

THINKING ABOUT ASSESSMENT

Thomas MacLaren School's vision statement concludes with this: *Thomas MacLaren School strives to build a lasting community of learners in which each student is the agent of his or her education.* If we are leading them to be the agents of their own education, we want students to mature into life-long learners who can recognize what they have learned and what they have not; what questions still need answering; what work they need to do to learn something better; what is the next question in light of what they have learned; and what fascinates them. In other words, we want them to grow into people who are at once confident and intellectually humble, people who can recognize what they know and don't know as they take part in the great conversation of humankind. With all that in mind, we want to reflect carefully on how and why we assess our students' progress toward becoming those people.

- 1) To find out what students know about a particular topic on a particular day.
- 2) To determine what students have learned over the course of a period of time such as at the end of a unit or a book.
- 3) To discern whether the students can tell that they are learning what they are supposed to learn.
- 4) To give them feedback and coaching so that *they* have a sense of what they have learned/are learning and where there may be gaps. We direct them individually to where they need to put their efforts in light of where each one is as a learner.

The two primary ways that we assess our students are *formative assessment* and *summative assessment*.

Formative assessment is a means of gauging whether the students are learning the material taught that day. It is the “check for understanding” that so many plans require, and perhaps the single most effective way for us as teachers to break out of the trap of “I taught it; why didn't they learn it?” Formative assessment is an essential part of the craft of teaching: a dynamic interchange between teacher and student in which we question, pose challenges and problems, didactically instruct, model how to perform a skill or task, engage, exhort, wonder—and follow that up by assessing their learning, which in turn informs where we go next as a class. Do we need to reteach? Are we ready to move on? If we need to reteach, what did they not understand on the first go-round, and how can we break through their confusion?

Note that there is no single formative assessment that can be standardized across grades, subjects, or activities. The key word here is “dynamic”—some lessons and activities and courses and days are chock-full of *visible* formative assessment, while it may be sparser or less obvious in others. This is largely a question of what is being taught: formative assessment will be much more uniform and mechanical in some areas of the curriculum than others.

Consider, for example, the difference between a second-grade math lesson and an eleventh-grade drama class: the math teacher needs to have a well-structured way of checking daily to determine if the class can subtract a three-digit number from a three-digit number. Without that knowledge, he is flying blindly through the curriculum, and may only discover that the class is entirely lost when he gives a quiz after two long weeks of daily work—not a great place to be! So for the

second-grade team, it might be standard that at the end of 90% of math lessons, the teacher orally quizzes the class on the skill practiced that day, gives them a quick check (“Flip your whiteboards up in 1-2-3: flip!”), and records the students who did not correctly solve the problem. The drama teacher, on the other hand, may have a much more organic process—circulating between small groups running lines with one another, listening in briefly, giving feedback and pointers, and making a mental note of those students who are not yet ready to go off-book. She may have formal, graded, quiz-like (in essence, *summative*) line-checks built into the course, but her day-to-day practice of formative assessment is entirely organic and relies on her teacherly judgment to determine what the class should be doing from one day to the next.

Ultimately, lead teachers should direct their teams in how and where to build in those more mechanical and scripted formative assessments, while all teachers should feel empowered to regularly and frequently gauge their students’ understanding through more immediate and one-off types of formative assessments.

Some examples of formative assessments, ranging from *less* scripted/planned/mechanical to *more* scripted/planned/mechanical:

- *Pepper*: Teacher cold-calls individual students and asks questions related to what was just taught. (Note that one danger of Pepper is that it is only calling on one student at a time and can give a misleading impression of generalized success to the teacher. It can also be difficult to be truly random in our cold-calling—little teacher-tools like popsicle sticks are helpful in that regard.)
- *Show me*: Teacher asks the class to make visible their understanding or lack thereof. This is often stronger than Pepper in that it is more inviting of participation and more supportive of No Opt Out.
 - This might be general: “Give me a thumbs-up if you feel confident with this material, you could teach it to someone else, and you’re ready to move on, and give me a thumbs-down if you still have questions or confusion.”
 - It could also be much more targeted: “Hold up one finger if you think this statement is true, and hold up two fingers if you think it’s false.” Or “Show me with your fingers how many distinct clauses there are in this sentence.”
- *Systematic observation*: Teacher circulates and observes / listens to students working alone or in groups and records where the class is with a particular concept or skill.
- *Group work*: Teacher assigns pairs or small groups that work together on a problem and report to the teacher what they know and where they are confused.
- *Warm-up/Entry ticket*: Students complete a short task that reviews the content taught the previous day.

- *Exit Ticket*: Students answer a handful of questions at the end of class or at the end of the day.
 - This might be done in the manner of an immediate skill check (“Multiply these fractions. Flip up your white board when finished.”), in a more reflective mode (“Write 1-3 sentences about what you learned in History today.”), or, in the Lower School, as an actual ticket to exit the classroom (“As soon as you have handed me your Exit Ticket showing that you have correctly proven these three words, you may line up for recess.”)

(One model of formative assessment that is noticeably missing here we might label “Just go ahead and call on the kids who raise their hands.” The reason is obvious: gauging the success of a lesson on the basis of raised hands is a great way to learn what the most confident students in the class know, but a terrible way of learning what the rest of the class knows. This does not mean that MacLaren students should never raise their hands—quite the contrary—but it does mean that we should not try to glean meaningful data about an entire class or lesson this way.)

Formative assessment is generally understood to be ungraded: we might think of it more as a way to grade *ourselves* as teachers—did we successfully impart knowledge, skills, understanding to our students? That said, it is acceptable to use scores gathered from formative assessments in our gradebooks as an *internal* and ongoing record of our students’ progress; we just don’t want those grades to be part of the students’ understanding of those assignments. No fair returning Exit Tickets with grades on them, in other words!

Finally, formative assessment is meaningless if we simply accept the students’ answers and do not act on the data. And yet this is perhaps the single most difficult aspect of it: devising engaging ways of gathering data on our students is fun and easy. But... then what? The 80% mark is a useful one: if 80% of the class understands the concept or can perform the skill, this is a good indication that that we can move forward, albeit with the knowledge that some meaningful fraction of the class will fall further and further behind unless we intervene outside of the Tier I lesson. But if fewer than four-fifths of the students in a given class understand the material, then we probably need to figure out how to reteach it more effectively. This requires close conversation with colleagues, as one class may be ready to move forward while the class next door may need to slow down.

Summative assessment is a means of determining whether the students have learned the material over the course of a meaningful period of time—several days, several weeks—which is typically done when a unit of study is completed. Some examples of summative assessments:

- Quiz or Test
- Essays
- Project work

On a daily basis, teachers should be able to evaluate whether students are learning the content of the material. Students should also be able to evaluate themselves on whether they are learning the material.

It is easy to think that only numerical data (such as quizzes or test scores) can tell us what a student knows or doesn't know. But we want to avoid the temptation to reduce students to mere numbers on this one assessment. In addition, we want them to learn the material so that they can be more awake and alive to the world. Whether we are doing formative or summative assessments, we want to treat them as the curious, thoughtful, inquisitive, and maturing learners that they are. In other words, we want to see them as humane learners, and we want them to perceive themselves in a humane way.

In essence, we want to take the grade out of grading. We want them to be able to ask, "How can I better understand this material? What questions do I have? What is confusing? What caught my interest or made me more curious?" Our students will know how successfully they are learning primarily due to the written narration and oral feedback you give them. But they should also be able to mature as agents of their own education by figuring out what they need to learn and what they have learned thus far. To this end, here are some dos and don'ts when it comes to assessing.

- o Don't talk to a student about his overall grade or percentage as a means of showing what they have learned.
- ✓ Do give narrative feedback consisting of praise and correction so that students know what they have learned and what they have not learned.

- o Don't put a number grade on everything, or even most things.
- ✓ Do lead with narrative feedback. If something needs a fraction, it is merely the numerical record of the student's performance. Narration and conversation is more valuable for instructional feedback.

- o Don't become a slave to the numbers, class averages, rubrics, or bell curves.
- ✓ Do give information that tells them both what they learned and where they need to put their efforts to learn more/better.

- o Don't become pressured by the belief that every assessment needs a grade or feedback.
- ✓ Do have assessments that inform you and the student what they have learned.

- o Don't allow your students to think that their grades are the final reflection of who they are as singular human beings.
- ✓ Do give feedback that is conducive to a growth mindset in the student instead of a purely performance-based mindset.

- o Don't be the Lone Ranger.
- ✓ Do regularly check your assessments with your co-teachers and curricular lead.
- ✓ Do follow your curricular lead teacher. What is the most effective way of discerning what your students have learned on a daily basis? Is there an assessment that will help them grow as an agent of their own education?