What, Exactly, Is Formative Assessment?

As the evidence that formative assessment can have a significant impact on student learning has accumulated, a variety of definitions of *formative assessment* has been proposed. In our original review, Paul Black and I defined *formative assessment* "as encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, p. 7). Writing around the same time, Bronwen Cowie and Beverley Bell qualified this slightly by requiring that the information from the assessment be acted upon while learning was taking place. They defined *formative assessment* as "the process used by teachers and students to recognise and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, *during the learning*" (Cowie & Bell, 1999, p. 32, emphasis added). Others have also emphasized the need for action during instruction and defined *formative assessment* as "assessment carried out during the instructional process for the purpose of improving teaching or learning" (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 275). A review of practice by the OECD across eight countries defined *formative assessment* as "frequent, interactive assessments of students' progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately" (Looney, 2005, p. 21).

What is notable about these definitions is that, however implicitly, formative assessment is regarded as a process. Others have tended to regard formative assessment as a tool. For example, Stuart Kahl (2005) defined formative assessment as "a tool that teachers use to measure student grasp of specific topics and skills they are teaching. It's a 'midstream' tool to identify specific student misconceptions and mistakes while the material is being taught" (p. 11). Indeed, it appears that the term *formative assessment* is now more often used to refer to a particular kind of assessment instrument than a process by which instruction might be improved.

Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment.* Bloomington, IND: Solution Tree Press, 37-38.

Strategies of Formative Assessment

The discussion thus far has established that any assessment can be formative and that assessment functions formatively when it improves the instructional decisions that are made by teachers, learners, or their peers. These decisions can be immediate, on-the-fly decisions or longer term. However, if we want to really see what formative assessment looks like on the ground, we have to dig a little deeper.

All teaching really boils down to three key processes and three kinds of individuals involved. The processes are: finding out where learners are in their learning, finding out where they are going, and finding out how to get there. The roles are: teacher, learner, and peer. Crossing the roles with the processes gives us a three-by-three grid of nine cells, which can be grouped into five "key strategies" of formative assessment with one big idea (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005), as shown in figure 2.2. The five key strategies are:

1. Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward
4. Activating learners as instructional resources for one another
5. Activating learners as the owners of their own learning

The big idea is that evidence about learning is used to adjust instruction to better meet student needs—in other words, teaching is *adaptive* to the learner's needs. Over the next five chapters, each of these strategies is discussed in greater detail. Before moving on, however, it is worth considering why assessment should occupy such a central position in teaching.

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Where the learner is going</th><th>Where the learner is right now</th><th>How to get there</th></tr>
<tr><td>Teacher</td><td rowspan="3">Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success

Understanding and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success

Understanding learning intentions and criteria for success</td><td>Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and tasks that elicit evidence of learning</td><td>Providing feedback that moves learning forward</td></tr>
<tr><td>Peer</td><td colspan="2">Activating learners as instructional resources for one another</td></tr>
<tr><td>Learner</td><td colspan="2">Activating learners as the owners of their own learning</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 2.2: The five key strategies of formative assessment. Adapted from Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005.

Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment.* Bloomington, IND: Solution Tree Press, 45-46.