

Words, Words, Words:

Formative Assessment in a Secondary English/Language Arts Context

Poster 271: Leigh M. Tolley, Syracuse University (lmolley@syr.edu)

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What is “formative assessment”?

Formative assessment (FA), also commonly referred to internationally as “assessment *for* learning” (as opposed to “assessment *of* learning”), involves teachers using evaluative skills and strategies to guide and improve student learning through timely feedback, and is akin to program evaluators offering recommendations for improvement (Ayala & Brandon, 2008). One of the most commonly cited definitions of FA is that it is a term “encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, pp. 7-8). However, the use of formative assessment in K-12 schools varies widely, and there is no single, unified definition of what FA is and how it occurs.

The instructional and assessment practices that fall under the “formative assessment” umbrella vary depending on the context in which they take place, and may be impacted by factors including the grade level of the students and the subject matter being taught (Hodgen & Marshall, 2005; McMillan, 2010). FA in K-12 education has been studied more frequently in science and math, where the learning progression is more linear, and empirical research is lacking in more subjective fields such as English/language arts (ELA), especially at the secondary level.

Study Background

The study presented in this poster is the preliminary fieldwork I conducted for my doctoral dissertation research. Although I have secondary ELA teaching experience, it had been several years since I had been in a high school classroom as a teacher. I wanted to learn how a particular group of ELA teachers (whom I planned to study for my dissertation) and their administrators talked about the FA practices that they used.

Study Overview

As presented in the poster, this study used qualitative methods (individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group) with five instructors and three administrators in a concurrent enrollment program associated with a private university in the northeastern United States. These instructors were selected for study because along with their being experienced secondary ELA teachers with advanced degrees, their program involvement allows for many opportunities for them to learn about, reflect on, and share their instructional and assessment practices to improve student learning with each other.

Research Questions

1. What training in instructional and assessment practices to improve student learning do these instructors receive?
2. How do these instructors talk about the instructional and assessment practices to improve student learning that they use in their teaching?
3. What are contextual factors that may impact how these instructors use instructional and assessment practices to improve student learning with their students?

Implications of This Study for the Field of Evaluation

The findings of this study:

- revealed contextually-relevant terms currently used by these secondary ELA teachers; use of these terms can lead to more appropriate research with this and other populations;
- provided information about factors that impact teachers’ instructional and assessment practices, which in turn can inform further study in this context; and
- emphasized the need to be aware of the terminology used by stakeholders and evaluators, especially when dealing with terms that may be ill-defined.

Suggested Readings

Below is a sampling of the literature on FA, including more in-depth explanations of the term, explorations of its efficacy, its ties to the field of evaluation, and its use in content-specific contexts.

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