

FERRETING OUT FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

(A Really Small Group Exercise)

Directions: This exercise calls *first* for you to *individually* decide whether five teachers-in-action (described in the vignettes presented below and on page 2) are using formative assessment as defined earlier in today's session. When you make your decision, simply circle *YES* or *NO*—using pencil, pen, crayon, or lip-gloss—to indicate whether you think the teacher in the vignette is using formative assessment. *Second*, after making your judgment about *each* vignette, immediately compare that judgment with the italicized answer key you will find on page 3 of the exercise—one vignette at a time. *Third*, after completing all five vignettes, discuss with one or two nearby colleagues (1) disagreements between your exercise-answers or (2) any more general definitional concerns.

TEACHERS-IN-ACTION VIGNETTES

Vignette 1: Math Quiz Fervor

Paul Ives teaches fifth-grade students at Emerson Elementary School. His daily mathematics lessons are almost always concluded by a 5-item quiz because Paul believes the prospect of these end-of-lesson quizzes motivates his students to pay closer attention during the lesson. Paul uses an items-correct grading system whereby his students' final grade in mathematics is based on each student's average score on these per-lesson quizzes. Because Paul's students invariably score well on the mathematics section of the state's annual accountability tests, his principal expresses delight with Paul's frequent use of daily quizzes. [*Is Paul using formative assessment? YES or NO*]

Vignette 2: Observant Social Studies Teacher

Ms. James teaches U.S. government to seniors in a suburban high school. Although she occasionally gives both formal and informal tests to her students, she rarely uses students' scores on these tests to alter her instructional-planning decisions. She does, however, constantly monitor the quality of her on-going instruction by attempting to observe the levels of understanding her students seem to possess regarding the concepts she presents in class. On many occasions, for example, her students' perplexed expressions incline Ms. James to meaningfully adjust her instruction, typically by re-teaching the same concept, but in a different way. [*Is Ms. James using formative assessment? YES or NO*]

Vignette 3: Building-Block Status

During any instructional unit taking more than three weeks to complete, Maria Sanchez tries to isolate two or three pivotal en route skills or bodies of knowledge that she believes her students must master in order to achieve the

instructional unit's most significant intended objective. She develops brief assessments for each of these en route building blocks, typically using multiple-choice or short-answer items, and requires her students to complete those assessments while the unit is still underway. Based on her students' performances on these during-the-unit assessments, Maria often—but not always—modifies her planned instructional activities so those activities mesh more appropriately with the students' current levels of achievement. [*Is Maria using formative assessment? YES or NO*]

Vignette 4: A “Students Only” Approach to Using Assessment Evidence

Gerald Peavy is a chemistry teacher who believes strongly that students learn most meaningfully when they take personal responsibility for their own accomplishments. Accordingly, during his instruction he uses a variety of assessment techniques that he describes as “dipstick tests.” Some of Mr. Peavy's dipstick tests are quite traditional and some are truly atypical. The function of these assessments is to provide students with information they can use to tell if the procedures they are currently using (in an attempt to master a series of en-route subskills and bodies of enabling knowledge) are working well. Mr. Peavy wants many of his students to become “real-world” chemists, and he tries to have them monitor the success of their own learning approaches by using what he calls, “scientific evidence of their progress.” Mr. Peavy does not, however, use the results of the dipstick tests to adjust his own instructional procedures. He believes that, if he were to do so, this would represent a dilution of the assessment evidence he wants to provide exclusively for his students. [*Is Mr. Peavy using formative assessment? YES or NO*]

Vignette 5: Interim Tests to the Rescue

In a desperate effort to turn around the typical low scores of her school's students on the state's yearly accountability tests, Jill Smith, the principal of Tate Elementary School, has used a grant from a local foundation to purchase a rather expensive series of interim “diagnostic assessments” published by a national measurement firm. In several other school districts in the state, those tests have been shown to be quite predictive of students' scores on the state accountability tests. Typical correlations between students' scores on the interim assessments and students' scores on the state accountability tests range between .60 and .75. Jill requires her school's teachers to administer the tests every other month in order to identify those students apt to experience difficulties on the end-of-school-year accountability tests. These students are, according to Jill's directives, supposed to receive extra instruction. [*Are the teachers at Tate Elementary School using formative assessment? YES or NO*]

ANSWER KEY

1. **Math Quiz Fervor:** *No, Paul's frequent quizzes seem to be used exclusively for grading and motivation, not as evidence for Paul to make instructional adjustments or for his students to make adjustments in their learning tactics. This, therefore, would not be an instance of formative assessment.*
2. **Observant Social Studies Teacher:** *Although it is surely sensible for Ms. Jergens to be watchful during her class sessions, and to note students' reactions to what's being taught, and though some of the resultant changes made by Ms. Jergens will probably be beneficial, this teacher is not using assessment-elicited evidence to make adjustments in her instruction. Ms. Jergens, therefore, is not using formative assessment.*
3. **Building-Block Status:** *Maria is most definitely using formative assessment. She focuses on a few key building blocks underlying her students' mastery of a target curricular aim, then uses classroom assessments to find out whether students appear to be mastering those building blocks. Based on her students' performances on these en route assessments, Maria then, if necessary, adjusts her instructional plans. This is precisely the way that the formative assessment process is supposed to function.*
4. **A "Students Only: Approach to Using Assessment Evidence:** *This is a difficult exercise to judge, because Mr. Peavy gets credit for using formative assessment even though he, himself, doesn't use assessment evidence to alter his instructional activities. Remember, formative assessment is present if (1) teachers are using assessment evidence to make instructional adjustments, (2) students are using such evidence to make adjustments in their learning tactics, or (3) both of those activities are occurring simultaneously. Although we would rarely expect to encounter a teacher such as Mr. Peavy using a "students only" approach to formative assessment, this still qualifies as an incarnation of formative assessment.*
5. **Interim Tests to the Rescue:** *Well, the teachers at Jill's school might actually be using formative assessment, but we certainly can't tell from this vignette. The use of interim tests to predict students' success on accountability tests, even when those tests are aggrandized by being marketed as "diagnostic," is not what the formative-assessment process is all about. There's no description here of using assessment-elicited evidence to adjust teachers' instructional activities or to modify students' learning tactics. Perhaps some educational dividends will flow from Tate Elementary School's use of these interim tests. But what's described here definitely should not be regarded as formative assessment.*