

## Softening the Edges of Formative Assessment and Feedback

How do we soften the edges of formative assessment and feedback? Here are a few suggestions.

### Share Criteria for Successful Learning With Students

When we clarify and share the learning continuum with our learners, we invite an immediate shared responsibility for learning. Students benefit immensely from knowing the destination and key markers along the way. Every time we start a class or learning experience, we must be explicit about where we are going and how it will look, both as we travel and when we approach the destination. We need to share the criteria *every time*. Even better, co-construct the criteria for proficiency with students. Work together to examine work samples, craft assessment tools, and imagine the story of learning. No surprises, no ambiguity. Even when we are engaging in inquiry and the process is less linear and more organic, we need to share the criteria for strong inquiry (the process).

### Start With Strength

It is nearly impossible to determine the next steps on the learning journey if we don't take time to acknowledge the skills and knowledge learners are developing as they explore each target in their journey toward the learning goal. It is tempting to focus on the steps that remain, but first we must celebrate the steps we have already taken. Formative assessment allows us to acknowledge these steps every time they happen. The preassessment will have identified the skills and knowledge learners possessed even before the goal was introduced. Targets needing instruction are identified and those already mastered are acknowledged. After that, each day is filled with practice, questions, and discussions. Each target that students explore and master is added to the list of accomplishments to celebrate. First, this act honors the learners and their efforts. Every learner brings something to the learning conversation, and this must be acknowledged. Second, it allows us to determine where we go next, in what manner, and how growth will be recognized and celebrated. A strength-based approach is not just a catchphrase. It is an integral part of educating the whole student. Every assessment and feedback experience must start with strengths.

## Equip Students With the Strategies They Need to Experience Successful Learning

It is not enough to give feedback about where a student is on the learning continuum. Students may also need clarity about *how* to move to the next step. This means equipping them with the strategies that will help them make better sense of their learning goals. Without explicit teaching followed by practice in applying these strategies, students often cannot grow.

When we talk about learning strategies, we are talking about *thinking*. Learning strategies are those strategies humans apply to make sense of their world and their responses to the world, and to formulate an action or feeling. So, when we respond to challenges during a lesson, we are not responding to the activity itself or even the product; we are responding to the *thinking* that occurs before, during, and after students engage in the learning experience. This is difficult because thinking happens inside a person's head and may not be shared verbally or visually. We have to design ways to make this thinking visible or engage students in a conversation about their thinking processes.

When we don't see or hear these processes, we can make assumptions about where a student may need support with little evidence to back our assumptions. For example, we may assume a student knows that making strong predictions is a great way to begin the process of identifying the main idea or that organizing numbers is important before beginning a computation. When these assumptions are wrong, however, they can be frustrating for both our students and ourselves. When we ask students to get better and don't help them to know how, we are ensuring a repeat performance.

## Involve the Students

Feedback is ineffective without student investment, and formative assessment is useless if it doesn't inform future actions for learners. Our students must become consumers and users of formative assessment information. This asserts their role as partners in their learning. Students and teachers engaging in dialogue that serves learning will help create soft edges. This dialogue has to involve two or more parties and focus on strengths and next steps. Carol R. Rodgers (2006) clarifies this further:

It is not an evaluation of good and bad but an exploration of what helps and hinders learning and why. In all, feedback gives everyone the chance to slow down, to breathe, to make sense of where they've been, how they got there, where they should go next, and the best ways to get there together—a decision made with students, rather than for students. (p. 219)

We have to remind ourselves to speak *with* students, not *at* them. In fact, there is some research to suggest that delaying our feedback in favor of self-reflection and assessment on the part of the learner may reap greater rewards. There is even more conclusive evidence that both delayed and immediate feedback are better than no feedback at all (Thalheimer, 2008).

Involving students is also an investment for teachers because, in the end, it can save us time. When students become proficient at reflection and feedback, they can begin to offer it to each other, freeing us to focus on other things. Furthermore, strong formative assessment allows us to stop practices that no longer serve our students and, in return, gives everyone time to focus where it is most beneficial for them, softening the edges of assessment.

### **Use Formative Assessment to Guide Differentiation**

When we engage in timely formative assessment, we are offered insight into our learners' strengths and the specific steps needed to help students reach the next phase on their learning journeys. Furthermore, strong formative assessment supports flexible grouping by need, which leads to learning experiences tailored to each student. This kind of flexible response to student needs is called *differentiation*. Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau (2010) clarify the role of assessment in differentiated instruction: "[Assessment is] a data-gathering and analysis process that determines the degree to which students have achieved essential outcomes and informs decisions about and planning for instruction" (p. 21). Once we know how each student is doing in relation to proficiency (for example, in which stage of the learning continuum they are currently engaged), we can design lessons that invite different learning experiences intended to address different targets based on learner needs, all within the same class period. Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral (2015) explain, "Planning intentionally now shifts from using this instructional practice because it's a good thing to do to choosing this instructional practice because it's what's best for students at this moment in time" (p. 106). When students see that the outflow of a formative assessment is a new learning experience that supports their growth very specifically, it renews hope in all assessment processes. Students want to be noticed, supported, challenged, and trusted. When formative assessment leads to differentiated instruction, student receive these outcomes and their needs are met with a soft edge.

### **Utilize Both Smaller and Larger Formative Assessments**

When we have clarity about the formative assessment purpose, the information we

will gather, and how we will respond, we can make precise decisions about the type of formative assessment we will invite and the range of information it will address. There is room in a balanced formative assessment practice for both in-the-moment assessments and robust formative measures of larger pieces of the learning goals. Quick formative assessments each day allow us to be responsive and instructionally agile and, as a result, are often the bread and butter of effective teachers. However, there is also room for larger formative assessments. When we measure multiple pieces of a learning goal, and we capture several stages on the learning continuum all at once, we notice students' needs and build in smaller scaffolds or more intensive interventions early.

### **Make the Feedback Cycle a Two-Way Street**

Receiving feedback from students is just as important as giving it to students. If assessment is a conversation, then there has to be an exchange of information between parties. There are times when we are too quick to respond to formative assessment. We assume we know what students need, when, if we continued the conversation just a little longer, we would gain some additional insight.

However, receiving feedback from students is not an easy task, and acknowledging the challenges feedback presents to us as educators is part of softening the edges of this practice. We need to be prepared for the honesty of our learners. At times it can feel like they have been restlessly waiting for someone to ask them what they think. Once we give students a much-needed voice, we may get more honesty than we bargained for at first. For example, after engaging in a lesson in which students worked in groups, we may ask them how they felt the experience helped them learn. They may share a lack of enjoyment or engagement in the group process. This is a great moment to continue the conversation and try to determine the reasons for their comments. Was it the process itself that was difficult? Was it their relationships with group members that was challenging? Did they learn less than they should have or did they just experience less enjoyment of learning? Is there a way to increase enjoyment and engagement? What needs to be addressed tomorrow? These are rich conversations that only emerge out of relationships built on honesty and inquiry. It would be easy to dismiss the feedback, but getting at the root of it can help us develop our learning experiences alongside learners. This does not mean we always do what students want; it means we are interested in their perceptions of the learning experiences they are having.

We also need to be prepared for contradictory feedback. Some students may see great benefit to our approaches while others may not. Even more complex, there may

be a juxtaposition between favorable student learning outcomes and their feelings about the learning experiences themselves. For students who are accustomed to achieving early and easily, engaging them in enrichment and deep thinking, while good for them intellectually, may destabilize their confidence and create a hard edge. Students who traditionally either opt out of fully engaging in learning experiences (refuse to participate, sit back during collaborative learning) or achieve solely by minimal compliance may perceive our approaches as inconvenient to their understanding of how school works. To soften these edges, we must be prepared to return to these conversations over and over and help students create new stories of successful learning. A hard edge for learners can be softened when they come to deeply understand that learning involves risk taking and mistake making. It can feel uncomfortable and unmanageable at times. The edge of these lessons can be softened when they occur in a classroom filled with formative assessment, feedback, reflection, relationships, and trust. Resilience can be built in an environment where the edges are soft in our assessment practices and where we communicate a belief in our students' capabilities, even in tough times.

As teachers, we know that people do not always feel good about the journey through new and challenging learning. Happiness is not always directly correlated to growth and change. When I think about my own personal experiences, I know I am often very uncomfortable during times of rapid growth, but it is through these challenging experiences that growth happens. By partnering with students in the process, we can strive to work together better and even open up to our students' ideas of what learning looks, sounds, and feels like. Learning about learning is important, and two-way feedback facilitates an exploration of this goal.

## Stay Curious

A typical learning experience (lesson, activity, and so on) is filled with complexity. When we plan learning experiences for students, we consider outcomes, criteria for success, ways learning could be lived, and environments that support and enhance learning. We consider a great deal when we teach. It is this very complexity that makes it challenging to identify exactly where difficulty occurs for students when they are having trouble experiencing success or growth. As a result, we have to stay curious to determine why and respond accordingly.

Staying curious takes a concerted effort. For example, when a student does not follow our instructions during a game in physical education, we may conclude *defiance* or *not listening*. However, as Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) explains, "Too narrow an attention to the obvious—can make one miss something essential going on at the

periphery” (p. 100). Staying curious includes stepping back and looking at all of the parts of the learning experience. Some questions we may ask ourselves are, “Did the students hear my instructions?” “Do they understand the words I used to explain the game?” “Do they have visual or auditory challenges?” “Is the game too complex?” “Why didn’t they pick up on social cues from their peers?” “At exactly which point did they show difficulty?” “Did they respond when I gave them a verbal cue?” Being curious means we ask many questions before determining possible responses.

### **Be Aware of a Student’s Preconceived Notions About Assessment**

How students perceive the assessment process impacts how they respond to our feedback. Our conversations with learners need to start with their previous assessment experiences and how our practices may or may not shift their beliefs. We may have to clarify the role of formative assessment in learning, articulate how feedback will be given, what actions will result, and how both processes will support increased achievement. There are many misconceptions about formative assessment, and we can soften these edges by including students in the conversation about how assessment will impact their learning.

### **References**

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