4 Formative Assessment Practices that Make a Difference in Classrooms

Spotlight on: formative assessment strategies and techniques

- What highly successful teachers do
- Specific techniques to try
- Implementation tools and tips

To teachers, it's a familiar challenge: every class period, accomplish a significant amount while facilitating learning for 25-plus students with varied instructional needs. With time being such a precious commodity, teachers know they need to focus on practices that can make the biggest difference to their students.

But what are those practices? One highly effective approach to identifying them involves looking at three key questions and three members of the classroom learning team.

Let's start with the questions. In our earlier article, *3 Reasons Savvy District Leaders Prioritize Formative Assessment*, we defined formative assessment as "students and teachers continuously gathering evidence of learning to adapt what happens in the classroom."

This definition is supported by several key questions:

Where is the learner going?

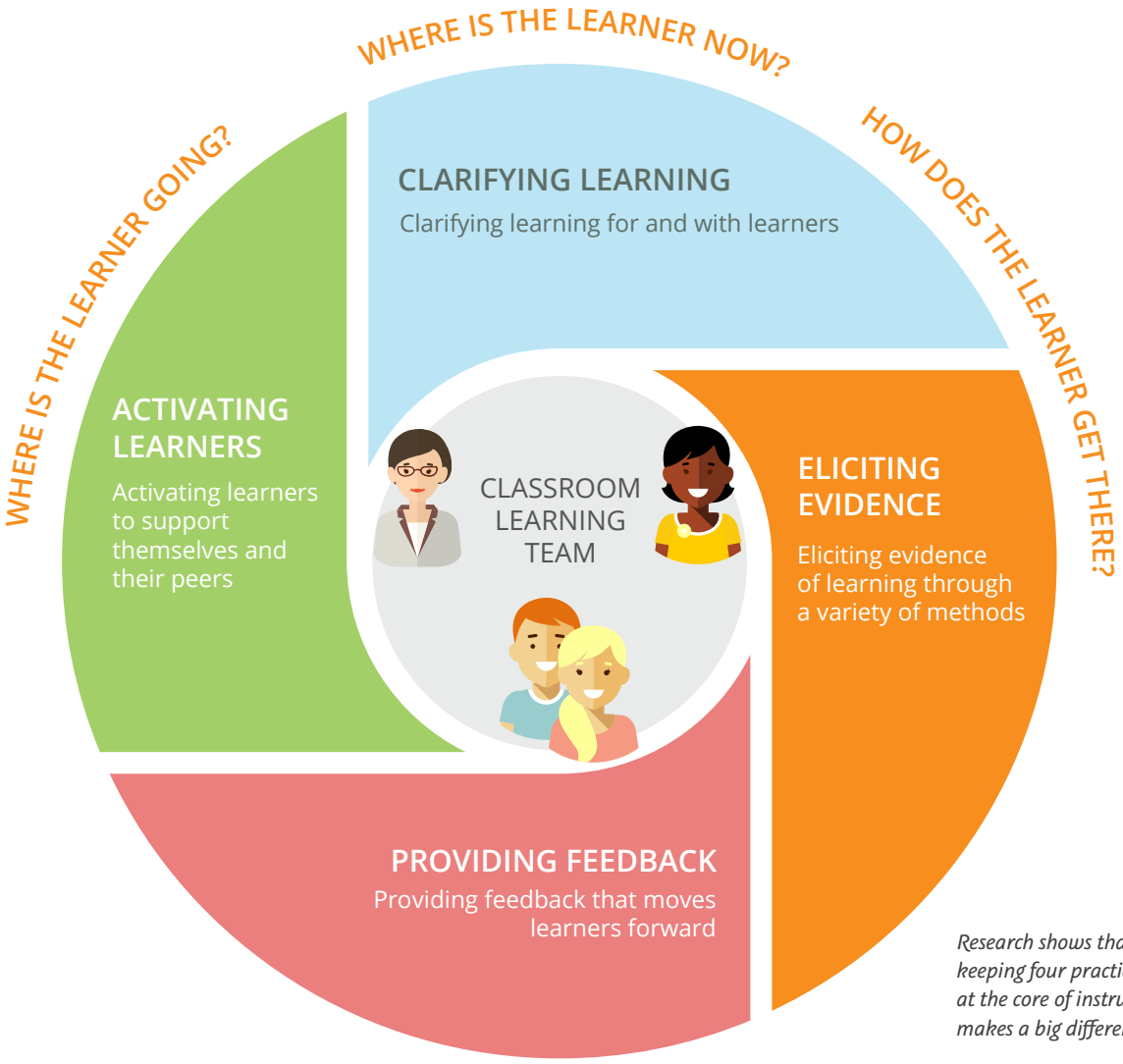
Where is the learner now?

How will the learner get to where he or she needs to be?

Members of the classroom learning team—the teacher, students and peers—all play an active role in supporting that culture of learning.

The key questions above guide the classroom learning team's goals as well as the activities teachers use in their practice of formative assessment. Answering these process questions requires teachers to be strategic and intentional; this enables both teachers and their learners to get better and better at using evidence (data) to immediately adjust learning and teaching.

The 4 formative practices every teacher needs in his or her toolkit



Research shows that keeping four practices at the core of instruction makes a big difference.

How the most successful teachers behave
Proven ways to improve student engagement and outcomes

- Believe in success for all students. Engage all students in learning; it's critical to helping them succeed.
- Establish a culture of learning. To support this, cultivate a growth mindset, build engagement, and provide students with processes, strategies, and tools to support them in owning their learning.
- Keep all members of the classroom learning team responsible. The learning team consists of the teacher(s), individual students, and peers. Each member of this team plays a crucial role in supporting the others.

Test yourself:
Are these stats on high-quality teaching old news or fresh info?

- The best teachers can be four times as effective as the worst. Students taught by the most effective teachers learn in 6 months what those taught by the least effective teachers learn in 2 years. *(Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006)*
- A high quality educator closes achievement gaps; an average one perpetuates them. In the classrooms of the most effective teachers, students from disadvantaged backgrounds learn at the same rate as those from advantaged backgrounds. *(Hamre & Pianta, 2005)*
- When students are taught by the most effective teachers, the rate of learning almost doubles. *(Wiliam, 2009)*

On the next few pages you'll find examples of techniques to support each practice, as well as some of our favorite technology tools that take the pain out of implementation and can be used with a wide range of grade levels and subjects.

PRACTICE # 1:
Clarifying Learning

What do we want students to learn (to know and be able to do)?

Before instruction starts, clarify what students are learning and let them know how to gauge if they're successful. Research shows this makes a difference in their learning; having clear targets provides the direction students need in order to set a course. From there, knowing what it looks like if they've learned allows them to become better assessors; they can compare themselves to the target in order to determine where they are in their learning.

Strategies and Tools

- **Group Discuss Expectations:** Small groups of students take a few minutes to discuss the learning target and success criteria before instruction begins. They clarify questions for each other and those they cannot clarify are taken back to the whole class so the teacher can respond.
- *Animoto*: This application gives students the ability to make a short, 30-second share video of what they learned in a given lesson.
- *Lino*: A virtual corkboard of sticky-notes makes it easy for students to provide questions or comments on their learning. Use this to clarify learning targets or success criteria, or use it for exit tickets.

PRACTICE # 2:
Eliciting Evidence

How do we know where students are in their learning?

Designing effective discussions and questions takes practice. Additionally, planning where in the lesson these activities will occur is important. This gathering of evidence on an ongoing basis allows teachers to better meet student learning needs in-the-moment. There are two main purposes for questioning:

- to promote student thinking
- to elicit evidence of student learning, surface errors, and misconceptions

In his research, John Hattie talks about the fact that the effects of questioning vary mainly due to the types of questions asked; yet overall there is still an effect size of 0.46, almost half a standard deviation. Effect size tells us how effective something was and half a standard deviation equates to about 1.5 grade levels.

Strategies and Tools

- **No Hands Up:** This strategy takes a variety of forms. The use of craft sticks personalized with individual student names works as a randomizer. The teacher poses the question, waits (think time), draws a stick, and calls the student name. All students need to be prepared to engage.
- *AnswerGarden*: A tool for online brainstorming or polling, educators can use this in real time to see student feedback on questions. It creates word clouds with responses, allowing teachers to look for words used most frequently.
- *Kahoot!*: A game-based classroom response system where teachers can create questions and quizzes.

PRACTICE # 3:
Providing Feedback

How do students know what to work on next?

When it comes to student performance, providing effective, learning-focused feedback and the time to use that feedback matters. It means working with students to get them the information they need to better understand problems and solutions, so they can offer feedback to themselves and others. Teachers should share feedback that focuses on the task, causes students to reflect on their performance, and includes a recipe for future action. Then the teacher needs to structure time for students to use that feedback. Hattie reports that doing this—providing effective feedback and the opportunity to use it—has a 0.73 effect size. This effect size could mean almost 5 points on the ACT or a difference of 2–3 grade levels.

Strategies and Tools

- **Comment-only Marking:** Provide students with comments, but no grades. This gets them to focus on the learning rather than their rank in the class. Comments are specific to the qualities of the work, designed to promote thinking, and provide clear guidance on what to improve.
- *ForAllRubrics*: This software is free for all teachers and allows you to import, create, and score rubrics on your iPad, tablet, or smartphone. You can print or save the rubrics as a PDF or spreadsheet.
- *Formative Feedback for Learning*: This iPad app is designed to foster and encourage communication between students and teachers by using a conference setting as well as icons to prompt discussions.

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PRACTICE # 4:
Activating Learners

How can we encourage students to own their learning and become resources for their peers?

In 2004, Sue Brookhart led a research team that found that when students were involved with monitoring their own progress, they were "more autonomous and were able to accurately predict their performance." They also enjoyed doing self assessment and seeing the progress. Students can be given many opportunities to self assess, set learning goals, and monitor their progress. To help students develop a growth mindset, teachers can actively support students in figuring out which learning strategies work best for them.

Getting students involved in learning together has great benefits. The research from Johnson, Johnson, and Roseth (2006) shows that student achievement increases when we do this. Hattie (2009) reports an effect size of 0.74 for activities such as reciprocal teaching. When we set students up to be instructional resources for one another, we empower them to share and support each other in ways adults can't. These types of involvement range from using multiple problem-solving approaches in a small group, to providing each other feedback that moves the learning, to actually looking for evidence of learning in each other's work. Imagine: what might it look like if your classes moved from having one teacher and 27 students to having 28 teachers and 28 students?

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Strategies and Tools

- **Stop/Slow Signals:** Using cups, disks, or Red-Yellow-Green cards, students indicate during the learning (or even in homework) where they are in their understanding. Green indicates good to go and keeping up. Yellow indicates there is a question but it is not impeding the learning. Red indicates the student has a question that is stopping them from further progress.
- **Homework Help Board:** Simple, easy, and effective, this technique empowers students as experts and supports for each other. One method is to have students post homework problems that were challenging and other students (who were successful with them) solve them on the board, doing a think aloud so everyone hears the process.
- *ThinkBinder*: A collaboration tool that allows students to ask questions and discuss topics in a group, share, create, and work together on almost any project.
- *TitanPad*: This unique tool for collaborative work offers eight colors to choose from so that each contributor may use a different color. You can easily imagine how this can help make group work (be it peer review or peer editing) more interactive.
- *GoSoapBox*: This all-student response system works with the BYOD model. One of the most intriguing features is the Confusion Meter, which lets students indicate their level of confusion with the assignment.

Small changes in the flow of instruction can often lead to big changes in student learning. Now you're armed with four powerful strategies, as well as some techniques and tools you can use immediately to make a difference. Stay tuned for the next article in this series to get tips for making formative assessment a long-term habit—not just for individual teachers, but for entire instructional teams, schools, and districts.

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TRY IT NOW:

School and District Leaders: Share this article with your instructional coaches and dialogue about current classroom practices.

Teacher Leaders and Instructional Coaches: Share this article with teachers and discuss some of the strategies and tools they may find most relevant for their work.

Teachers: Choose one of the four key practices to focus on over the next two weeks. Consider strategies or tools that will allow you to apply the practice in the way that best resonates with your students and your subject area. Share this article with peers at your next professional learning community (PLC) meeting. Discuss which strategies or tools you're using and which ones you may want to try.

Enrich your ability to boost every student's engagement and ownership of learning: visit NWEA.org/formativeassessment to learn how our professional development team will support your vision of student achievement and growth by helping you build and sustain classroom formative assessment practice at the school and district level.

1. Hattie, John. Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement. New York City: Routledge, 2009.
2. Wiliam, Dylan. Assessment for Learning: Why, what and how? London: Institute of Education, University of London, 2009.
3. Moss, Connie M., and Susan M. Brookhart. Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom: A Guide for Instructional Leaders. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009.

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