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Improving Student Writing Through Formative Assessments

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Experts and educators agree that using formative assessments can significantly increase student achievement, especially when used to improve student writing.

In 1998, British researchers Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam published a meta-analysis drawing from 250 reports that found a typical, strong to medium positive effect size (0.4–0.7) in student learning in classrooms using formative assessments. Black and Wiliam determined that formative assessments can lead to significant learning gains and can help narrow the achievement gap while benefitting all learners.

In 2007, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)—a U.S. organization of individuals who head the education systems in each state—defined formative assessments as a "process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement on intended instructional outcomes."

Within the CCSSO's definition, says James Popham in his ASCD book *Transformative Assessment*, are guidelines for how state education leaders envision formative assessments taking shape in classrooms. Unlike summative assessments that conclude a learning unit and evaluate who reached targets and who didn't, formative assessments should be given while there is still instructional and learning time left to allow for both teachers and students to adjust their practices. Those adjustments are informed by assessment-based evidence—feedback on where the student is in relation to the learning targets and what strategies both learner and teacher have used so far. Adjustments based on feedback from the formative assessment process should lead to improved student achievement. Also, using formative assessments allows teachers to respond to the reality that students learn at different rates and as a result of different strategies.

Making the Writing Connection

Using formative assessments to improve writing seems like the perfect fit because the writing process is naturally formative. Students learn best when creating successive drafts of their work and incorporating meaningful feedback from peers and teachers into their revisions.

Released in September 2011, *Informing Writing* (part of a series of reports that also includes *Writing Next* and *Writing to Read*) is a meta-analysis funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and led by Vanderbilt University researchers Steve Graham, Karen Harris, and Michael Hebert. A meta-analysis allows researchers to synthesize the results from a variety of studies so that, despite differences between studies, they can still derive generalized conclusions. This is the first report to examine the effectiveness of classroom-based formative writing assessment using meta-analysis. The researchers found positive effects on overall writing quality when teachers provided feedback, taught students to assess their own writing, and monitored students' writing progress.

What Is Formative Feedback?

Informing Writing found that providing feedback on students' writing had a strong (0.77) average effect size on learning. Giving feedback to students allows them to compare their work with a target, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and prescribe an action for improvement.

A good feedback system clarifies the goal, responds to student work, and modifies instruction. Feedback should be specific and show students' progress toward a learning goal. Additionally, in the December 2007 *Educational Leadership* article "Feedback That Fits," Sue Brookhart says good feedback is descriptive of the work and the process used to do the work, not the student.

It's not hard to convince most teachers of how beneficial providing feedback is—it's more of an issue of finding the time to provide the feedback. Graham says researchers were mindful of this in the *Informing Writing* study. "Two findings in this study suggest that feedback doesn't have to come from just the teacher," Graham says. He notes that giving

feedback to and receiving feedback from peers can be quite powerful. Teaching students how to self-assess is also important, he adds.

"If students produce it, they can assess it; and if they can assess it, they can improve it," writes State University of New York Albany professor Heidi Andrade in the December 2007 *Educational Leadership* article "[Self-Assessment Through Rubrics](#)."

Informing Writing found that self-assessment of writing had a consistently positive influence on the quality of students' writing. Good self-assessment looks a lot like high-quality formative assessment. Students should perform self-assessments with a work in progress and have clear criteria (through teacher- or student-created rubrics) that they will use for identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Graham says he has observed that students need more time and practice on scoring themselves against a rubric, but that their scores do not have to be 100 percent accurate because the opportunity to practice and learn about self-assessment is, in itself, valuable.

Teachers don't have to do it all when it comes to giving feedback. In fact, sometimes less is more. Anecdotal evidence suggests that one way to improve writing is for teachers to actually scale back on the amount of feedback they provide. "You don't have to give feedback on every piece of writing," says Graham. Also, Graham warns, teachers should fight the urge to give an overwhelming amount of feedback on an assignment; instead, they should focus on particular areas of improvement. Too much feedback can actually crush a student's motivation to become a better writer, says Graham.

Jason Buell, a middle school science teacher in San Jose, Calif., and formative assessment enthusiast—as evidenced by the name of his blog, *Always Formative*—agrees that feedback need not be an epic time suck to be effective. "Teachers worry too much about [giving] super-fast feedback," he says. "What you really want to do is make sure students get feedback before the next time they work on [an assignment] or revise it."

For feedback on writing in the content areas, Buell advises separating writing and content. "Once they've mastered the content, then we can come back to the writing. If you do both at the same time, you and your students are going to drown," he adds. (Buell describes his [layering](#) approach to teaching content and process.)

Monitoring Progress

Tracking student progress is essential to success in teaching writing, says Graham. For example, Graham noted that teachers might analyze student writing using the 6 + 1 Trait rubric (a common tool for scoring writing), then chart student progress data and use that information to adjust instruction. With data, teachers can track the feedback and interventions students receive and determine which method proves the most effective.

Buell uses weekly portfolios with targets aligned to standards-based grading to track his students' progress. "[I] think about writing goals in the content areas over the long term—by the end of the year, [I] want them to have a well-written lab report," explains Buell. "We'll spend a month or two working on writing really good analysis. I'll give specific feedback on that and not worry about other things, like the hypothesis."

The Time Is Write

Creating clear criteria for high-quality writing, collaborating with other teachers to score student writing when possible, and checking for interscorer reliability can improve assessment practices, Graham says. Generally, researchers advocate for (1) providing additional time for student writing practice and revision, (2) collecting multiple samples of student writing, and (3) assessing student writing in a variety of genres.

Informing Writing outlines many recommendations that will prove challenging to implement—more professional development for teachers, better classroom conditions, greater inclusion in summative assessments, and broader access to technology that expedites feedback and monitoring processes and prepares students to take computer-based tests. Still, the time is also right to focus on improving writing instruction. The Common Core State Standards emphasize writing for a variety of purposes, the 2012 Nation's Report Card on Writing will bring attention to the need to improve writing, and the ever-changing social media landscape continues to provide endless opportunities for students to publish for a variety of authentic audiences.

"We know how to teach writing—that it makes students better readers and helps understanding in content areas," says Graham. Armed with this evidence, schools and policymakers have a prime opportunity to change the narrative on student writing. **EU**

Is Writing in Crisis?

Writing is crucial to success in college, a career, and life in general. Despite writing's pivotal role, several indicators point to a nationwide crisis in the skill.

"Policies have been shaped by misconceptions that writing cannot be taught or assessed," says Graham. In reality, writing can be taught and assessed—but it requires a significant investment in teacher training and improved summative assessments, he notes.

Studies show that two out of three students don't write well enough to meet grade level. In classrooms, less time is spent on writing instruction, and students have fewer opportunities to write, especially writing that involves analysis and interpretation.

"The Nation's Report Card," by the National Assessment of Education Progress, reports broad trends in subject-specific achievement across the United States. In 2007, the report showed small gains in writing, but these gains may have masked the fact that only a third of 8th graders and less than a quarter of high school seniors tested at or above the proficient level, writes Gavin Tachibana in the article, "'Nation's Report Card' Shows Modest Improvement in Students' Writing Scores."

Basically, two out of three students don't write well enough to meet grade level, say the *Informing Writing* researchers. And, employers and college students are spending billions every year for remedial writing courses. For example, almost a third of all incoming freshmen (attending community and four-year colleges) take at least one remedial course; about a quarter of those remedial courses are in writing, according to the 2006 Alliance for Excellent Education report *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation*.