
Preface

This book guides teachers in learning about and applying formative assessment sensibly to serve student learning and improvement in teaching practices. We believe in the power of the formative assessment process as a tool to assist and empower students in learning and to encourage them in the process. While the book focuses on building teachers' skills in the use of formative assessment, most important, perhaps, it provides effective strategies for building habits that serve teaching and learning. The book centers on classroom instruction and assessment. Here we guide development and use of strategies for gathering and using information in ways that serve daily instruction and encourage strong working relationships between students and teachers and among students themselves.

We think you will find this book to be a refreshing change from the standard testing approaches of most books on assessment. We banded together to write this book because too little is written about assessment outside the realm of testing. Testing, of course, is big business, and testing companies make millions through the sale of tests for summative purposes (e.g., No Child Left Behind). Most who now want to get on the "formative assessment" bandwagon choose the use of formative testing, because such tests can be packaged and sold with curricular materials. There is little money to be made in the type of assessment we encourage, but there is real gold in student learning that results from the assessment processes we present here.

This book emerged from a 2009 national conference on student assessment practices conducted under the auspices of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation and supported

by the National Science Foundation.¹ A major finding of the conference was the need for information and materials that are practical to use and that directly assist teachers in improving their practices. A self-evaluation guide developed for the conference by two of the authors (Cummings and Noakes), along with ideas and suggestions from practicing teachers and a teacher coach, struck a strong chord among the authors, who were conference attendees, and forms the foundation of the book.

What began as an attempt to synthesize the conference findings changed in orientation to focus on formative assessment to be used by teachers. The result is material solidly grounded in research, but focused and presented in practical, how-to terms. Our book acknowledges the importance of student testing, but does not focus on testing or the use of tests and quizzes. Rather, it focuses on building teacher skills in a variety of assessment practices that support and assist daily student learning.

We built the book as a “stool” with three legs. In the first leg, we provide a well-framed definition of formative assessment and evidence of its key role in student learning and its place in the classroom. In the second leg, we set forward characteristics of formative assessment or building blocks as tools to help you prepare to develop and hone your formative assessment skills. In the third leg, we developed our ideas in terms of a recursive model. That’s a fancy way of saying that we help you follow a practical, cyclical development and learning path, adding new information so that your practice in each new cycle builds from previous efforts. Together, the characteristics from the second leg and the cyclical process from the third can serve as a guide for your practice into the future.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is a guide for teachers. If you are a teacher who seeks to improve your understanding of your students, desires to build confidence in your students, and seeks improved learning among your students, you are in our audience. If your job is to assist teachers in improving their assessment practices, this book is intended for you, too. If you are a student aspiring to be a teacher, you can gain

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much from this book. If you are comfortable with where you are, how you are teaching, and believe your students are learning as much as they are capable of learning, this book is not for you.

Special Features of This Book

The value of the book for your self-development efforts is substantially enhanced by four attributes:

1. Real-world examples. In each chapter, we include examples of teachers using formative assessment in their classrooms as they go through the process of changing practice. These composites from actual teachers and teaching situations add clarity to the ideas presented. They range from elementary through high school examples and a variety of subjects. We are necessarily limited in how many examples we can provide; but rest assured, even if you cannot find an example that matches your grade or subject area, the process of formative assessment will still apply to you and your students. These examples also provide specific, practical exemplars of steps teachers have taken, outcomes they have achieved, things they have learned, and improvements they have made based on their reflections. Learning communities, coaches, and administrators will find these examples useful for introducing and discussing formative assessment issues.

2. Array of online tools. We have included templates for organizing, gathering, and systematically using information to serve your formative assessment development needs. These tools are described, included in examples, and made available for your use through web-based access. The first time we mention a particular tool in a chapter, a margin icon will remind you that you can download it from the website. We encourage you to use, modify, and share these tools with other teachers.

3. Objectives and big ideas. For quick reference, we begin each chapter with a clearly stated objective and close each chapter with a summary of the big idea. This presentation method serves both to focus each chapter and to reinforce knowledge/skill development.

4. Questions. We conclude each chapter with a set of questions to help teachers, individually or in groups, think further or deeper about the chapter's main ideas. In addition to helping reinforce what has been learned, the reader is encouraged to go beyond the specific ideas presented and consider new options and opportunities.

Given the many books now available about classroom assessment practices, why should you buy and use this one? When all is said and done, this book is uniquely worthwhile in at least three ways.

- This book focuses on formative assessment as a continuous process that serves student learning—tests and quizzes get no attention, none, other than as one of many sources of evidence that teachers and students can draw on.
- This book treats teachers' skill development in formative assessment practices as a continuing process with the goal of producing sound lifetime habits. Grounded in research, it is practical in application with both how-to exemplars and practical tools made available to serve teachers' self-development.
- This book provides insights into how teachers can dramatically improve teaching effectiveness and student learning and therefore make teaching and learning more enjoyable. That perspective, if not unique, is certainly rare among books on assessment.

Chapter Highlights

The book includes seven chapters. In Chapter 1, we introduce the general concept of formative assessment in the context of student learning goals, identifying where students are in relation to those goals, and using feedback to make adjustments to instruction. In Chapter 2, we describe several common ways in which formative assessment practice is defined and applied—what it looks like in practice. In Chapters 3 and 4, we provide practical steps all teachers can take to consider and begin personal self-development efforts by determining a focus and planning for making specific formative assessment changes. In Chapter 5 we focus on practical steps to implement changes. In Chapter 6, we describe how to evaluate the changes you made using systematic processes to guide your learning and ensure that the changes made do serve students in direct and sound ways. In Chapter 7, we draw on the big ideas of all chapters to synthesize the ideas of the book and suggest avenues for moving forward with what has been learned.

We think you will find the book easy to read and filled with excellent, practical guidance for improving your skills in formative evaluation. We designed it to be used by teachers on their own or in a small learning community. The ideas, tools, and practices we included are intended to enable you to implement them without the

guidance of a staff development expert. Our experience suggests you will persist and enjoy the learning process more if you engage with other like-minded teachers. Reading Chapters 1 and 7 first will give you a sense of the whole book, which might be helpful before you begin in earnest.

As you read, we believe you will say often, “I do some of this already, but I never thought of this part.” Enjoy the book for its insights into classrooms, for the ways in which it builds on common classroom practices, and for its attention to tradeoffs you make when implementing new ideas. As you implement the book’s ideas, share your assessment learning intentions with your students. They will appreciate knowing that you care enough to work to make your teaching the very best.

Finally, in keeping with our intention to help you grow in your assessment skills, we seek your feedback. As you read this book and apply its ideas, please note which ideas work best, what you find problematic, and what alternative strategies can apply, and let us know. This book also is a work in progress. We know that with your input it can be improved. Contact information for the authors is included in the web support materials.