



A spotlight on...

Formative Assessment

Centre for Innovation in Education

Overview

Formative assessment refers to a range of both formal and informal assessment procedures conducted during the learning process. They enable and support modification to both teaching and learning activities and to improve student attainment (Crooks, 2001). It generally has a developmental purpose, designed to enable students to learn more effectively by providing them with feedback on their performance and indicating how this can be improved or maintained. Formative assessments typically focus on the details of performance and content rather than scores and as such tend to include qualitative feedback (Huhta, 2010).

Benefits

There is considerable research evidence which demonstrates that effective feedback leads to learning gains (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). A meta-analysis by Black and Wiliam (1998) of 250 studies revealed that feedback produced significant benefits across all content areas, knowledge and skills types. Formative assessment improves student outcomes including increased academic performance, self-regulated learning and self-efficacy, with formative feedback having been shown as the single most important factor in learning (Broadbent, Panadero and Boud, 2017; Hattie and Timperley, 2007), preparing students for summative assessments, especially innovative assessments.



Putting it into practice

The key to formative assessment is that it is not usually credit bearing. The main purpose is to provide students with feedback/forward to enhance their future performance. It may include activities such as:

- Online quizzes or progress tests
- One-minute writing/ reflective papers; a question is posed at the beginning of the session and at the end students are given one minute to write their anonymous answers. The lecturer can then review the answers, looking for misunderstandings or gaps and address these either in the next class or in a virtual learning environment.
- Exit tickets; as students leave a class they are given a short quiz or a few simple questions about what was covered. This allows the lecturer to gauge student understanding and tailor subsequent teaching.
- Group or think-pair-share discussions; students are given questions to answer and pair up or work in small groups to discuss their answers.
- Draft essay or project plans; reviewed by lecturers or peers either in class or virtually.
- Peer reviewed research proposals.
- Student marking activities, where students use the module marking rubric to review their own or peers work.

To engage students with formative assessment talk to them about the purpose of it, to provide them with feedback and advice on how to improve their work.

Formative assessment can be used during teaching to help gauge if desired learning is being achieved (Napper, 2013). If formative assessment indicates that learning is either not occurring or not accurate, the teaching can be altered, or revisited (Napper, 2013).

Developing formative assessment

- Formative assessment should be constructively aligned with learning outcomes (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Links to the learning outcomes that are being measured should be made clear to students.
- Provide students with feedforward rather than feedback. This will help them to identify gaps in their knowledge and skills and to perform better.
- Try to use the same rubrics and marking criteria as the summative assessment to retain consistency.
- Try to use various forms of formative assessment to keep the students engaged in what they're doing.
- To get the best from students it's important to create an environment where students can try new things, talk things through and build their confidence. Formative assessment is an excellent way to foster a safe space without the pressures of credits or weightings.

Sadler (1989) identifies three conditions necessary to enable students to benefit from the feedback they receive in academic tasks and argues that students must know:

- What good performance is
- How current performance relates to good performance
- How to act to close the gap between current and good performance

This has led many to consider that as well as improving the quality of feedback messages, teachers should focus much more effort on strengthening the skills of self-assessment in their students (Boud, 2000).

Making it visible to students

One of the pitfalls teachers may encounter when designing formative assessment activities is not involving or communicating assessment strategies to students. Both the NSS (National Student Survey) and TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment) surveys ask students specific questions with regards to their formative assessment opportunities throughout their studies. However, if students are unaware of what formative assessment is or the purpose of it, this can clearly skew results and feedback. It's also important to communicate the value of formative assessment throughout students' period of study so that they get the most out of the activities.

Some recommendations for ways to involve students include:

- Ensure there is an agreed common assessment terminology used across the programme for transparency and consistency.
- Including not only assessment criteria in handbooks, but more of a detailed strategy on why certain assessment types (formative and summative) have been selected.
- Get students designing their own formative assessment tasks, or helping you design a task. Students who are involved are usually more engaged and perform better in their summative assessments.
- Formative assessment also creates a great opportunity for peer assessment.

Additional resources & references

www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/resources/all-resources/formative-assessment.html



Help and feedback

Can you help us improve this resource or suggest a future one? Do you need this resource in an alternative format? Please contact us at: cie@liverpool.ac.uk