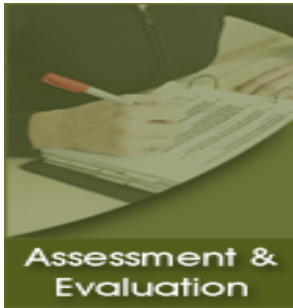


Assessment and Evaluation Branch Information Bulletin

Formative Assessment

February 2008



"Change does not necessarily assure progress, but progress implacably requires change."
Henry Steele Commager

Change is a defining feature of our time. Of late, research on assessment practices and recent changes in assessment measures have contributed to a changing climate in our schools and classrooms. The purpose of this bulletin is to share some of the latest research on assessment practice and provide a few practical suggestions for continuing our professional development with regards to assessment literacy.

Definitions

Formative assessment practices include frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding. Often defined as assessment *for* learning, formative assessment is an ongoing, dynamic process and takes place during the learning process when both the teacher and the student can make decisions towards promoting further learning.

Summative assessment is conducted after completion of a program and serves as a summary of performance. Often defined as assessment *of* learning, summative assessment is used to make a judgement, such as what grade a student will receive on an assignment, or to determine whether a particular program was effective.

The difference between summative and formative assessment is not in the type of question or test, rather, the difference between summative and formative assessment is how the results are used.

Research on Formative Assessment:

In 1998, Paul Black and Dylan William surveyed over 500 research studies focussing on assessment practices. From their research they concluded, "all these studies show that innovations that include strengthening the practice of formative assessment *produce significant and often substantial learning gains*" (p.140). In addition, the research showed that improvement was most significant for low achievers, therefore reducing the range of achievement and raising achievement overall (p.141).

Formative Assessment: A framework for Teaching and Learning

In *Formative Assessment: Improving Learning in Secondary Classrooms* (2006), the OECD researched the successful integration of formative assessment in eight international educational systems, including Canada. The researchers found when teachers focused on integrating formative assessment practices, the end result was a powerful new framework for teaching and learning. The key elements of this framework are as follows:

- a classroom culture that encourages interaction and use of assessment tools,
- establishing learning goals and tracking individual student progress toward those goals,
- use of varied instructional methods to meet diverse student needs,
- feedback on student performance and adaption of instruction to meet identified needs, and
- active involvement of students in the learning process.

The researchers found that each of these elements, "is important to raising levels of student achievement, helping to close achievement gaps, and building students' ability to learn new skills" (OECD, 2006, p.51).

Did you know?

The terms formative and summative assessment, in their generally accepted current meaning, came from Benjamin Bloom et al. in 1971 as a response to social justice issues inherent in traditional educational institutions. They began their *Handbook of formative and summative evaluation of student learning* by noting how, traditionally, educational systems operated on a selective basis identifying and "dropping" students at each major stage (Newton, 2007, p.152). By using formative assessment practices, Bloom's goal was to instead, "pinpoint the part of the task not mastered...[and] help both the learner and the teacher focus upon the particular learning necessary for movement towards mastery" (p.61).

“Data can help us confront what we may wish to avoid and what is difficult to perceive, trace, or gauge: data can substantiate theories, inform decision, impel action, marshal support, thwart misconceptions and unwarranted optimism, maintain focus and goal-orientation, and capture and sustain collective energy and momentum.
Schmoker, 1999

Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning

In *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it Right – Using it Well* (2007) Richard Stiggins, Judy Arter, and Jan and Steve Chappuis suggest that if we want to use assessment for learning, students need to: know where they are going, where they are at, and how to close the gap. They propose that we can help our students answer these three critical questions and help them to engage and take active responsibility for their learning by employing the following seven strategies:

WHERE AM I GOING?

1. Provide a clear and understandable vision of the learning target.
2. Use examples and models of strong and weak work.

WHERE AM I NOW?

3. Offer regular descriptive feedback.
4. Teach students to self assess and set targets/goals.

HOW CAN I CLOSE THE GAP?

5. Design lessons to focus on one aspect of quality at a time.
6. Teach students focused revision.
7. Engage students in self-reflection and let them keep track of and share their learning.

Working together

With regards to developing your own assessment literacy, PLC's are valuable resources. Michael Fullan remarks, "Access as much information as you can, but it is the local networks that count, because it is when we are learning in context that knowledge becomes specific and useable" (2001, p.104).

As part of his PLC work with NB Districts, Rick Stiggins, from *The School Improvement Network*, outlined several approaches to improving achievement related to implementing a formative assessment framework. He mentions using the potential of our PLC's as a collaborative tool to:

- clarify what each student must learn
- monitor each student's learning on a frequent, timely basis
- create systematic interventions that give students extra time and support for learning
- create a results orientation by frequently gathering and using achievement data to inform and improve our practice
- examine all of our practices in light of their impact on learning

Practical Tips for the Classroom

- Ensure all students are aware of the outcomes or goals for any given lesson, assignment and unit of work. Photocopy the outcomes, written in student-friendly language, or have students copy them into their books.
- Provide rubrics, exemplars and samples to help students build mental models of what success looks like.
- Regularly monitor progress towards the specific outcome, adjusting teaching and learning where necessary.
- Ensure students self-monitor their progress towards the expected outcome. Have a target or goals sheet pasted into students' books, outlining the target, the date set and the date met.
- Provide a classroom environment where conversations about learning take place. In groups, learners can check their thinking and performance and develop deeper understanding of their learning (Davis, 2000).

“The teaching profession is a calling, a calling with the potential to do enormous good for students. Although we haven't traditionally seen it in this light, assessment plays an indispensable role in fulfilling our calling. Used with skill, assessment can motivate the unmotivated, restore the desire to learn, and encourage students to keep learning, and it can actually create – not simply measure – increased achievement.”

Stiggins et al. (2007)