

Infusing Rigor into Formative Assessment: Four Simple Strategies

BY BARBARA R. BLACKBURN



Introduction

Formative assessment is one of the hottest topics in education today. A Google search nets over a quarter of a million hits! However, formative assessment is more than a buzzword; it is also one of the most powerful tools we have to impact student learning. Esteemed educational researcher John Hattie, in his landmark book *Visible Learning*, synthesized over 900 meta-analyses of studies to determine what is effective in terms of increasing student learning and achievement. He assigned effect sizes on each aspect of teaching and learning, with items scoring higher than .4 showing above average evidence of positively impacting students. Formative assessment has an effect size of .9, demonstrating its importance.

However, formative assessment is not necessarily rigorous. If we ask students to complete exit slips which require a basic response (such as “What is the largest state in the United States?”), that isn’t rigor. In this snapshot, we’ll look at four examples of formative assessments, with descriptions of how to infuse rigor in each one.

Observations

An important formative assessment tool for teachers is the use of observations. Observations can be planned, or they can be spontaneous. In an observation, you simply observe what students are doing, and take notes for documentation. You may choose to observe for particular instructional behaviors, or for understanding of content.

Of course, teachers are constantly observing students. However, the most effective observations are planned in advance. For example, if you want to see a student’s problem-solving ability, you would schedule time to observe the student during a science activity or experiment. The documentation, which may include simply taking notes, allows you to ensure you are documenting your observations, but it also helps you assess the rigor of the work.

Checklists

Checklists can be used as a part of observations. Checklists can be simple yes/no tallies, but open-ended ones are more effective for understanding specific aspects of student learning. It’s important to make sure your criteria measure the rigor of what the student is doing, rather than whether or not he or she is simply completing a task. For example, when you detail what you are looking for in terms of rigorous reading, you are more likely to assess it effectively.

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Sample Reading Checklist

Characteristic	Observations/Examples
Student demonstrates problem-solving ability with a question or task or that requires high levels of analysis.	
Student answers a rigorous question by providing evidence from the text, and explaining that evidence, rather than parroting back the information.	
Student demonstrates persistence while reading material that is challenging.	
Student shows applications of learning that move beyond the text to real-life applications.	

Classroom Discussions

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Classroom discussions are an excellent way to gather data for formative assessment. First, as you ask questions, listen to students' answers. You can gauge how well students understand your content through their responses.

In terms of rigor, this has two implications. First, your questions need to be at a rigorous level. I typically recommend using Webb's Depth of Knowledge as a framework, with Level 3 representing rigor. (As a caution, there is a very popular "DOK Verb Wheel" available on the internet. It was not created by, nor is it endorsed by Dr. Webb. Verbs alone do not represent the depth and complexity of rigor.) Next, student's responses must be at a rigorous level. Typically, one word or one phrase answers do not reflect a depth of analysis and application reflective of high levels of learning.

Tasks and Assignments

Quality tasks and assignments must be rigorous, meaning they must include questions, tasks, assignments, and other assessments that address higher level questioning and skills. Typically, we think of tasks and assignments as summative assessments, but they can easily be used in formative ways. The difference is how you use the information.

If you give students a set of written questions designed to gauge overall understanding for a grade, they are used summatively. However, you can use similar questions during a lesson or unit to assess if and how much students are learning. Once again, it is important that our assessments are rigorous. For example, in a math classroom, we often think that, after students complete a variety of word problems, we can increase the rigor by asking them to create their own word problem. It may be a bit more challenging, but that is still an application activity, which is a lower level (2) on Webb's Depth of Knowledge.

In order to reach a level 3 (considered rigorous), students would need to recognize and explain misconceptions. For example, students could review three word problems that have a solution. They must identify which one or ones are incorrect, solve them correctly, explain why the first solution was incorrect, and why their solution is correct.

A Final Note

Formative assessment is an effective tool you can use to inform your instruction and improve your students' learning. But, don't take them for granted. If you want to students to achieve at high levels, your formative assessments should be rigorous. Planning ahead will ensure that you infuse your assessments with rigor.

About the Author

Barbara R. Blackburn has taught early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school students and has served as an educational consultant for three publishing companies. In addition to speaking at state and national conferences, she also regularly presents workshops for teachers and administrators in elementary, middle, and high schools. She is the author of numerous bestselling books on rigor and motivation, including *Rigor and Differentiation in the Classroom* (forthcoming), *Rigor in the RTI and MTSS Classroom*, and *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word, 3rd Edition*. To learn more about Barbara Blackburn and her books, visit www.routledge.com/collections/10881.

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