

Formative Assessment and Growth Mindset

Glaus reflects on formative assessment, the procedures conducted during the learning process in order to modify teaching and learning while they are happening

I vividly remember my first English class as a first-year college student, probably because I've told the bizarre stories from that class so many times. Each story stems from early in the semester based on my first experience with assessment at the college level.

During the second week of classes, the professor walked into the classroom carrying a folder of our papers at arm's length, as if it pained him to hold them near his body. While positioning himself at the front of the room, he told us our papers were "turds," dropped them on the floor where they scattered, and then paced back and forth over them while lecturing for the 55 minute class period. Then he left. When we were sure he was gone, some of us got on our hands and knees to distribute the papers: mine had a partial shoe print on it, along with comments in the margins and a big red "C" on the last page.

While I knew that what that professor did was unprofessional, it still took a while for me to move beyond the troubling letter grade, but once I did, I was able to read the comments in the margins. Most of them made sense, and some would have been just as helpful written in another language. In my mind, this meant that I would have to talk to him about those comments. However, like roughly half of the other students who dropped his class, he was one of the last people I wanted to talk to. At that time, I did not think about all of the internal and external factors that steered me into his office to ask my questions, but I was glad that I did because in roughly ten minutes, he answered my questions, cleared up the confusion, and was actually quite lovely about it.

The last time I told this story, someone asked why I went to office hours—what had cultivated the expectation that I should ask

questions about writing and physically show up to face a seemingly very unpleasant man? Why not just drop the class? That question has very little to do with skills or academics. It has mostly to do with habits or even assumptions I had developed about teaching and learning shaped before college and career readiness became a slogan.

When we hear the phrase *college and career readiness*, most likely the first thing that that comes to mind has something to do with academic skills students have mastered to be successful after graduating from high school. However, we all know that there is much more to life after high school than content knowledge. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction agrees (see figure 1). There are necessary habits and behaviors students must figure out in order to persist in the face of challenges. Of course content knowledge is important—we would not be able to write with authority about much without it. Even the skills for appropriate application of that knowledge is crucial, but when the opportunity to continue honing those skills and adding to that knowledge comes to a halt in the face of a challenge (or even an insult), nothing much happens, or even worse, damage is done.

Many people have heard or read about growth mindset from Dweck (2003), who suggests that success is in the learning. I have

heard educators talk about how to teach growth mindset to foster reflection, value hard work, and think of mistakes as opportunities to learn. When I learned about growth mindset myself, I kept coming back to the idea that it seems related to formative assessment. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2016) [defines formative assessment](#) as “a deliberate process used by teachers *and students* during instruction to provide specific, actionable, and immediate feedback” (emphasis added). It is not a test, or something to put in the gradebook; rather, it is the expectation that teachers and students use everyday classroom experiences based on learning goals to gather feedback for the purpose of planning what comes next in learning. Key parts of this process include making sure that students have a solid understanding of the objectives so that they can provide input about where they are with their learning and take part in plans to move forward. These established expectations fit under the idea that we are here to learn rather than simply look smart (Dweck, 2003, p. 245). Because formative assessment focuses on student growth, information that teachers gather from students reflects the assumption that a learning process does not look the same for each student, and each student will take responsibility for learning (NCTE, 2013). This also means that mistakes will be made—

a hard sell to someone with a fixed mindset about intelligence, or a student focused solely on finishing an assignment to get a good grade. However, if we think about teaching and learning with the focus on formative practices where not everything is graded, then there is room to grow.

Another way to think about formative assessment and its relation to a growth mindset is a re-framing of how we think about learning gaps. I appreciate how Heritage (2010) reminds us that when we are learning, there *should* be a gap, otherwise, there is nothing to work toward (p. 12). In other words, we talk about teaching and learning as a process, full of actionable feedback from teachers, peers, and students themselves, all working to close that gap as evidence of learning.

Looking back on the opening story, I admit that I went right to the grade and fell into a fixed mindset where feelings of not being smart enough or good enough thrive. Had I languished there, I would not have talked with the professor like I had in the past with other teachers about gaps in learning in order to make my writing better. Those teachers helped me focus not only on writing, but on what NCTE identifies as “goals that represent valuable educational outcomes with applicability beyond the learning context” (p. 3). I firmly believe that because

of those formative experiences, I learned the basis of what was needed to begin college level coursework, and the mindset to work through obstacles and learn from criticism (Dweck, 2006).

NCTE’s [position statement](#) on the use of formative assessment to inform instruction in the English language arts provides further background, strategies, and further reading related to formative practices. They promote a formative assessment stance that, like Dweck, emphasizes the understanding of a learning process as the focus for success.

References

- Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Heritage, M. (2010). *Formative assessment: Making it happen in the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2016). *Formative assessment*. Retrieved from <http://dpi.wi.gov>
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *Wisconsin’s graduates are college and career ready*. Retrieved from <http://dpi.wi.gov>

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Figure 1

The graphic features a photograph of diverse high school students smiling and holding books. The text 'Wisconsin Graduates are College and Career READY' is overlaid on the photo, with 'READY' in green. Below the photo, a green arrow-shaped box contains the text: 'ALL STUDENTS IN WISCONSIN GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMICALLY PREPARED AND SOCIALLY AND EMOTIONALLY COMPETENT BY POSSESSING AND DEMONSTRATING...'. To the right, three categories are listed: 'Knowledge' (Proficiency in academic content), 'Skills' (Application of knowledge through skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity), and 'Habits' (Behaviors such as perseverance, responsibility, adaptability, and leadership). A concluding sentence states: 'These proficiencies and attributes come from rigorous, rich, and well-rounded public school experiences.' At the bottom is the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction logo with the tagline 'Keep Students, Parents, and Schools Empowered.'

Wisconsin Graduates are College and Career **READY**

ALL STUDENTS IN WISCONSIN GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMICALLY PREPARED AND SOCIALLY AND EMOTIONALLY COMPETENT BY POSSESSING AND DEMONSTRATING...

Knowledge
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These proficiencies and attributes come from rigorous, rich, and well-rounded public school experiences.

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