Our students do not learn what we teach. It is this simple and profound reality that means that assessment is perhaps the central process in effective instruction. If our students learned what we taught, we would never need to assess. We could simply catalog all the learning experiences we had organized for them, certain in the knowledge that this is what they had learned.

But of course, anyone who has spent more than a few hours in a classroom knows this hardly ever happens. No matter how carefully we design and implement the instruction, what our students learn cannot be predicted with any certainty. It is only through assessment that we can discover whether the instructional activities in which we engaged our students resulted in the intended learning. Assessment really is the bridge between teaching and learning.

Formative Assessment

Of course, the idea that assessment can help learning is not new, but what is new is a growing body of evidence that suggests that attention to what is sometimes called formative assessment, or assessment for learning, is one of the most powerful ways of improving student achievement. Different people have different views about what exactly counts as formative assessment. Some think it should be applied only to the minute-to-minute and day-to-day interactions between students and teachers, while others also see interim, or benchmark, tests administered every six to ten weeks as formative. For my part, I believe that any assessment can, potentially, be formative, which is why I suggest that to describe an assessment as formative is what Gilbert Ryle (1949) described as a “category mistake” (p. 16; ascribing to something a property it cannot have).

The term formative should apply not to the assessment but to the function that the evidence generated by the assessment actually serves. For example, a seventh-grade teacher had given her students an English language arts test, under test conditions, and collected the students’ test responses. Most teachers would then try to grade the students’ responses, add helpful feedback, and return the graded papers to the students the following day. On this occasion, however, the teacher did not grade the papers. She quickly read through them and decided that the following day each student would receive back her or his own paper; in addition, groups of four students would be formed, and each group would be given one blank response sheet, so that they could, as a group, produce the best composite paper. When the groups had done this, the teacher led a plenary discussion in which groups reported back their agreed responses. What is interesting about the example is that the assessment being used had been designed entirely for summative purposes, but the teacher had found a way of using it formatively.

If we accept that any assessment can be used formatively, we need some way of defining formative assessment in a way that is useful for classroom practice. The way that I have found most useful is to think of three key processes in learning:
1. Where the learner is right now
2. Where the learner needs to be
3. How to get there

It’s also vital to consider the respective roles of teachers, students, and their peers. Regarding the processes and the roles as independent (so that teachers, students, and peers have a role in each) suggests that formative assessment can be thought of as comprising five “key strategies” as shown in Figure 1. Each of the five strategies is discussed in further detail in the sections that follow.

**Key Strategies of Formative Assessment**

**Learning Intentions**

The idea that teachers should share with their students what it is intended that they learn from a given instructional activity seems obvious, but it is only within the past 20 years or so that this has been routine in English language arts classrooms. While this is a welcome development, it is also important to note that in many schools, well-intentioned attempts to communicate learning intentions to students have made writing a mechanistic process of checklist management. It is true that rubrics can identify important elements of progression in writing, but they can too easily become a straitjacket. To be sure, where we can, with fidelity, specify what makes writing good, we should do so, but we should also remember Albert Einstein’s advice: “Make things as simple as possible, but no simpler.” Sometimes, we should accept that the best we can do is help our students develop what Guy Claxton has called “a ‘nose’ for quality” (1995, p. 339). Indeed, some writers, such as Royce Sadler (1989), have argued that this is an essential precondition for learning:

The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself, and has a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw at any given point. (p. 121)

In recent years, it has been common for writers to advocate the “co-construction” of rubrics with students. The idea is that rather than having the teacher present the students with a rubric as “tablets of stone,” the rubric is developed with the students. A common method for doing this is for the teacher to provide the students with a number of samples of work of varying quality (e.g., anonymous samples from a previous year’s class); the students then rank them and begin to identify features that distinguish the stronger work from the weaker work. This can be a very powerful process, but the end point of such a process must reflect the teacher’s concept of quality. The teacher knows what quality writing looks like; students generally do not. Of course, the teacher’s views of quality work may shift in discussion with a class, but the teacher is already immersed in the discipline of English language arts and the students are just beginning that journey.

**Eliciting Evidence**

Although feedback is considered by many to be the heart of formative assessment, it turns out that the quality of the feedback hinges on the quality of evidence that is elicited in the first place. Knowing that a student has scored only 30% on a test says nothing about that student’s learning needs, other than that he or she has apparently failed to learn most of what was expected. The

**Figure 1.** The five “key strategies” of formative assessment
point is, effective feedback requires asking the right questions. This may be obvious, but what is less obvious is that effective feedback requires a plan of action about what to do with the evidence before it is collected.

Many schools and districts espouse a commitment to data-driven decision making, but too often, this entails the collection of large bodies of data just in case they come in useful at some later point. This is a particular problem when teachers administer common formative assessments to all students in a grade and then meet to discuss what to do. By the time all the common assessments have been graded and a meeting to discuss the implications has been scheduled, the data are well past their “sell-by” date; the teaching has moved on. And even if the data were available in a timely fashion, unless time has already been scheduled for any additional instruction shown to be necessary by the assessments, nothing useful can happen. That is why data-driven decision making is not a particularly helpful approach. What is needed instead is a commitment to decision-driven data collection. For example, rather than an “end of unit test,” the teacher could schedule a “three-fourths of the way through the unit test.” Rather than grading the papers, the teacher could use the information gleaned from the test to decide which aspects of the unit need to be re-taught or, if the students have all done well, provide some extension material.

On an even shorter time-scale, a fifth-grade teacher had been introducing students to five kinds of figurative language: alliteration, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, personification, and simile. Five minutes before the end of the lesson, she listed the five kinds of figurative language on the whiteboard. She then read out a series of sentences, asking the students to use “finger voting” to indicate what kinds of figurative language they had heard (e.g., hold up one finger if you hear alliteration, five fingers if you hear a simile, and so on).

These are the sentences she read out:

A. He was like a bull in a china shop.
B. This backpack weighs a ton.
C. The sweetly smiling sunshine warmed the grass.
D. He honked his horn at the cyclist.
E. He was as tall as a house.

Most of the students responded correctly to the first two, but most of them chose to hold up either one finger or four fingers for the third. The teacher pointed out to the class that a few

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRIETHINK**

**Knowledge into Action: Figurative Language**

One way to assess students’ understanding is to put their knowledge into action. The article shares an example using the study of figurative language. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Figurative Language Awards Ceremony” invites students to explore books rich in figurative language and nominate their favorite examples of similes, metaphors, and personification for a figurative language award. Once nominations are in, the class votes, selecting a winning example in each category. Finally, students are challenged to write an acceptance speech for one of the winners, using as many literary devices (simile, metaphor, personification) as they can in their speech.


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students had held up one finger on one hand and four on the other, because the sentence was an example of both alliteration and personification, while most students had assumed that a sentence could only have one kind of figurative language. With this misconception cleared up, most of the students realized that the fourth statement was both alliteration and onomatopoeia while the last was both a simile and hyperbole.

The important point about this example is that the teacher planned to collect the data only once she had decided how she was going to use it—in this case managing to administer, grade, and take follow-up remedial action in less than three minutes.

Feedback

In 1996, two researchers in the psychology department at Rutgers University published an extraordinary review of research studies on the effects of feedback in schools, colleges, and workplaces (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). They began by tracking down a copy of every single published study on feedback they could find, going back to 1905! They found around 3,000 (2,500 journal articles and 500 technical reports). They then analyzed the studies to see whether the conclusions could be trusted. They eliminated those without a control group that was not given feedback, those for which the effects could not be attributed only to the feedback given, and those for which there was not sufficient detail to quantify the impact of feedback on achievement. They were surprised to discover that only 131 studies made the cut. Even more surprising was that while feedback did increase achievement on average, in 50 of the studies (i.e., 38%), feedback actually made performance worse!

They concluded that, from a scientific point of view, most of the studies that had been undertaken were a waste of time because they completely failed to take into account the reactions of the recipient. The question “What kind of feedback is best?” is meaningless, because while a particular kind of feedback might make one student work harder, it might cause another student to give up. There can be no simple recipe for effective feedback; there is just no substitute for the teacher knowing their students. Why? First, knowing the students allows the teacher to make better judgments about when to push each student and when to back off. Second, when students trust the teacher, they are more likely to accept the feedback and act on it. Ultimately, the only effective feedback is that which is acted upon, so that feedback should be more work for the recipient than the donor.

Students as Learning Resources for One Another

There is a large body of literature on peer tutoring and collaborative learning—particularly in English language arts—that it is neither possible nor necessary to review here (e.g., Brown & Campione, 1995 [reciprocal instruction]; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003 [general models of collaborative learning]). However, it is worth noting that peers can be very effective assessors of one another’s work, especially when the focus is on improvement rather than grading. One sixth-grade class was working on suspense stories, and the teacher had co-constructed with the students a checklist of four key phases that made a good suspense story: establishment, build-up, climax, and resolution. The class also decided that it would be a good idea, just as an exercise if nothing else, for the story to contain at least two examples of figurative language.

The students worked on their stories and, when everyone was done, exchanged their work with a neighbor and switched roles from “author” to “editor.” The editor’s task was to “mark up” the story by using four different colored pencils to indicate the beginning of each phase, with a fifth color to underline the two examples of figurative language. With the editor’s approval,
a story could be submitted to the teacher (the “chief editor”). Because each editor was responsible for ensuring that the required elements were present, students took the role very seriously (not least because they were accountable to the chief editor!).

Of course, one could list many more examples of this kind, but what teachers routinely report is that students tend to be much tougher on one another than most teachers would dare to be. This is important because it suggests that with well-structured peer-assessment, one can achieve better outcomes than would be possible with one adult for every student.

**Students Owning Their Own Learning**

As Rick Stiggins (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004) reminds us, the most important instructional decisions are not made by teachers—they are made by students. When students believe they cannot learn, when challenging tasks are just one more opportunity to find out that you are not very smart, many students disengage. And this is perfectly understandable. What students are really doing when they disengage is denying the teacher the opportunity to make any judgment about what the student can do—after all, it is better to be thought lazy than dumb. This is why the most important word in any teacher’s vocabulary is *yet.* When a student says, “I can’t do it,” the teacher responds with “yet.” This is more than just sound psychology. It is actually what we are learning about the nature of expertise and where it comes from.

Of course individuals vary in their natural gifts, but these differences are very small to begin with. What happens is the small initial advantages of some students quickly become magnified when the students with these small advantages work hard, engage, and improve, while those who are slightly behind avoid challenge, and thus miss out on the chance to improve. As the title of a recent book by Geoff Colvin (2010) makes clear, “Talent is overrated.” It is practice that creates expertise. Chess grandmasters don’t have higher IQs than average chess players—they just practice more. Indeed, in almost all areas of human expertise, from violin playing to radiography, expertise is the result of ten years of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006).

When students come to believe that smart is not something you are but something you get, they seek challenging work, and in the face of failure, they increase effort. Student athletes get this. They know that to improve, they must practice things they can’t yet do, rather than just simply rehearse the things they know how to do. We need to get students to understand this in the English language arts classroom, too. Ultimately, we would want students to resent work that does not challenge them, because they would understand that easy work doesn’t help them improve. In the best classrooms, students would not mind making mistakes, because mistakes are evidence that the work they are doing is hard enough to make them smarter.

**Conclusion**

People often want to know “what works” in education, but the simple truth is that everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere. That’s why research can never tell teachers what to do—classrooms are far too complex for any prescription to be possible, and variations in context make what is an effective course of action in one situation disastrous in another. Nevertheless, research can highlight for teachers what kinds of avenues are worth exploring and which are likely to be dead ends, and this is why classroom formative assessment appears to be so promising. Across a range of contexts, attending not to what the teacher is putting into the instruction but to what the students are getting out of it has increased both student engagement and achievement.
Different teachers will find different aspects of classroom formative assessment more effective for their personal styles, their students, and the contexts in which they work—so each teacher must decide how to adapt the ideas outlined above for use in their practice. Of course, as always, “more research is needed,” but the breadth of the available research suggests that if teachers develop their practice focused on the principles outlined above, they are unlikely to fail because of the neglect of subtle or delicate features. There will never be an optimal model, but as long as teachers continue to investigate that extraordinarily complex relationship between “What did I do as a teacher?” and “What did my students learn?” good things are likely to happen.

Note
1. The representation in Figure 1 was developed by Marie Thompson and Dylan Wiliam, and was first published as Leahy, S., Lyon, C., Thompson, M., & Wiliam, D. (2005). Classroom assessment: Minute-by-minute and day-by-day. Educational Leadership, 63(3), 18–24. It is used here by permission of Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ.

References

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NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2014: February 27

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE’s Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, February 27, 2014. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday for details.

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