

# 8

## Extensions

### *Formative Assessment: Instructional Magic?*

#### Chapter 8's Assessment-Related Understanding

*Formative Assessment.* The formative-assessment process, a robust, research-ratified use of classroom-assessment evidence permitting teachers to adjust their instruction and/or students to adjust their learning tactics—although remarkably effective—is seriously underutilized.

#### BETTER UNDERSTANDING AN UNDERSTANDING

This chapter's assessment-related understanding deals with one big idea, namely, that a remarkably effective classroom instructional strategy is being woefully underused. What's most important for you to comprehend about this understanding, is the nature of formative assessment itself. If you don't grasp what formative assessment is—and isn't—then

it's almost certain that you'll not truly understand the thrust of this Chapter 8 understanding.

True, the chapter parades out a compelling collection of research findings to support formative assessment, chiefly in the form of a widely cited 1998 review of empirical investigations by two British researchers—findings subsequently confirmed by other investigators. But to get the most goodness out of the Chapter 8 understanding, it is imperative for a reader to really acquire a firm grasp of formative assessment.

For openers, it is crucial to recognize that formative assessment is a *process* in which assessments—typically classroom tests—are used in a particular way. These classroom tests, employed by teachers while instruction is taking place, are usually aimed at fairly long-term curricular goals, thus requiring an instructional sequence lasting for a month or longer. Because students will be completing classroom assessments during an instructional sequence consonant with formative-assessment process, it is typically efficient for formatively focused teachers to tackle fairly significant curricular targets when using formative assessment.

Another key notion of formative assessment is that the process can be used to enhance the instructional-adjustment decisions of teachers and/or the learning-tactic adjustment decisions of students themselves. Ideally, we would hope to see more classrooms in which the formative-assessment process is employed by *both teachers and students*.

The chapter's lament about under-utilization of a demonstrably effective instructional process, hinges on a thorough understanding of the nature of formative assessment itself. Accordingly, please try to internalize the following definition of formative assessment provided by a well-intentioned writer some years ago:

Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics. (Popham, 2008)

Don't forget the need for *planning*, and don't forget that the entire enterprise revolves around teachers' and/or students' making *adjustment decisions* about what they are up to. Most of all, please recognize that this potent assessment-rooted instructional process helps children get a better education. That's why we need to use it more widely.

## COLLEGIAL CONJECTURING

Presented below is a pretend e-mail to you from a pretend friend of yours. Your task is to look over the message sent by your friend, then construct a reply. You can agree or disagree with your friend's point of view, so simply make sure that your response, whatever its nature, is well-reasoned and persuasive.

**TO: THE PERSON WHO'S READING  
THAT BOOK ABOUT ASSESSMENT BASICS  
FROM: YOUR LONG-AGO CLASSMATE  
SUBJECT: WHY NOT MORE WIDESPREAD?**

Good afternoon:

Who would have guessed that, many years ago when we were both students in the same elementary school, I would one day be e-mailing you to get your opinion about the nation's inability to install a high pay-off instructional approach in more of our schools? Yet, this is precisely what I am doing at the moment.

I remember when you telephoned me a few weeks ago, that you have been digging into a new book about educational testing and, as you said then, you were often surprised by what you were reading. Let me lay out what's currently bothering me, and ask you to supply an insight or two regarding how to fix what I regard as an untenable situation.

I am referring specifically to the nation's under-use of the formative-assessment process. As I am sure you know, from your

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reading of *That ABC's Book* (and I may have the book's name wrong), formative assessment calls for teachers or students to routinely collect classroom-assessment evidence and then, on the basis of such evidence, decide whether (for teachers) to adjust their instruction or (for students) to adjust how they are trying to learn. I believe I understand the essence of how this formative-assessment stuff works. What I *do not* understand, however, is why formative assessment is not utilized more in our schools.

The formative-assessment process, regardless of minor variations in how it is carried out, apparently pays off big time in improved student learning. Why on earth, then, aren't many more teachers using it? Everyone wants to be successful, and if employing the formative-assessment process will, as the research evidence seems to make clear, increase a teacher's instructional success, why is formative assessment not being used by every teacher in our nation?

Very appreciative will I be if you can get back to me on this! And, of course, I'll see you next month—even if you don't respond to this note!

Adrian

## THOUGHT-PROVOCATION QUERIES

Please examine the four questions below regarding different aspects of the formative-assessment process. If you conclude that any of these queries are of interest, try to come up with a sensible response.

**Query 1.** By far, the bulk of supporting empirical evidence regarding the positive effects of formative assessment stems from the use of *classroom assessments* rather than from the use of *large-scale standardized assessments*. Why do you think this is so? Could it be differences between the test-construction procedures used with those two categories of assessments, or could it stem from the manner in which the two types of assessments are typically used?

**Query 2.** In Chapter 8 of *The ABCs*, the formative-assessment process is described as being organized according to a “learning progression.” If you were describing a learning progression to someone who knew nothing about such things, how would you go about doing so? Beyond describing *what* a learning progression is, also indicate *why* learning progressions are often touted as important elements in the formative-assessment process.

**Query 3.** Please recall Chapter 2’s distinction among three primary purposes of educational tests: (1) to provide comparisons of test-takers, (2) to improve ongoing instruction and learning, and (3) to evaluate instruction. Clearly, when classroom assessments are being used formatively, they are intended to help improve ongoing instruction and learning. However, some writers have argued that tests used as part of the formative-assessment process could also make an important contribution to the evaluation of schools or teachers. Do you agree or disagree with this position and, either way, why do you hold this view?

**Query 4.** At a school district, state, or national level (your choice), what practical strategies and tactics could be *successfully* employed in an effort to expand the usage of the formative-assessment process in classrooms?

### A REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

As suggested earlier, to meaningfully comprehend this chapter’s assessment-related understanding, it is necessary to fully grasp the nature of the formative-assessment process itself. In this exercise, subgroups are asked to devise realistic descriptions of the instructional use of educational tests. Some of those descriptions should be completely consonant with the definition of formative assessment that was provided earlier in this chapter’s extensions, whereas some descriptions should not. The latter descriptions, although they may seem

similar to formative assessment, should actually not be. The exercise, described below in italics, is intended to help participants sharpen their abilities to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate descriptions of formative assessment.

### **DEFINITION DERBY**

#### **(A SUB-GROUP OR PAIRS EXERCISE)**

*This exercise can be carried out in small groups of 4–8 persons or in pairs. The essence of the activity is to have a sub-group or one member of a pair generate descriptions of the sorts of assessment-related instructional situations that might be seen in the real world of schooling. These descriptions should be in total accord with the 2008 definition of the formative-assessment process previously presented (and, thus, should be regarded as bona fide descriptions of formative assessment). Other descriptions should “look like” but not match the definition’s key elements.*

*After allowing 15 minutes or so for a sub-group (or a pair-member) to develop a small collection of such descriptions, those involved should take turns in reading aloud their supposed examples of formative assessment in action. The other sub-groups (or pair-member) then decide whether each description should be classified as Real or Phony. Differences of opinion should be hammered out, if possible, in light of the definition governing this exercise.*