

## [Grading Formative and Summative Assessments](#)

Posted on October 27, 2010, by [Rick DuFour](#)

By Rick DuFour

We received a question about grading, specifically how to balance grading between formative and summative assessments. The author was concerned because the grading practices of the teachers in the school were so different.

To answer the question, we need to develop a common understanding of the terms formative assessment and summative assessment. A summative assessment is an assessment that asks, “Did the student acquire the intended knowledge and skills by the deadline—yes or no, pass or fail?” For example, every course at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, ends with a final exam that counts for 25 percent of a student’s final grade. This is clearly a summative exam. State exams are another example of summative assessments.

A formative assessment asks, “Is the student learning it, and if not, what steps do we need to take to support his or her learning?” Of course, good teachers are using formative assessment in their classrooms every day as they use a variety of strategies to check for student understanding—asking questions, having students work on a problem or write an answer as they circulate around the room to check student work, using clickers, etc. A teacher who asks students to complete a first draft of an essay and then provides feedback on how the next draft can be improved is also using a formative assessment.

But this question gets at the issue of what happens when, at the end of a unit, the teacher gives a unit exam to determine if the student has learned. Is that exam formative or summative? The answer is, “It depends on how you use it.” If the student fails the exam and is merely given an F and the class moves on, it is a summative exam. But if the exam is assessing the essential skills we want all students to learn, simply moving on is not in keeping with a commitment to learning for all. If the student is given another opportunity to demonstrate that he has learned, it would be formative.

We have seen schools simply allow students to take a test or turn in an assignment over and over again until the student demonstrates proficiency. This is often very frustrating to teachers who feel it sends the message to students that the initial quality of your work does not matter because we just keep giving you more chances.

We feel that the better strategy is to use the assessment in the following ways:

1. Use the assessment to identify students who are not yet proficient on a particular skill or concept.
2. Require those students to keep working on that skill or concept in a structured school wide intervention program that is timely, directive, and systematic. This intervention never removes the student from class. Time is purposefully carved out in the daily schedule to provide students who struggle with additional support.

3. When the student has demonstrated proficiency in intervention, allow the student to retake an assessment on the skill or concept in question. If the student is able to demonstrate proficiency, the failing grade should be dropped and replaced by one that demonstrates proficiency because grades should reflect student learning, not how fast they learned.

Here is a specific example. An algebra teacher is assessing student proficiency during instruction each day. The teacher assigns homework on a regular basis, may use ungraded quizzes a few times to monitor student learning, and uses a graded quiz each week. At the end of three weeks, the teacher uses a team-developed common assessment and tells students that if they demonstrate proficiency on the assessment, their lowest score of the unit will be dropped. If a student fails the exam, he or she is assigned to a week of intensive tutoring in the school's intervention center during what would have been study hall, free time, or lunch. During this intervention period, the student keeps working and learning, putting in more time to acquire the intended skill. At the end of the week, he or she retakes the test and earns a C. The C should replace the F.

In this scenario, we would contend the assessment was formative even though the student received an initial grade of F because the assessment was used to identify a specific area of concern. The results were also used to provide the student with specific instruction and support aimed at helping him or her acquire an essential skill. By giving the student another opportunity to demonstrate that he or she learned, by replacing the F with the C, and by not continuing to punish the student for initial difficulty, he or she has an opportunity to earn a grade that reflects actual learning. Furthermore, the student has an incentive to do well the first time—to keep free time and eliminate the lowest grade of the unit.

Note that this requires a coordinated effort at several levels. The team must agree on the essential learnings and the common assessments they will create to monitor that learning. The team must address the variation in grading practices the question referenced. Members must decide what factors will go into determining a grade. They must also decide how much weight each factor should be given. For example, the math team must decide the weight given to homework, quizzes, and the unit exam. One teacher can't count the exam for 10 percent of a student's grade and another count it for 50 percent. And very importantly, there must be a systematic school wide approach to intervention. The teacher would be responsible for reporting which students need the intervention but not for providing the intervention or seeing to it that the student is placed there. That becomes an administrative responsibility.

We can continue the tradition of using assessment merely to *prove* what students have learned so we can assign a grade and move on, or we can use assessment to *improve* student learning when we insist that students who do not demonstrate proficiency keep working and learning until they do.

## Why Formative Assessments Matter

Formative assessments matter because teachers make important instructional decisions based on the data they provide.

Summative assessments, or high stakes tests and projects, are what the eagle eye of our profession is fixated on right now, so teachers often find themselves in the tough position of racing, racing, racing through curriculum.

But what about informal or formative assessments? Are we putting enough effort into these?

### What Are They?

Informal, or formative assessments are about checking for understanding in an effective way in order to guide our instruction. They are used during instruction rather than at the end of a unit or course of study. And if we use them correctly, and often, yes, there is a chance instruction will slow when we discover we need to re-teach or review material the students wholly "did not get" -- and that's okay. Because sometimes we have to slow down in order to go quickly.

What this means is that if we are about getting to the end, we may lose our audience, the students. If you are not routinely checking for understanding then you are not in touch with your students' learning. Perhaps they are already far, far behind.

We are all guilty of this one -- the ultimate teacher copout: "Are there any questions, students?" *Pause for three seconds. Silence.* "No? Okay, let's move on."

Ever assign the big project, test, or report at the end of a unit and find yourself shocked with the results, and not in a good way? I have. The reason for the crummy results is not the students, but a lack of formative assessments along the way and discovering when, where, and how certain information needed to be re-taught or reviewed.

### To Inform, Not Punish

If you find yourself wanting to spring a "gotcha" quiz on your students, ask yourself if it is really meant to collect important data or to freak them out and maybe "get them more serious about paying attention"?

Believe me, I've been there: wanting to punish the lazy, the cocky, the nonchalant. Sometimes we just want to see that hint of panic as they number 1 to 10 on their half sheets of paper (after all, many of us experienced the "gotcha" quiz as students!)

If you feel tempted to do this, just say no; it's a mistake.

### When and How?

Formative assessments are not about *gotcha-ing* students but about guiding where instruction needs to go next. We should use them frequently, and while or after kids learn a new idea, concept, or process.

When you are on your way to the Big End Project (or summative assessment) and students have just learned a piece or a step toward the end, check to see if they've got it. And to avoid using the tired old quiz, here's a few ways you can check for understanding:

## **Exit Slips**

These can be fun and not daunting, for students or teacher. Give students a question to answer that targets the big idea of the lesson, and have them write a sentence or two. Stand by the door and collect them as they leave. Sit at your desk and thumb through them all, making three stacks: they get it, kind of get it, and don't get it all. The size of the stacks will tell you what to do next.

## **Student Checklist**

Give your students a checklist and have them self-assess. Collect the checklists with each, or every other, new idea during a unit of study. Make sure they write a sentence or two explaining how they know they've got it, or why they think they are still struggling.

## **The Three-Minute Paper**

This is more involved than the exit slip and often times, I'd give the kids more than three minutes. I don't use the word "essay" or they get too nervous. I might say, "Take out a piece of paper, and tell me what you have learned so far about \_\_\_\_\_." Often they will basically write an essay (something they usually labor over in drafts and on their own!) I assess these the same way as the exit slip, by making the three stacks.

## **One-Sentence Summary**

Ask students to write a summary sentence that answers the "who, what where, when, why, how" questions about the topic.

## **Misconception Check**

Provide students with common or predictable misconceptions about a specific principle, process, or concept. Ask them whether they agree or disagree and explain why. Also, to save time, you can present a misconception check in the form of multiple-choice or true/false.

## **Watch, Look, Listen**

Simply observing the actions, behaviors, and words of students can provide a wealth of valuable data and serve as a formative assessment. You can take notes as they conference with one another, pair and share, or engage in collaborative learning groups (lab projects, literature circles, etc.).

What to look for? If there are small group conversations happening, and they are successfully applying the new learning, not just one student is talking; they are talking over each other, and they are animated with body, hands and eyes. On the other hand, if it is quiet during this talk time, and they are watching you watch them, they are most likely lost.

Your note taking can be as easy as making a check-plus mark after each child's name who shares something of value and on-target/topic with their group. (Put a check by each child you hear share so you can see how many you heard versus how many get it.) If I have 17 names with checks after them, but only four check-plus marks, it's time to review or re-teach.

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