The Basics of Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is assessment that provides information (i.e., feedback) that leads to changes in both instruction and student learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). The cycle of assessment, feedback, and change to instruction helps support students by increasing clarity of expectations, scaffolding content knowledge, and improving awareness around how to learn. It also allows instructors to identify where changes are needed to better support student learning.

Formative assessment is a term that is sometimes conflated with "low-stakes" assessment, but formative assessments can range from no-stakes to high-stakes. Planning opportunities for feedback and structured responses to that feedback (e.g., drafting and revising) creates an assessment that is formative in nature. These assessments help students better recognize their process of learning, improving their knowledge beyond simple mastery of the content.

- **Feedback for Changes in Instruction.** Designing formative assessments with intention of revising instruction can help prevent moments of panic that might otherwise motivate unplanned changes, such as students doing surprisingly poorly on an exam. Examples of sources of feedback that can inform instructional changes are student performance, observable behaviors (e.g., enthusiasm, attentiveness), and student responses to feedback requests. Black and Wiliam (2009) suggest creating "moments of contingency" during which information is gathered that determines details of upcoming instruction. This can be as simple as asking what content students feel unclear about or as complex as guided self-reflections in conjunction with multi-draft assessments. What matters is that the information gathered has an impact on instruction and, through those changes, student learning improves.

- **Formative Instructor Feedback for Student Learning.** Grades alone, or other feedback without context, is not sufficient to satisfy the requirements of effective formative assessment. Effective formative feedback is clear in how it relates to grading criteria (e.g., rubric), allowing students to understand where they stand in the process of learning. The feedback is as immediate to the task as possible to best allow students to recognize how they can apply the feedback to their broader learning context. How the feedback is delivered also impacts the effectiveness of that feedback. Being clear about how to read and use the feedback can help students understand the intentions behind that feedback, especially if it is meant to affect follow up assessments. Additionally, providing feedback with warm and supportive tone leads to better academic performance than formative feedback delivered with less encouragement (e.g., encouragement to study, willingness to listen, expressed belief in potential; Wu & Yu, 2025)

- **Other sources of Formative Feedback.** Effective formative assessment might include feedback from sources other than the instructor. Self-assessment, such as frequent quizzing or self-reflection, can provide students with immediate feedback about their learning if structured with the intention to focus on the learning process, rather than focusing purely on demonstrating knowledge. Peer-review may also be formative in nature if structured to guide feedback such that it supports revision or changes in the approach to future learning in the course.

Resources

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 21*(1), 5-31. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9068-5

Wu, J., & Yu, X. (2025). The influence of formative assessment on academic performance: exploring the role of teachers' emotional support. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1567615

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email.