedback from others, to provide useful feedback to peers, to monitor their own progress, and to reflect actively on their own learning. Ultimately, the aim of formative assessment is to enable students to self-assess—that is, for students to monitor, respond to, and direct their own learning both within and beyond the classroom.

#### 4 How Does Formative Assessment Relate to Teacher Evaluation?

Assessment—that is, gathering information about student learning—is a central responsibility of teachers because assessment results (of all types) should inform instructional decisions. However, surprisingly few teachers have been formally trained in basic principles of assessment, and fewer still seem to apply their limited expertise in the classroom relative to other competencies such as instructional delivery, classroom management, and professionalism (Tucker et al. 2003). When these issues are coupled with the current intense focus on comprehensive standardized assessments, educational leaders may be wise to revisit the professional competencies upon which their teacher evaluation systems are designed...and ask some key questions. Have we adequately defined “assessment” as a competency, including the role of formative assessment in instruction? Are teachers able to demonstrate this competency adequately in our evaluation system? And, perhaps most important, are our teachers *able* to use formative assessment techniques effectively in the classroom to improve student learning?

Revisiting the forgotten art of formative assessment may be worth our while as we grapple with the demands of evaluation and accountability.

#### References

- Airasian, P. (2001). *Classroom Assessment: Concepts and Applications* (4th ed.). Boston; McGraw-Hill.
- Assessment Reform Group. (1999). *Assessment for Learning: Beyond the Black Box*. Cambridge, UK; University of Cambridge School of Education.
- Gronlund, N. (2006). *Assessment of Student Achievement* (8th ed.). Boston; Pearson.
- Guskey, T.R., & Bailey, J.M. (2000). *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA; Corwin.
- Marzano, R.J., Pickering, D.J., & Pollock, J.E. (2001). *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Alexandria, VA; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tucker, P.D., Stronge, J.H., Gareis, C.R., & Beers, C.S. (2003). The Efficacy of Portfolios for Teacher Evaluation and Professional Development: Do They Make a Difference? *Educational Administration Quarterly* 39(5), 572–602.