

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

“The fundamental purpose of assessment in education is to establish and understand the points that students (either as individuals or groups) have reached in their learning at the time of assessment”

Masters, (2015)¹

OVERVIEW

This Professional Practice Note provides guidance for teachers and school leaders on formative assessment: what it is and how to build it into regular classroom practice.

Used alongside a set of clearly defined and challenging learning intentions, formative assessment is continuous feedback that allows a *teacher* to evaluate impact and a *student* to move their learning forward².

If we understand assessment as the process of establishing where students are at then, in fact, all assessment is formative. Incorporated into a teaching and learning cycle, formative assessment is at the heart of improving student learning outcomes.

Formative assessment provides the answers to the questions: Is learning on track? What needs to change? Where does learning go next? It can be immediate (a specific question, thumbs up-thumbs down) or planned (a quiz, a student moderation). It is timely (built into every lesson of every unit), and iterative (closes the circle of planning).

This Professional Practice Note, together with [Practice Principles](#) 1: High Expectations, 4: Curriculum Planning, and 6: Rigorous Assessment Practices, provide a reference point for future planning and improvement and can support teachers and school teams to use effective formative

assessment as a focus for their work with professional learning communities and in each classroom.

UNDERSTANDING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment provides the feedback to enable teacher and student to answer three key questions:

- What is to be learned?
- How is learning progressing?
- What will be learned next?³

THE PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT

Rather than categorising assessment as ‘as learning’, ‘for learning’, or ‘of learning’, we need to focus on what assessment tells us about the progress that students (individually or in groups) have achieved in their learning at the time of assessment.

We can start to see all assessment in schools as formative if we focus on the question “what is the purpose of the assessment?” A form of assessment traditionally understood as ‘summative’, such as a test, can be formative if the teacher uses what they learn from the students’ test results to modify a lesson plan to revisit a topic previously covered⁴ because they identify gaps in their students’ understanding.

Similarly, a ‘diagnostic’ assessment focusing on alphabet recognition becomes formative when the teacher uses the data gathered to build in explicit teaching⁵ on phonemic awareness for their Foundation class.

The information that formative assessment yields can be used in many different ways: to define learning intentions, to design a unit of work based on the Victorian Curriculum, to identify gaps or misconceptions in individual understanding, to identify a student’s zone of proximal development, or to

¹ Masters, G (2015) ‘Rethinking formative and summative assessment’ *Teacher*, ACER. Retrieved 27 February 2018: <https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/columnists/geoff-masters/rethinking-formative-and-summative-assessment>

² William, D (2011), *Embedded Formative Assessment*. Victoria: Hawker Brownlow Education, p.127

³ Hattie, J (2003). *Formative and Summative Interpretations of Assessment Information: who says formative assessment matters*, p.2

⁴ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 6: Multiple Exposures: DET – High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS): <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/Pages/hits.aspx>

⁵ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 3: Worked Examples and 10: Differentiated Teaching, HITS (op.cit.)

inform the cycle of teaching and feedback in the classroom. For formative assessment to be used well it is essential that:

- learning intentions, Victorian Curriculum F-10 achievement standards, and forms of assessment are closely linked
- the learning program is designed to scaffold and stretch students, enabling them to achieve their goals⁶
- the learning program is differentiated – it is built and modified around the individual learning needs of the students.⁷

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS

Schools where teachers collaborate, adopt evidence-based teaching strategies, have professional conversations about how to improve their teaching, and use evidence to moderate assessment are all using formative assessment. Evidence must be directly observable (the teacher should be able to see it, touch it or hear it⁸). It provides the qualitative and quantitative data to inform both the teacher and the learner about progress. It should be linked to the Victorian Curriculum F-10 achievement standards.

Examples of formative assessment techniques include: hot-seat questioning, all-student response and question shells⁹. All of these are designed to provide the teacher with evidence of the impact of their teaching on their student's learning. A teacher can then use this to guide the lesson design and pace, select different strategies, differentiate, and give feedback to individual students. Good feedback enables students to move their own learning forward.

Using multiple forms of formative assessment in a classroom strengthens assessment practice overall. It provides the structure and process for teachers and students to develop a shared and deep understanding of learning intentions, success criteria and the curriculum standards on which assessment is based.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN CONTEXT

Formative assessment can be used alongside data walls¹⁰ in that it provides teachers with evidence of student learning. Both formative assessment and data walls feed into the design of learning and actionable classroom strategies and build collective efficacy – that is, teachers' collective power to improve learning outcomes for students.

Peer observation¹¹ also has a key role to play formative assessment as it enables teachers to build individual capability and develop a shared understanding of effective practice. Peer observation is also incorporated into a learning cycle, based on feedback and built on explicit criteria.

USING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback for learning. This can be:

- feedback to the teacher about how and where to modify the teaching program to meet the needs of one or more of their students
- feedback on what achievement of standards looks like
- diagnostic feedback incorporated into the design of a learning program with learning outcomes in mind (or backward mapped¹²).

To put this into practice, let's look at examples of four strategies of formative assessment¹³ in an improvement cycle process.

To clarify learning intentions

One week into a four week unit of work on persuasive writing skills, a Year 3 teacher sets a writing prompt and collects their students' work. Working from a rubric, they identify that most of the students are able to organise their

⁶ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 10 – Differentiated Teaching, HITS (op.cit.)

⁷ Practice Principle 1: High Expectations - DET - Practice Principles: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/Pages/principlesexcellence.aspx>

⁸ Griffin, P (2009), 'Assessment is for teaching' Independence, 34, No 2, p.58

⁹ Wiliam, D (2011), (op. cit), pp.86-88

¹⁰ DET – Professional Practice Note 6 – Using Data Walls: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/classrooms/Pages/approachesdatawalls.aspx>

¹¹ DET – Professional Practice Note 4 – Peer Observation, Feedback and Reflection: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/Pages/peerobservation.aspx>

¹² Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design – Expanded 2nd Edition*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

¹³ Wiliam, D (2011), (op. cit), p.46

ideas and communicate effectively, but that many have made errors of punctuation, spelling, and grammar. The teacher decides to revisit the learning intentions and build in explicit teaching on re-reading, editing and checking for vocabulary, structure and meaning.

To analyse evidence of student learning

Prior to starting a unit of work, a Year 7 teacher designs a short test to evaluate their students' understanding of rational number. The results show that several students have misconceptions in their understandings of fractions and decimals. As a result, the teacher uses the Victorian Curriculum F-10 achievement standards to revisit the learning objectives and selects a different instructional focus and teaching strategy for her students.

To provide feedback to improve learning

Year 9 students working on media texts are invited to write and present their own sample of 'Fake News'. A rubric is shared with the students, which they discuss as a group. Their teacher explains that they will use a rubric to assess each other's work, and give feedback to each other based on the criteria identified in the rubric. They also put dots in the margins of each line that needs attention, and then return the written pieces to the original authors for reflection and further development. The teacher is using feedback that causes thinking and moves learning forward¹⁴.

To enable learners to learn from each other

A Year 5 teacher teaching a unit on creative writing selects an instructional focus on creating fantasy characters. After a period of explicit teaching¹⁵ on how language features, and vocabulary influence interpretations of characters, settings and events, their teacher sets up a student moderation. The class starts by discussing the assessment criteria and standards for this unit of work. They then use anonymous work samples from last year's class to discuss and rate the samples. The students have worked collaboratively to clarify, share and develop a deep

understanding of the learning intentions and success criteria¹⁶.

These examples show how teachers can use formative assessment to prepare a student learning program and make adjustments as needed. In each case, the assessment practice is firmly based in planned learning intentions based on explicit curriculum-linked assessment criteria.

ENABLERS OF SUCCESSFUL FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Strong formative assessment practices are enabled when:

- teachers have a deep understanding of the curriculum, and the continuum of student learning
- teachers have high expectations of their students and design and modify the learning program as part of a continual process based on the feedback it provides¹⁷
- teachers use differentiated teaching to select strategies to *extend the knowledge and skills of every student in every class, regardless of their starting point*¹⁸
- teacher practice is based on a deep understanding of the purpose of assessment and feedback.¹⁹

ADVICE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

A key point about formative assessment is the role it plays in enabling powerful professional conversations about impact on teaching. School cultures that invite challenging conversations invite teachers to work in teams and develop shared ownership of the strategies and solutions they use. Schools with deeply embedded practices of formative assessment are likely to have a strong culture of open, challenging professional conversation about effective teaching.

School leaders play an essential role in creating the culture and resources to enable effective formative assessment. To do this, they can:

¹⁴ William, D (2011), (op. cit), p.127

¹⁵ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 14 – Explicit Teaching, , HITS (op.cit.)

¹⁶ William, D (2011), (op. cit), p.52

¹⁷ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 1 – Setting Goals, HITS (op.cit.)

¹⁸ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 10 – Differentiated Teaching, HITS (op.cit.)

¹⁹ Practice Principle 6: Rigorous Assessment Practices - DET - Practice Principles (op.cit.)

- build in the structures and space to enable dialogues based on observation of what students do, say, make or write
- actively encourage teachers to talk about what they can do to improve their teaching
- ensure that teachers understand the purpose of formative assessment, how it fits into their assessment design and how it is linked to learning intentions
- encourage teachers to use rich dialogue to develop a shared language and consistent understanding of achievement standards in the Victorian Curriculum F-10
- demonstrate the role formative assessment plays in criterion-based assessment, evaluation of learning gain, establishing high expectations of all students, and developing clear understandings of what is expected of each student.

All of these principles underpin strong equity-based assessment practices. They emphasise the fundamental principle that all students can learn.²⁰

ADVICE FOR TEACHERS

- Teachers can invite collaborative discussion on how to incorporate formative assessment into a learning program and how to link it explicitly to the standards that are articulated in the Victorian Curriculum F-10.
- Discussion of how to build formative assessment into the teaching and learning cycle across different year levels can be a useful way to embed evidence-based High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS).
- Teachers can use discussion of formative assessment practice to give each other feedback about where to focus, where to adjust their practice, and what is working well. In this way, they embed a culture based on challenging conversations.
- Teachers can engage students directly in formative assessment by explicitly teaching what we want students to know, understand and do, and introducing tools such as rubrics, or checklists, to rate anonymous

work samples representing different levels of achievement.

EXTENDING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Focusing on a few aspects of formative assessment practice, such as moderation or feedback, could be part of an inquiry-based improvement cycle for a professional learning community (PLC).

Formative assessment is embedded in the [Practice Principles](#) on: 1: High Expectations, 4: Curriculum Planning, 6: Rigorous assessment practice and evident in [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#): 1: Setting Goals, 3: Worked Examples, 6: Multiple Exposures, 10: Differentiated Teaching.

See also [AITSL's formative assessment in the classroom](#)

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership currently offer a [Literacy Masterclass Series](#), the first of which will focus on formative assessment. This will be live-streamed from the Bastow Theatre at 4.30pm on Thursday March 20. This webinar will explore ways to can plan, gather and analyse data to inform teaching and learning.

See also:

[Victorian Literacy Portal](#) and [Victorian Numeracy Portal](#)
[Literacy Teaching Toolkit](#)
[Tools to Enhance Assessment Literacy for Teachers of English as an Additional Language](#)
[Literacy Case Studies](#)
[Insight Assessment Platform](#)
[Reading and Viewing Work Samples](#): Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)

OTHER SUPPORT

This note is part of a series of professional practice notes to support school based staff to continue improving their practice. See [Professional Practice Elements](#) for more information. For more information, or to share your feedback on this resource, please email: professional.practice@edumail.vic.gov.au.

²⁰ See High Impact Teaching Strategy 10 – Differentiated teaching and Practice Principle 1 – High expectations for every student, HITS (op.cit.) (and Practice Principles (op.cit.))