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Formative Assessment: The Secret Sauce of Blended Success

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A few weeks ago, a colleague emailed me about some trouble she was having with her first attempt at blended instruction. She had created some videos to pre-teach a concept, incorporated some active learning strategies into her face-to-face class to build on the video, and assigned an online quiz so she could assess what the students had learned. After grading the quizzes, however, she found that many of the students struggled with the concept. “Maybe,” she wondered, “blended instruction won’t work with my content area.”

When I met with the colleague, it was clear from our conversation that she hoped a blended approach would allow her to incorporate more active learning strategies into her face-to-face class. She wanted to break away from a primarily lecture-driven environment and provide students with more opportunities for collaboration and interaction. When we discussed her blended lesson, however, she focused mostly on what she wanted the students to learn during the different phases of the lesson. “What,” I asked “were YOU learning from your students during the different phases of the lesson?” She seemed puzzled by the question, which provided a great entryway for discussing how formative assessment can contribute to blended success.

Although most people probably associate the term “assessment” with quizzes and exams, in reality these high-stakes activities represent a small subset of assessment opportunities. Educationally, assessments can be broken into two larger categories: summative and formative. Most of our experience with assessment usually comes in the form of summative assessment. We have our students take exams or write papers at the end of a chapter. Summative assessments are valuable because they let us know whether our students have successfully learned what we wanted them to learn. Summative assessments, however, are limited in that they provide little information to guide teaching because they usually serve as the endpoint of some instruction.

Whereas summative assessments are assessments “of” learning, formative assessments are assessments “for” learning. They help to guide instruction and provide valuable information for the instructor and for the learner. Formative assessments can help to drive instructional decision-making and allow the instructor to “take the temperature” of the class. In the discussion with my colleague, I outlined the different phases of blended learning and highlighted opportunities for formative assessment in each.

**Activities for before class**  
In a blended class, instructors typically assign a video or some instructional content to pre-teach a topic or concept. But this also provides opportunities for formative assessment. Instructors can examine the prior knowledge that students possess before starting the lesson. This process doesn’t have to involve giving students something formal. Prior to assigning the pre-teaching material, instructors can have students complete a concept map representing what they already know about a given topic, or they can facilitate a classroom discussion where students share their knowledge associated with the concept.

The specific strategy isn’t as important as the information the process reveals. By assessing students’ prior knowledge, the instructor discovers the starting point for her learners, which can inform how the lessons are organized and the techniques used. In a science class, this could mean helping students overcome long-held misconceptions about a topic by using more hands-on instruction. In a math course, this might mean teaching some requisite skill needed to learn at a higher level.

Assessing prior knowledge isn’t the only assessment opportunity in the pre-teaching phase of blended instruction. Instructors can also assess students after they’ve interacted with assigned video lessons. Students can complete a handout while watching the video or take an online quiz after the fact. Free tools like [EDpuzzle](https://edpuzzle.com/" \t "_blank) and [Educanon](https://www.educanon.com/" \t "_blank)allow instructors to easily embed questions at specific points during the video. The screen recording software[Camtasia Studio](http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.html) also allows instructors to inject questions throughout a video lesson. Again, the specific strategy itself isn’t as critical as the information it provides. Armed with information from these assessments, instructors can modify their in-class lessons and activities to target areas where learners have struggled after the pre-teaching phase.

**Activities for during class**  
In this phase of the blended cycle, instructors incorporate activities and lessons to help students build on the concepts they learned during the pre-teaching phase. Maybe students are completing problems in class or discussing higher order concepts in more detail.

Like the pre-teaching phase, this phase provides opportunities for formative assessment that can help guide instruction. For instance, instructors can use clickers to assess whether students are effectively applying the concepts. This can let the instructor know when he needs to reteach a concept or open the class to some peer instruction. Even informally observing body language and facial expression can prove to be powerful formative assessments to guide instruction.

**Activities for after class**  
In this phase of the blended cycle, students are extending their learning by applying the concepts to new situations or building on the concepts through additional instruction. These situations lend themselves to even more formative assessments. For instance, as students exit the class, instructors can ask them to submit what they felt was their “muddiest point” of the lesson. This could provide useful information as instructors create or select content to assign.

In my colleague’s lesson, she had originally assigned the quiz as more of a summative assessment. After our in-depth discussion on the power of formative assessment, my colleague began to see the quiz as providing valuable information to guide her instruction and reteach areas where the students had struggled. This important shift in the purpose of assessment is critical to the success of any student-centered environment, especially a blended class.

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