

Engaging Students in Learning: The Formative Assessment Process By Connie Kamm, Ed.D.

To better prepare students to be productive citizens in this not-so-new century, we need to transform teaching, leading, and learning in schools. Although many educators are keenly aware of our need to change current structures and practices, what this change looks like and how we go about making these transformations is still unclear.

A few years ago, I authored an article titled “Transforming Education.” In preparation for this article, I invited children to share their thoughts on effective teaching. They responded with note-worthy perception:

Abigail (age 8): “Mrs. Clark is a teacher that I like to have because she has a bright and cheery face that helps me start the day. She is a teacher who knows exactly how learning is planned for the day, and she doesn’t forget the plan.”

David (age 11): “In school I’m learning how to be a smarter and better person so I can get a good job. Good teachers watch me and ask me questions. They make sure I’m ok with what they are teaching.”

Ava (age 6): “If I am always learning the same things every day I won’t have time to learn the new things I need to know.”

The insights of these 21st century children offer key components of a vision for learning in the present and for the future. Effective educators radiate enthusiasm and develop positive relationships with their students. They follow a clear plan for learning, observing and assessing their students carefully to ensure mastery of essential knowledge that will prepare their students for future pursuits. In addition, leading educators implement strategies that engage their students as active learners, and they keep their curriculum appropriately challenging to invigorate learning. To reach this vision of students who are vital and enthusiastic partners in their own learning, educators can turn to the components of the formative process.

Implementing the Formative Process

Inherent in the formative process is responsive teaching, an approach that puts evidence of student learning and the needs of the learner at the heart of instructional decisions. It is in the formative process that rich classroom practices are enhanced and learning dialogues occur that actively invite students to participate as designers of their own learning.

Components of the formative process include clearly stated learning outcomes, models of the final product, student-generated criteria, peer-to-peer teaching,

focused teacher feedback, the meta-cognitive process, and multiple opportunities for success. To infuse the components of the formative process in their classroom learning experiences, teachers can respond to the following questions to guide their planning:

1. How will students be involved in generating the **learning criteria**? How will students use the criteria to support their learning?
2. How will both students and teachers determine the appropriate **learning progression** toward mastery of specific concepts and skills?
3. Which assessment products will provide students and teachers with **evidence** of student learning?
4. How and when will **teachers provide feedback** to students? How will the students use this feedback to revise their work?
5. How will teachers use the feedback to **revise their instruction**?
6. How will students shape and monitor their learning goals and establish their own **plans of action**? How will these plans of action be used daily by both teachers and students?
7. How are opportunities for **peer feedback** provided? What guidelines and documents will be used to support peer feedback?
8. What opportunities will students be given to **teach one another**?
9. How and when will students engage in a **meta-cognitive process**?
10. How will students be provided with **multiple opportunities for success**?

The formative process engages teachers and students in a cycle of reflection where students become leaders of their own learning and teachers examine and adjust their instructional practices in response to students' learning needs.