

## What is a Formative Assessment?

Looking across the evolution of the term “formative assessment,” the common thread is that a formative assessment is defined by more than the assessment itself. From an historical perspective, formative assessment is defined in reference to the inferences and the actions educators are able to make based on assessment results.

The concept of formative assessment has its roots in the field of program evaluation. Scriven (1967) first suggested a distinction between “formative evaluation” and “summative evaluation” when describing two major functions of evaluation. Formative evaluation was intended to foster development and improvement within an ongoing activity (or person, product, program, etc.). Summative evaluation, in contrast, was used to assess whether the results of the object being evaluated (program, intervention, person, etc.) met stated goals.

The notion of formative assessment was later incorporated into the practice of Mastery Learning (Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971). Under the Mastery Learning instructional technique, students do not progress to the next learning objective until they have mastered the current one. For a given “unit” a teacher instructs according to a standard teaching method. After instruction, the teacher administers a formative assessment for that unit and

classifies students as to whether or not they have mastered the objectives. For students that have not mastered the objectives, the teacher utilizes diagnostic information gleaned from the assessment to implement corrective action by targeting instruction that is specific to the student’s weaknesses.

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The use of the phrase “formative assessment” expanded in more recent years to describe assessment that did not necessarily fall under the mastery learning model. Wiliam and Black (1996; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2006) have lobbied to expand the definition of formative assessment beyond that which Bloom described. Wiliam and Black (1996) stated that “in order to serve a formative function, an assessment must yield evidence that, with appropriate construct-referenced interpretations, indicates the existence of a gap between actual and desired levels of performance, and suggests actions that are in fact successful in closing the gap.” They further note that “all assessments can be summative (i.e., have the potential to serve a summative function), but only some have the additional capability of

serving formative functions.” These definitions suggest that, unlike what Bloom described, an assessment activity need not be embedded within day-to-day instructional activities and provide immediate feedback in order to serve a formative function. Instead, various types of assessments can serve formative functions if they identify and provide information that is effectively used to correct learning deficiencies.

Labeling of a particular test as a formative assessment implies that the assessment results, whether from classroom interview strategies or standardized assessments, can be used to improve student learning. That kind of claim must be supported by evidence; every assessment is required to earn the label of formative, whether a classroom-based assessment or a large-scale standardized test.

- Paul D. Nichols
- Jason Meyers
- Kelly Burling

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