

The Confusion Surrounding "Formative Assessment"

"Formative assessment" has been recognized as a valuable tool for student learning, and thus the term has become quite a buzzword lately. As educators began to renew emphasis on the use of formative assessments, publishers seized the opportunity to enhance their products, and did so with pre-packaged "formative assessments," or assessment-item banks to accompany textbook purchases. Before we determine the appropriateness of these packaged formative assessment products, we first need to decide what the term actually means.

The confusion about what constitutes "formative assessment" has recently surfaced as a major issue in schools attempting to use assessments to the best possible advantage. Since even assessment experts such as Richard Stiggins now express concern about how the terms *formative* and *summative* are being used, it is no wonder that schools are experiencing difficulty in communicating what is and is not a formative assessment. Dr. Stiggins now refers to the frequent "check for understanding" assessments (formative assessments) as "Assessments FOR Learning." Similarly, he describes the assessments to measure student accomplishment of the curriculum (summative assessments) as "Assessments OF Learning." This departure from the previous references to "formative" and "summative" indicates the depth of the confusion over definitions.

The actual distinction between the two types of assessment lies in how the data from the assessments are used! Formative assessments are assessments that are used to measure student progress as the student works *toward* accomplishing a target in the curriculum. These assessments are generally short, are intended to measure small steps of progress, and give the student and the teacher a clear picture of what to do next. The data gathered from formative assessments guide the teacher in planning instruction, and open an opportunity for dialogue between students, teachers, and parents about specific progress the student is making in the learning process.

An assessment is considered *summative* if no further instruction will occur. Teachers measure the *sum* of student progress *after* students accomplish specific targets in the curriculum. This type of assessment is used when instruction for the entire outcome is "finished." The assessment can provide a score, which can be recorded and reported, but it is not used to plan instruction.

Paul Black and Dylan William at King's College, University of London, echo this distinction. In the September 17, 2008 *Education Week* article, "Test Industry Split over 'Formative' Assessment," they wrote "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."

Here at the Curriculum Leadership Institute (CLI), we believe that ultimately it does not matter what an assessment is *called*. We encourage school districts to define assessment levels according to the *type of target* to which the assessment is aligned. For instance, a curriculum written in outcomes and components would need an assessment prepared for each component and an assessment written for each outcome. The data from the "**component assessment**" provides feedback to students and teachers as to whether students are ready to move to the *next component* or if the student requires additional or different instruction on the *current component*. When all components have been completed successfully, teachers would then measure student achievement of the learning expected in the *entire outcome*. Based on the results from the "**outcome assessment**," the student and teacher determine whether a "final score" can now be recorded, or if specific additional instruction is required to improve performance. Thus the "**outcome assessment**" could be considered either formative (if new instruction is planned) or summative (if finished). Again, what's important is what the assessment is measuring (a component or an outcome) and how the data are used – not what the assessment is called.

In order for an assessment to be useful, it must be valid. Validity is the extent to which an assessment measures what it is intended to measure; therefore, even a short formative assessment must be *exactly* aligned to the particular curriculum target. It may not include extraneous materials. This means it may not contain "lead-up" skills from a different curriculum target, nor may it contain "enrichment items" to push students to extend their understanding. Although there is a time and place to measure student retention of "lead-up" skills and a time and place for enriching students, neither one exists in the measurement of a *particular target*. An aligned, valid assessment measures completely and ONLY what the curriculum target specifies.

Not only must concepts in the assessments match the concepts in the curriculum target, but the tasks students are to perform on the assessment must match precisely the verbs in the curriculum target. The type of assessment chosen (multiple choice, essay, etc.) must also match the verb in the curriculum target. With all these requirements in mind, it is clear that a "packaged" assessment is only useful if it completely aligns with the curriculum target in concept and task, or if it can be altered accordingly by the teacher. Once again, the important points to consider are: (1) whether the assessment exactly aligns to the learning target described in the curriculum; and (2) how the scores are to be used – whether a score becomes a final report or if, instead, it is used to inform continued instruction. Regardless of whether you create the assessment locally or you purchase an assessment product, the assessment must be closely scrutinized for these two considerations.