1

Introduction to Improving Formative Assessment Practice

We consider *formative assessment* to be the continuous process in which students and teachers engage to monitor learning and to inform future instruction. The research literature identifies the consistent and careful use of formative assessment to be an important factor for improving student learning. This book is for teachers who want to know more about formative assessment and who want to improve their own practice in this area. Readers will be at different stages in their practice, some more familiar with formative assessment than others, some more proficient than others. The purpose of the book is to help all teachers examine their practice—regardless of how proficient—and to find ways to make improvements.

This book has been written so that it can be used by an individual teacher who wants to pick it up and work through the chapters. However, we recognize that there is significant value in groups of teachers working together on their practice. Therefore, the approach is such that this book also can be used by a small, informal group of teachers, a whole department, and/or coaches or mentors working with individual teachers. In short, it can be used by anyone whose goal is to improve his or her formative assessment practice.

A reflective practitioner is someone who spends time critically examining his or her practice with the goal of improving it (Schon, 1983). In a world of ever-increasing demands on teachers, finding time for analysis and self-evaluation may be difficult. For a teacher who desires to improve her practice, there is the question of how to identify an area on which to focus. Should she examine her classroom discourse practice to ensure that she is fair in terms of the types of questions and expectations that she has of boys and girls alike? Should she look at her instruction to see to what extent she uses real-world and cross-curricular contexts in her instruction? Should she focus on her assessment practices? As the title of this book suggests, we consider the examination of formative assessment practices to be a valuable, ongoing exercise for teachers. However, rather than asking you to just accept our perspective, the next chapter articulates what we mean by formative assessment and the impact it can have on student learning—which, of course, is why we consider it to be an important topic for self-reflection and ongoing improvement.

In this chapter, we make several clear distinctions important for this book: between formative and summative assessment and between assessment and evaluation. We describe how evaluation of teaching practice can be part of ongoing professional development and how this self-evaluation process will unfold as the book progresses.

Formative and Summative Assessment

To make sense of the rest of what follows in this book, it is important to be clear about the distinction between formative and summative assessment. A teacher engages in assessment in a variety of ways, as captured by the following questions: What is the mood of students as they enter the classroom? How attentive do they seem today? What do they remember about this topic from yesterday or from last week? Are students ready for the upcoming test? How can students support each other in the learning process? Which students are ready for a new challenge? Which students need another opportunity to explore the topic from a different perspective? Some of these questions might be asked as part of the formative assessment process, while others would not. For example, while it is critical that a teacher assess and pay attention to students' moods and levels of attention, those aspects are not directly parts of formative assessment. All the other questions could be asked as part of formative assessment. As noted in the introduction, we consider *formative assessment* to be a continuous process in which students and teachers engage to monitor learning

and to inform future instruction. Formative assessment is an important part of instruction that has been shown to have a positive impact on student learning when used systematically and consistently.

> Formative assessment is a continuous process in which students and teachers engage to monitor learning and to inform future instruction.

By contrast, *summative assessment* is the term usually given to assessments that "sum up" learning by measuring the amount of knowledge, skills, or abilities that someone has at a particular point in time (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009). In school contexts, these assessments can be large-scale, high-stakes assessments—that is, assessments taken by all students in a particular grade, in a district or state, under standardized circumstances. Summative assessment can also refer to the measures that contribute to end-of-course or end-of-year grades given to students. While the reach of the assessments used to determine that grade may not extend beyond a particular school, once the grade has been given, there is rarely an opportunity to further influence it. Thus, summative assessments can be thought of as static measures with generally no further instructional opportunities to shape learning. Clearly, summative assessments are not something to be ignored; however, they are not the focus of this book.

We believe that while knowledge of formative assessment is important, competence or proficiency in formative assessment practices is really our goal for each teacher reading this book. For that reason, the book is built around opportunities for you to reflect on your practice, consider alternative approaches, and put them into practice in your own classroom, so that you develop competency in formative assessment practices, not just knowledge of formative assessment. The remainder of this chapter will introduce the self-evaluation process to provide a sense of what will follow in the rest of the book.

The Purpose of the Book

This book includes opportunities for you to reflect on your formative assessment practice, consider alternative approaches, and try them in your classrooms, so you can develop not only knowledge of formative assessment characteristics but also competency in formative assessment practices.

Evaluation and Formative Assessment

In this book we use the terms *evaluation*—and often *self-evaluation*—and *formative assessment* a great deal. In many contexts, assessment and evaluation are synonymous. For example, it is equally appropriate to talk about a fitness assessment or a fitness evaluation. However, to be as clear as possible in the book, we assigned different roles and meanings to these terms. *Formative assessment*, as defined previously, refers to the continuous process in which teachers and students engage to monitor learning and make appropriate adjustments. *Evaluation*, in this context, refers to the process in which a teacher examines an aspect of practice—in this instance, to examine formative assessment practices. In this book, evaluation always focuses on the teacher's personal practices and accomplishments. For that reason, evaluation and self-evaluation are treated as synonymous. Table 1.1 illustrates how the actors, partners, and subjects differ.

Table 1.1	Distinguishing Between Formative Assessment and Evaluation

	Formative Assessment	**Evaluation**
Actor	Teacher	Teacher
Partner	Students	Peers, coach, administrators
Subject	Student learning	Formative assessment practice
Purpose	Improve student learning	Improve teaching practices

As the table illustrates, formative assessment involves the teacher as the primary actor and students as partners. By contrast, while evaluation also involves the teacher as the primary actor, partners are more likely to be other adults with whom they can work, such as peer teachers, coaches, or administrators. The focus or subject of the two processes is also different. While formative assessment is focused on collecting evidence of the specifics of student learning, evaluation (in this book) is focused on the formative assessment practice itself. This distinction relates to the purpose of the two processes. Formative assessment seeks to directly improve student learning by more accurately tailoring learning opportunities to student needs. Evaluation in this context is conducted to improve teaching practices, which, in fact, then will affect student learning. While the next chapter focuses

solely on formative assessment, the subsequent chapters focus more on evaluation of formative assessment practices.

Evaluation and Professional Development

In some recent writing about teacher professional development, the language shifts from the term "professional development" to "professional learning" (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). We think this is an important recognition of the fact that changing teaching or formative assessment practices is an ongoing effort that requires learning and practice. More traditional professional development opportunities will have much less impact on practice.

Here our focus is on the teacher as a learner. We do not assume that teacher professional development can be guided only by external experts or prepackaged units of instruction. Rather, we assume that every school includes teachers or content coaches who have expertise in specific aspects of formative assessment or who are willing to explore and learn together. Furthermore, we believe that teachers can benefit from the expertise of their colleagues and that expertise can be developed collectively with appropriate resources and support.

This book invites you to engage in self-evaluation, plan for improvement, implement changes, and reevaluate your practice. It is based on a process of continuous improvement rather than on a series of individual training sessions. Support for continuous improvement exists close to the teacher's classroom and is not dependent on funding, release time, or external consultants. However, we firmly believe that when teachers are working in a school where collaborative time is provided or teachers have opportunities to observe each other, the improvement process is much more effective.

In using the material in this book, you will be asked to build upon your strengths and identify your weaknesses through self-evaluation. We recommend that you work with a trusted colleague or a small group of colleagues in this process. We also realize, given the busy lives of teachers, that practitioners can benefit from a structured process for their self-evaluation and development. In pilot projects using the self-evaluation tools that we describe in later chapters, we found that teachers benefited from having more guidance and structure to help them in this process. You will notice that we provide questions at the end of the chapter for you to think about on your own, but also questions that you can address with a group of peers. Working with

a colleague in a community of practice strengthens the learning of the entire group.

The Self-Evaluation Process

In the chapter that follows, we describe the formative assessment process as a cycle in which a teacher is continually asking a series of three questions (Wiliam, 2004): Where are my students headed? Where are they right now? How can I close the gap between where they are and where I want them to be? The formative assessment process is all about identifying learning goals for your students and then identifying where they are in relation to those goals. The gap-closing is achieved through timely, specific, corrective feedback; adjustments to instruction; and engaging peers in the support process. While these steps move students closer to the original learning goals, they also enable the teacher to establish new goals as learning progresses.

Students engaged in formative assessment also can ask these same questions: Where am *I* headed? Where am *I* right now? How can *I* close the gap between where I am and where I want to be? The three questions also have applicability in terms of your self-evaluation of how you implement formative assessment. You can ask yourself, Where am I going? Where am I now? How do I close the gap?

The Self-Evaluation Cycle

Where am I going? (Chapter 2)

Where am I now? (Chapters 3 and 4)

How do I close the gap? (Chapters 5 and 6)

Where Am I Going?

As a teacher who is about to embark on an evaluation of your own formative assessment practice, you also can think about the three questions above in relation to your formative assessment practice. The first question is "Where am I going?" Rather than focusing on *student* learning goals, in formative assessment the focus is on *your* learning goals. In the next chapter we give you a vision of formative assessment practice. Some aspects of the descriptions are likely familiar to you and represent practices you already use in your classroom. Other practices may be less familiar to you or may not be things that you do on a regular basis.

Where Am I Now?

The second question is "Where am I now?" Chapters 3 and 4, along with the accompanying materials on the website, are designed to help you identify areas of practice to work on. This question creates a cyclical process. Thus, you likely will return to these chapters and the resources on more than one occasion as you choose different areas of practice on which to focus.

How Do I Close the Gap?

The remaining chapters are designed to support you in the exploration of formative assessment ideas to help you answer question 3, "How do I close the gap between where my current practice is and where I want it to be?" Just as the self-evaluation aspect of Chapters 3 and 4 is something that you will revisit, these final chapters are also part of that cyclical process.

The Journey

There is no *right* way to begin this process. Each person's formative assessment journey will be unique. Each of you has a distinctive profile of strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, each of you can choose different areas of focus for new approaches in your classroom. Effective formative assessment practice is multifaceted, but you do not need to begin working on all fronts immediately. What is important is that you identify some place to start (and Chapter 3 will help you with this).

Think of this process like training for a triathlon. Many people who decide to compete in a triathlon do so because they really like to swim, run, or bike, but they are not necessarily strong in all three areas. Training is an incremental process, starting with shorter distances than the ultimate race will require, but building up gradually over time. Training in one area tends to have benefits across the other areas. Swimming is a great cardio workout, resulting in improved stamina. In turn, improved stamina benefits the running and cycling components of the race.

Improving formative assessment practice is a bit like training for a triathlon—your strength may be engaging students in peer assessment or asking questions to get at the heart of student learning. You may need more training in other areas, but you can begin the process gradually. There will be cross-training benefits. For example, suppose

you choose to focus on learning intentions for each lesson to identify the key information students need. The process of working on learning intentions, perhaps with a colleague, may actually help you develop better classroom questions to identify whether students really have understood the learning intention.

Overview of the Chapters

In Chapter 2 we present two examples of formative assessment practice and then examine several different definitions of formative assessment. We also present some of the research about the impact that formative assessment can have in your classroom.

In Chapter 3 we describe the beginning point for the self-evaluation process. Here we give you an opportunity to think about the general information about formative assessment in the context of your own instructional practice. Our goal is to help you choose a target area from the full breadth of formative assessment. Establishing a more limited focus will help you with the evidence collection process we present in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 4, we focus on an in-depth evaluation of the area or areas you identified initially in Chapter 3. We suggest sources of evidence to help with this process, such as observing or informally interviewing peers. In addition, we introduce several resources that can be found on the website accompanying this book. After you have identified your own strengths and weaknesses with respect to formative assessment, we conclude Chapter 4 with setting goals and creating a specific plan to guide your actions for four to six weeks. There is no expectation that any one set of goals would represent all the changes you might ultimately want to make to practice. Rather, in Chapter 4 we focus on selecting goals that are achievable and manageable. What are you going to do to change your practice?

Chapter 5 focuses on ways in which you can find support to help you implement change, both in terms of people that can support you and actions that you can take. Chapter 5 introduces the idea of the learn-practice-reflect-revise cycle (Thompson & Wiliam, 2008). Here we invite you to try out some new practices in your classroom, reflect on them, and revise as necessary. This forms a cycle of action within the larger process, which is a cycle in and of itself. Figure 1.1 illustrates the larger cycle that is driven by the content in Chapters 3 through 6, along with the smaller cycle, which is the specific focus of Chapter 5.

Chapters 6 and 7 conclude the book with the idea of an evidence chain. This evidence chain supports you to think through the question, "How will I know if I have been successful?" It also helps you decide when you are ready for a new challenge with respect to formative assessment.

Before you begin an in-depth reading of each chapter, you might also find it helpful to read Chapter 7. This chapter provides a summary of the big ideas in this book. Knowing the end point might help you better plan your journey to get there.

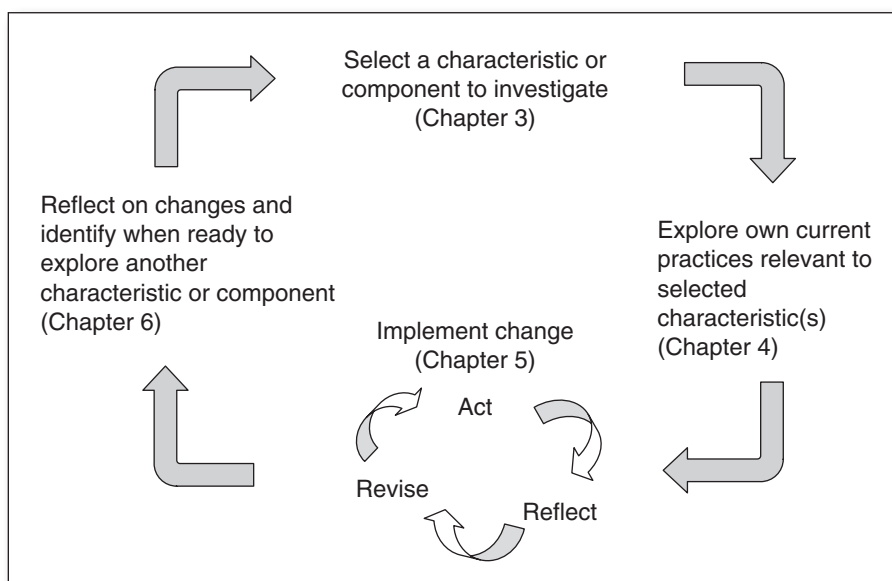**Figure 1.1**   The Cycle-Within-the-Cycle Process

Figure 1.1 will be used at the start of Chapters 3 through 6 to reorient you to where you are in the process. The next chapter is your opportunity to examine formative assessment more closely, beginning with two examples of practice. It is an exciting journey, and we wish you well with it as you begin.