

Everything is assessment

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If there is one bias that I have developed when it comes to assessment for learning it is this: As much as possible, we should not have to stop teaching in order to conduct our formative assessments. In other words, if I were to walk into a classroom and observe, the lines between the moments of assessment, instruction, and feedback would be blurred; the chosen strategies would seamlessly lead students and teachers through a continuous assessment-instruction-feedback loop. While there are always exceptions to any rule, we should, as much as possible, strive to infuse our assessment for learning practices into our instructional strategies.

With that, formative assessment is actually easier to infuse than some might think. So many of the strategies that teachers have been using for years can – quite effortlessly – be used for formative assessment purposes. In fact, when I'm asked to provide/discuss some effective formative assessment strategies with teachers I'm often met with the fairly typical response of, "Oh, I already do that."

Now, I'm not doubting their responses. The truth is that many teachers are already doing or using the strategy I describe, at least at first glance. Upon further review, however, I've come to realize that while many are using the strategies I outline, the strategies fall short of serving as an assessment for learning.

Everything teachers do – every strategy, activity, or process – is an assessment in waiting. Every activity students participate in – every project, assignment, or task – has information that can be used for formative purposes if we follow two simple guidelines.

First, every activity must be linked to the intended learning. Activities are just activities unless there is a direct link between the activity and the intended learning; that's what turns a task into a target. Even better is expressing this link in student-friendly language so that students may have intimate access to what they are expected to learn from the activity. This link is what's often missing in far too many classrooms. Think about how often you begin a lesson by describing to students what they are going to do as opposed to what they are going to learn? The link to learning will establish far greater relevance for students and assist in their understanding of why – especially with knowledge targets – what they are doing today is important and relevant for tomorrow (and beyond).

Second, the results of every activity must have the potential to illicit an instructional response from the teacher. One of the core fundamentals behind formative assessment is that the collective results are used to decide what comes next in the learning. Now I use the word potential because the results of your activities (assessments) may indicate that what you had previously planned to do tomorrow is, in fact, the most appropriate decision. You're not always going to change course, but for an activity to serve a formative assessment purpose it must have the potential to influence what you plan to do next. As long as you are

willing to consider some instructional adjustments based on the results of the activity then it becomes an assessment for learning. As well, the more we can involve students in the process of self-assessment and personalized adjustments the more they become meaningful decision-makers in their own learning.

Whether it's a class discussion, an A/B partner talk exercise, an Exit Slip, a 4 Corners Activity, a Jigsaw, or the use of exemplars, we can infuse our assessment/feedback practices into our instructional routines. When we link an activity to the intended learning and allow the results of the activity to potentially influence our instructional decisions, it moves from being just an activity to an assessment. Everything is an assessment in waiting if we use these two guideline to enhance what we're already doing.