Formative Assessments for K-12 Education

A Powerful Ally for Improving Student Performance

SunGard K-12 Education

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A Performance Check-Up | What the Research Says | Tips for Practitioners

Do you sometimes feel like you find out about student struggles too late?
Provide your students with a performance check-up.

Each winter, we see students coming into school not feeling well, dragging, and succumbing to the seemingly inevitable winter cold. Offering goodwill advice, we suggest going to the doctor, getting more rest, and moving along the road to recovery. Having identified the symptoms early, we are able to help the students recover and enjoy the rest of the year. We do not wait until the end of the year and wonder if we could have helped them.

When a student struggles with a cold, the symptoms are easy to identify and treat. With performance, sometimes those symptoms are harder to identify and, with traditional testing, most of the time we find out too late. In order to improve performance in a meaningful way, 21st-century educators need to provide a proactive check-up before the *cold* progresses.

Just like a medical checkup for anyone who is not feeling well or a yearly physical, we can provide these diagnostic check-ups to our students who are not performing well. A teacher has his or her own stethoscope for just such check-ups: **formative assessment**.

The Research

For years, research has supported such arguments for the application of formative assessments. British researchers Paul J. Black and Dylan Wiliam indicate:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (Black & Wiliam, 2009)

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development conducted a study on formative assessment. Highlights from that study include the following:

- Formative assessment has been shown to be highly effective in raising the level of student attainment, increasing equity of student outcomes, and improving students' ability to learn.

- The achievement gains associated with formative assessment have been described as "among the largest ever reported for educational interventions." (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005)

The key, then, is to observe, diagnose, and prescribe a treatment.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Formative assessment should help students answer three questions: Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap? (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007)

Some examples could include students creating one of the following:

- Performance-based tasks, such as multimedia presentations
- Class blog entries
- Photo story
- Create a social media account for a character or topic being studied (e.g., a Facebook page for a Pilgrim on the Mayflower or a series of tweets from a frog in each stage of the life cycle)
- Create a wiki or plan and deliver an online survey/quiz
- Independent work tasks
- Small-group instruction "quick quizzes"
- Timed math minutes (graph for progress)

These are "better" options because they provide (near) immediate feedback about students and allow a teacher to act promptly. For example, with performance-based tasks, such as creating a Pilgrim Facebook page, the teacher can assess each step (planning, research, publishing, promoting, etc.), redirect as needed, and check for understanding. By providing this feedback and redirection, teachers are able to give students answers to those three questions listed above.

Additionally, some students struggle more with "sit and get" learning; for those students, creative, smaller, or hands-on tasks may better allow them to illustrate their understanding. Contrasting many standardized assessments, those formative assessment tasks that ask students to *do something* frequently engage them in deeper evaluations through explorations, investigations, and actions.

Furthermore, oftentimes, teachers are able to use formative assessments as a tool to shift to student-centered evaluations, wherein students can act as group leaders, they can research for themselves (as opposed to the teacher providing all of the materials), and peers can use jigsaw learning to teach one another, freeing the teacher to observe, make anecdotal notes, and plan future instruction.

Even if you do not want to create a formal framework, a variety of tasks can be tracked for students. For example: Do your students complete exit slips or bell ringers frequently? If you provide five of those a week, where do you track how many of them were completed correctly? Create an overall framework with a total score section and track the number of days the student correctly responded to the task. Just like adding that score to your gradebook, a teacher can quickly type in the students' score for the week.

Some other examples could include:

- Math minutes (student is challenged to beat his own time or the number correct in a given time)
- Rubrics aligned to independent work tasks (e.g., track how frequently the student independently applies a learning strategy)
- Student self-assessments on their demonstration of understanding for a given topic/task

The key difference between summative and formative assessment is formative assessment helps in active learning rather than gauging past learning.

"When teachers assess student learning for purely formative purposes, there is no final mark on the paper and no summative grade in the grade book. Rather, assessment serves as practice for students, just like a meaningful homework assignment does." (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007)

Gathering, interpreting, and acting on information throughout the students' learning process, rather than afterward plays a critical role in tracking successful and unsuccessful patterns in both teaching and learning. These formative, classroom assessments are powerful, personalized tools to gather information about student performance. Prepare for your diagnostic treatments now, adjust them to meet your students' needs, and use the ever-changing data to adjust teaching, independent work, and home/ family-based tasks accordingly.

Works Cited

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