A PERSONAL VIEW

Ten maxims of formative assessment

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment is pivotal to the intricate tapestry of education as it drives student learning. It is a potent instrument in the armamentarium of the educator and, therefore, deserves careful consideration. It is a widely accepted norm that the role of assessment is not simply to assess students on certain predetermined criteria and make judgments, but also to facilitate students’ learning through a continuous process of feedback and provide them the opportunity to improve.

Today, the shift in emphasis from summative to formative assessment is the offshoot of the acknowledgment that assessment is as powerful in causing learning as it is in measuring worth. Caroline Gipps describes formative assessment as “...the process of appraising, judging or evaluating students’ work or performance and using this to shape and improve students’ competence” (5). It is the process used by teachers to recognize and respond to student’s learning to enable and enhance it. In essence, formative assessment is the assessment for learning (6).

The goal of this article is to outline ways in which formative assessment can be captured as 10 F’s and are presented in the order of importance:

1. Faceless
2. Facilitates learning
3. Feedback
4. Feedforward
5. Focus on learning
6. Flexibility
7. Fast
8. Frequent
9. Friendly
10. Fun

Maxim 1. Formative Assessment Remains Faceless

Anonymity gives safety and comfort and gives students the bandwidth to make mistakes without being put on the spot. Administering a class quiz without the identity of the students being revealed indicates where and why things are going wrong rather than who has gone wrong. While precision in measurement of understanding by the students is not possible, it is perhaps not even necessary in the formative assessment. However, if feedback is intended to be given at an individual level, the formative assessment may not be faceless.

Maxim 2. Formative Assessment Facilitates Active Learning

Student involvement in the process of assessment has been discussed as an influential tool in augmenting student learning. The article by Black and Wiliam (7), “Inside the black box,” revealed that classroom-based formative assessment, when appropriately used, can positively affect learning. According to them, contrary to the traditional forms, learners and their peers play a vital role in the process of formative assessment (7). Stiggins et al. (32) suggested that classroom assessment that involves students can motivate their learning. Formative assessment should encourage students to have a central part and be active in their own learning. Making students think about what they are learning and providing a range of opportunities to explore what has been learned will enable teachers to gauge the depth of understanding (8). Most of the evidence related to formative assessment propounds its importance and implications for instruction and that assessment should facilitate “action” in the classroom to affect learning (36).

Maxim 3. Formative Assessment Encourages Feedback

The most powerful single factor that enhances achievement is feedback, which determines the effectiveness of formative assessment. Results of a meta-analysis posit the role of providing feedback as a key ingredient of formative assessment (22).

For feedback to be effective, it needs to be constructive. It needs to describe rather than to evaluate or judge. Chappuis...
and Stiggins (12) suggest that judgmental feedback not only holds less value for improvement and student learning, but also discourages students from learning. Black and William (7) suggested that formative feedback should bring out students' strengths, provide suggestions for improvement, and avoid comparing one student with another. This feedback may be particularly helpful to underachievers because it emphasizes that students can improve because of effort (2).

As Brookfield (10) so aptly says,

Feedback should not leave students just feeling good or bad about what they’ve done; they should provide guidance as well. If students only feel warmed or ashamed by our evaluation then formative assessment will fail in its purpose to be educative.

Feedback should provide information about the existing gap between the actual and desired levels of performance (27, 30). Specific, accurate, timely, clear, and focused feedback will encourage the students to reflect on their learning and feel the necessity to change (19). Formative assessment should be early and timely enough to help both teachers and students to make course corrections during the learning journey (17).

Maxim 4. Formative Assessment Engenders Feedforward

While feedback focuses on a student’s current performance, feedforward looks ahead to subsequent actions taken toward improvement. A combination of retrospective and prospective approaches to student learning will have a more tangible impact than either alone. The loop of effective feedback is complete only when necessary actions are taken toward improvement. Formative assessment should allow the learners to reflect and ponder. Kluger and DeNisi (21) showed that the most effective feedback for students is when they are not only told in which areas they need to improve, but also directed on how to go about improving those areas by the feedforward strategy. Feedforward assignments should be designed with a built-in opportunity for students to put the feedback to immediate use (11). Teachers need to closely monitor the actions taken to improve so that they can be sure that the feedback was effective in its purpose. To emphasize continuous learning (29) and encourage self-regulated learning (24) and metacognition, where students learn from understanding their own thought process, they need to have opportunities to make mistakes and to learn from them before they encounter summative assessment; in essence, formative feedback and feedforward precede summative assessment.

Maxim 5. Formative Assessment Reiterates Focus on Learning, Not on Grading

Assessment has to be viewed in a different perspective: beyond grades, marks, and recognitions. It must be perceived as a yardstick to probe what the students have learned and to provoke their thinking on what they have learned (18). Ideally, assessment for learning happens best in an environment free of judgments and grades. Assessment need not always be graded and involves many ungraded measures of student learning. Formative assessments are “good” when minimally graded and “best” when not graded at all. Only when grades are divorced from formative assessment will the students have the chance to evolve in the learning process (1).

Interesting interactions rather than interrogation should be the cornerstone of formative assessment, wherein the student realizes that learning is paramount rather than a grade or a mark (4, 13). Formative assessment should elicit evidence of students’ learning status at a point of time. Concurrently, formative assessment needs to enable teachers to focus on instructional strategies and students to focus on learning approaches (26). Formative assessment should also direct the teacher on where to focus his or her time. If students show deep understanding of a topic, the teacher can increase the difficulty of the assignments to challenge their thinking. If students are struggling with a particular skill or topic, the teacher can review the material or teach it in a different way. Reteaching, alternate instructional approaches, and more practice opportunities can be attempted by the caring teacher who diagnoses the struggles students are experiencing (9). In short, it helps the teacher to modify the teaching to the needs of the student.

Maxim 6. Formative Assessment Provides Flexibility

There is as much variety in implementing formative assessments, as there is diversity in instructional styles (16). Although teachers employ paper-and-pencil tests for the purpose of formative assessment, it can be conducted by a wide variety of less traditional and much less formal assessment methods. The flexibility to choose between different types of activities is the strength of formative assessment and needs to be explored and exploited to benefit learning.

Formative assessment allows us the freedom to choose a mixture of approaches to assess student understanding of what has been taught. Just as dipsticks are used to measure the depth of oil in the engine of an automobile, it is possible to use such dipsticks (interventions) to dip into the minds of the students to fathom their understanding of the topic (15). These activities in the classroom, not only facilitate learning, but also reinforce concepts, break the monotony, and permit the teacher to get a snapshot of student learning.

Maxim 7. Formative Assessment Happens Fast

Formative assessments need to be fast, meaning they need to follow soon after instruction. If it occurs several weeks or months after instruction, the impact of formative assessment is lost. This is especially true with factual knowledge and conceptual understanding. It is a well-known fact that reviewing the topic taught in the first 24 h after learning information reduces the amount of knowledge forgotten, and this can be achieved by using formative assessments (23).

Maxim 8. Formative Assessment Needs To Be Frequent

Regularity of formative assessment followed by a constructive feedback is important for student learning (10). Formative assessments should not be few and far between. They should be frequent enough to maintain, sustain, and retain the momentum in learning. This ensures that teachers are continually monitoring students’ comprehension as learning unfolds. Progress monitoring begins with collecting prevailing data regarding student performance and needs to be collected frequently to monitor student progress (18). Only when the formative assessment is considered as a continuous and frequent process can a student-specific, corrective, and timely feedback regarding progress be given (22).

Information learned is lost over time when there is no attempt to retain it and is well represented by the forgetting
curved. Murre and Dros (23) quoted Ebbinghaus, who suggested that the best method for increasing the strength of memory is repetition based on active recall and retrieval practice. Incorporating formative assessment frequently will greatly decrease the effects of the forgetting curve (23).

Maxim 9. Formative Assessment Propagates a Friendly Learning Environment

Formative assessments not only instill confidence in the students, but also brings about a cultural change in the classroom environment (25). Creating a healthy, safe, and supportive environment enables learning to happen in more enduring ways. Formative assessment should involve mutually interactive participation between teachers and students, leading to a joint productive activity (3). Respect, regard, and mutual trust form the bedrock of this transformative process. As Ann Brown proposes, in formative assessment, teachers and learners are viewed “as participating in a mutual dance of appropriation of ideas and actions” (3), which is possible only when an environment conducive to learning is established. Such an environment promotes innovation, inquiry, and risk taking. If students do not feel supported and safe, their minds will revert to focusing on survival.

A congenial learning climate, which is devoid of fear, humiliation, or ridicule, will encourage more participation, because making mistakes is viewed as a stepping stone rather than a stumbling block (36). While conducting formative assessments, we must distinguish between the Socratic method and interrogation: in the former, insightful questions are a stimulus to learning and discovery, whereas in the latter, aggressive questioning causes belittlement or humiliation of the learner (34, 35). Creating conditions conducive to learning is as much a teacher’s responsibility as convincingly conveying his/her scholarship.

Maxim 10. Formative Assessment Generates Fun in Learning

One must understand that play is the highest form of learning. Fun in formative assessment increases learners’ attention and concentration and can enliven both learners and teachers (20). According to Leo Buscaglia, “it is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them” (33).

Teachers need to outgrow the myth that fun in the classroom will sacrifice real learning, and that proper learning should not be fun. Rather than fun being viewed as a relief from learning, it needs to be ingrained into the learning process (31). Making formative assessments fun with intermittent instructional initiatives implemented imaginatively will ignite student’s interest.

Conclusion

The overt reason for formative assessment is explicit, to give feedback to students; the covert reason is implicit, to provide an avenue for teachers to reflect on their teaching strategies and to hone them. With so much at stake in the implementation of summative assessment, there is an eclipsing effect on the teacher’s constructive use of formative assessment. In our drive to summatively assess student learning, we must not forget why and how to formatively assess student learning in the classroom (16). Learning becomes more functional and enduring when the key attributes of formative assessment, such as reflection, feedback, and self-assessment, are permitted to bloom. Harnessing the 10 maxims presented in this article will ensure that formative assessment is implemented with ease and enthusiasm.

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