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## Let's Expand What Formative Assessment Means

By [Invited Contributor Listed Below](#) on April 21, 2014 9:11 AM | [No comments](#)

Today's guest contributor is **Deanna Iceman Sands**, Professor and Dean, College of Education, Seattle University.

In [previous blog contributions](#), the concept of formative assessment (FA) was raised on several occasions. The authors implicitly or explicitly described a concept of FA as 'tests' or products or systems. They suggested further that teachers need support and professional development to design assessments that are connected directly to their curriculum as opposed to content typically captured in district, proprietary benchmark, state or national, standardized assessments.

Emerging new definitions of FA move the concept along. [One well-known definition](#) was proposed in 2008 by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The Council defined FA as "a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes" (CCSS), 2008, p. 3). Notably, this definition describes formative assessment as a **process** rather than an assessment instrument, tool or product.

My colleagues and I have developed a framework to explicate the process of FA through the Laboratory of Educational Assessment, Research and InnovatioN. [LEARN](#), based at the University of Colorado Denver and involving researchers and doctoral students from institution such as Seattle University, the University of Colorado Boulder, and the University of Washington, rests on an extensive base of theoretical, conceptual, and research literature. The [framework makes operational a concept of formative assessment](#) that involves "four assessment activities - *clarifying learning expectations (goals), collecting information, interpreting information, and acting on/using information collected to move students closer to the learning goals.*" **All four activities are necessary** in order for an occurrence of FA to transpire. Further, our structure considers FA as an ongoing, continuous process that occurs along a continuum of formal and informal practices. It involves planned and more spontaneous actions, one or more students, and occurs in a social context that involves, norms, routines, tools, and roles/responsibilities for the teacher and students.

This FA framework and accompanying assessment activities build on socio-cultural and cognitive psychology theories of learning. It is situated in the daily life of classrooms and allows teachers to seamlessly engage in assessment connected to their planned and implemented curriculum and instruction. The framework and assessment activities:

- provide a venue for enacting evidence-based teacher practices such as explicating clear learning goals and targets, questioning, observing, providing feedback, modeling, and planning instruction based on individual student needs;
- develop and employ instructional tools (e.g. progress monitoring sheets, advanced organizers) to scaffold and support student learning; and
- establish norms and routines to create a culture of advancing assessment itself.

Formative assessment conceptualized in this way promotes self-directed learning for students as they engage in goal setting, self-assessment, self-monitoring, and self-regulation of their learning strategies. This framework encourages building classroom contexts for collaboration between teachers and students (and among students) by applying practices such as peer-assessment, peer-mentoring, and coaching. Through our continued work, LEARN colleagues hope to use this framework to provide protocols that can be used to identify when, and the quality by which, formative assessment occurs in classrooms.

Classrooms are dynamic systems in which teacher and student decision-making varies by content area as well as by day-to-day tasks and activities. Teachers must be equipped to understand how to set clear learning targets and outcomes and collect, interpret and act on information, in concert with their students, in order to plan, facilitate, and support learning tied to standards and curriculum goals and daily objectives. Formative assessment, conceived broadly, yet framed explicitly, provides a structure for a multitude of strategies (including the use of data from 'tests!') to inform and advance student learning, critical thinking, and achievement. As important, formative assessment provides teachers with a process and set of practices that more decisively and completely situates them to carry out the critical role they play in their students' intellectual, communicative, socio-emotional and overall well-being.

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