Formative Assessment

What is it? Why should I use it?

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Engaging students during a class can at times seem difficult. Measuring how well they understand the lecture you have just presented can be even tougher. End of term, or unit tests provide data that can be used to determine how well, or how poorly, our students have mastered course material. These summative assessments are then used as the figurative bow for this present. Sometimes this bow is put on a less than thrilling gift, one that may shock the teacher, students, or even both. How do you prevent this shock from occurring? That answer is formative assessment, it may take a little extra time during your day-to-day teaching, but the end results will be more than worth it.

Summative assessments are activities that nearly all faculty are familiar with and may not even know it. Assignments such as final exams, midterms, major projects, or other assignments that carry a high impact grade. The problem with these type of assignments is that the assessment of progress the students have made is realized at the conclusion of the course or unit. An easy way to think of this, summative assessment is created from the sum of student learning. This does not give the student, or the instructor information between the first and final classes to gage an understanding of how learning is occurring (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2009). Though many of the assessments that are used today are summative, there is a shift towards using more formative assessment (McKinley, Fraser, Vleuten, & Hastings, 2009).

Formative assessment provides the instructor and the student an opportunity to understand how learning is progressing (Fry et al., 2009). This is done using simple, low-stakes assignments that allow the instructor to provide near-instant feedback to the student. These assignments allow students practice in a safe, or low-stakes manner that are powerful learning opportunities, but do not risk negatively affecting their grade (Ives, 2014). Studies also show when this type of approach is implemented, standards of students rise for the normal tests (Formative Assessment 1, 2005). This means that “teaching to the test” does not occur, but rather a better understanding and ability to apply course material. The make-up for formative assessment is in two parts. The first, the feedback the instructor has for the student. The second part is the student receiving this feedback. This type of communication is a vital component to teaching and learning (McKinley et al. 2009).

Studies have shown that when students take an active role in their learning perform better (Ives, 2014). Formative exercises provide an opportunity for students to become engaged in class. This can allow the instructor to determine how learning is proceeding, and use “scaffolding” to direct where student learning needs to go. However, be sure to avoid designing grades based on class participation, for this will put students who are introverts at a disadvantage, and perhaps encourage some students to dominate the class in a not-so-positive manner (Ives, 2014). When beginning to design formative assessment activities, be sure to define the learning intentions for your students; what successful criteria looks like; and the learning environment (Formative Assessment 1, 2005). Studies have also shown that students actually prefer to be tested often because the feedback can be beneficial. However, other studies show that as more tests are administered, the benefits decrease (McKinley, 2009).

Formative feedback can cover the full desired outcome, or can be used to address specific sections (Ives, 2014). Though formative assignments that cover multiple learning aspects have shown to have greater impact (Weimer, 2012). These assignments should be used to improve student learning (Astin et al., 2017). Implementing them over a period of time will provide the ability to measure the learning that is taking place in your classroom (Astin et al., 2017). There are numerous Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) that can be incorporated in your teaching. Some of these include practice quizzes, minute papers, “cold calling,” or even writing assignment blogs. Any type of tool that can provide you and the students immediate feedback is beneficial (Fry et al.,2009). Embedding these type of activities into your syllabus or curriculum will help tailor your focus on student learning and not just summative scores (Fry et al., 2009). As an instructor, these assessment can be used to determine the current progress compared to expected progress (Astin et al., 2017). It should again be emphasized that using formative assessments will help eliminate any shock that could be revealed at the conclusion of a summative assignment. Instructors who use CATs in their teaching tend to receive higher evaluations and an affirmation towards commitment to their students’ learning (Angelo, 2001). Though there are many ways to use formative feedback, it is important to use it to help students identify the gaps in their skills. The next challenge is if the student has the motivation to improve the skills in which they are lacking (McKinley et al., 2009). Using formative assessment has few negative aspects, the major one being the time needed to dedicate to implementing some of the techniques (Angelo, 2001).

Summative exams will be the main focus for every course heading into the near future. By using formative assessment techniques can help prepare students for the summative assignments and even instill confidence. As an instructor you will have instant feedback into gauging how your students are progressing and allow you to make adjustments as needed. Using only summative assessments limits your ability to provide students with opportunities for self-reflection to understand where their strengths and weaknesses in the course.

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