

# Assessment: An Opportunity to Practice Biblical Unity?

by Christine Buel

Create an environment in which students partner with you to create tests, quizzes, and evaluative rubrics. Let them share in developing a statement of what constitutes quality work. This partnership creates unity, which we read about in Ephesians 2:21–22: “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (NIV).

Most Christian educators, when given the opportunity, eagerly promote a form of biblical unity in the classroom.

The first week of school abounds with speeches and pep talks aimed at students and espousing the virtues of loving one another, functioning as citizens of a classroom community, and valuing the



worth and contributions of others. Platitudes, in the form of colorful posters, serve as reminders on how to function as community members. Curricular and cocurricular activities such as service projects, group discussions, literature circles, group think-pair-shares, and learning centers are often chosen as a means to strengthen the community mindedness of students. Ironically, assessment of student learning, so carefully crafted into each day, is rarely seen as an opportunity to foster community, and yet it offers some of the richest payback for promoting unity in the landscape of teaching.

Assessment, with all its inherent complexities and jargon, has evolved over the last 60 years to include authentic assessment, standards-based assessment, content-based assessment, diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment. As a supervisor for preservice teachers, I often ask them to differentiate between formative and summative types of assessment. *Summative assessment* seems to engender an easy definition. But when asked to define *formative assessment* after a semester of student teaching, one of my most promising students noted, “*Formative assessment* is the middle activity you do after you have taught your lesson.” Moreover, in the culminating project, known as the Teacher Work Sample portfolio, I noted that the formative

assessments conducted in the classrooms and later described by one of my student teachers were often oversimplified and dwarfed by activities that yielded little information on how well students actually knew or valued the material. My students lacked clarity and vision when it came to defining formative assessments and incorporating them into the daily classroom routine.

Good teachers plan frequent formative assessment opportunities for their students. That’s right; good assessment happens every day as a natural part of instructional delivery. Assessment is formative when the results of a student’s per-

formance on a given activity are used to form or mold the student into a more engaged decision maker in the classroom community. That means that Friday’s quiz may indicate to

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the students and the teacher that changes should be made to Monday’s lesson. Teachers need to think on their feet, and, on the basis of formative assessment results, they must be willing to change direction or discard old faithful methods that are not working for a group of students.

Unlike summative assessment, which measures learning, formative assessment is a seamless part of the learning process, and it occurs simultaneously with other aspects of the lesson. Formative assessment is not the “fell out of the sky” type of isolated exam, but rather an activity that allows students to think through the information and apply some form of problem-solving or divergent-thinking approach.

Such assessment fosters community in the classroom in that both the teacher and the students take ownership of the teaching-learning process. Student achievement is bolstered because the students share a common goal with the teacher and have a vested interest in reaching targeted learning goals. Grades take a backseat to the collaborative process.

Some examples of formative assessment include ungraded tests and quizzes, think-alouds, student-constructed concept maps, learning logs, and portfolio development. Let’s get more concrete:

- **You have given the target goal.**

You have written the following targeted learning goal on the board: You will learn how to write concisely by means of creating a museum label for Civil War artifacts.

- **You have taught the lesson and modeled the skill.**

You teach a lesson on how to write museum labels by introducing examples of actual labels found accompanying artifacts in the Museum of Natural History. You demonstrate the distinction between descriptive and interpretative labels.

- **Students, with your guidance, decide what quality of work is required to meet the targeted goal.**

Now it is your students' turn to create their own labels. This activity is not formative yet. It still needs the mutual involvement of the students and the teacher. So you hand out exemplary, average, and below-average label samples generated by previous classes. You ask the students to develop their own rating scale for judging labels and ask them to rate the samples. This rating scale, with some modification, becomes the mechanism for grading the project. You comment on the rating scales and suggest modifications or improvements. Now the lesson has become formative: the teacher and the students have agreed on the quality of work necessary to meet the targeted learning goal.

- **You supply meaningful and descriptive feedback.**

After the completion of the museum labels, it is time for constructive feedback from you in the form of oral dialogue or written notes, without undue emphasis on letter grades. Feedback to students lies at the heart of the formative assessment process. Through feedback, students learn about any gaps between the actual level of performance and the targeted learning goal. The following is an example:

I liked how you used multiple perspectives in your descriptive label. Why don't you try interacting on a more personal level with your audience? They may like to know that the "Cherokee Braves" flag was in honor of the only Native American who became a Confederate army general.

Nonspecific praise and normative comments fail to give students an action plan to clear up fuzzy or unmet learning goals. Instead, conversation should be specific and meaningful, guiding the students to a higher level of problem solving. After you provide feedback to the students, give them another opportunity to work on their labels. At

this point, you may choose to attach a grade to the project.

- **Students reflect on their progress toward or beyond the learning goal.**

All productive formative assessment should allow students to reflect on their final products, either orally or in writing. Such reflection should include not only statements about what they believe their next step of learning should be but also realistic goals for themselves. Student reflection allows for specific and meaningful dialogue with you and fellow classmates. Students should ask themselves such questions as the following: What part of my work was most effective? What part of my work was least effective? What action will I take to improve? What will I do differently next time?



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Formative assessment is not just a miniversion of a summative, or final, assessment. Many educators, not just student teachers, struggle with the inconsistent language and seemingly unrelated examples used to describe formative assessment. Clearly, the description must move beyond a simple evaluation of how students are doing. Assessment is formative when it forms a stronger bond between the students and the teacher. Cleverly crafted formative assessment experiences promote unity in the Christian school classroom: both teachers and students agree on common definitions of quality work, share authorship of evaluative tools, enjoy rich dialogue, and plan for future learning goals.

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