

PIIC News

The Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching

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Promoting the Use of Formative Assessment in a Climate of Summative Evaluation

By Tom Sebastian, PIIC Regional Mentor Coordinator (RMC)

With the emphasis that's being placed on the PA Common Core and Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the link between student achievement and teacher quality has been dramatically amplified. Dylan Wiliam (in his book titled, *Embedded Formative Assessment*) points out that teacher quality is the single most important variable in the education system. He goes on to say that "while there are many possible ways in which we could seek to develop the practice of serving teachers, attention to minute-by-minute and day-to-day formative assessment is likely to have the biggest impact on student outcomes."

"Although the term 'formative assessment' is part of our professional vocabulary, its definition and use can vary considerably from teacher to teacher and from school to school."

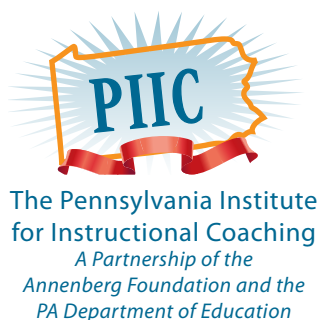
With formative assessment being recognized as a key element of effective instructional practice, one would expect it to permeate the school culture with teachers prioritizing assessments for learning. However, feedback from administrators, instructional coaches, teachers, and students indicates that:

- Although the term "formative assessment" is part of our professional vocabulary, its definition and use can vary considerably from teacher to teacher and from school to school.
- Traditionally, the most common approach used by teachers to address formative assessment has been the practice of the teacher asking questions, selecting students to answer the questions, and then commenting on the answers given. In addition, many teachers attempt to "backfill" formative assessment by dropping two or three of each student's lowest test score for each marking period.
- The use of formative assessment is often in competition with summative

assessment practices that are believed to provide extrinsic motivation for student engagement while helping teachers substantiate student report card grades.

- If teacher quality can be enhanced by the continuous use of authentic formative assessment, how can instructional coaches promote and support its use? Using the PIIC Model of Instructional Coaching and the *Before, During, After* (BDA) process, instructional coaches can do the following:
1. Provide the staff with a variety of research-based definitions of Formative Assessment and have the staff select the definition that resonates with them. An example of a viable definition is one provided by B. Cowie and B. Bell, "The process used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning."
 2. Share high impact resources and model strategies and techniques that support assessment for learning as opposed to assessment of learning. Keep stressing that formative assessment is a process and not a tool and that it improves the decisions made by the teacher and the learners.
 3. Reflect with teachers using the following three questions that Dylan Wiliam associates with the process of formative assessment:
 - a. Where is the learner going? (Learning goal)
 - b. Where is the learner right now?
 - c. How will the learner get there?

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The Pennsylvania Institute
for Instructional Coaching
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Professional Learning Opportunity Dates

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Conference Center
State College, PA

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PIIC'S MISSION: To support instructional coaching which helps teachers strengthen instructional practice, increase student engagement, and improve student learning.

2 Letter from PIIC's Executive Director

"The greatest impact on learning is the daily lived experiences of students in classrooms, and that is determined much more by how teachers teach than by what they teach" (Dylan Wiliam, Embedded Formative Assessment).

There are many buzz words in education that reinforce the "flavor of the day" philosophy. Some words are obsolete; some are cyclical; and some have been revised. Some words like differentiated instruction, brain research, and blended/hybrid learning are included in the more recent group of educational buzz words. Sometimes, the vocabulary has changed but the practices, especially the effective ones, are still implemented with integrity and fidelity.

One practice that needs regular and ubiquitous implementation is using formative assessments to support effective learning environments. We need to understand what formative assessment is and how these assessments are used to improve student learning. Not surprising, these assessments are meaningless if there is no plan to use what is learned from them.

Of course, there are several definitions of formative assessment. Black and Wiliam define formative assessment as "All those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged." I especially like Cowie

and Bell's definition, "The process used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning" (Wikipedia.org). Assessments used effectively modify teaching and learning.

Taking the pulse of each individual student's learning is critical for student success. Teachers must analyze their students' areas of strength and weakness and identify ways to address any gaps in learning. They need to provide opportunities for students to think about their thinking and take responsibility for learning.

Fortunately, many teachers are working with instructional coaches who help them make instructional decisions based on collected data followed by the appropriate adjustments in teaching. They work together to co-plan and/or co-teach to consistently implement effective instructional practices that help increase student engagement and improve student learning. This is not a "once and done" or "drop-in" relationship for the teacher and coach. This is a process that occurs over time; is developmental; and requires insight, skill, and experience.

Formative Assessments are formative which means they help shape an opinion based on data; they are valuable assessments to help teachers create a "scrapbook" of a student's development, a snapshot in time to be used to assess what learning has taken place. Teachers

need to review these "scrapbooks" every day that tell the stories about each individual and adapt their instructional delivery based on their analysis of what students know, understand what they should be able to do at the end of the learning cycle, and reflect on whether or not the learning outcomes were met.

So, what do teachers need to enhance their own development about formative assessment? Teachers need time to reflect upon their assessment practices and benefit from [observing] and consulting with other teachers about effective practices and about changes they would like to make (National Research Council, 2001). They need support in understanding the importance and value of monitoring student progress. It's not the summative assessment that makes a difference; that's just the autopsy, an examination when it's too late to remedy.

Coaches are in the ideal position to work with teachers and guide them in the process of student assessment. Working together, teachers and coaches collectively problem-solve, communicate openly, share feedback, and reflect "on, in, and about" their actions. Their ongoing collaboration leads to thoughtful planning that results from collecting, analyzing and using the data in ways that make a difference in student learning.

Have a happy and healthy New Year!

Galen B. Eisenberg

Please access PIIC's online resource, ***The Instructional Coaching Resource Guide:***
www.instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org

Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom

Book Review by Heather Moschetta, IU 3 PIIC Mentor

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey have teamed up to co-author numerous books and resources for ASCD and Literacy for Life, their educational consulting company. One of my favorites is *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom* (ASCD, 2007). This book takes a practical and creative approach to formative assessment techniques, centered around the idea that improved performance necessitates ongoing assessment and adjustment.

One advantage to this book is that it is not a "cover-to-cover" read thus making it easy for a coach or teacher to pick up,

flip through the examples, and find a formative assessment to use in class. Each assessment provides a teacher-friendly explanation, which clarifies misconceptions and makes it easy for teachers to use them effectively. Fisher and Frey include the research

and rationale behind each formative assessment as well as examples and authentic scenarios from teachers who have

"Each assessment provides a teacher-friendly explanation, which clarifies misconceptions and makes it easy for teachers to use them effectively."

Continued on page 3, Checking for Understanding

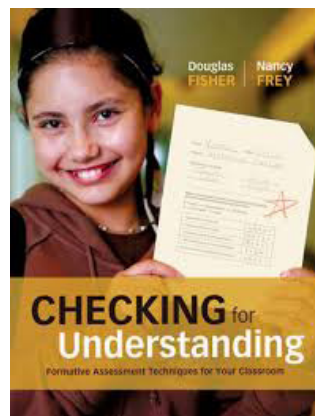
used them in schools with a variety of demographics.

From a coaching perspective, the book lends itself to reflective practice; in fact, in the foreword, Jay McTighe writes, “I encourage you to actively reflect on your own assessment practices as you traverse its pages. To what extent do you use the ideas suggested? Which suggested formative assessment methods best apply to your specific teaching situation? How will you apply these ideas to enhance the learning of your students?” The book’s afterword provides a strategy analysis grid, which could serve as a great coaching tool to help teachers figure out which formative assessments presented in the book will work best for them.

Checking for Understanding aligns beautifully with the PIIC model. Coaches can use the book to guide one-on-one and small group coaching, collecting and using formative assessment data to change classroom practice, and fostering literacy practices across the curriculum. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are almost entirely literacy-based, as they address formative assessment through oral language, teacher questioning, and writing. In my coaching experience, it was those chapters I used the most, encouraging teachers to use such techniques as value lineups, misconception analyses, yesterday’s news, and take a stand.

Although the book was published in 2007 and is therefore a bit dated, most, if not all, techniques it presents are still usable and valuable for teachers and coaches alike.

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“Teachers need to use a wide variety of assessment systems (and regularly check our students’ understanding) to know whether or not our instructional interventions, modifications, accommodations, and extensions are working.”

Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom

Formative Assessment Questions on Complex Concepts

By Becky Duffy, Colonial School District Instructional Coach

As a student progresses through the educational system, the complexity of skills and the amount of content in the curriculum increases dramatically, and as a result, the type of questions we ask become more and more complicated. In one brief question on a complex concept, students may be asked to illustrate their ability to read, interpret, synthesize and create simultaneously. Although this type of question is essential in developing critical thinkers, it is an ineffective way to formatively assess a student’s understanding.

The best formative assessments are *focused, specific and easy to grade and interpret*, so that the teacher can use the results immediately to inform his or her instruction, and so that we as coaches, can have efficient and effective conversations on using data to drive instruction in the classroom. We can support teachers through the PIIC model and Before-During-After (BDA) cycle in answering this very challenging question: how can we create quality formative assessments questions on complex concepts. Consider the following suggestions as you conduct *Before* conversations on creating formative

assessments with your colleagues:

Identify and focus on the specific skill and/or content that you would like to assess. Be mindful that you can separate skills from content, so that you can pinpoint if the student lacks the skill or lacks the understanding of the content. Also, try to breakdown the complex concept into smaller measurable parts.

“The best formative assessments are focused, specific, and easy to grade and interpret...”

Determine how the students will respond so that it is easy for the teacher to grade and interpret. You can use a multiple choice format, which is simple to grade; however, if you require a written response, try asking for a specific number of examples or details in the answer. Providing bullet points or numbers is more efficient than reading a narrative response.

Think about how you plan on using the information gathered. What is the goal of your formative assessment? Do you want to identify struggling students or those who need to be challenged?

Strategies such as remediation, flexible grouping, tiered lessons and challenge by choice are possible strategies to differentiate for your learners.

For instance, consider the following two examples on determining mood, a challenging concept in Language Arts. Both examples assess similar concepts, yet one is more focused, specific, and easier to grade and interpret:

- Example: What is the mood in “The Lottery,” and how does Shirley Jackson create it in the text?
- Better Example: List three words or phrases from “The Lottery” that illustrate its mood.

Although both examples assess similar concepts, the better example is more explicit. The teacher will be able to get specific information on his or her students in very little turnaround time, making it an effective formative assessment question, and will glean better data that can be discussed in the *After* conversation of the BDA cycle.

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Using Formative Assessment to Guide Student Learning

By Loriann Ruddy, IU 18 PIIC Mentor

Measuring what and how well students learn is an important component in the process of strengthening and improving our nation's schools. Tests, along with student grades and teacher evaluations, can provide critical measures of students' skills, knowledge, and abilities. Most of the testing conducted in schools focuses on a summative approach where the findings are rarely used to drive learning by informing teachers' instructional practices. Summative assessment, sometimes referred to as assessment of learning, typically documents how much learning has occurred at a point in time; its purpose is to measure the level of student, school, or program success.

The information that is most valuable for teaching must focus on student thinking and learning. Dylan Wiliam states that, "The central idea of formative assessment, or assessment for learning, is that evidence of student learning is used to adjust instruction to better meet students' learning needs." Dylan Wiliam describes formative assessment practice as students and teachers using evidence of learning to adapt teaching and learning to meet immediate learning needs. Many teachers are hesitant to actively use formative assessments within their classrooms. Teachers are often reluctant to use valuable class time to formatively assess their students' understanding, and instead, focus on moving on with the content to cover the content addressed on the high stakes assessments. However, in the midst of trying to cover more content, students are actually learning less. Without adequate time to reflect on and process the new information, students are unlikely to retain much of the information.

Professional development plays a key role in helping teachers to implement formative assessments. Very few teachers are trained to use formative assessments and have no experience implementing its use in classrooms. Instructional coaches can greatly impact teachers' practices by offering support in terms of how to use formative assessments. Coaches working through the PIIC model can support teachers' use of formative assessment by clarifying the definition of formative assessment and addressing expectations. Many authors and researchers have varied definitions; with that in mind,

it is important for school districts to establish a common definition and expectations related to formative assessment.

Using the *BDA* cycle of coaching, coaches can provide continuous support for teachers as they refine their instructional practice. In the *Before*, coaches and teachers collaborate about using effective strategies and evidence of student progress. Collecting formative assessment data in the *During* of the coaching cycle and then discussing these data in the *After* is an easy way to put the students at the center of coaching conversations. It also provides rich opportunities to understand the impact of coaching on student and teacher learning.

Coaches often wonder how they can encourage more teachers to participate in the coaching cycle. Too often, coaches face resistance from teachers and worry if their coaching is making the desired impact. By putting formative assessment data at the center of coaching conversations, coaches create conversations that are grounded and specific, moving student learning forward.

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"Instructional coaches can greatly impact teachers' practices by offering support in terms of how to use formative assessments."

The PIIC 4 Quadrant Framework

PIIC advocates **one-on-one and small group support** for teachers, coaches, and school leaders using the **BDA cycle of consultation**.

PIIC focuses on **collecting, analyzing, and using data** to identify student needs, assess changes in classroom instructional practice and measure student progress.

PIIC emphasizes the use of **evidence-based literacy practices**.

PIIC supports **reflective and non-evaluative** practices.

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