

Formative Assessment

Formative Assessment Activity 1

This activity will help you answer the essential question:

- Why is formative assessment important?
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Activity 1

You may complete this activity individually or in groups.

After reading the introduction to Black and Wiliam's article "Inside the Black Box" that appears on the following pages, respond to each of the following:

- How formative is the assessment that occurs in your classroom, school, or district?

- In one column, list the obstacles that constrain your implementation of formative assessment. In the second column, identify what must be changed in order to eliminate those obstacles.

Obstacle	Solution

Excerpt from:

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan* Vol. 80 (2), October 1998, pp.139-148. Currently available at: http://blog.discoveryeducation.com/assessment/files/2009/02/blackbox_article.pdf

Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment

By Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam

Firm evidence shows that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement, Mr. Black and Mr. Wiliam point out. Indeed, they know of no other way of raising standards for which such a strong prima facie case can be made.

Raising the standards of learning that are achieved through schooling is an important national priority. In recent years, governments throughout the world have been more and more vigorous in making changes in pursuit of this aim. National, state, and district standards; target setting; enhanced programs for the external testing of students' performance; surveys such as NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) and TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study); initiatives to improve school planning and management; and more frequent and thorough inspection are all means toward the same end. But the sum of all these reforms has not added up to an effective policy because something is missing.

Learning is driven by what teachers and pupils do in classrooms. Teachers have to manage complicated and demanding situations, channeling the personal, emotional, and social pressures of a group of 30 or more youngsters in order to help them learn immediately and become better learners in the future. Standards can be raised only if teachers can tackle this task more effectively. What is missing from the efforts alluded to above is any direct help with this task. This fact was recognized in the TIMSS video study: "A focus on standards and accountability that ignores the processes of teaching and learning in classrooms will not provide the direction that teachers need in their quest to improve."

In terms of systems engineering, present policies in the U.S. and in many other countries seem to treat the classroom as a black box. Certain inputs from the outside -- pupils, teachers, other resources, management rules and requirements, parental anxieties, standards, tests with high stakes, and so on -- are fed into the box. Some outputs are supposed to follow: pupils who are more knowledgeable and competent, better test results, teachers who are reasonably satisfied, and so on. But what is happening inside the box? How can anyone be sure that a particular set of new inputs will produce better outputs if we don't at least study what happens inside? And why is it that most of the reform initiatives mentioned in the first paragraph are not aimed at giving direct help and support to the work of teachers in classrooms?

The answer usually given is that it is up to teachers: they have to make the inside work better. This answer is not good enough, for two reasons. First, it is at least possible that some changes in the inputs may be counterproductive and make it harder for teachers to raise standards. Second, it seems strange, even unfair, to leave the most difficult piece of the standards-raising puzzle entirely to teachers. If there are ways in which policy makers and others can give direct help and support to the everyday classroom task of achieving better learning, then surely these ways ought to be pursued vigorously. This article is about the inside of the black box. We focus on one aspect of teaching: formative assessment. But we will show that this feature is at the heart of effective teaching.

The Argument

We start from the self-evident proposition that teaching and learning must be interactive. Teachers need to know about their pupils' progress and difficulties with learning so that they can adapt their own work to meet pupils' needs -- needs that are often unpredictable and that vary from one pupil to another. Teachers can find out what they need to know in a variety of ways, including observation and discussion in the classroom and the reading of pupils' written work.

We use the general term *assessment* to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers -- and by their students in assessing themselves -- that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes *formative assessment* when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs.

There is nothing new about any of this. All teachers make assessments in every class they teach. But there are three important questions about this process that we seek to answer:

- Is there evidence that improving formative assessment raises standards?
- Is there evidence that there is room for improvement?
- Is there evidence about how to improve formative assessment?

In setting out to answer these questions, we have conducted an extensive survey of the research literature. We have checked through many books and through the past nine years' worth of issues of more than 160 journals, and we have studied earlier reviews of research. This process yielded about 580 articles or chapters to study. We prepared a lengthy review, using material from 250 of these sources, that has been published in a special issue of the journal *Assessment in Education*, together with comments on our work by leading educational experts from Australia, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Lesotho, and the U.S.

The conclusion we have reached from our research review is that the answer to each of the three questions above is clearly yes. In the three main sections below, we outline the nature and force of the evidence that justifies this conclusion. However, because we are presenting a summary here, our text will appear strong on assertions and weak on the details of their justification. We maintain that these assertions are backed by evidence and that this backing is set out in full detail in the lengthy review on which this article is founded. We believe that the three sections below establish a strong case that governments, their agencies, school authorities, and the teaching profession should study very carefully whether they are seriously interested in raising standards in education. However, we also acknowledge widespread evidence that fundamental change in education can be achieved only slowly -- through programs of professional development that build on existing good practice. Thus we do not conclude that formative assessment is yet another "magic bullet" for education. The issues involved are too complex and too closely linked to both the difficulties of classroom practice and the beliefs that drive public policy. In a final section, we confront this complexity and try to sketch out a strategy for acting on our evidence.

You can read the entire article at:

http://blog.discoveryeducation.com/assessment/files/2009/02/blackbox_article.pdf