

Formative assessment and the craft of writing framework: A response to Cremin and Twiner

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this short article is to respond to Teresa Cremin and Alison Twiner's key paper titled *The Craft of Writing Framework: Focusing on Feedback*. The authors of this consider the provocations of Cremin and Twiner in relation to reflexive feedback and the teaching of writing. We argue that effective formative assessment practices are needed rather than just a call for reflexive feedback. We share findings from a PhD study including a number of definitions and models of formative assessment. We also discuss the importance of embedding effective formative assessment practices in the classroom in order to improve writing practices and products. We then present more detailed suggestions as to how teachers might implement the Craft of Writing Framework alongside a range formative assessment practices, not just through teacher feedback.

Introduction

Writing is a necessary skill in life. We write for different purposes and audiences with the aim to communicate clearly through language and often other modes such as image, sound and gesture. When we learn to write it is important to receive feedback on how our writing might be improved. Teacher feedback is critical for the development of creativity and clarity. Cremin and Twiner's article outlines how teachers need to be reflexive in their feedback to students. They argue that often teachers lack confidence in providing feedback due to uncertainty as writers themselves. Extensive research has explored the notion of teachers as writers (Cremin, 2006; Grainger, 2005; Wells & Lyons, 2020) and how this improves teachers' self-efficacy in teaching writing (Locke & Johnson, 2006). Despite such scholarly work we argue that teachers not only need the confidence to provide 'reflexive feedback' but they also need an in-depth knowledge and understanding of appropriate formative assessment strategies more specifically in relation to writing instruction.

Defining formative assessment for the purpose of this response

There have been copious efforts to identify pedagogical instructions that improve students' writing (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley & Wilkinson, 2004; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Graham & Hebert, 2010; Graham and Perin, 2007). Despite these efforts teachers need additional evidence-based practice for improving students writing. Formative assessment has the potential for improving students' ability to write effectively. It allows

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[teachers to gauge the effectiveness of teaching instruction, modify teaching practice as required and provide students with feedback on the quality of writing and areas for improvement. To this end, it's important that formative assessment practices are intertwined with the implementation of the craft of writing elements to ensure the improvement of students' writing skills.](#)

Generally, formative assessment can be referred to as any form of assessing learning outcomes throughout the learning journey, not just at the end of a unit of work. When exploring the literature on formative assessment it is clear that a number of definitions are available, resulting in conjecture on what formative assessment actually is. Two such definitions of formative assessment that are regularly cited in the literature however, include Black and Wiliams' (1998) and Heritage's (2010) work.

[W]e use the general term assessment to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers – and by their students in assessing themselves – that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs. (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p.2)

Formative assessment is:

a planned process that takes place continuously during the course of teaching and learning to provide teachers and students with feedback to close the gap between current learning and desired goals (Heritage, 2010, p. 10).

You can see that Heritage's definition includes not only certain practices of formative assessment but also its purpose – closing the gap between learning and learning goals. It is important that both teachers and students are aware of the purpose of the types of formative assessment selected; enabling and supporting positive student learning outcomes.

Why do formative assessment?

There are a number of reasons for doing formative assessment in the classroom. First, it is an evidence-based approach to checking for learning. Second, it can be an effective way for students to become more aware of how to monitor their own progress and their peers. Alvarez (2014) suggested that effective formative assessment can:

- promote students' learning through continually monitoring students' progress
- elicit evidence of learning through a variety of tasks depending on the instructional purpose
- change the roles of teachers and students, where the teacher is focused on creating a supportive learning environment in which the students are at the centre of teaching and learning
- use learning progression to anchor learning goals and monitor learning
- result in meaningful feedback and adjustments to improve instruction for students, and
- enable students to become self-regulated and autonomous learners (p. 12).

Without effective formative assessment practices in the classroom teachers may misunderstand students' progress and continue to judge them on previous achievements. Students may also lack the skills to monitor their own progress, necessary for growth. Ultimately, formative assessment is a key component of learning as regular feedback and monitoring of progress is important for students to know where to next, and how to improve next time through strategies other than summative assessment.

Types of formative assessment

A scan of the literature identifies different types of formative assessment. These include formal, informal, divergent, convergent, computer-based and computer-adaptive (Miller & Lavin, 2007; Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2007; Sharkey & Murnane, 2006). Ruiz-Primo and Furtak (2007) for example, explain that formal formative assessment is a planned, information-gathering process focusing on a definitive aspect of learning in a whole-class environment. In contrast, informal formative assessment is incidental, with teachers gathering information in any given situation where communication occurs between teachers and students (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2007).

The difference between convergent and divergent formative assessment is clarified by Torrance and Pryor (1998). In convergent formative assessment the aim is to discover *if* a student knows, understands or can do a predetermined task. Divergent formative assessment, on the other hand, involves identifying *what* a student knows, understands or can do. The latter view adopts a constructivist view of learning, where assessment is viewed as

accomplished by both the teacher and the student. When implementing formative assessment practices it is important to consider the two assessment modes and moving from one to the other in a principled way (Torrance & Pryor, 1998), enhancing the impact on classroom assessment. Effective formative assessment has the potential to engage students in an active process where they take responsibility for their own learning, set goals and identify ways to progress their learning (Heritage, Kim, Vendlinski & Herman, 2009).

Other researchers have investigated the use of digital technologies as a tool for formative assessment. Two such forms of formative assessment are discussed by Sharkey and Murnane (2006). These are computer-based and computer-adaptive assessment. Each of these approaches to formative assessment has strengths and weakness. For example, one strength of computer-based assessment is that it is practical, makes it quick to score, and easy to access students' results. It allows for students' longitudinal data that are easily accessible. Computer-based assessment can, however, discourage students from engaging with paper-based assessment, and multiple-choice questions in such assessments are generic and broad (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006).

The main difference between computer-based and computer-adaptive assessment is that the latter focuses on the individual students, as it examines the skill level of each individual student. In contrast, the former is aligned with curriculum achievement standards. It asks the same question of each student to examine whether students have achieved proficiency levels on the tested skills (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006). Whether it is computer-based or computer-adaptive, what is important is what the teacher gleans from the information gathered and how they use the information to support students' learning.

In addition, Yin and colleagues (2008) explained that it is what the teachers do with the information collected from the assessment that makes the difference. They clarify that when teachers use the information collected from the assessment to cater for different students' learning needs and adjust the teaching to address those needs, students' outcomes will improve and they will be more engaged and motivated. Understanding the different types of assessment enables teachers to use the most suitable type of assessment in any given context.

Determining the suitable type of assessment has great implications for teaching practice as it not only enables teachers to design learning goals that meets students' learning needs but also select the instructional strategies that support motivation, competence and self-

directed learning. Assessment of students' writing is a process and occurs at many different stages throughout the writing process and could come in many different forms. At different points in the assessment process, teachers take on different roles such as motivator, collaborator, critic, and evaluator (Brooke Horvath, 1984) and give different types of response and feedback to students. One of the key intentions of writing assessment is to provide feedback to students. Feedback is crucial to the writing development. In a Harvard Study of Writing (2004), it was concluded, "Feedback emerged as the hero and the anti-hero of our study—powerful enough to convince students that they could or couldn't do the work in a given field" (p. 17). To this end, the importance of gauging where students are at in developing their writing capabilities and providing them with feedback cannot be stressed enough.

Ultimately, all formative assessment practices comprise of four main elements:

1. Identifying gaps in students' learning
2. Deciding where students are in their learning and what they need to learn
3. Adjusting instructions to address individual students' learning needs, and
4. Supporting them toward achieving their learning goals (Heritage et al., 2009, p. 2).

Formative assessment and the teaching of writing

Good writing can be likened to a musical symphony – you know it is good when you hear it. Similar to a well composed musical score, good writing is carefully crafted to communicate the author's thoughts and appeals to the reader's senses by evoking vivid imagery in the reader's mind. To this end, it is important to stress the role of the teacher in orchestrating the teaching of writing and aiding students when composing their writing in the most effective way possible.

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Marzano (2017) explains that teachers "should view learning as a constructive process in which students constantly update their knowledge" (p. 97). Similarly, Hattie (2017) highlights the importance of helping students to engage in metacognitive strategies, such as Planning and Prediction, Elaboration and Organisation, and Evaluation and Reflection. When we think of writing as a constructive process in which we should help students engage in

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metacognitive strategies, we realise how crucial it is that we provide students with regular feedback throughout the entire writing process.

As underscored by Cremin and Twiner in their article as well as Brookhart (2017), many teachers are more confident teaching writing conventions rather than the craft of writing, often leaving the more subtle aspects of writing to chance. As such, it is crucial to develop teachers and students' writing capabilities with instructions that target the craft of writing (National Commission on Writing, 2003). The proposed *Craft of Writing Framework* provides a modelled approach to developing students as writers. As part of the *Craft of Writing Framework* both teachers and students become both the author and the audience to facilitate reading like a writer and writing with the audience in mind.

The five elements that comprise the Framework offer principles for success that pave the way for crafting writing and highlighting the qualities that writing should exhibit. These elements also focus the feedback on targeted aspects of the writing, helping students to self-monitor and evaluate others writing. Students are novice writers, they cannot hit a target they cannot see.

The Framework serves as a reference point that guides students and provide them with signposts to reach their learning targets. However, the key to ensuring that students' compositions stay in tune, is the ongoing quality feedback provided to students during their writing process not just at the end. The effective implementation of the *Craft of Writing Framework* allows teachers and students to give and receive an immediate feedback that leads to tangible improvements. Copious amounts of feedback on student writing is wasted, because students do not often use it. Many teachers assume that students will use the feedback the "next time" they write. The best and most effective feedback on students writing is followed immediately by a planned opportunity, within instructional time, for students to use the feedback.

Effective feedback develops students' critical- and creative-thinking skills. Feedback works best when we collect it from students (Hattie, 2009). The more we ask students to self-evaluate and reflect on their work, the greater the impact on their achievement (Hattie, 2017). Accordingly, it can work well to have students first self-evaluate their writing using the Craft of Writing Framework then come to a writing conference prepared with examples of what's working in their writing and where they need help. When we give feedback like this, we

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encourage students not only to become better writers, but better thinkers as well. Quality feedback probes student thinking and cause students to reflect, evaluate and learn.

The proposed *Craft of Writing Framework* promises a pedagogical tool that supports developing common language about writing, where students can learn to self-reflect on their work. Thus, creating a culture of a writing community that appreciates feedback in their quest to compose a harmonious symphony.

Box 1: Some suggested strategies to help students with writing feedback

- Use the Craft of Writing Framework to model giving and using feedback with students
- Use the Framework to teach students self- and peer assessment skills
- Plan for writing feedback lessons
- Have students develop their own writing and/or peer feedback tool using the Craft of Writing Framework
- Encourage the students to use the Framework to answer their own questions about the writing
- Provide opportunities for students to enact the feedback they receive.

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