

W. James Popham

A Process—Not a Test

Despite the widespread advocacy of formative assessment these days—as well as a bundle of solid research showing that it works—we see far fewer applications of formative assessment in our schools than one would expect. Why is this?

One deterrent to its expanded use is the considerable confusion among educators regarding what formative assessment actually is. Many educators think of it as a particular kind of test, whose results can help teachers improve their teaching. But such a conception is flat-out wrong.

Formative assessment is not a test. Rather, it is an ongoing *process* in which teachers use test-elicited evidence to adjust their instruction or students use it to adjust their learning tactics. For example, let's say that an along-the-way quiz indicates that students aren't getting some concept. The teacher might reteach the concept using a different instructional approach. The students might adjust their learning tactics: Some might add on more

study time; others might rely more heavily on peer study groups. Because tests supply the evidence that teachers or students need to make such changes, they obviously play a pivotal role. But the heart of research-supported formative assessment is its assessment-informed adjustment process.

Let's look, for just a moment, at the research underlying today's advocacy of formative assessment. Chiefly, this evidence comes to us from a review of nearly 10 years' worth of research on classroom assessment carried out by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam.¹ On the basis of a careful appraisal of about 250 published research investigations, these two British researchers concluded, "The research reported here shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve student learning" (p. 61). They also reported that the

learning gains triggered by formative assessment were "amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions" (p. 61). Moreover, when teachers employ formative assessment, the process is sufficiently robust that it is almost certain to work. As Black and Wiliam pointed out, "Initiatives here are not likely to fail through neglect of delicate and subtle features" (p. 61).

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In their review, these investigators make it clear that they are describing a planned process in which teachers assess students—using both formal and informal tactics—to supply evidence that teachers and students need in order to make any necessary adjustments.

Four Crucial Steps

What does it take to make this adjustment process work properly? First, teachers must understand that we're talking about a *test-supported process* instead of a test. Teachers can then rebuff the many so-called "formative assessments" that are currently peddled by commercial test companies. Some tests will surely support certain uses more than others, but educators should view with skepticism the sales pitches of anyone who tries to equate a test—all by itself—with formative assessment.

Second, teachers need to decide at what points in the instructional process to collect assessment evidence from students. Too much testing robs students of the teaching time they deserve. Ac-



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cordingly, teachers need to identify the truly pivotal building blocks that students must learn on their way to mastering a more distant curricular outcome. An optimal time for collecting assessment evidence is after addressing those building blocks instructionally. We refer to such a collection of *en route* building blocks as *learning progressions*, which become frameworks for well-planned formative assessment.

Third, teachers must decide whether to use assessment-elicited evidence only

to adjust their own instruction or whether to provide students with this evidence as well. For those teachers who are dipping a toe in the formative assessment pool, I would suggest starting out cautiously by adjusting your own instruction first. Then, at a later date, share assessment-elicited evidence with students and encourage them to use it to adjust their learning tactics.

Finally, teachers must make sure that the assessment-based process they devise is not too complicated or time-

consuming because if it is, it won't endure very long. It takes skilled planning to ensure that formative assessment meshes with what the research says will work, yet doesn't become too off-putting in the process.

Formative assessment can dramatically enhance the quality of instruction, but only if educators understand what it is—and isn't. ■

¹ Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7–74.

W. James Popham is Emeritus Professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies; wpopham@ucla.edu.

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