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Is REAL Formative Assessment Even Possible?

Let me start with a simple, researched-based truth:

Formative assessment—timely feedback gathered and reviewed during the course of a learning experience that serves to *'inform'* both teachers AND students and allows for the *'formation'* of new learning plans—matters.

Need proof?

Let's start with the fact that after conducting a meta-analysis of every significant research study on achievement in the past three decades, Bob Marzano believes in formative assessment.

In fact, the conclusions he's drawn in [What Works in Schools](#) suggest that ***providing students with timely and specific feedback on their levels of mastery*** can account for percentile gains of anywhere from 21 to 41 points—higher than gains caused by other school-based achievement factors including parent and community involvement, safe and orderly environments, and collegiality in the schoolhouse.

As John Hattie—an educational researcher cited by Marzano in *What Works*—writes, “The most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be 'dollops of feedback.’” (As quoted in Marzano, 2003, p. 37)

But I'm really starting to wonder whether or not effective formative assessment is even possible in the classroom.

Here's why: I've spent the first four weeks of this school year trying to make formative assessment a bigger part of my own instructional practices—and it's damn near killed me.

Don't get me wrong: I'm proud of the work that I'm doing and am convinced that I've adopted some of the best practices suggested by assessment experts ranging from Marzano to Stiggins, Ainsworth, Chappius and Chappius.

Here's what I'm doing:

I've got short lists of essential objectives (see [here](#)) called I Can Statements written in student friendly language that students refer to before every lesson and use to self-assess their own progress towards mastery.

I've developed exemplars demonstrating a full-range of performance for almost every subjective task that we've tackled (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

I've given two or three practice assignments—tasks that count for less than 10 percent of a child's grade and are designed solely to give students feedback on their individual strengths and

weaknesses and to give me a sense for the intellectual hiccups that my students are having around the concepts we are studying—for every essential skill that we’re required to study.

I’m using my Livescribe pen to record quick mini-tutorials on the concepts that great numbers of my kids seem to be struggling with (see [here](#)).

I’ve used student responders to quickly measure student mastery and to give my kids a chance to instantly see whether or not they have a firm grasp on the content we’re studying in class.

I’ve used our peer tutoring program—a system of intervention that pairs struggling students with successful peers to rework tasks and to review content—to provide support before summative assessments.

I’ve used our working lunch program—a 30 minute one-on-one review session with the classroom teacher—to help kids that continue to struggle after peer tutoring.

Sounds great, doesn’t it? Heck, I’d bet that there aren’t many teachers who are taking these kinds of steps on a regular basis anywhere in America.

Here’s are the problems, though:

First, I’m probably three-weeks behind in my curriculum—formatively assessing and then taking action on what I’m learning is a relatively time-consuming process, especially when kids aren’t mastering content at the rate that my district’s pacing guide suggests is possible.

Second, I’m completely exhausted and doubtful that I can keep up this work all year long. I haven’t seen my daughter or my wife much this month simply because responsible formative assessment is an incredibly time-consuming process.

Heck, just last night I spent 3 hours grading one set of graphs because I wanted to get them back to my students in a timely way—but that required working from 5:30-8:30 and missing dinner with my family and bedtime with my little girl.

The past two weekends in a row were similar stories as I spent 5-6 hours both weekends putting exemplars together, writing remediation activities and designing new lessons to review challenging content.

Add on top of this my need to work several different part time jobs simply to pay my bills—combined with the meetings I’m required to attend during 3 of my 5 weekly planning periods and the room cleaning that I’m required to do now that our district has cut back on janitorial services—and it becomes clear that I’m going to have to make a choice between formative assessment and living a life.

If a highly-motivated guy like me is starting to doubt formative assessment, I’ve GOT to believe that there are thousands—if not millions—of teachers doubting formative assessment too.

So what steps can school leaders take to make formative assessment a more widely-accepted and doable practice in their buildings?

Here are a few suggestions:

Make it painfully clear that you DON'T expect your teachers to march through their entire curriculum.

In my 18 years of teaching, I've NEVER heard a principal tell me that it was okay to choose a small handful of essential objectives from my curriculum to focus on.

That creates tension in teachers who know that to formatively assess their way through an entire curriculum would be simply impossible but who also worry about what their principals will say if they pare down the "required curriculum" without permission.

By making it clear that the first step in formative assessment is deciding on a manageable set of objectives that REALLY matter, principals instantly make the recursive nature of formative assessment practices more approachable for their teachers.

Find ways to reduce the number of students that each teacher serves.

I work with 120 students this year—and while that's a pretty average load for a middle/high school teacher, it can make formative assessment a nightmare.

From strictly an assessment standpoint, I've got to find ways to collect information on 120 kids every time I introduce new content or skills.

Then, I've got to record that information and report it to parents, students, and other professionals in my building.

The entire process takes about 3 hours for a typical assignment—and that's time I just don't have.

Add on top of that the other clerical tasks that come with 120 students—communicating with 120 sets of parents, responding to emails, collecting permission slips, attending special programs meetings—and it's painfully obvious that formatively assessing large groups of kids ain't going to be easy.

That's why I'd love to see principals working to find ways to reduce the number of students that each teacher serves.

Work in a middle school or a high school?

Hiring people who carry multiple certifications and creating integrated classes—middle schools could consider language arts/social studies and math/science classes—can cut student loads without requiring additional resources.

Work in an elementary school?

Convert beyond-the-classroom positions into teaching positions. I know of an elementary principal who cut class sizes to 15 in her building by eliminating teacher assistant positions completely.

While it's a nontraditional move, she's created a situation where teachers can really pull off sustained formative assessment efforts because they're working with 15 kids instead of 120.

Eliminate meetings, Eliminate meetings, and then eliminate some more meetings.

If principals really believe in formative assessment, they've got to recognize that it's an incredibly time-consuming process.

That means the limited planning and professional development time that teachers actually DO have in schools needs to be protected if we're ever going to make formative assessment practices a priority in our buildings.

When we try to cram formative assessment practices into the time that we have leftover after faculty meetings, department meetings, grade level meetings, and professional learning team meetings, we just shouldn't be surprised when they fail.

Instead, school leaders should ask that teachers meet with ONE collaborative group and one collaborative group only. Then, they should require that collaborative groups make formative assessment a priority.

Meetings should focus on studying formative assessment data, creating exemplars, improving rubrics, and designing remediation and enrichment opportunities for kids.

The simple truth is teachers just don't have the time to do formative assessment correctly if their attention is divided between the kinds of traditional meetings we've always been required to attend.

Does any of this make sense? Essentially what I'm trying to say is that I'm convinced that formative assessment MATTERS—but I'm not convinced that formative assessment is POSSIBLE unless we take some drastic steps to make it a priority in our buildings.

I'm sure I'll write about formative assessment again—it's an area of professional focus for me this year. I'd love to hear your thinking, too.

How can I make this work easier?