



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## Integrating Formative Assessment Practices

While planning for each academic semester, instructors often search for new instructional practices that increase student engagement and retention. The challenge is to find optimal teaching practices that ensure students can understand and apply the course content. I often ask myself, "How do I determine if my students are grasping the course content?"

### What Is Formative Assessment?

According to *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*, assessment refers to all course activities administered by teachers to students that provide information that can be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes *formative assessment* when the evidence is actually used to adapt teaching to meet students' needs. Formative assessment helps instructors identify aspects of the course content that require additional attention. Unlike summative assessment, (i.e., final essays, mid-term exams, final exams) formative assessment (i.e., quizzes, short essays, homework assignments) are administered continuously throughout all units covered in a course and seek to improve student achievement of learning objectives.

The goal of formative assessment is to continuously monitor student learning so instructors can provide ongoing feedback; this feedback can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning. More specifically, formative assessment helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that need work, as well as help faculty recognize where students are struggling in order to address problems immediately.

### Assessment Practices

I consistently use formative assessment in my courses because it creates synergy between teaching and learning. Through weekly chapter quizzes, tests, in-class responses, and homework assignments, I can identify the course information that is troublesome for students and rearrange the course schedule to better meet their needs. Each week, students are assigned specific chapters to read from the course textbook. Following the assigned readings, students are given quizzes on the corresponding chapters to assess their knowledge. I review the results of the weekly chapter quizzes and analyze the questions from

the chapters that most students missed. I then use the quiz results as a starting point to begin the next class meeting.

### Providing Feedback

I always make sure to provide written feedback on students' assignments. Feedback is a very important part of formative assessment; the written feedback tells the student what to study or work on next. For example, for a student that has demonstrated success and achievement in learning, the feedback can inform him or her that continuing with the approach he or she is using is effective. For a student who may be struggling, or may have misunderstood some of the key concepts, feedback can provide direction as to why mistakes were made on the assignment. According to *The Concept of Formative Assessment*, the most helpful type of feedback on tests and homework assignments provides specific comments about errors, specific suggestions for improvement, and encourages students to focus their attention thoughtfully on the task rather than on simply getting the right answer.

### Student Engagement Strategies

Student engagement strategies are related to formative assessment because they allow instructors to identify questions that students have, where interest in the course material may have been lost, and what invigorates students to learn. Similarly to formative assessment, student engagement strategies provide instructors with ways to understand their students' comprehension of course content. Much like formative assessment, the results of student engagement strategies can determine if an instructor should spend more or less time on specific course content.

### Engagement Strategy Example

In the classes I teach, I incorporate individual activities, class discussions, and group assignments to evaluate students' understanding of course content. For instance, when covering a unit about time-management strategies, I assign students a group activity. Each student group receives a different case study about time management. The groups must paraphrase the case study and identify three time-management strategies in the case study. Afterwards, each student group presents their responses and writes the strategies they selected on the whiteboard. Following the group activity, students are required to complete an individual assignment where each student selects one time-management strategy to document his or her school and work plans for a week.

The above group activity leads to two benefits in terms

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of formative assessment. First, the activity allows students to recall what they learned about time management and serves as a benchmark for how they can increase their current knowledge of time-management strategies. Second, the activity allows me to evaluate which aspects of the lesson require additional time or explanation. Before the group activity, I required students to read about a variety of time-management strategies. During the activity, I recognized that many student groups were repeating the same three or four strategies in their presentations, thus leaving out a significant portion of the lesson's content. Consequently, I have extended the time management lesson into two class periods to allow for additional discussion and to cover the remaining time-management strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Formative assessment is used to check for students' understanding of course material in order to guide instruction. Instructors should use formative assessment results to determine if they need to revise their lesson plans, modify the scaffolding of course materials, or regroup how particular course materials are being taught. In addition to homework assignments, quizzes, and other types of formative assessment, student engagement strategies can also be used as formative assessment, as long as instructors use the results of engagement strategies to help guide future classroom instruction.

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