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Getting Started With Formative Assessment

When we first read about formative assessment, the compelling research sparked our immediate interest. In a nutshell, formative assessment involves collecting and using ongoing assessment data regularly *to inform teaching and learning*, rather than merely to assign grades. Research shows that formative assessment can double student learning, and it can result in even greater gains for students who struggle (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The more formative assessment is used, the greater the gains. Students given one formative assessment per 15-week period scored 13% higher on final achievement measures. Students receiving 20 assessments scored 26% higher, and those who received 30 assessments scored almost 30% higher (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991).

After using formative assessment regularly, we found this research even more compelling. We witnessed this accelerated growth as our students in special education were mainstreamed back into regular education at rates we had never seen before. Even more gratifying, we watched students beam with pride at what they could now accomplish. Our most disengaged students came alive as they systematically took charge of their own learning and saw their efforts pay off. Moreover, our students unanimously told us how much they liked formative assessments. While the research piqued our interest, our experience secured our buy-in.

In this first chapter you will find:

- An introduction to the formative assessment framework
- An overview of the purpose of formative assessment

- Three ways to begin using formative assessment, with vignettes that illustrate the three paths teachers typically follow
- A self-assessment tool to help you determine how much formative assessment you already use in your own classroom
- Steps to establishing a classroom culture that supports formative assessment practices

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

Formative assessment provides a framework of practices in which both you and your students use assessment data to shift the mindset away from gauging “What has been taught?” toward “What has been learned?” You and your students then use the information gained to guide what you teach and what they focus on learning.

So what exactly is a “formative assessment framework,” and where did this framework originate? Formative assessment is a framework of related practices originally proposed by Sadler (1989) and perpetuated by other researchers and practitioners. This framework includes not only the collection of assessment data to inform instruction and learning, but also several related practices that guide which data to collect and how to use these data. Wiliam (2010) formally defined the formative assessment framework as how teachers or students use assessment data to make decisions about next steps—decisions that are better founded with these data than those made without these data.

The research of Black and Wiliam (1998) references and builds on Sadler’s (1989) framework. In their view, for assessment to qualify as formative assessment, it must:

- Be based on and directly convey criteria or standards
- Be followed by detailed, clear, and specific feedback
- Involve students in self-assessment, using feedback and goal-directed behavior
- Use the data gathered to inform next steps and adjust teaching practices
- Recognize the enormous impact of assessment on students’ confidence and motivation

Therefore, the process of formative assessment involves (1) specifying and conveying standards, (2) collecting assessment data on where students are in relation to these standards, and (3) sharing the data with

students via detailed feedback. It is essential to ensure that students are actively involved; their participation is a critical piece of the formative assessment framework. Students will often score their own formative assessments and determine how they can use the results to inform what they focus on learning.

It is also critical for you to use the assessment data “to inform next steps and adjust teaching practices,” or to differentiate instruction. Tomlinson (1999) defines differentiating instruction as an organized, flexible, proactive approach to adjusting instruction so that it best meets the needs of all learners and promotes maximum growth for all.

As discussed in the Preface, we developed our own formative assessment framework based on research and classroom experiences (see Figure 1.1). Our framework presents seven practices, or steps, for practitioners; each practice is followed by research that validates its effectiveness.

We suggest that you approach the list of practices as you would a buffet. Do not expect to engage in all of these practices at once or within a short time frame. Teachers we have worked with have repeatedly recommended that we emphasize this. Fortunately, choosing and using only a few practices will still increase student achievement. For the most part, the teachers we worked with tested the practices by selecting only a few of the strategies; in some cases, they used even the ones they chose only partially. Yet they quickly discovered that student achievement rose in notable and exciting ways. This finding is confirmed by larger-scale research (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006).

Figure 1.1 Seven formative assessment practices.

1. Establish supportive and self-directive class climate norms (Andrade, 2010).
2. Specify measurable standards to be mastered and convey them to students (Black & Wiliam, 2005).
3. List extensions and interventions before collecting data (Wylie & Wiliam, 2006).
4. Preassess before each unit and continuously assess throughout the unit (Black & Wiliam, 2005; Reeves, 2003).
5. Involve students in using assessment data and teacher feedback to inform next steps they will take in their learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).
6. Use assessment data to support and challenge students with tiered activities and scaffolded extensions (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007).
7. Differentiate homework and graded assessments to meet instructional levels (Bryan & Burstein, 2004).

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The first column of Figure 1.2 shows classroom characteristics and practices that exemplify these formative assessment practices; the second column shows those that do not.

Figure 1.2 Comparison of formative assessment–based and performance-based classrooms.

Formative Assessment–Based Classroom	Performance-Based Classroom
<i>Practice 1:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher proactively sets and manages classroom climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A competitive climate flourishes
<i>Practice 2:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit targets are specified and conveyed up front 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets are not conveyed, or are conveyed only just before tests
<i>Practice 3:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcomes and interventions are preestablished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcomes may be unclear until assessments are crafted at the end of the unit • Interventions are considered after problems surface
<i>Practice 4:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preassessment precedes each unit, and frequent check-ins take place during units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only summative tests are used
<i>Practice 5:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and students review assessment data to design individualized supports and challenges • Both teachers and students use data to set next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same work is given to all • Students follow the teacher’s lead
<i>Practice 6:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons break off into tiers • The teacher makes use of frequent and flexible student groupings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The whole class is usually instructed together • The curriculum or text drives what is taught
<i>Practice 7:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework, tests, and grading systems are differentiated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The same homework and unit tests are given to all

These practices can seem daunting. As one teacher joked, “Being expected to do all seven of these practices now there’s an argument for merit pay!” But again, you can pursue these individually. First, use the self-assessment at the end of this chapter to note which ones you already do. Then consider each carefully, weighing which benefits would help the most in your current situation. We suggest you prioritize and select two or three to focus on each year.

THE PURPOSE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

As we have noted, the ultimate role of formative assessment in the classroom is twofold:

1. You will use the results of the assessments to alter your teaching practices.
2. Your students will use the results to set goals and focus their learning efforts.

The fundamental purpose must be to increase student learning, not to collect data. Let us take a brief look at that purpose in more detail here.

A colleague recently asked, “What is formative assessment, and what is the purpose?” Almost any assessment can be used summatively or formatively. Traditionally, schools have focused on summative assessments, which summarize learning and are used to compare students’ achievements to one another for the purpose of assigning grades or ranking students. In contrast, formative assessments actually inform next steps taken by students and teachers in ways that enhance achievement. Essentially, formative assessment looks forward to how the information we gain from looking at student work can inform future instructional decisions, much like how information gained from a physical exam might inform future health choices we make.

Moreover, formative assessment is often conceptualized as “assessment *for* learning” rather than “assessment *of* learning.” Summative assessment takes time away from learning for assessment *of* learning. But with formative assessment, you can use assessment purposefully *for* learning, as an integral contribution to learning. You can integrate assessment with learning so that it becomes a powerfully effective learning activity itself. Formative assessment is not about giving assessments; it is about using the results to teach differently (Reeves, 2005).

Formative assessment offers a paradigmatic shift concerning some of the deepest purposes of education. Until recently, schools functioned to sort students (Wiggins, 2005). School practices, including assessment, separated those who knew from those who did not. Assessment results were often used to determine who could continue in academic tracks and who would be placed in vocational tracks. Now schools must ensure that all students strive to meet certain standards. Organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have called for a shift in the purpose of education, with the primary role of assessment no longer being to “*prove* [emphasis added] whether teaching or learning has taken place, but to *improve* [emphasis added] the quality of teaching and learning and thereby increase the likelihood that all members of the society will acquire a full and critical literacy” (NCTE, 2009, Standard 3).

So the role and purpose of assessment, along with many school practices, has become to maximize learning for *all* rather than *some* students. The formative assessment framework enables you and your students to identify standards and to assess where students are in terms of mastering all of those standards. The formative assessment practices offer a research-validated route for the steps that will then need to be taken to close any gap.

THREE WAYS TO BEGIN USING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Given the definition, framework, and purpose of formative assessment, where and how should you get started? The vignettes in the following sections illustrate three paths that we have observed teachers, including ourselves, take as they get started:

1. Preassessments before a new unit
2. Midunit concept check-ins
3. Specific skill probes

Following these vignettes is a self-assessment tool you can use to identify where you are in using the seven practices that make up our framework—and next steps you can take.

Keep in mind that the teachers in the vignettes began in different places and pursued individually designed goals. Additionally, each teacher used a combination of formative assessment practices, but not all seven.

Preassessments Before a New Unit

Preassessments are a central practice used frequently in high-performing, high-need districts (Reeves, 2003). Ms. Yang, an eighth-grade teacher in a suburban district, decided early in the year to start using preassessments to enhance how she differentiated instruction. (We discuss differentiated instruction in great detail in Chapter 3.) She based that decision on the following research:

- *Students typically already know 40% to 50% of what teachers expect them to learn from an activity (Nuthall, 2007).*
- *Preassessments help teachers determine instructional levels and avoid reteaching known material.*
- *When students self-correct, they focus on what they need to work on, set goals, and become motivated to improve.*
- *Although teachers often believe they can predict students' performance, research has shown time and again that their judgments are often inaccurate (Begeny, Krouse, Groce, & Mann, 2011; Eckert, Dunn, Coddling, Begeny, & Kleinmann, 2006).*

To begin, Ms. Yang identified practices she already used. She regularly offered differentiated classwork, homework, and tests so that students would spend more time working at their respective instructional levels. She decided her next step would be to give formal diagnostic preassessments before units.

As a trial, Ms. Yang gave a preassessment performance task that measured sentence variety in essay writing. To her surprise, one typically high-achieving student used far fewer types of sentences than most of his peers. His preassessment revealed strong vocabulary, solid organization, and clearly stated ideas, yet little sentence variation. In fact, his efforts came in well below the district's benchmark expectations. Yet based on the limited writing samples Ms. Yang had seen from him, she had assumed he had already mastered this skill.

The student was also surprised by these results, which helped him learn what to focus on next. In fact, after he had scored his preassessment, Ms. Yang was thrilled to hear him say, "I thought I used varied sentences, but now I know I need to work on these. I found a sentence-combining website where I can practice this."

The preassessment helped her change her differentiation plan for this student. Originally, she had planned to work on an enrichment task with him and a few other students. Instead, based on the results of the preassessment, she had him work on sentence-combining exercises, an activity that increases sentence variety and further enhances overall writing quality (Saddler, 2005).

At the end of the day, Ms. Yang felt that her decision to try preassessment was beneficial to her class. In this case, it helped her identify where to focus her teaching, and her student also knew exactly where he needed to focus his learning.

Midunit Concept Check-Ins

Mr. Klein, a sixth-grade teacher who worked in an independent school located near a major city, decided to begin with midunit concept check-ins. He was curious about whether or not students were learning the material, and he felt a midunit check-in would leave him enough time before the end-of-unit assessment to address gaps if needed. He also wanted to give students a chance to work on enrichment tasks if they showed mastery of the material or concepts at a faster pace.

Through read-alouds and interactive discussions (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008), Mr. Klein had modeled how to identify characters' points of view. In these lessons, he had worked to gradually release responsibility to his students. One night, when he was reviewing the class's homework, he had found two persistent misconceptions that students made when identifying point of view on their own. As a result, he designed a quick check-in to confirm what he had seen in their homework.

In class the next day, Mr. Klein helped students self-correct their check-ins. First, he explained which point of view each passage had conveyed. Then, as students corrected their responses, he provided more general feedback on the two misconceptions he had noticed and helped each student identify which misconception he or she had made.

Research shows that this kind of feedback is a two-way street, benefiting both students and teachers (Hattie, 2009). The feedback from the check-ins helped the students understand what they needed to learn, and it also helped Mr. Klein recognize that he needed to ramp up his teaching efforts. Following the check-in, he chose to use skits (Meltzer, Cook Smith, & Clark, 2002) to reteach the lessons on point of view.

The initial check-ins had provided relevant information for Mr. Klein to best match his students' needs to specific tasks. For instance, some students had struggled to identify when the narrator was being sarcastic, so Mr. Klein had them work on scenes in which they acted out different points of view that they pretended to hold (but did not actually hold).

Students who had shown a mastery of point of view in the check-in wrote and acted out brief new passages that portrayed more subtle perspectives. Then they practiced identifying point of view in each other's passages. They took delight in seeing who could write in the most difficult-to-discern point of view.

As this occurred, Mr. Klein worked with two students who were having the most pronounced difficulties. He explicitly showed them how to write skits from varied perspectives. He also had them practice making personal connections to events in the story; this helped them make the specific kinds of inferences needed to identify point of view. They then wrote and acted scenes out.

As an exit ticket from class, Mr. Klein had each student read a two-sentence passage and identify point of view. This validated for him and his students that the activities were a success.

Specific Skill Probes

Ms. Lee, a fifth-grade teacher in an urban high-need district, wanted to enhance how she formed writing groups based on students' initial skill levels. She

recognized that skill level measures of specific areas such as fluency, comprehension, and writing were probably the best-researched formative assessment measures and offered the greatest promise of lifting student achievement (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005).

Ms. Lee's district used AIMSweb probes, including the writing measures, to monitor student skill levels. In these writing probes, teachers count how many correct word sequences students write within three minutes. Yet, as Gansle, Noell, VanDerHeyden, Naquin, and Slider (2002) have noted, there are concerns about the quality of feedback these probes offer. Ms. Lee shared these concerns; she suspected that the probes mostly reported writing mechanics errors, and she found that they did not provide much useful instructional guidance.

In the past she had often used the data from these probes and observations she had made in class to create three groups based on whether students had shown full, partial, or emerging mastery in writing. Now she wanted to augment her data by doing a deeper analysis of underlying skills. She believed this would allow her to group students according to more clearly targeted skill areas, informed by multiple sources of data.

Ms. Lee's class norm was "We all learn differently." Consequently, she wanted to move beyond grouping by global readiness levels so that she could move students away from regularly comparing each other hierarchically.

To do this, she redesigned her open response preassessment rubric to better capture the different skill elements, and she adopted an additional Quick Writes assessment format. Quick Writes is an emerging supplemental writing measure that uses a more rubric-oriented scoring method. Initial research is finding this method to be sensitive to instruction (Green, Smith, & Brown, 2007; Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2009).

First, Ms. Lee had her students self-correct their open responses with her redesigned rubric. She also asked them to complete a more substantial self-reflective evaluation to more closely analyze the areas they found challenging. This included a framework for using the data from their preassessments to set learning goals.

Her students proved to be adept and thoughtful in their post-preassessment analyses. She then asked them to decide which skill areas they felt they should address. She instructed students to put their heads down. Then she called out various areas to work on. Students raised their hands when she called out their area. This allowed her to group them by genuine area of need, because it prevented them from raising a hand just so they could work with a friend. The students were surprised that the groups were mixed up more than they had been before (when they had been grouped by levels based on whether they had shown full, partial, or emerging mastery in writing). In fact, they thought that Ms. Lee had randomly selected groups.

Once the students were grouped, they began working on their specific skill areas as they revised their pieces, referencing models Ms. Lee provided that exemplified how to address each skill area. Tasks included identifying more details in the passage and citing them, using clearer topic sentences, making more connections between ideas, and using sharper vocabulary.

Ms. Lee recognized that peer editing effectively raises writing achievement (Diab, 2010; Yang, Ko, & Chung, 2005), so she then had her students peer edit the work of those from other groups. This allowed students with different strengths to provide feedback to one another.

Pleased with the outcome, Ms. Lee also knew that the students would not be able to rank the groups hierarchically. This helped her create a classroom climate where students focused on learning the skills they had not mastered, rather than on peer comparison.

SELF-ASSESSMENT: DETERMINING HOW MUCH FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT YOU ALREADY USE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

The teachers in the previous vignettes understood that achieving a comprehensive vision of using formative assessment to differentiate instruction occurs over time, and that the path to doing so is unique. Fortunately, research has found that many teachers already use some basic formative assessment practices as a natural part of their work. And when they do, the more practices they use and the more frequently they use them, the greater their students' achievement (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006). To begin, complete the self-assessment in Figure 1.3 to identify the formative assessment practices you already have in place. Your results can help you decide your next steps. *For a downloadable version of the "Differentiating Practices Rubric," go to <http://www.corwin.com/books/Book237623>.*

Figure 1.3 Differentiating practices rubric.

Differentiating Practices Rubric

We all begin in different places and pursue different goals as we grow as teachers. This self-assessment provides an overview of practices that can enhance how you use formative assessment.

On a scale of 1–4, rate how frequently you do each practice:

1—I do this often, 2—I do this occasionally, 3—I've tried this, 4—I haven't tried this yet

Practice 1: Establish a Supportive Climate				
I foster self-directed, independent approaches to learning.	1	2	3	4
Students recognize that doing different work helps each student get what she or he needs.	1	2	3	4

Practice 2: Specify and Convey Standards				
I clearly convey objectives (targets) before beginning each unit.	1	2	3	4
Practice 3: List Extensions and Interventions				
I list potential extensions and supports before designing and then collecting formative assessments.	1	2	3	4
Practice 4: Preassess and Continually Assess				
I use diagnostic preassessment tasks before beginning each unit.	1	2	3	4
I systematically collect formal and informal assessment data all along.	1	2	3	4
Practice 5: Involve Students in Next Steps				
I use assessment data to tier homework, class activities, and assessments.	1	2	3	4
I have students self-score assessments and use the results to decide next steps to take.	1	2	3	4
I stress the importance of self-initiated learning that is based on teacher feedback and self-scored assessments.	1	2	3	4
Practice 6: Use Data to Challenge and/or Support				
I regularly use flexible groupings for differentiated tasks.	1	2	3	4
When reviewing homework or class participation during teaching, I enable students who “get it” to move on as I assist others.	1	2	3	4
I use an extensive bank of supplemental resources.	1	2	3	4
I have a bank of strategies for challenging students (e.g., open-ended tasks, higher-order questions, abstract projects, compacting contracts, and extension resources).	1	2	3	4
Practice 7: Differentiate Homework and Assessments				
I differentiate homework and hold students accountable for the different work they do.	1	2	3	4
I differentiate class assessments.	1	2	3	4

The rest of the chapters in this book are “keyed” so that you can see which sections highlight and model each practice:

-  **1 Supportive Classroom Climate** Practice 1: Establish a supportive climate—Chapter 1, last section
-  **2 Conveyed Standards** Practice 2: Specify and convey standards—Chapter 2
-  **3 Listed Extensions/Interventions** Practice 3: List extensions and interventions—most chapters, particularly Chapters 4, 6, and 7
-  **4 Continuous Assessment** Practice 4: Preassess and continually assess—most chapters, particularly Chapter 2
-  **5 Student Self-Direction** Practice 5: Involve students in next steps—most chapters, particularly Chapter 3
-  **6 Data-Informed Instruction** Practice 6: Use data to challenge and/or support—all chapters
-  **7 Differentiation of Student Work** Practice 7: Differentiate homework and assessments—Chapter 6

STEPS TO ESTABLISHING A CLASSROOM CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

The next section gives an overview of how to establish a supportive classroom climate, a key element in getting started with using formative assessment to differentiate instruction.



A supportive climate needs to be in place before the potential gains of formative assessment can grow wings.  In one of the most extensive reviews ever conducted on the power of feedback, a core component of formative

assessment, researchers concluded that climate is “critical” if students (and teachers) are to welcome and use corrective feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). According to Andrade (2010), one of the leading researchers on formative assessment, students must perceive the major factors that underlie formative assessment to be both valued and valuable. Moreover, the NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing* emphasize how important it is for teachers to consider how “the climate produced by assessment practice” can facilitate or impede learning (NCTE, 2009, Standard 3).

The following vignette highlights the various ways in which Mr. Miles, a seventh-grade English teacher working at a public school in a suburban setting, establishes climate. His classes consist of 25 students varying in ability from those identified as having a learning disability to those who are high achieving. An analysis of each of his actions and how they develop climate follows the vignette.

From day one, Mr. Miles lays the foundation. He explains that students will need to work on different tasks according to regular formative assessment data that show where they are in their skills and understandings. He models respect for the fact that learning happens at different paces and in different ways and conveys the expectation that all students will also respect this reality. He emphasizes how important it is to ensure that all students feel safe and comfortable no matter how they learn. When students work on tasks from different angles or on entirely different work he says, “Since we all learn differently, different learning experiences are fair.” He often makes the analogy to a sports team: “Each player brings a different skill set, but all skill sets are needed for the team to perform optimally together.”

Since self-assessment is a basis for becoming self-directed, a core norm Mr. Miles cultivates, he carefully designs repeated opportunities to coach students in developing accurate self-assessment skills through frequent practice, feedback, and guidance of their efforts. As they determine where they are in their understanding of a topic, he is careful to remain nonjudgmental. He also avoids complimenting students who do well, because he has realized that privileging students who perform well sets a model and sends a message that can undermine the establishment of a climate in which all levels of performance are respected.

One week, as he prepares to launch a new unit, Mr. Miles decides to preassess the extent to which his students know the elements of an action-adventure story. First, he asks his students to select and read an action-adventure story from a list he provides. Then, as a preassessment, he asks them to demonstrate their knowledge of the essential elements of the genre by completing one of the following assignments:

- *Write a series of paragraphs.*
- *Create a multiple-scene diorama with a keyed explanation of each part.*
- *Write a magazine exposé.*
- *Create a trailer that gives an overview of the major elements.*
- *Write a first-person narrative monologue that conveys the major elements.*

The skill assessed here will not be the presentation but whether the student can convey an understanding of the key elements of an action-adventure story. By varying the assignment, Mr. Miles allows students to have an opportunity to complete the work in the medium that they are most comfortable with. Students who might otherwise be hampered by unrelated skill challenges, such as written expression difficulties, can now choose an alternate route to show what they know about action-adventure genre elements. Mr. Miles also recognizes that student motivation and achievement rise when they are given choices (Hattie, 2009).

After students complete this work, Mr. Miles reviews the key elements of an action-adventure story and lists them on the board. Students self-correct their work and list any elements they have not identified. The next day, Mr. Miles reads a brief story at the start of class and then asks students to identify the action-adventure traits exemplified in it. They self-correct their work with a key that indicates whether they "get it," "need more practice," or "have questions" about the elements of an action-adventure story.

In the past, Mr. Miles has found that when he asks students about their level of understanding, many will state they "get it" but then fail to pass the quiz. This is particularly the case with struggling students, who notoriously have difficulty with accurate self-assessment (Stone & May, 2002). Now Mr. Miles is able to use the key to help students self-evaluate accurately, as well as to encourage them to use the data from their evaluation to make a homework choice that offers the amount of practice appropriate to their needs.

As students ask clarifying questions about the differentiated homework tasks he has assigned for that evening, Mr. Miles quickly checks to ensure they have chosen the homework that will best match their needs. He agrees with a few who have chosen to skip the basic comprehension questions and do only the extra extension question, which involves comparing a similar event from the last few stories to this story and noting why there are similarities. These students have shown they have fully mastered identifying elements of action-adventure stories. He is careful not to convey a congratulatory tone as he agrees to their homework selection. In this way, he is careful to avoid making others, who do require the extra practice, feel any less than those who are ready to move on to the extension.

Mr. Miles recommends that one student complete a graphic organizer of the chapter's text structure before doing the comprehension questions. As usual, he is careful to focus on the task and not on her as a person, since research has shown that this approach is important to increasing achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

"We all should seek ways to get what we need," he reminds the entire class. "Whether you choose to do the comprehension questions or the extension is not the central issue. What matters is whether, in the end, you master the targets for the unit."

In this snapshot, Mr. Miles works to establish a climate in which students feel supported, safe, and comfortable with differences. Additionally, he carefully cultivates independent work habits and a self-directed approach to learning, which is necessary if students will be working on

differentiated tasks during the year and will not have direct teacher guidance at all times. This also helps students who are passive learners to become more active and self-driven learners.

Establish a Climate of Respect

In the previous vignette, Mr. Miles modeled respect for all students. As you work to establish a climate of respect, you may wish to follow his approach:

- Purposefully distribute praise among all students, even when aspects of the task do not come easily to them.
- Be careful not to overvalue verbal intelligence in your praise. Instead, carefully compliment students on factors that are more easily within their control, such as effort level. Do not compliment the student with “Good job”; instead, focus on giving feedback on the task, such as, “I saw you do several extra practice exercises, and then you remembered all the elements of the genre on the quiz we took the next day.”

In his many years of teaching, Mr. Miles has seen plenty of struggling students make tremendous leaps with the right coaching and practice. As a result, he has come to question how narrow the band of capability really is. He believes most students can excel in the right conditions, which further fuels his endeavor to reserve praise for ability and instead give praise for effort.

Furthermore, in his classroom, Mr. Miles cultivates respect for all. He sets a climate in which it is expected that all students will demonstrate respect for peers’ unique learning profiles in ways that make everyone feel safe and supported. Here are some of the ways you can also achieve this:

- Rather than working to make differences invisible, celebrate them from the start.
- Point out how some students may instantly “see” a concept but struggle with articulating it. Others can easily make lists that enable them to explain a concept. Emphasize that both types of students “get it.”
- Create tasks that offer choice and allow students with different strengths to shine.
- Be careful with the language that students use when they are correcting their work or when they are unsure about a concept. Discourage “I don’t know this.” Instead, encourage students to say, “I haven’t learned this yet” or “I have questions.”

- Emphasize that since all students are different, giving the same work to all would unfairly privilege one learning profile over another. Note that *different* sets the stage for *differentiation*, which is actually fairer.

In terms of grouping, Mr. Miles recognizes that middle school students are highly adept at quickly determining “high” and “low” groups and that this tendency cannot be easily minimized. Consequently, he often places students in “mixed” groups, offering different levels of challenge to different students within the wider groups so that all have the chance to attain a similar level of mastery of the standards. He is more casual now when he announces groups, confident that he is taking the right measures to give all students what they need individually to come up to the standard level. He has also become more capable of designing preassessments that reveal more nuanced learning profile differences that he can use to form groups, rather than forming them only on readiness levels.

Cultivate Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learners learn more and are more successful in school (Andrade, 2010). Self-assessment practices in particular have powerful learning potential. In the vignette, students benefited from scoring their own work with the answer key after hearing the action-adventure short story and listing genre elements.

The first step to cultivating self-directed learning involves using formative assessments that students self-score and then use to design plans for how they will master concepts they have yet to learn. Such assessments, which are described in detail in Chapter 2, can help you place students in charge of understanding and managing how they will learn. With this approach, you can take the role of the facilitator or the collaborator and not the instructor.

In his classroom, Mr. Miles repeatedly asks students to self-evaluate their learning of each topic with carefully selected phrases such as “Got it,” “Need more practice,” or “Have questions.” In addition, he expects his students to make a plan for what they should do next to move ahead in their learning. In the vignette, this occurs when he allows them to select from a variety of homework options.

Mr. Miles often approaches his students’ questions with questions of his own. In this way, he allows them to realize that (1) they already understand much of the concept, and (2) sometimes they can answer their own



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Student Self-Direction

questions with the right support. With this approach, he encourages perseverance and avoids being seen as the sole authority, which could diminish students' belief in their own skills and abilities.

In these ways, Mr. Miles builds a climate in his classroom in which students feel supported, safe, and comfortable and become self-directed in how they approach learning. Building such a climate is the first and arguably most important step in using formative assessment practices to differentiate instruction.