

Formative Assessment

Category: Assessment, Feedback and Learning

Formative assessment is a process in which evidence about learning is elicited, interpreted and used to make better-founded decisions about what should happen next. Teachers, peers and learners may make those decisions. An activity is formative because of the use made of its evidence, not because it is ungraded, informal or frequent.

The process operates over different timescales, from an in-class question that changes the next explanation to evidence that reshapes a later unit. It requires a learning destination, an account of current understanding and an actionable route forward ([Black & Wiliam, 2009](#)).

Formative Assessment Cycle

1. **Clarify:** Develop shared understanding of learning intentions, standards and relevant success criteria.
2. **Elicit:** Design questions, dialogue or tasks that reveal important features of learners' thinking.
3. **Interpret:** Relate evidence to the intended learning and recognise uncertainty or alternative explanations.
4. **Respond:** Adapt teaching, feedback, peer support or learner action while improvement remains possible.
5. **Revisit:** Gather further evidence to judge progress and refine the next decision.

Examples in Practice

A multiple-choice question reveals that many chemistry students conserve mass incorrectly in an open system. The lecturer asks for explanations, contrasts models, provides a new scenario and checks whether reasoning—not only answers—has changed.

Why It Matters

Formative assessment integrates assessment with pedagogy and can make teaching more responsive. The label should not conceal weak practice: constant quizzes, data collection or detailed comments are not formative when they do not improve subsequent decisions or learner action. Responsible use attends to participation, accessibility and assessment's effects on learner identity, confidence and agency ([Bennett, 2011](#)).

Further Reading

6. Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2009). [Developing the theory of formative assessment](#). *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5–31.
7. Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). [Assessment and classroom learning](#). *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.
8. Bennett, R. E. (2011). [Formative assessment: A critical review](#). *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18(1), 5–25.

Related Terms: Assessment for Learning | Diagnostic Assessment | Feedback | Classroom Assessment Techniques