

Dylan Wiliam on the Powerful Potential of Formative Assessment

“People often want to know ‘what works’ in education,” says U.K. assessment guru Dylan Wiliam in this article in *Voices from the Middle*, “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.”

But recent research tells us that formative assessment, used well, can significantly improve student achievement. Formative assessment is often thought of as in-the-moment checking for understanding. Not necessarily, says Wiliam. Moreover, he believes the term formative assessment is a misnomer; what makes a difference is the *formative use of assessment* at any point in the learning process. “There will never be an optimal model,” says Wiliam, “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.” Some examples:

- A seventh-grade English teacher gives a test under exam conditions and collects students’ papers. After quickly reading them, the teacher decides not to grade them; rather, she gives them back the next day, has students sit in groups of four, and asks each group to write the best composite paper. Each group then reports out to the whole class and the merits of their collaborative work are discussed and debated. “What is interesting about the example,” says Wiliam, “is that the assessment being used had been designed entirely for summative purposes, but the teacher had found a way of using it formatively.”

- A fifth-grade teacher introduces students to five kinds of figurative language: alliteration, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, personification, and simile. Five minutes before the end of the lesson, she writes the five on the board and reads these sentences aloud:

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

Students “finger vote” which kind of figurative language they heard (one finger for alliteration, two for hyperbole, etc.).

Most students give correct responses to the first two, but the third sentence gets a mix of one finger and four fingers. The teacher notes that they are both right and wrong: the sentence has both alliteration and personification. Realizing that a sentence might contain more than one, most students get the last two correct (alliteration and onomatopoeia, and simile and

hyperbole). In less than three minutes, this teacher used a formative assessment to check for understanding, grade, and take follow-up action.

- A sixth-grade class works on suspense stories, with these ground rules: (a) stories need to contain four phases: establishment, build-up, climax, and resolution; and (b) stories must contain at least two examples of figurative language. When students finish a first draft, they exchange papers with a classmate and everyone switches roles from “author” to “editor.” Each editor marks up the story using four different colored pencils to mark the beginning of each phase and a fifth color to underline the two examples of figurative language. With the editor’s approval, a story is submitted to the “chief editor” (the teacher). Because each editor is accountable for ensuring that the required elements are there, students take the role very seriously.

Wiliam suggests three key considerations with formative assessment: (a) Where the learner is right now; (b) Where the learner needs to be; and (c) How to get there. Then teachers need to use a process that involves the student, their peers, and the teacher. Trying to follow Albert Einstein’s advice – “Make things as simple as possible, but not too simple” – Wiliam suggests these steps:

- Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions;
- Orchestrating effective discussions, activities, and tasks that elicit evidence of learning;
- Feedback that moves learning forward;
- Activating peers as learning resources for each other;
- Getting students to own their own learning.

Wiliam concludes with a quote from researcher Roy Sadler: “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.”

“Assessment: The Bridge Between Teaching and Learning” by Dylan Wiliam in *Voices from the Middle*, December 2013 (Vol. 21, #2, p. 15-20), <https://bit.ly/2BAMVWX>; Wiliam can be reached at dylanwiliam@mac.com.

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