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the education blog

Making it work:
How formative assessment
can supercharge
your practice

nwea

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What is formative assessment?

Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become self-directed learners.

The formative assessment cycle asks teachers and students to consider three essential questions:

1. Where is the learner going?

2. Where is the learner now?

3. What's next in the learning journey?

Responding to these questions involves integrating and embedding the following practices in a collaborative and respectful classroom environment:

- Clarifying learning goals and success criteria

- Eliciting and analyzing evidence of student thinking

- Engaging in self-assessment and peer feedback

- Providing actionable feedback

- Using evidence and feedback

Dear educator,

The focus of this e-book—formative assessment—is nothing new in education. However, the topic is always a timely one.

The truth is that educators are always under a lot of pressure, time is always tight, and student needs are always great. Formative assessment is a critical tool for addressing these pain points, bringing student and teacher focus to learning, addressing student misconceptions, and building up students as independent learners. In this e-book, we share concrete ways to make formative assessment work for your students, knowing the need for accurate information to drive instruction will always be great.

Meeting teacher needs

Assessment information must serve teachers' needs in directing instruction. It must make its way through the clamor of competing priorities, constraints, and the variety of other curriculum and instructional tools that teachers are asked to implement. This e-book offers two approaches for integrating formative work into a broader instructional framework: responsive planning with the end in mind and a balanced assessment system.

Formative assessment as part of responsive planning puts learning in the context of where students have been, going beyond "in-the-moment" learning adjustments to treat learning as a broader journey. Formative assessment as part of a larger, balanced assessment system can support each step of a teacher's decision-making process.

Serving students

As a practice, formative assessment zeros in on meeting student needs and supporting students as independent and empowered learners. This is a new way of thinking about assessment for many educators, who have primarily seen assessment as failing to support students as well-rounded learners. No teacher wants their student's learning

psyche dominated by fear of a test. Formative assessment provides tools to dispel these fears, help students think about their learning, and leverage assessment as a way to promote student growth and personal development.

Formative assessment can also be intergrated with strategies for supporting students' social-emotional learning goals and can help students build the muscles they need to stay focused and motivated.

Making it work

In their seminal textbook on classroom assessment, Jan Chappuis and Rick Stiggins argue an effective classroom assessment system involves both "doing it right" (gathering accurate information on where students are) and "using it well" (using that information to drive enhancements to student learning). To this list, we humbly add a third element: "making it work."

We believe it's important to support educators in discovering and integrating best practices into their day-to-day work. We hope this e-book helps you make formative assessment a central tool in your instructional toolbox.

Jacob Bruno
Vice President, NWEA Professional Learning

How responsive planning can strengthen your formative assessment practice

Brooke Mabry

In my work with educators over the years, I have found the majority associate formative assessment with the phrase "assessment for learning" and describe it as "in-the-moment adjustments to teaching." While both of these are true, my work with educators focuses on helping them cultivate a more robust definition and application of formative assessment.

As an organization, we subscribe to the CCSSO revised definition of formative assessment and, with permission, have adapted it for use in our organization:

> Formative assessment is a **planned, ongoing process** used by **all students and teachers during learning and teaching** to **elicit and use evidence of student learning** to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and **support students to become self-directed learners**.

Notice the phrases in bold. Our definition situates both students and teachers at the heart of the formative practice, ensuring it is a process done *with* students rather than *to* or *for* them. We seek to position formative assessment not as a thing, but as a process, an intentional and planned iterative cycle, used by both students and teachers to accomplish two specific student outcomes: improve understanding of intended learning and support agency.

Formative assessment that goes beyond "in-the-moment adjustments" helps teachers focus on empowering students; collaboration between teachers and learners; and learning as a journey, rather than a destination. Responsive planning with the end in mind—a larger process that relies on formative assessment to be effective—is a way to put your formative assessment practice in a larger context, one that can greatly strengthen your teaching and boost your students' learning.

Responsive planning with the end in mind: What it is and how to do it

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, there is a powerful scene where Alice arrives at a fork in the road. Spotting the Cheshire cat sitting high above her in a tree, she asks him which way she should go. He responds with a question of his own: "Where do you want to go?" When she says that she doesn't know, the cat, in his sly way, says it doesn't matter.
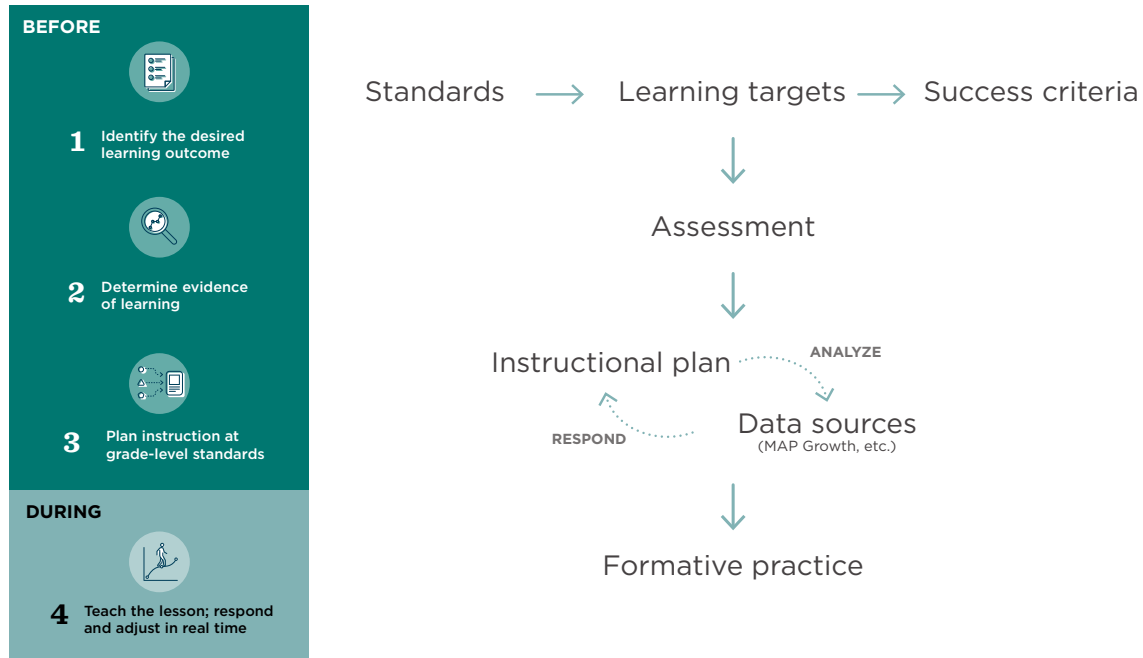
Isn't this true in our instruction as well? If we don't know where we want to go in our teaching—and where we want our students to go through their learning—any old lesson plan will get us there. Either road in that fork will do.

Responsive planning with the end in mind is an approach that challenges us to undertake our practice with more intention. It's designed to respond to students' unique needs *before* and *during* a lesson, as outlined in the purple and blue sections of the visual below. And it relies heavily on formative assessment to create a complete picture.

Intended to ensure strong alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment, responsive planning with the end in mind allows you to create a plan that outlines assessments, instructional activities, and tasks responsive to students' learning needs and preferences. The plan also indicates when in

> **Formative assessment that goes beyond "in-the-moment adjustments" helps teachers focus on empowering students; collaboration between teachers and learners; and learning as a journey, rather than a destination.**

the lesson students will be assessed, and how teachers and students can adjust based on the results. Let's walk through the four steps.

BEFORE

1 Identify the desired learning outcome

2 Determine evidence of learning

3 Plan instruction at grade-level standards

DURING

4 Teach the lesson; respond and adjust in real time

Standards ⟶ Learning targets ⟶ Success criteria

↓

Assessment

↓

Instructional plan ·········· **ANALYZE**

RESPOND ·········· Data sources (MAP Growth, etc.)

↓

Formative practice

1. Before instruction: Identify the desired learning outcome

To determine your desired learning outcome—that place you want to go, as the Cheshire cat would say—you'll need to look to your grade-level standards. Unwrap the content to establish student-friendly learning targets and success criteria that explicitly support students in understanding the aims of your instruction and the criteria to measure their learning progress. Here's how it could look in ELA, content area reading, and math.

- **ELA:** Try a text-based approach. It may be a departure from what you're used to, but this method puts text—rather than skills and strategies—front and center.

  First, dig into the text to identify the key understandings you want students to have after reading and to determine what makes the text complex, such as aspects of meaning, knowledge, structure, or language. Second, create a focusing question and writing task that will allow students to express that they grasped the key understandings. Third, with the qualitative complexity in mind, identify the standards that will support students in navigating the most challenging aspects of the text, and use those standards to create scaffolded, text-dependent questions that will support students in making meaning of the text and drive toward the focusing question and writing task.

- **Content area reading:** Content area reading refers to reading to learn, rather than learning to read. It encompasses all the skills and abilities required for students to access, comprehend, and apply informational text used to impart content understanding and learning. If you're a content area teacher, you, too, can support students in accessing text so that they can glean the content you are trying to teach.

  Just like ELA teachers, consider a text-based approach when planning for instruction involving complex informational texts. The process is the same, except the focusing questions and tasks should drive toward content understanding in grade-level standards.

- **Math:** Strong mathematical instruction centers primarily on where the standards focus; considers coherence across grades and links to major topics within the grades; and attends with equal intensity to the aspects of rigor in the standards, including conceptual understanding; procedural skill and fluency; and application.

2. Before instruction: Determine evidence of learning

In the second step of responsive planning with the end in mind, consider how you and your students will know they have met the desired learning outcome identified in step one by establishing the evidence you will accept and how you will collect it. This involves identifying or designing the formative and summative assessments you will use when you're actually teaching the lesson. These are the assessments that will allow you to continually adjust your teaching.

3. Before instruction: Plan instruction at grade-level standards

Once you know your learning outcomes and how to measure learning progress and mastery, you can plan the instructional activities that will support and guide students to those outcomes. Begin planning focused on the grade-level standards and rigor, as if all students are ready for grade-level instruction. Then, in order to promote access to equitable instruction, consult your multiple data sources—from curricular assessments to scores from an interim assessment, like MAP® Growth™— to determine where students may need additional support or challenge to access the instruction in a way that promotes productive struggle, that just-right level of challenge in a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is also where you can consider students' social-emotional learning needs.

> Responsive planning with the end in mind is [...] designed to respond to students' unique needs *before* and *during* a lesson [...]. And it relies heavily on formative assessment to create a complete picture.

4. During instruction: Teach the lesson; respond and adjust in real time

This fourth step is all about instruction. Put your plan to work and use your [formative practice](#) to monitor and adjust the plan in real time based on how students progress. Be sure to make notes about what works so you can use your reflections to anticipate and proactively plan for potential student needs in the future.

In closing

What I find most exciting about responsive planning with the end in mind is that we don't have to wait until we are in the teaching and learning cycle to begin our formative practice. Analyzing existing data sources to inform responsive adjustments to a plan *before* teaching will save you precious instructional time, since you will be proactively anticipating and planning for student needs. And it will make your formative assessment methods much more effective. **TLG**
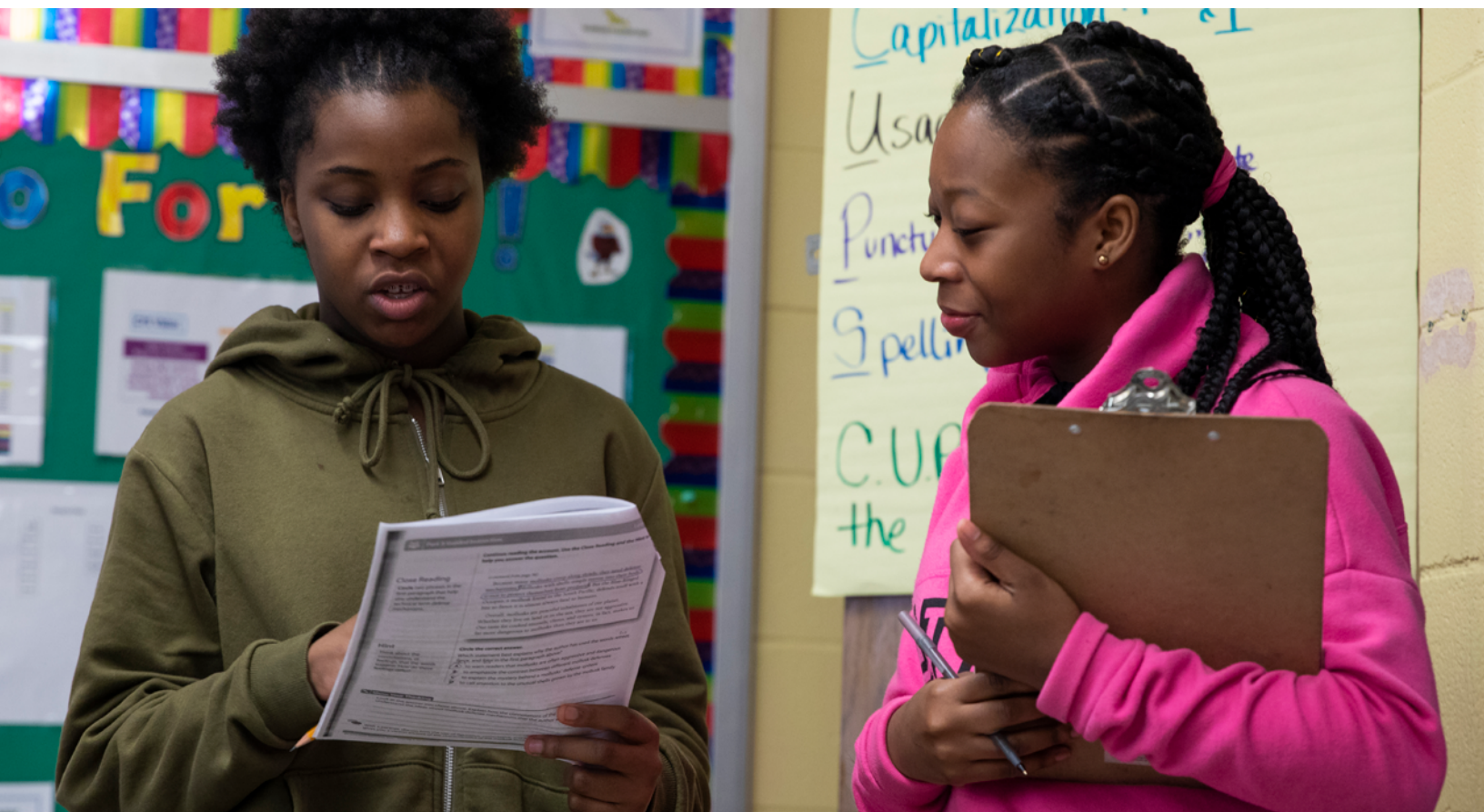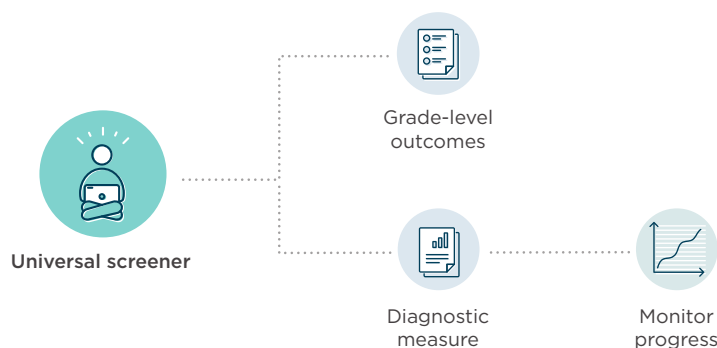
How to build a balanced assessment system

Steve Underwood

There is a saying that schools can be data rich, but information poor. This means that you can have many sources of data on students but lack the coherent information you need to make effective decisions. It's helpful to consult many sources of formal and informal data to inform your instructional design, of course, but without an intentional, well-thought-out plan for how all the sources of data fit together, it will be hard to make decisions well. A coherent approach to assessment practices can streamline decision-making and improve learning.

One way to achieve this coherence is by developing a balanced assessment system. A balanced assessment system intentionally makes use of formative, interim, and summative assessment practices—with the most emphasis placed on formative assessment. This type of system is at the heart of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), which uses a decision-tree approach to assist in streamlining decisions, as shown below.

Universal screener

Grade-level outcomes

Diagnostic measure

Monitor progress

Strike a balance

To create a balanced assessment system, there are two major domains that teachers need to consider:

1. The standards-based core instruction domain that aligns to grade-level or advanced content

2. The intervention domain for students who are not yet achieving standards and need additional support

Formative assessment plays a key role in both domains and should always be the starting point. It begins as a universal screening process for all students. Universal screening can take many forms, such as an early literacy probe, behavioral data, attendance patterns, grades, and even MAP Growth or MAP® Reading Fluency™. The purpose, just like when doctors take your blood pressure and weight during an annual checkup, is to look for signs that something might be off track.

Following the administration of a universal screening process, educators face a decision point that affects which of the two domains come into focus for teaching and learning.

For students who are more or less on track with the universal screening measures, teachers should proceed with business as usual in the core instruction domain, using formative assessment practices to connect to and activate prior knowledge in ways that guide the relationship of teaching and learning, check for understanding along the way, and assess mastery against grade-level outcomes to determine if future adjustments need to be made.

This moment in time is an opportunity to revisit and rebalance your assessment practices. [...] [A] balanced assessment system—built on formative assessment practices—can guide instruction to meet the needs of your students.

If the universal screener indicates that the learning or social-emotional well-being of a student is at risk, then the best course of action for teachers is to employ formative assessment practices that diagnose and pinpoint what support is needed within the intervention domain, monitor progress on a learning progression, and assess mastery of prerequisite learning.

How to move forward with core instruction

All students should experience teaching and learning that supports their success in the core instruction domain. This begins with teachers reviewing the scope and sequence of standards-aligned content, establishing clear learning targets, and using formative assessment data to

develop responsive plans for lessons and units. The figure below illustrates three key assessment practices within core instruction: activate prior knowledge, check for understanding, and check for mastery and adjust instruction as needed.

CORE INSTRUCTION DOMAIN

Universal screener

Activate
prior knowledge

Check for
understanding

Check for
mastery and adjust
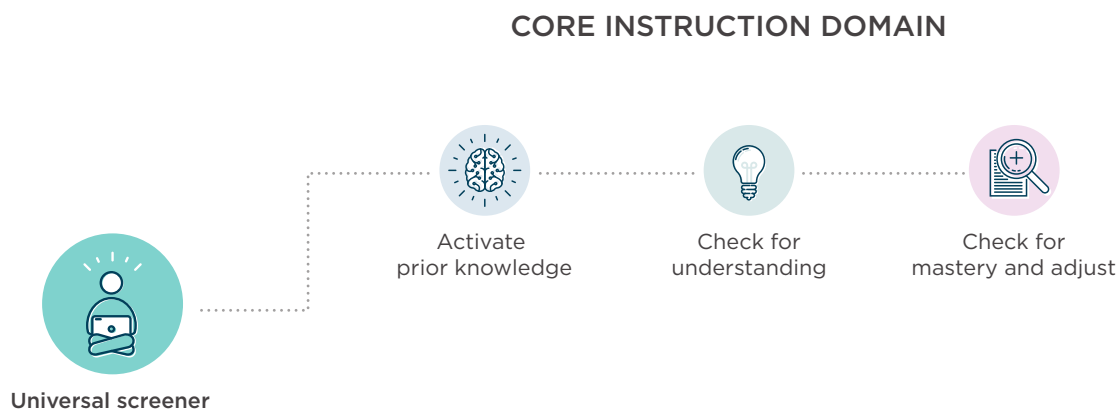
Before core instruction: Activate prior knowledge

Lessons and units should start with formative assessment practices in the form of a pre-assessment or a process of activating prior knowledge. This serves the purpose of illustrating what students already know and assists teachers and students in understanding the learning path that students will need to take to reach the learning target.

Formative assessment at the beginning of a lesson or unit can take many forms, such as entrance tickets, K-W-L chart activities, Venn diagrams, think-pair-share, and more. No matter the type, a formative assessment activity at the beginning of a lesson or unit will create the context for helping you know how to adapt core instruction by adding more scaffolding for students who may struggle; adapting content to adjust for key background knowledge that the whole class may need to be successful; or developing differentiated paths for advanced students who may wish to go deeper with their learning in the particular content area.

During core instruction: Check for understanding

Formative assessment practices should take the form of checking for understanding. In a lesson, for example, this may occur when you monitor small group conversations, review students' quick writing assignments, or listen to how students report out on jigsaw activities. Over the course of a unit, formative assessment should be occurring throughout, even incorporating more formal interim assessments, quizzes, and longer-term assignments.

What makes these practices formative is using them to adjust instruction to keep learning progressing. If the activities are used for grading or there's no change to the long-term instructional trajectory, they no longer serve a formative purpose and swing over into the arena of summative assessment.
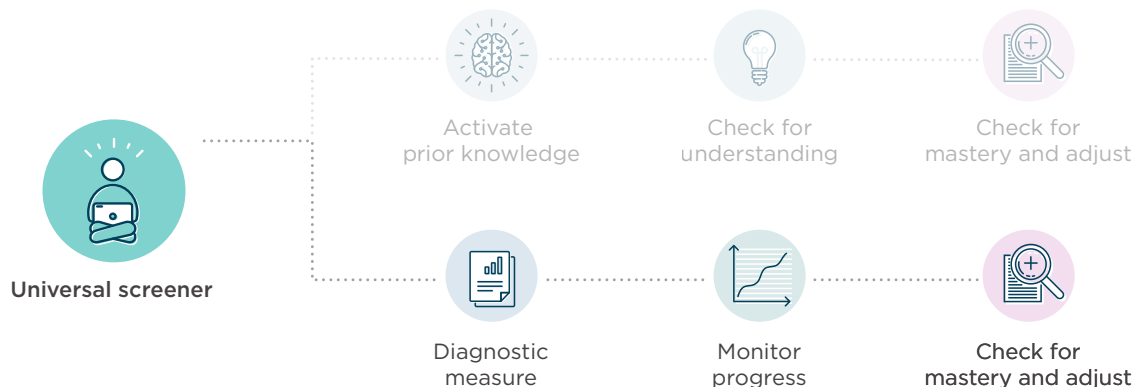
After core instruction: Check for mastery and adjust

At the end of a lesson or unit, a balanced assessment system will make use of purposeful summative assessment. If the learning targets were clear from the beginning, a summative assessment will focus solely on the success criteria by which students demonstrate that they have learned what was expected. It is often common practice that end-of-unit summative assessments do not serve a formative purpose. However, if you intend to reteach the content or proceed to a new unit that builds on the previous one, summative assessment can be utilized in a formative manner if there is an intentional effort made to adjust teaching and learning based on the degree to which students mastered the success criteria.

All students should experience teaching and learning that supports their success in the core instruction domain

Tackling the intervention domain

In the intervention domain, assessment practices often take on different terminology and more formal designs, but they represent similar ideas to the core instruction domain and are guided by the principles of formative assessment. When students are identified by a universal screener as being at risk, adopt the MTSS sequence illustrated below: diagnose learning needs; monitor progress; and check for mastery and adjust.

Universal screener

Activate prior knowledge

Check for understanding

Check for mastery and adjust

Diagnostic measure

Monitor progress

Check for mastery and adjust

INTERVENTION DOMAIN

Before intervention: Diagnose learning needs

In elementary schools, educators often make the mistake of making intervention about the content of the universal screener. For example, an early literacy screener might emphasize reading fluency, so some teachers will make intervention about fluency. Without diagnosis, the teacher may not uncover that the root cause of the student's poor fluency performance is an underlying issue with phonics.

By implementing a clear plan for diagnosis before intervening, you stay true to the idea of formative assessment by gaining the information you need to pinpoint the best starting point for teaching and learning. In early literacy, there are diagnostic assessments for phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, and more. In high school, a mathematics teacher may engage in diagnostic assessment by assessing students on a spectrum of math standards from lower grade levels. Regardless, the purpose of diagnostic assessment has the long-term learning trajectory in mind and can be matched with short-term success criteria that students can demonstrate to show their learning is on track. This creates the connection between diagnostic assessments and progress monitoring.

By implementing a clear plan for diagnosis before intervening, you stay true to the idea of formative assessment by gaining the information you need to pinpoint the best starting point for teaching and learning.

During intervention: Monitor progress

Once you pinpoint the entry level for intervention, instruction and a progress-monitoring plan are needed. For example, an eighth-grade algebra teacher may diagnose that a student has strengths in many areas but is struggling because they have not yet learned to identify when two expressions are equivalent (a sixth-grade standard). This means that *during* intervention, instruction would begin at this level, and a learning path would slowly build toward eighth-grade standards. Formative assessment would occur in the form of progress monitoring that is broken out to measure the success criteria of each step needed to meet the related eighth-grade math standards.

Similarly, in early literacy, when students have mastered their basic phonics skills but still need support working on automaticity, accuracy, and prosody (i.e., fluency), a teacher might choose to use the progress monitoring for oral reading test within MAP Reading Fluency as a progress-monitoring tool.

Similarly, in early literacy, if a third-grade student is identified as struggling with variant vowels (a first-grade skill), intervention would build from variant vowels and measure student progress toward mastery of this and successive phonics skills until the student demonstrates grade-appropriate success criteria with word reading.
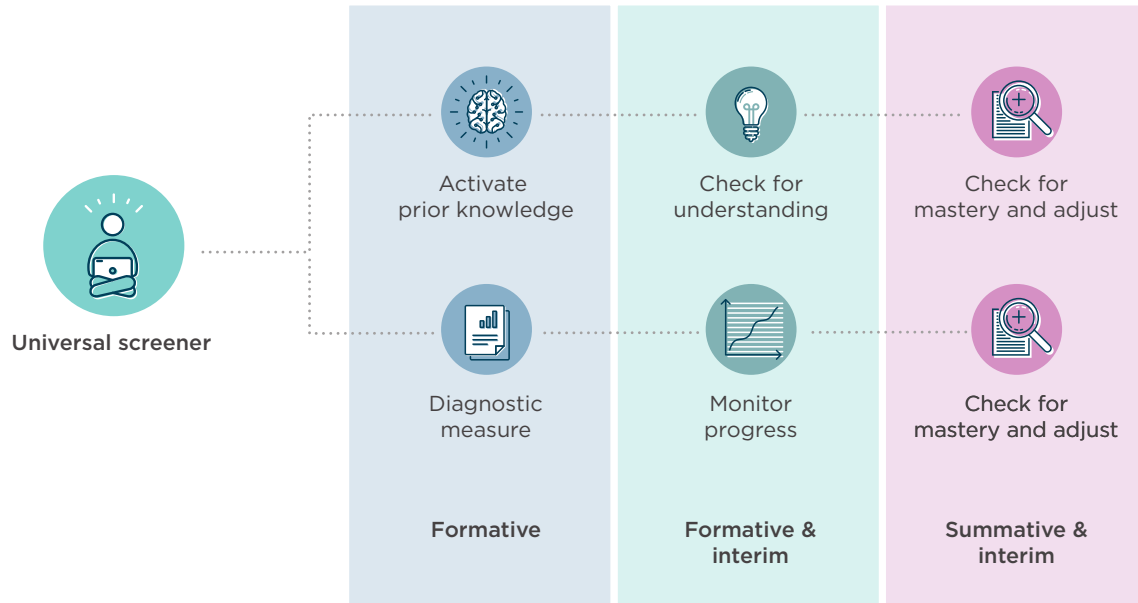
After intervention: Check for mastery and adjust

Following instruction, student learning should be verified through a summative assessment that measures whether or not a student has mastered the goals that have been set within their learning progression. A summative approach could even be the same diagnostic assessment tool that was used to identify the student's learning needs. If this is the case, the purpose changes from a formative, diagnostic use to a summative checkpoint that assesses mastery.

By implementing a clear plan for diagnosis before intervening, you stay true to the idea of formative assessment by gaining the information you need to pinpoint the best starting point for teaching and learning.

Tying it all together

Here's a visual representation of the sequence and relationship between formative, interim, and summative assessment and the relevant assessment approaches that are most helpful in the core instruction domain and the intervention domain.

Universal screener

Activate prior knowledge	Check for understanding	Check for mastery and adjust
Diagnostic measure	Monitor progress	Check for mastery and adjust
Formative	**Formative & interim**	**Summative & interim**

Want to be sure you're engaging in formative assessment every step of the way? Here's how:

- Use the information you glean about students *before* instruction to plan core instruction and intervention

- Take what you learn *during* instruction to respond to students' needs and adjust what comes next in your lesson or unit plans

- Put summative assessment gathered *after* instruction to use guiding how you will reteach content or adjust your plans for the next unit **TLG**

6 ways to help heal toxic stress, trauma, and inequity in your virtual or in-person classroom

Erin Beard and Lauren Wells

Because we care so deeply for our students, we might feel overwhelmed and even paralyzed when we consider the realities they face. Some good news (yes, I am shamelessly stealing from John Krasinski): One thing that can help us overcome paralysis is understanding how the learner-empowerer classroom assessment model—which has formative assessment practices at its core—can help us heal the effects of toxic stress and trauma as well as help us repair systems of inequity.

The shift from learner-manager to learner-empowerer

Many of us experienced a learner-manager model both as K–12 students and as educators in training. The process looks something like this: the teacher teaches *to* the students, the teacher gives tests *to* the students, the teacher assigns grades *to* the students. In a learner-manager model, classroom assessment processes and practices are done *to* students, not with them.

When classroom assessment practices are done in this way, when students have no voice, choice, or clear, predictable rhyme and reason, the experience can feel unsafe, unpredictable, unwelcoming, and even threatening. Salvatore Terrasi and Patricia Crain de Galarce explain that, "When children perceive their environment as a dangerous place, they can become hypervigilant, experiencing everyone and everything as a potential threat to their safety. Psychologically, they have a fragmented sense of self and are vulnerable to anxiety and depression; behaviorally, they are prone to the extremes of withdrawal or serious acting-out behaviors." All of this can compound stress, trauma, and inequity.

The purpose of a learner-empowerer model is to activate students as co-owners of the learning process. Classroom assessment processes and practices are done *with* students, not *to* them. Because the learner-empowerer model activates, leverages, and responds to students' lived experiences, voices, choices, and needs, it can help us interrupt biased educational structures and methods. The principles of the learner-empowerer model also require employing stress- and trauma-sensitive practices, making it possible to ameliorate the effects of toxic stress and trauma while also addressing inequity. Here's how the two align.

Learner-empowerer practices, rooted in formative assessment	Stress- and trauma-sensitive practices
Activate respect, collaboration, engagement, and agency as well as social-emotional and academic needs.	Encourage and incorporate learners' strengths and interests. Structure activities in predictable and emotionally safe ways. Provide opportunities for students to learn and practice regulation of emotions and modulation of behaviors. Ensure settings employ positive supports for behavior.
Clarify learning goals and paths.	Communicate expectations in clear, concise, and positive ways.
Elicit thinking.	Present information and assess learning using multiple modes.
Engage in self, peer, and teacher feedback.	Provide opportunities for learning how to interact effectively with others.
Practice using actionable feedback and evidence.	Provide opportunities for learning how to plan and follow through on assignments.

Sources: Learner-empowerer practices: Revising the definition of formative assessment. Stress- and trauma-sensitive practices: Trauma and learning in America's classrooms and Addressing race and trauma in the classroom.

How to keep empowering students

Some more good news: You've probably been following the learner-empowerer model, at least in part and maybe even without realizing it. The model is not a new idea; the components and learner-centered intent are already embedded in our educator professional standards (e.g., InTASC standards 3 and 6) and are the topics of existing professional development opportunities available through NWEA. The challenge now is to continue to empower students.

We know that learning environments and access to resources often vary. We'd like to help prepare you for whatever comes your way, so we've gathered some strategies that can be done with paper and pencil as well as digital tools.

1. **Incorporate welcoming/inclusion activities.** CASEL has some great ideas.
    Paper/pencil tools: A notebook or "do now" worksheet
    Digital tools: A video chat or document on a shared platform, like Google Docs

2. **Create learning teams and expectations.** Set expectations together, and elect class leaders to help monitor progress, celebrate successes, and follow up with issues.
    Paper/pencil tools: Paper ballots to vote on ideas for expectations and a handout of the final team expectations
    Digital tools: Mentimeter for polls, and a final or ready-to-edit-as-a-class document on a shared platform

3. **Use groups to get kids talking.** Practice small, structured pair or group conversations.
    Paper/pencil tool: Debrief circles
    Digital tool: Flip

4. **Set goals together.** Cue students to record learning goals and monitor their progress. P
    aper/pencil tools: A notebook or goal-setting worksheet
    Digital tool: A document on a shared platform

5. **Involve students in quiz writing.** After a chunk of learning, prompt students to anticipate possible quiz questions that review the learning. Students write the questions and quiz their peers.
    Paper/pencil tools: Notebooks, portable whiteboards, or a worksheet
    Digital tools: Kahoot! or Quizizz

6. **Try practice quizzes.** Have students compare their answers to a
   key and reflect on their answers.
   Paper/pencil tools: Notebooks or a handout
   Digital tool: A document on a shared platform

Here are some additional digital tools you can use to create interactive
lessons rich in formative assessment:

- Pear Deck and Nearpod let you create interactive presentations
  through PowerPoint or Google Slides.

- Edpuzzle lets you embed formative assessment into videos. You can
  even create a virtual field trip.

- Seesaw helps students use different digital mediums to show what
  they know and create portfolios of their work.

- Formative, Poll Everywhere, and Socrative let you create polls, word
  clouds, and quizzes.

You can do this

Our students will always benefit from quality learning experiences that
develop their knowledge and challenge their thinking. Ground your
practice in the learner-empowerer model and formative assessment to set
yourself and your students up for success. **TLG**

How formative assessment boosts metacognition— and learning

Vicki McCoy

In a June 2018 BOLD blog post, Annie Brookman-Byrne describes metacognition this way: "[M]etacognition is 'thinking about thinking,' but metacognition also encompasses the regulation of these thoughts—the ability to change them. It is a step further than simple awareness of thought processes, incorporating the ability to alter thoughts and behaviours."

Metacognition is a way of noticing our thinking that can lead to improving upon it. Metacognitive practices offer us ways to refine and expand on our range of skills, especially those in our areas of automaticity, which comprise a lot of what goes on in our brains on any given day.

Think about the steps you take when you get behind the wheel of a car and drive. Now try to recall your first time behind the wheel, the amount of energy and attention that you gave to backing out of a parking space, making a left turn, changing lanes. Big difference, right? We develop automaticity as a means to free up energy and attention for other things. And that's usually good. Except when it's not.

For teachers and students, many of their daily behaviors in the classroom fall into the category of automatic activity. But the bad news about *unexamined* automaticity is that we may not recognize our opportunities to change for the better. Enter metacognition: thinking about our thinking, about what we notice, how we react, where we go next. When we give our attention to otherwise automatic functions, we have a chance to notice what's not working so well, and also to embrace and amplify the things that are helping us to meet our goals.

Formative assessment, reporting for duty

One of the best ways to bring metacognition to the classroom is through the practice of formative assessment (FA). When educators develop and implement FA, they build awareness in their own practice and demonstrate for students the habits of mind that are conducive to learning. When those habits are embedded in the routines of teaching and learning in the classroom, the classroom culture is changed.

All of this is well supported by research on improving learning outcomes. Across content domains, FA techniques in the classroom are associated with some of the highest achievement gains for students among teaching strategies. This is especially true for students who begin at the lowest levels of achievement. For students whose backgrounds have not included modeling patterns and structures that are foundational to the learning process, FA can add transparency to what might seem to them like a game with hidden rules. As a former middle school teacher, I can attest to the fact that when such students see themselves "losing" that game repeatedly, they frequently declare it stupid and irrelevant, and opt out entirely. It's our job to change that.

A key benefit for these students, early or even later in the educational journey, may exist within the transparency that is inherently a part of the FA cycle. When teachers give voice to steps in the process of learning—planning, monitoring, and continuous improvement—and invite students to co-own them, students can see how the game is played, so to speak, and better understand their role in it. These steps are central in FA and are often shared in student-friendly language, such as, "Where am I going?" "Where am I now?" and "How will I get there?" Articulating this metacognitive process can be a first step in promoting an independent continuous improvement cycle for students, which, for some, may be a turning point

> When we give our attention to otherwise automatic functions, we have a chance to notice what's not working so well, and also to embrace and amplify the things that are helping us to meet our goals.

from disengagement to empowerment. Explicit modeling in the classroom during learning can provide a bridge for students to awareness of steps in the learning process that are implicit, that is, often assumed to be known and understood by all.

Moving from theory to practice

So, what does all of this look like? When FA is practiced in the classroom, the teacher is developing student metacognitive skills by helping students recognize where they are in their learning as well as what aspects of the learning process work best for them.

Let's say that I realize I do best when I use a visual organizer to break down complex ideas. When listening to a lecture or reading dense text, I may create a T chart to graphically arrange my notes. But some students haven't assimilated that as a strategy for learning. A formative discussion can change that.

What if I, as the teacher, model this on the board during a lesson, and explicitly invite students to self-assess their results using the T chart? Upon completion of the lesson, I'll ask them, "What do you remember about X, Y, or Z? Did the T chart we created help you remember? If yes, add that to your learning toolkit." If the T chart didn't help, I can suggest other strategies for students to test within this or other lessons. Perhaps a read-aloud with a partner will help to make the learning "sticky" for some students.
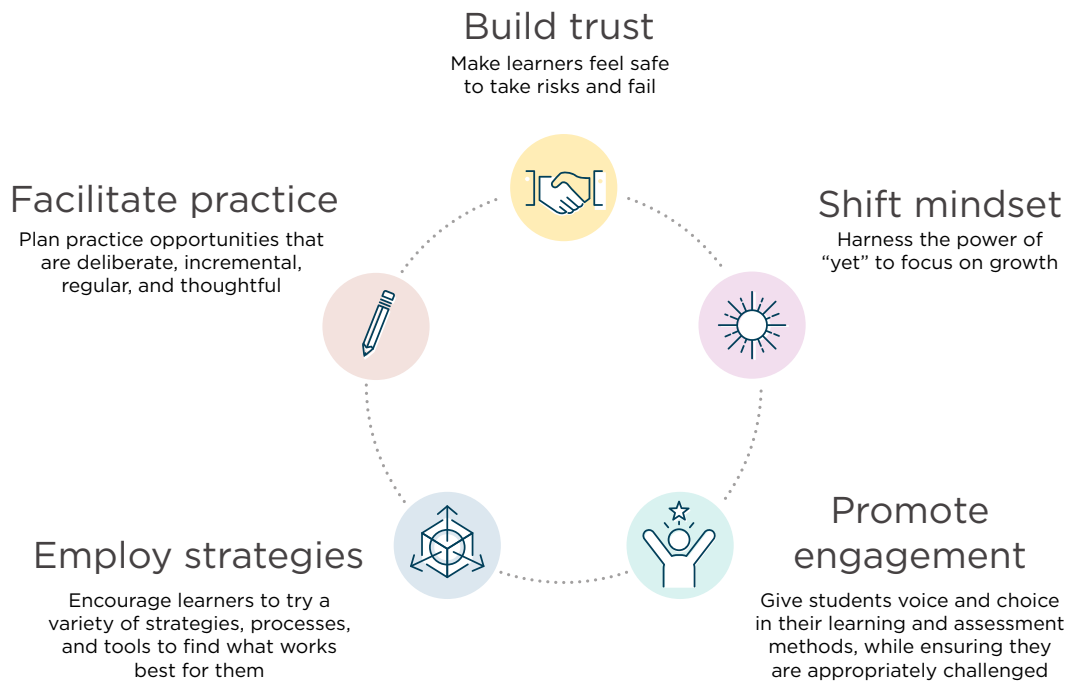
Empowering kids through self-assessment

As students self-assess in this way, they grasp their best strategies for learning and recognize opportunities for choice, too. By leading a brief moment of self-assessment in a low-stakes/high-trust situation, you can invite students to identify tools they can leverage for success again and again. When you talk about assessment as a way to check for progress and understanding about what works in the midst of teaching and learning— rather than solely as a measure of success or failure—you are taking steps that empower students for a lifetime of learning.

In student-centered assessment, formative practices are fundamental. Students learn to chart a learning path informed by their specific funds of knowledge, identify areas of challenge, add strategies to their unique learning repertoire, and even learn to ask for what they need in the classroom. That's empowerment, just one of the many benefits of FA listed in the 2018 CCSSO FAST SCASS Theory of Action publication. As such, FA practices are key to creating the foundation for a classroom culture of learning. Such a culture is built intentionally to create a safe and transparent environment; embrace a

growth mindset for all; encourage student voice, choice, and engagement; and empower all learners as active members of a learning team, advocates for themselves, and active resources for each other.

Building a culture of learning

When a teacher plans for many opportunities in which students engage in mindful and productive struggle with new ideas and skills, that leads to meaningful and lasting learning gains. Creating such a culture of learning in the classroom, school, and even at the district level enacts a powerful shift in the dynamics of education that generates engagement designed to reach every student.

Build trust
Make learners feel safe
to take risks and fail

Shift mindset
Harness the power of
"yet" to focus on growth

Promote engagement
Give students voice and choice
in their learning and assessment
methods, while ensuring they
are appropriately challenged

Employ strategies
Encourage learners to try a
variety of strategies, processes,
and tools to find what works
best for them

Facilitate practice
Plan practice opportunities that
are deliberate, incremental,
regular, and thoughtful

Furthermore, when teachers practice FA strategies to develop such a classroom culture, they sharpen their own skills through metacognition. By definition, FA asks teachers to cultivate keen attention to evidence of learning that is exhibited by students during the process of teaching and learning. To tune teaching and learning in the classroom, teachers can develop automaticity in the skill of sifting through ongoing feedback signals from students that come in the form of student conversations in group work, responses in class discussions, and other student activity prompted by informal FA strategies. Through this deliberate attention to student behavior during a lesson, teachers strengthen automaticity in gathering informal evidence of learning, and also gain awareness of the efficacy of their lessons.

As a teacher studies the efficacy of a lesson in the moment and makes deliberate shifts, the entire process becomes easier—because more automaticity is gained—and making adjustments in the moment becomes a habit. These adjustments to instruction can sometimes spare students from more formal remediation, which often removes students from the rich instructional environment of the classroom. These corrections can help strengthen the next lesson as well. Teachers can better anticipate when to include responsive strategies like scaffolding, extension, and support in initial lesson plans, and lesson plans grow stronger.

Never stop learning

By paying explicit attention to student behavior in response to any given lesson, teachers become experts at discerning the leading indicators of learning, rather than recipients of the lagging indicators of learning that more conventional assessments provide at the end of a lesson or a unit of study or, worse still, in the form of a year-end assessment, the autopsy of educational progress. In effect, the teacher has become a more expert and responsive driver of their teaching, while the students have become more expert and engaged drivers of their learning. Students can name their needs and preferences, claim their successes, and adjust their behavior to meet challenges, while their teacher can provide expert guidance from the sidelines. The classroom is no longer built around the unknown rules of a game but offers a more level and well-lit playing field for all. Go team.

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Ready to learn more? Here are some additional resources on the power of metacognition and FA:

- Using formative assessment and metacognition to improve student achievement

- Using self-assessment to develop metacognition and self-regulated learners

- A way to increase students' independence in learning

- Top 5 strategies for motivating students **TLG**

About the authors

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Erin Beard has more than 17 years of practice as a secondary teacher-leader in southern Oregon, where she lives with her partner, three children, and four cats. Erin is a content designer for NWEA and received her DEd in educational methods, policy, and leadership from the University of Oregon in 2020. Her dissertation explored the intersection of student-involved assessment for learning, equity, and trauma-informed practices.

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Brooke Mabry has more than 17 years of experience in education and joined NWEA in 2016 as a professional learning consultant. She now serves as strategic content design coordinator of the Professional Learning Design team. Brooke began her career as a high school English teacher in Asheville, North Carolina, and holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in education from Western Carolina University. She also holds national board certification in adolescence and young adulthood English language arts. She's deeply committed to fulfilling the NWEA mission, Partnering to help all kids learn®.

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Vicki McCoy is a lifelong educator who joined NWEA in 2003. At NWEA, she has led collaborative initiatives involving philanthropic entities, higher education programs, and education service agencies nationwide. As senior director of the Professional Learning Design team, she has led the effort to build scalable, innovative, and responsive models for professional learning that support educators in building and sustaining student-centric approaches to assessment and instruction.

Steve Underwood

Steve Underwood joined NWEA in January 2020 and is a manager on the Professional Learning Design team. He's an experienced educational leader with extensive experience working in schools, districts, state education agencies, and non-profits. Steve specializes in the design and implementation of evidence-based professional learning and in facilitating systemic improvement to improve teaching, learning, and leading. He earned a doctorate in education in curriculum and instruction from Boise State University, with an emphasis in school improvement, and he holds undergraduate and master's degrees from Biola University. He enjoys equipping educators to successfully meet the needs of all learners.

Lauren Wells

Lauren Wells has over 19 years' experience in education, including teaching, administration, instructional coaching, and professional learning facilitation. She received her BA and MA from Michigan State University and an EdS and PhD focused on educational leadership from Oakland University. As a member of the NWEA Professional Learning team, Lauren is fully committed to fulfilling our mission, Partnering to help all kids learn.

Read more at

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