

The Power of Formative Assessments Featuring the “Ticket to Leave” Protocol

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In the September issue of the education journal, Phi Delta Kappan, a new section has begun – the “Kappan Classic” – where an article from the Kappan archives is re-published with an invitation to the original authors to: “update this [article] with a short introduction about what they learned after writing this article, what still needs to be learned, or, perhaps, how the field managed to misinterpret what they were suggesting.” The first of these “Classics” is **“Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment”** by Paul Black and Dylan William, originally in the October 1998 Kappan, over ten years ago. Paul Black is emeritus professor of science education at King’s College London, and Dylan William is deputy director of the Institute of Education at the University of London, both in the United Kingdom, or England.

I believe that we in NSRF need to expand our thinking, our writing, and our practice to include protocols with provocative ideas and strategies for classroom teachers in improving education for all learners, and “formative assessments” are one of the most powerful tools at our disposal. Many – although obviously not all - of our protocols, our research articles, and book reviews are about how to develop productive “professional learning communities,” or “Critical Friends Groups;” I would like to include more about how teachers can change their actual classroom teaching practices. This article attempts to begin to do that, to expand the discourse, and to create a sample protocol that will involve a skill that teachers could work to develop. And I invite you Connections’ readers to submit your articles and/or protocols about how to help teachers make changes in specific classroom practices.

In that landmark article of 1998, Black and William defined “formative assessment” as: “all those activities undertaken by teachers – and by their students in assessing themselves – to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities.” In their meta-analysis of more than 4,000 research studies over the past 40 years – “All of these studies show that innovations that include strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce significant and often substantial learning gains...for age groups ranging from 5-year-olds to university undergraduates, across several school subjects, and over several countries.” And they go on to point out that – “Many of these studies arrive at another important conclusion: that improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall.” It is essential here, to point out, that the kind of formative assessment being referred to here is that short-and medium-cycle formative assessment in which students receive the feedback with in minutes, or hours, or at least days. Whereas in contrast, there is no evidence standard kinds of assessments, that take weeks or months for students to know the results, achieve any increase in student achievement.

In a more recent article by one of the authors of the original Kappan piece, Dylan William, **“Changing Classroom Practice”** in the December 2007/January 2008 issue of Educational Leadership, five non-negotiable components or key strategies of an effective formative assessment system were described:

- 1) “clarify and share learning intentions and criteria for success of students;

- 2) engineer effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks;
- 3) provide feedback that moves learners forward;
- 4) activate students as the owners of their own learning; and
- 5) encourage students to be instructional resources for one another.”

In their most recent article – **“Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment”** – in the January 2009 issue of the journal *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, Black and William together simplify this, noting that there are three key processes in learning and teaching – “establishing where the learners are in their learning, where they are going, and what needs to be done to get them there.” The last two strategies are particularly important as they involve engaging students in their own self-assessments and learning activities, including collaborative learning, reciprocal teaching, metacognition, motivation, interest, and attribution. The role of the teacher then becomes one of providing useful feedback to students, and promoting meaningful discourse, teacher-to-student and student-to-student, which can become quite complex when the discourse involves a whole class of students’ input to a problem they are seeking to solve, rather than dialogue with a single student.

Two examples from Black and William show the crucial nature of the teacher’s role in discourse. In the first, six year-olds drawing pictures of a daffodil are asked, “What is this flower called?” – and one response is “I think it is Betty.” Here the teacher has to decide whether to use the opportunity to discuss the different ways in which “is called” may be used as it will potentially move the students psychological development further than a simple response – “No, it’s called a daffodil.” In the second example, students are asked to explain “infinity” and one of the first to respond is a boy who has behavioral problems for which he is receiving special counseling – “I think it’s the back of a Cream of Wheat box.” – to which the teacher immediately responds – “Don’t be silly, Billy.” In a later discussion with his counselor, Billy explains how there was a picture on the back of the box that showed a man holding a box, and this picture showed a man holding the same box, and that picture showed a man holding the same box, with pictures getting smaller and smaller – approaching infinity perhaps. Here, if the teacher had asked Billy to explain what he meant, the explanation would have been quite appropriate, underscoring the importance of teacher-student discourse or dialogue, which underscores what Black and William state about the complexity of teacher’s actions: “In formulating effective feedback the teacher has to make decisions on numerous occasions, often with little time for reflective analysis before making a commitment. The two steps involved, the diagnostic in interpreting the student contribution in terms of what it reveals about the student’s thinking and motivation, and the prognostic in choosing the optimum response: both involve complex decisions, often to be taken with only a few seconds available.”

William in his article on **“Changing Classroom Practice”** goes on to describe, therefore, what he believes to be the most effective, practical method for changing day-to-day classroom practice - namely creating groups of teachers into “teacher learning communities” (TLCs, groups of teachers only, specifically those engaged in classrooms teaching students, not a more all encompassing “professional learning community”). He recommends that these groups – run for at least two years, start with volunteers who have the same basic assignment, are building-based, meet at least monthly for at least an hour and fifteen minutes, have 8-10 members, and have a facilitator.

Sound familiar? – like a “Critical Friends Group”? – expecting teachers to make detailed, modest, individual action plans about things they want to change, to improve with their students in their classrooms. Some examples of such plans might include:

- improve my wait-time/think-time;
- change the grading system to be a standards-based, color-coded, comment-only system;
- change the way I use peer assessments; or
- have students take more ownership of the quality of their work.

Thus, a more nuanced definition of “formative assessment” is offered by Black and William: “Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited.”

To become an integral part of the instructional process, teachers will need to: 1) use assessments as sources of information both for themselves and their students, 2) follow the results of the assessments with corrective instruction, and 3) give students second chances to demonstrate success with a later assessment that follows soon after the corrective instruction. All of which leads to the following **protocol** I suggest we who are NSRF National Facilitators begin to try with our teachers in our CFGs.

“Ticket to Leave” (or “Exit Ticket”) Protocol - Changing Classroom Practice Using a Formative Assessment

Goal – To provide teachers with the opportunity to practice modifying their teaching practice, and receive feedback from colleagues, based on the use of a simple formative assessment

Procedures – [Note: to be done in 2 phases – first, teachers decide on the formative assessment to use (see examples below) in their classrooms, and second, teachers practice modifying their teaching based on their students’ responses on the formative assessment. The student responses are shared with a group of teacher colleagues - a CFG - who offer suggestions for modifying classroom teaching practices. Can be done in an hour depending on how many teachers present in their small groups]

1) Teachers use a “Ticket to Leave” by having students write their name on one side of a 5 x 8 index card, and write a brief statement or summary of what they just learned in class, or a solution to a problem given, or a response to a question about what was just taught. Examples:

“name one important thing you learned in class today”

“ give at least one reason why _____”

“write a question about something that has left you puzzled”

“read this problem and write what unit you will use in the answer”

“read these three sentences and decide which form of (there, their, they’re) to use”

Students hand these to the teacher as they leave or “exit.” The teacher then collects and reviews them, and possibly sorts them into groups (i.e. students who have not yet mastered the skill, stu-

dents who are ready to apply the skill, and students who are ready to go ahead or to go deeper), and makes decisions about what adjustments to make in their teaching the next day.

2) These student response cards are brought to a CFG. Breaking into small groups of 3-5 people, one teacher in each small group begins by sharing his student responses, explaining what he intends to do to modify his classroom teaching in light of these responses on the formative assessment. - OR - If the teacher has already done some “corrective instruction,” he describes the teaching modification he tried, and discusses the effectiveness of this modification, noting if it resulted in any change in the student or students’ understanding of that which was being taught, or the skill being developed or practiced.

3) The teacher then poses a focusing question about what she might do next. Participants in the small group first ask clarifying questions, then discuss among themselves possible next steps in modifying instruction that the teacher might take, while she turns around, listening-in and taking notes. Then she returns to the group to share how the experience went, and what was learned.

4) This process (steps 2 and 3 above) is repeated, time permitting, for each teacher in the small group.

Debrief the process

