Develop a Student-Centered Mind-set for Formative Assessment

When most teachers hear the word *mind-set*, they think of the work of Carol Dweck (2000), who has powerfully highlighted how students’ expectations of what it means to be “intelligent” shape their motivation and learning. Students who think intelligence is fixed want little challenge—they want easy assignments that make them feel “smart.”

In the end, however, they hobble their own potential. Students who think intelligence is malleable want more challenging tasks—they want the feeling of “growing smarter” that comes with mastering new skills.

I find there is another powerful “mind-set” at work among teachers who try to work with formative assessment. Teachers who think formative assessment is a teaching method to enhance their own instruction want to keep control of the process; they want someone to tell them how to “do” formative assessment. Teachers who think that formative assessment is about wrapping students’ heads around their own learning want to give away control over the learning (not the teaching, of course); they want to learn how to look at learning from the student’s-eye view.

Moving from a teacher-centered mind-set to a student-centered mind-set is the single most important thing you can do to improve both your use of formative assessment strategies and its effects on students (Webb & Jones, 2009). Any formative assessment strategy can be co-opted into becoming something teacher-centered and not at all formative. On the other hand, teachers with a student-centered mind-set can make almost all episodes of learning formative.

In some ways, teacher education and teacher professional development encourage a teacher-centered mind-set, because they often emphasize what teachers should do over what students should be doing. I have met many teachers who simply don’t realize the importance of the student’s point of view. In one workshop, for example, I put up a slide of a smiling student standing behind a project he had just completed. I asked, “How would you know what the student thought he had learned?” Eventually, most answers came down to some version of “talk with the student.” However, one teacher said, “What would I want to ask him for? I can see he knows how to do it!” That teacher was not going to be able to do formative assessment effectively, no matter what strategies she took from my workshop on the subject.

In this article, I illustrate common formative assessment strategies approached from a teacher-centered mind-set and from a student-centered mind-set. I hope that by examining these examples, many readers will also examine their own mind-sets and become more student-centered in their formative assessment.

**Example: Rubrics for Sharing Learning Targets**

A classic formative assessment strategy is to make sure students have a clear idea of what it is they are trying to learn. There are many ways to do this, but one important strategy is to use clear rubrics that help students conceptualize learning intentions.
The Student-Centered Mind-set

In a seventh-grade class, the teacher used a version of the 6+1 Trait Writing Rubrics to help her students conceptualize the learning target of “good writing.” She began by asking groups of students to sort several examples of student work based on just the Ideas (the first trait) in the work. As the students sorted the work, she had them engage in a discussion of what the focus of each piece of writing was and how the writer conveyed that. In the process, students learned that a clear, narrow focus obtained by organizing a set of directly relevant and interesting supporting details was the key to a piece of writing with high-quality ideas.

Then, students began to engage in a writing process that started with brainstorming ideas. In the same groups, students were able to ask the same questions of their brainstormed ideas as they had of the exemplar papers: Is this idea focused? Is there a set of directly relevant, interesting details, facts, or anecdotes that could be composed into a piece and support this focus? As the steps in the writing process progressed through drafting, editing, and revising, students continued to center their peer discussions on ideas, focus, and details. And it showed in the final work.

This teacher used strategies for getting the descriptions in the rubrics “inside the kids’ heads.” Those strategies included using the rubrics from the outset, centering lessons on one important aspect of writing, harnessing the power of students’ talking together to develop an abstract concept like “Ideas,” encouraging peer editing, and coaching students to keep their discussions and editing work trained on that one aspect. While the teacher certainly did a lot of instructional planning, the focus of the planning was creating opportunities for students to internalize important concepts and skills. This teacher exhibited a student-centered mind-set.

The Teacher-Centered Mind-set

In an eighth-grade class, the teacher used rubrics for a “How-to Essay.” She passed out the rubrics at the beginning of the assignment, meaning well; sharing rubrics with students at the beginning is often touted as a formative assessment strategy. She explained that she would grade the final papers using these same rubrics. She gave minilessons on how to write an introduction, body, and conclusion, and gave directions for topic selection, completing a rough draft, and producing a final copy.

As students were working on their essays, the teacher circulated around the room, talking with students and helping as needed. After their rough drafts were completed, students turned them in. The teacher returned the papers with feedback on the rubrics, which, again, is often touted as a formative assessment strategy. “This is where you are now,” she said. “This is what your grade would be if you were to turn in your final copy today. You have an opportunity to revise your work and make it better, and I’ll collect the final copies on Friday.”

This teacher used several strategies that can be formative: sharing rubrics, giving feedback, and providing opportunities for students to revise their work. But the end result was not that much different from what would have resulted from conventional instruction. That’s because this teacher exhibited a teacher-centered mind-set. Most of her work was focused on giving students an assignment and clear information about how it would be graded—both things that the teacher, not the students, did.

Example: Exit Tickets

Exit tickets can, if used well, be opportunities for students to clarify and consolidate their learning for a particular lesson. They can be a vehicle for...
student self-reflection and self-assessment, and sometimes for student goal setting as well.

The Student-Centered Mind-set
In a fifth-grade reading classroom, students regularly worked in “book club groups.” Most recently, they had been working on learning targets about listening, reading, and responding to historical fiction. The group members had been given choices about the texts they read and had been encouraged to have different members of their group read different selections. As with real “book clubs,” class work involved students sharing with group members what they had read and why they thought it was important. They were encouraged to incorporate group members’ comments into final summaries of their reading, which were also composed as the students were gathered in their book club groups.

On book club days, the teacher required exit slips at the end of the reading class. On half-sheets of paper, students answered the questions: “What did I do today in book club? What did I learn from it?” and turned their answers in to the teacher. The exit tickets gave students the opportunity for self-reflection, and it gave the teacher a window into their thinking (plus a way to assess whether students were working productively). The teacher used the information as she talked with students during subsequent book club days, sometimes to give feedback and other times simply to be more informed about the reading and thinking they were doing. This teacher exhibited a student-centered mind-set.

The Teacher-Centered Mind-set
Students in a fifth-grade class were learning how to punctuate dialogue in their writing. The day’s lesson contained some modeling with the whole class, during which students corrected incorrectly punctuated dialogue on a SMART Board and in some individual work. The teacher assigned students to create an exit ticket on which they were to write one correctly punctuated sentence in dialogue. So far, so good. The teacher could have used the exit tickets to start the lesson the next day, following up on both strengths and weaknesses and asking students how they were thinking about the sentences as they were punctuating them. In other words, this teacher could have exhibited a student-centered mind-set even though the subject matter was about punctuation rules. However, she instead graded the exit tickets, noting one point for a correct sentence and zero for an incorrect one. The exit tickets basically functioned as a small quiz, helping with the teacher-centered job of grading.

Example: Peer Editing
Peer editing can be valuable for improving students’ final written projects, but its most valuable learning function is the opportunity it gives students to see more than one example of work and to think about the criteria for good work.

The Student-Centered Mind-set
Students in a fifth-grade class were learning to write personal narratives. The teacher helped the students brainstorm things they should look for in their writing (e.g., “My personal narrative focuses on the topic in the prompt,” “My personal narrative is written in first person,” and so on). She had the students turn those statements into a checklist by adding “yes” and “no” spaces for each. In pairs, peers reviewed each other’s work using the checklist. When both had finished, they had a brief writers’ conference and then began revising their own work. The teacher used several strategies to uncover students’ thinking, including co-constructing the checklist with them, giving them opportunities to use the checklist on a peer’s example, expressing their understanding by talking with their peer, and reapplying those criteria to their own work as they contemplated revisions. The teacher exhibited a student-centered mind-set.
The Teacher-Centered Mind-set

Teachers who truly make the move to a student-centered mind-set can help students learn exponentially more than teachers who cling to a teacher-centered mind-set. Students in an eighth-grade class were writing reports summarizing a text about backcountry settlers in the early colonies, specifically Scots-Irish settlers in the Middle Atlantic colonies. The report was to be written in the genre of an expository article suitable for publication in a class journal. The teacher gave the following directions: Use an introductory paragraph. Describe what life was like and why they went to the backcountry. Include concrete examples from the reading. Do not write outside the space provided. Use a concluding paragraph. The teacher turned these directions into a checklist and asked peers to check each other’s work before the work was turned in.

What makes this an example of a teacher-centered mind-set isn’t that students checked each other’s work. As the previous example showed, peer editing can help make students’ thinking visible for both students and teachers and result in student-centered formative assessment. The problem here is the focus on the teacher’s directions—that is, a focus on compliance rather than on what the students learned. One can imagine how this activity resulted in many wooden reproductions of the reading, with little thought involved. Students followed the teachers’ directions, and many received A’s on the assignment, but as far as learning from informational text goes, this was a giant missed opportunity.

What’s Your Mind-set?

I hope these detailed examples make it easy to see that the execution of formative assessment strategies, in and of itself, does not guarantee that student thinking is made visible—which is supposed to be the point of formative assessment—or that the students necessarily learned any more than they would have in traditional classrooms. Formative assessment is effective when it helps both students and teachers get inside-the-head views of learning in order to light the way forward. That happens only when teachers approach formative assessment with a student-centered mind-set and strive to help students generate and use their own assessment information in order to improve. Those with teacher-centered mind-sets strive to collect assessment information that will help them plan the next set of things they will ask students to do. The former is based on contemporary understanding about how students learn: they construct their own meaning from the opportunities and resources that surround them. The latter is based on older theories about how students learn: they respond to stimuli (in the form of lessons), comply with directions, and give the teacher only what’s been asked for.

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student-centered mind-set can help students learn exponentially more than teachers who cling to a teacher-centered mind-set. But the change is hard, and it goes against many teachers’ prior experiences. Take a moment to reflect on the formative assessment examples I have described and ask yourself this question: Which mind-set is most reflective of the way I use formative assessment now? The more student-centered your approach to formative assessment, the more students will learn.

References


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NCTE is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2009 and December 2013) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE’s separate “Promising Researcher” program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to fjones@ncte.org: Your Name, Your Phone, Your e-mail, Author, Title, Publisher, Date of Publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. Please include four copies of the publication for distribution to the Selection Committee, or give full bibliographic information. Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2014, to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, Attn: Felisa Jones. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2014.

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