

Designing, Adapting, and Using Formative Assessments

Overview of designing, adapting, and using formative assessments

Teachers use a variety of methods to assess what students are learning during and at the end of lessons. These include simple questions, short performance tasks, journal or notebook entries, surveys, or end-of-class “exit tickets.” These frequent checks provide information about students’ current understandings and their sense of themselves as knowers and doers of the content and help the teacher adjust instruction in the moment or from one lesson to the next. Teachers design formative assessments that account for procedural and conceptual understandings, disciplinary practices, metacognitive processes, and development of productive identities, and should value multiple, diverse expressions of what counts as “knowing.”

Advancing justice through designing, adapting, and using formative assessments

Teachers can check for understanding in ways that actively combat patterns of inequity in classrooms. Without skillful, frequent formative assessment, teachers risk perpetuating reductionist views of content (e.g., only checking for right/wrong answers), overlooking student knowledge and skill, and teaching lessons that do not attend to the students in their class. When well designed and used, formative assessments can provide teachers with useful insights about how students are engaging with the content, and this, in turn, helps teachers strengthen instruction to deepen students’ understanding. Because formative assessments can be frequent and varied in form, they can help teachers to see what each of their students knows and can do. The information garnered through diverse formative assessments informs the adaptation of instruction and supports every student where they most need it.



Decomposition of designing, adapting, and using formative assessments

Table 1: Areas of Work and Techniques for Designing, Adapting, and Using Formative Assessments

Areas of work for designing, adapting, and using formative assessments	Techniques for designing, adapting, and using formative assessments
Identifying key concepts for formative assessments	• Identify key objectives, terms, concepts, practices, and aspects of productive identities that are the focus of the lesson and unit. • Pinpoint “steps” students will need to take on their way to achieving lesson objectives that are critical for understanding and determining the next instructional steps. • Note terms, concepts, and practice that might be especially hard for students based on what we know about common patterns of student thinking.
Determining when to administer the formative assessments	• Determine whether formative assessment is likely to provide useful information about what individual students or the class as a whole know and can do at a particular point in learning. • Determine the optimal timing for checking students’ understanding and administering the assessment. For example: ○ After teaching something new for the first time ○ After teaching essential content, or content that might be challenging for students ○ Just before the lesson shifts to a new focus ○ After independent, group, or partner work to give the teacher a sense of what students did or thought • Consider how often particular understandings or development may need to be checked during the lesson. • Ensure that the teacher will be able to understand and interpret the results of the assessment—in some cases, in real time.



Areas of work for designing, adapting, and using formative assessments	Techniques for designing, adapting, and using formative assessments
Adapting a formative assessment	If formative assessments are included in curriculum materials, they may need to be adapted. • Check alignment between what the assessment is asking and what the teacher wants to understand. If it is not aligned, the question(s), structure, or method of gathering information may need to be adjusted. • Ensure that the language is clear and accessible to all students. • Ensure that students will be able to complete it in the time allotted.
Designing a formative assessment	• Focus the task on the identified content. • Determine whether the assessment will: ○ Offer immediate or delayed feedback to students and teacher. ○ Be answered individually, by a group, or by the whole class. ○ Be open-ended or constrained in some way. ○ Be process-oriented or metacognitive (e.g., a student reflects on their perseverance) or product-oriented (e.g., asking students to solve a problem). ○ Be oral or written. ○ Be used only if a particular situation arises. ○ Encourage student self-reflection, encourage dialogue about learning, or promote positive dispositions and beliefs about learning. • Ensure that the language is clear and accessible to all students. • Ensure that students will be able to complete it in the time allotted.



Areas of work for designing, adapting, and using formative assessments	Techniques for designing, adapting, and using formative assessments
Administering and interpreting a formative assessment	• Determine whether the formative assessment is likely to provide useful information about what individual students or the class as a whole know and can do at the time you plan to administer the formative assessment. • Frame the formative assessment for students (e.g., “I’d like you to show all of your thinking on this exit ticket so that I can make a good decision about how to use our time together tomorrow”). • Administer the formative assessment and use the results to make tentative inferences about student understanding of core ideas.
Determining next instructional steps	• Given the results of the formative assessment, determine what instructional practice might best support students. Some possibilities include: ○ A new task or problem that allows students to continue grappling with the ideas. ○ Modeling and explaining content to help solidify ideas. ○ A discussion, where students share their current thinking and press one another’s ideas forward.

