

PRACTICE BRIEF

How Do We Know What Pacific Learners Know and Can Do?

Continuously Observe Student Learning

Teachers assess almost continuously in the classroom, whether they realize it or not. When teachers stop to listen in on the conversation between students who are working together to solve a problem because they want find out whether the students really grasp the nature of the problem, they are learning about what students know and can do. When they sit with a pair of students and ask them to talk about their work, or when they ask a student privately about a certain answer to a homework question and then act on that information, they are engaged in formative assessment practices that can improve learning.



Research suggests that formative assessment is most productive for teachers when it helps them understand not only *what* students have learned but also *how* they understand a concept (their thought processes). Only then can they decide how to alter instruction in relation to particular learning goals. Assessment can be informal and spontaneous (as in “listening in”) or it can be formal (as in a written weekly quiz or a presentation by a group of students in front of the class). In fact, any instructional activity that gives a teacher insight into the way a student understands a particular concept can be used as assessment.

If you think about your own teaching and learning experiences growing up in your village, this may sound very familiar. For example, the expert teaching someone to build a house models each step, requires a lot of observation, and allows the learner to try out each activity many times. There is no expectation to do the activity “right” the first time. Instead, the learner follows a cycle of trial and reflection. The expert intervenes to remodel as necessary. Another strategy is for the expert to develop a joint activity for the expert and “apprentice” to create together. In both cases, the expert continuously assesses the progress of the learner.

Most of the time, as in the description above, formative assessment is so integrated with teaching and learning that students and teachers do not recognize it as a separate “assessment” event. For instance, if students are asked to build a model of a traditional house, the teacher can first ask them to observe how he uses forms of measurement and calculations to design and build the model. Any errors that students make as they try this out may

Classroom Assessment

Teachers assess students for different purposes. One major purpose is to observe students’ growth toward specific learning goals through everyday teaching and learning activities. The information they gather is used to shape future instruction with the goal of improving student learning. We call this formative assessment.

A second purpose of classroom assessment captures student learning at the end of a learning cycle, such as a unit or school year. We call this summative assessment. The information collected is often used to determine part of a student’s grades.



Critical Reflection

How often do you do formative assessment? How do you decide what forms of formative assessment are most effective for evaluating the learning of your students? How do you use the information you get from formative assessments?

Mr. Alik's Classroom

In the third grade, Mr. Alik integrates formative assessment daily in his instruction in numerous ways, for instance:

- Walking around the classroom, listening in on students' conversations as they work on joint tasks and taking notes as needed to prompt later revisions in instruction.
- Asking students in small groups what parts of a task or problem they are having difficulty with.
- Having students write in their journals reflections about what they have learned.
- Asking small groups to prepare a short presentation about a particular topic.

Like many teachers, Mr. Alik uses whole-class discussions as a way to both teach and assess students. Because his students do not respond well to questions directed to individuals, he finds ways to elicit their comments without confrontation. Here is a short example of a discussion on erosion.

Mr. Alik: *"Okay, class, we have learned about "erosion"—how natural processes cause soil or sand and rock to be moved from one place and deposited in another place. This is important in our own island environment, as you know. I'd like you to work in your table groups [four students each]. [He passes out large sheets of paper.] In your group, talk about causes of erosion and write or draw them on the paper. Then we will share in the whole group."*

When he brings the class back together, Mr. Alik allows students to call out items from their lists and he writes them on the board. When the board list is complete, he gives feedback to the group, addressing any misconceptions he sees and asking volunteers to explain why "lightening," for instance, is probably not a usual cause of erosion.

point to misconceptions they have about key concepts. The teacher can then offer constructive feedback about those misconceptions to help students understand better. Usually giving feedback is the role of the teacher, but students can also give feedback to each other as part of peer-to-peer assessment.

Formative assessment holds special promise for students from indigenous backgrounds because it can be thoroughly tailored to local contexts.

Learning experts say that in the most effective assessment, the teacher becomes a facilitator, helping students to take responsibility for their learning. In schools where students are all or nearly all Pacific Islanders, the role of teacher as facilitator may be familiar—much like the role of the traditional expert above.

Formative assessment holds special promise for students from indigenous backgrounds because it can be thoroughly tailored to local contexts. Unlike ready-made assessments or textbook unit tests, teachers design assessment, keeping in mind the language of the classroom and students' preferred ways of showing what they have learned. It is based on the learning experiences students have in schools, and it can use familiar learning formats. For these reasons, formative assessment can be adapted appropriately to any local Pacific context. Below, we suggest some possible strategies that Pacific teachers may want to try.

Engage Pacific Students Effectively

Examples of strategies likely to draw out valid information about students' learning are listed here. Generalizations about cultural values and preferences come with the warning that teachers will, of course, need to decide which strategies are appropriate in their own cultural settings.

- Allow students choices about when and how to show what they have learned. On-demand tests often do not elicit best performance.
- Allow students to help each other often. This is not cheating; it is collaboration. The teacher can observe students' interactions to gather evidence of learning.
- Provide opportunities for students to model or demonstrate what they have learned. Don't rely on paper and pencil responses alone.
- Use visual input and supports, such as pictures and objects. Provide opportunities for students to use visual expressions of learning, such as artwork, diagrams, graphs, or 3-D constructions.
- Allow for choral (whole group) response or other methods that do not target individuals for public response to questions. Instead of asking a direct question during a discussion, use a statement that may provoke responses from students (e.g., "I noticed that some people didn't like the main character in this story...").
- Instead of questioning students in a small group, develop a conversation around the topics and concepts you want to hear them talk about. Evaluate indirectly by listening carefully to what they have to say.

Ask for open-ended responses rather than single right answers on written assessments. This reveals more about student understanding.