

## Recognizing Hard Edges in Formative Assessment and Feedback

How do we recognize when our formative assessment and feedback practices have hard edges and lack alignment with our own beliefs and values and the needs of the whole person? The following sections describe some indicators to watch for.

### Failing to Take Action

The key factor in whether an assessment is formative is the degree to which it impacts future actions and decisions. When we formatively assess students and never do anything with the information we gather, we fail to meet both our own needs and those of our students, and the edges become hard. Formative assessment with no action taken or feedback given implies that the opportunity to continue to grow and learn, to observe and respond, has ceased. Furthermore, it creates a climate of purposeless assessment for both teachers and students.

### Turning a Formative Event Into a Summative Mark

Grading formative assessments assigns a value to students' practice, which can reduce their emotional and intellectual safety. The opportunity for improvement and continued growth is halted the moment a formative assessment is treated as a summative assessment. Feedback becomes meaningless because a decision has already been made. Scores trump learning.

Treating a formative assessment as a summative event may occur for reasons other than by specific design. If we have not considered our learning continuum, we may create a summative assessment that should be formative because we have not clarified for ourselves what the learning goal is asking students to demonstrate. As mentioned previously, the smaller steps we take to practice and explore pieces of the learning goal should not be assessed summatively. These steps are part of the exploring stage. It is only when students are asked to synthesize these pieces into the complexity of a learning goal that we should be assessing summatively.

### Grading Homework

Homework is the topic of much debate. Arguments for and against homework abound, and discussions flourish in relation to the definition of *quality homework*. Alfie Kohn (2006) and Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish (2006) argue against the practice of homework in general, while authors such as Robert J. Marzano and Debra J. Pickering (2007) contend that homework has a place in our schools, but the

instructional quality of homework needs to improve. The hard edge being discussed here is not so much about the decision of whether to issue homework (although our decisions around this may or may not foster hard edges) but rather in how that homework is used in the name of assessment.

If we accept the idea that when the purpose of our homework is to allow learners time to practice and refine their skills and knowledge, then we have to conclude that homework falls under the category of formative work. To assign it a summative grade would be a premature act. Among Ken O'Connor's (2007) arguments to support this statement is the following:

When homework assigned as practice is scored and included in grades, what becomes most important to students is that it be done because it "counts," not because of any learning that might occur. It becomes an issue of compliance so it really doesn't matter who does the homework—the student, a parent, a sibling, or a friend. If we want homework to be about learning, we need students to understand that it is for practice if they need it, not compliance or grading, because then the person who benefits from the homework is the learner. (p. 100)

A further argument can be made for the hard edge of assigning homework a summative score. Homework, when treated as a summative event, advantages students who have the time for extended practice outside of school while creating a hard edge for many students who have commitments such as part-time jobs and child care responsibilities. Furthermore, learners who do not have a quiet place to work at home, who do not have technology available to them after school, and who do not even have basic supplies like pens and pencils at their disposal are at a distinct disadvantage when homework is brought back to school and graded. This causes the gap in achievement to widen between students who have the required resources and those who do not. This does not nurture the whole person.

Practice is essential, and when students are highly engaged in learning, we find them making time for practice in any way possible. We may offer tutorial or homework times during the school day (lunch, for example), or designate a half hour, one or two days a week, when students can work on practice for their classes. We may decide to build practice more fully into our class time so we can monitor progress as it develops. We may even shift our homework to include practice that can be done easily and with minimal materials (for example, sending home a set of playing cards

so students can practice multiplication tables through games or in short periods of time). Engaging in practice in ways that are accessible and meaningful can be a soft edge of homework, but we have to acknowledge all parts of each student and face the reality that homework is a luxury some students cannot afford.

Added to the need for practice to be accessible to all learners is the importance of our need to verify proficiency. When educators make a professional judgment about student learning, they have to be certain who has been doing the learning and under what circumstances. Homework invites variables that make it next to impossible to verify independent learning.

Homework is an effective tool because it offers exceptional opportunities for reflection and feedback. However, using homework in any other way creates a hard edge in our assessment practices.

### **Lacking Clarity About What Needs to Be Assessed**

When assessment serves little purpose and we are not sure what we are measuring, completing the work is all about compliance and no longer about the learning goals. If we are unclear about the learning continuum, we are unclear about growth. If we are unclear about what we hope to learn from an assessment, we are setting both ourselves and our students up for frustration and disengagement.

### **Using Data From a Few Students to Determine the Needs of Many**

Asking students to work in groups invites them to develop skills like collaboration, communication, consensus, problem solving, and empathy—all important to the development of the whole student. However, when we are assessing understanding, it is important to avoid the trap of collecting information from a few students and taking that as a sign that understanding has been developed in all students. For example, in a group discussion about a new concept, it is easy to ask one or two students to respond to formative-type questions to gauge understanding. However, just because some students show proficiency, it does not mean all students are proficient. We also have to consider that very early in the year, students develop an understanding of who in their classes will be answering most questions and representing the class's collective understanding. This pattern is set up quickly in some classrooms, and students understandably take advantage of it. Strong formative assessment collects evidence of understanding by *all* students, not just a few.

## Letting Standardized Assessment Dictate What We Teach and Assess

Giving a standardized assessment the power to define the kind and depth of learning in our classrooms creates a hard edge for teachers because it denies teachers' agency in making decisions for students and can even challenge teachers' beliefs about what should drive learning in schools. The work of Dylan William, Clare Lee, Christine Harrison, and Paul Black (2004) reassures us that our focus on learning goals does not limit our students' success on standardized tests. Their comprehensive study provides evidence that using formative assessment produces improved results on externally mandated tests. When we use formative assessment and feedback to help student learning develop in relation to broader learning goals, we can ensure long-term success and understanding, while at the same time students develop the skills and knowledge that will serve them well on a short-term test. We have to trust our own teaching as well as the ability of our students to demonstrate proficiency in multiple contexts. Letting standardized tests dictate what we teach and assess limits the potential of both our teaching and student learning.

## Expressing Feedback in Terms Too General or Too Specific

When we use phrases like "Great work!" or "Lacking insight," we offer students nothing in the way of feedback. They cannot relate statements like these to either their learning goals or to the processes they engage in to strengthen their learning. These kinds of comments can nurture an overdependence on praise and remove efficacy for learners. Instead, comments that refer to criteria are much more helpful, such as: "Your hook was highly engaging through your use of dialogue" or "You have supported your opinion with a few details, but more references to the research would strengthen your argument." Reciprocally, when we return student work after correcting every error and making an exhaustive list of suggestions at the end, we do two things. First, we do most of the work—correcting student errors completely removes all responsibility for learning from students. Anyone who has done this with essay after essay knows this is emotionally and physically draining and is a hard edge for teachers. Second, we overwhelm students and remove any confidence they have in reaching a goal. By understanding our learning continuum, we can be crystal clear about where a student is on the journey and offer feedback about the next step. For many students, this seems more attainable than a fully documented list of every single step they need to take.

## Failing to Return Formative Assessments in a Timely Fashion

Simply put, students cannot learn from their mistakes and celebrate growth if they have nothing to examine and reflect on. This means staying current in our assessment work so students can receive immediate information and refine their knowledge and skills before they add new learning. When they are forced to build walls on a potentially unsteady foundation of understanding, they have a greater chance of building a house that collapses in the long term.

### References

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