

Formative Assessment: A Look Down the Road

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All lingering thoughts of sleep immediately evaporated as I exited the hotel door looking for my rental car in the windy, 22-degree Midwest weather. The sun was out despite the chilly weather, which always perplexes my Arizona brain. I found the car and noticed I parked it backward. Ice covered much of the windshield, but the rear window was clear. “No problem,” I thought, until I noticed that the rental didn’t have an ice scraper.

The ice only covered about 60 percent of the window. I could see OK as long as I was careful, so I left the hotel parking lot squinting through the ice. Then I had a brilliant idea: Why not melt the ice with the windshield wiper fluid? This Arizona consultant had a quick lesson in winter weather driving when the spray froze on the windshield, lessening my visibility. I rolled down the window and steered to the side of the road. I could still see perfectly out the rear-view mirrors, but that was not much help.

Formative assessment in the United States is just like my iced-over rental car; it provides a quick view out the rear window but gives no view of the learning journey ahead and no indications of progress toward the destination. Always assessing students on the past, with no look into the future, is like my attempt to drive with no view out the windshield.

What does formative assessment look like when it is designed to give students the windshield view as well as the rear-view mirror perspective? During the first week of school, students receive a complete list of background knowledge to be learned over the course of the year plus a complete description of what they’ll be able to do at the end of the year. Educators call these documents “key concepts,” “essential learnings” or “knowledge maps.” Their key attribute is that they were written for their audience, students, and not exclusively for educators. Each year the editing process has the aim of making the key concepts even more clear to students.

Key concept lists are not to be confused with syllabi, lists of assignments, grading practices or even the table of contents in a textbook. They are more simple—mere statements of what students will learn during the school year. For these concept lists to be of the utmost value to students, they must be internally aligned from grade level to grade level and course to course. For example, no key concepts written for Algebra I can be included as a key concept for Algebra II; no vocabulary in grade one can be included as a vocabulary on any other grade level list.

Once the students are given the learning concepts for the year, then the windshield view of formative assessment is possible. Without the concepts for the year, formative assessment is limited to the rear-view look. The question to be answered continually for each student and for the class as a whole is: Are we on track to meet end-of-the-year expectations? For example, if one-third of the year has passed, have students learned one-third of the year’s content? Formative assessment should always be based

upon what is expected at the end of the year, not on what was taught during the last week or the last quarter.

Only looking at what was taught in the past is like me trying to drive with an iced-over windshield. Yes, one can see out the back, but windshields are rather important for journeys. When parents ask how their son or daughter is doing, the answer should always be comparing end-of-the-year expectations to where the student is at the moment. Even graded exams can follow the same format. At the end of the first quarter, students are given an end-of-the-year final that is graded. However, the grading scale is based upon answering only 25 percent correct. For example, on a final with 60 questions, 15 correct at the end of the first quarter is considered a perfect paper; at the end of the semester 30 would be perfect; 45 correct at third quarter; and, of course, 60 correct at year's end.

It is well known that kindergartners come to school with all the intrinsic motivation they need for life. The windshield view of assessment nourishes this intrinsic motivation by continually helping students to be aware of their progress in relation to end-of-the-year expectations, and many students will be ahead of schedule.

You might be wondering how there is enough time or space to give students complete end-of-the-year formative assessments—that must be way too many questions. The answer is using random sampling of end-of-the-year content, graphing the progress and then teaching students starting in kindergarten to interpret the graphs. That way, students can note whether their results are halfway up the graph by Christmas, for example.

The windshield view of formative assessment is entirely possible when students know where they are heading on their year-long learning journey as well as their progress toward their end goal. They need little or no extrinsic motivation to continue learning when they can see week by week that they are on track to achieve their year-long goals. It is not unlike driving with a GPS that displays the estimated time of arrival. When the ETA stays constant or even drops by only a few minutes, it is motivating. However, when the driver comes to a construction delay, forcing the ETA to reset, an extra cup of coffee might be necessary to re-charge the driver—a little extra assistance.

It is not uncommon to see an antique car driving down the road, and one notable difference between it and modern-day vehicles is the size of the rear-view mirror. Today's mirrors are much larger and now even have a smaller wide-angle mirror on top of the side mirrors. The auto supply stores sell rear-view mirrors for inside the car that are at least twice the size of the standard mirror. In addition to adding the windshield view to our formative assessments, we need to strengthen the rear-view mirrors. The antique view of only looking back one quarter is old-fashioned; we need to look back multiple years. For example, the Lexington, Neb., formative math assessments are given 28 times per year, or seven times per quarter, and they have each have seven questions randomly selected from the end-of-the-year expectations plus two questions from the prior grade level and one question from two grade levels prior. This allows teachers to see behind them at least two years.

There is one more mirror inside the car—on the backside of the sun visor. We only look in this mirror when the car is stopped and we want to know if we have lettuce stuck in our teeth. For teachers, this

view is item analysis based upon the latest formative assessment. Item analysis is an analysis graph completed by students by counting the number of classroom errors per question and then graphing them in rank order, meaning the first column of the graph is the most missed item and the last column is the least missed item. Just as the vanity mirror is used when stopped, the item analysis gives both students and teachers pause. A question such as “Why did so many of us in fourth grade miss a third grade item?” is not unlike “Why is that lettuce still in my teeth?”

The implementation of the windshield view of formative assessment is a team effort between teachers and administrators. It takes time to agree on key concepts for each subject and each grade level; it takes time to establish the processes for random selection and graphing, just as it took time to stop by the side of the road and scrape the ice off the windshield with a credit card. In the long run, however, a clear view out the windshield makes sense both for driving a car and for driving education.

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