**[Grading Formative and Summative Assessments](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032" \o "Permanent Link to Grading Formative and Summative Assessments)**

**Posted on October 27, 2010,** by [Rick DuFour](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?author=6)

By Rick DuFour

We received a question about grading, specifically how to balance grading between formative and summative assessments. The author was concerned because the grading practices of the teachers in the school were so different.

To answer the question, we need to develop a common understanding of the terms formative assessment and summative assessment. A summative assessment is an assessment that asks, “Did the student acquire the intended knowledge and skills by the deadline—yes or no, pass or fail?” For example, every course at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, ends with a final exam that counts for 25 percent of a student’s final grade. This is clearly a summative exam. State exams are another example of summative assessments.

A formative assessment asks, “Is the student learning it, and if not, what steps do we need to take to support his or her learning?” Of course, good teachers are using formative assessment in their classrooms every day as they use a variety of strategies to check for student understanding—asking questions, having students work on a problem or write an answer as they circulate around the room to check student work, using clickers, etc. A teacher who asks students to complete a first draft of an essay and then provides feedback on how the next draft can be improved is also using a formative assessment.

But this question gets at the issue of what happens when, at the end of a unit, the teacher gives a unit exam to determine if the student has learned. Is that exam formative or summative? The answer is, “It depends on how you use it.” If the student fails the exam and is merely given an F and the class moves on, it is a summative exam. But if the exam is assessing the essential skills we want all students to learn, simply moving on is not in keeping with a commitment to learning for all. If the student is given another opportunity to demonstrate that he has learned, it would be formative.

We have seen schools simply allow students to take a test or turn in an assignment over and over again until the student demonstrates proficiency. This is often very frustrating to teachers who feel it sends the message to students that the initial quality of your work does not matter because we just keep giving you more chances.

We feel that the better strategy is to use the assessment in the following ways:

1. Use the assessment to identify students who are not yet proficient on a particular skill or concept.

2. Require those students to keep working on that skill or concept in a structured schoolwide intervention program that is timely, directive, and systematic. This intervention never removes the student from class. Time is purposefully carved out in the daily schedule to provide students who struggle with additional support.

3. When the student has demonstrated proficiency in intervention, allow the student to retake an assessment on the skill or concept in question. If the student is able to demonstrate proficiency, the failing grade should be dropped and replaced by one that demonstrates proficiency because grades should reflect student learning, not how fast they learned.

Here is a specific example. An algebra teacher is assessing student proficiency during instruction each day. The teacher assigns homework on a regular basis, may use ungraded quizzes a few times to monitor student learning, and uses a graded quiz each week. At the end of three weeks, the teacher uses a team-developed common assessment and tells students that if they demonstrate proficiency on the assessment, their lowest score of the unit will be dropped. If a student fails the exam, he or she is assigned to a week of intensive tutoring in the school’s intervention center during what would have been study hall, free time, or lunch. During this intervention period, the student keeps working and learning, putting in more time to acquire the intended skill. At the end of the week, he or she retakes the test and earns a C. The C should replace the F.

In this scenario, we would contend the assessment was formative even though the student received an initial grade of F because the assessment was used to identify a specific area of concern. The results were also used to provide the student with specific instruction and support aimed at helping him or her acquire an essential skill. By giving the student another opportunity to demonstrate that he or she learned, by replacing the F with the C, and by not continuing to punish the student for initial difficulty, he or she has an opportunity to earn a grade that reflects actual learning. Furthermore, the student has an incentive to do well the first time—to keep free time and eliminate the lowest grade of the unit.

Note that this requires a coordinated effort at several levels. The team must agree on the essential learnings and the common assessments they will create to monitor that learning. The team must address the variation in grading practices the question referenced. Members must decide what factors will go into determining a grade. They must also decide how much weight each factor should be given. For example, the math team must decide the weight given to homework, quizzes, and the unit exam. One teacher can’t count the exam for 10 percent of a student’s grade and another count it for 50 percent. And very importantly, there must be a systematic schoolwide approach to intervention. The teacher would be responsible for reporting which students need the intervention but not for providing the intervention or seeing to it that the student is placed there. That becomes an administrative responsibility.

We can continue the tradition of using assessment merely to *prove* what students have learned so we can assign a grade and move on, or we can use assessment to *improve* student learning when we insist that students who do not demonstrate proficiency keep working and learning until they do.

[Register](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?action=register)   [Post Comment »   14 Comments »](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032#comments)

**14 Responses to “Grading Formative and Summative Assessments”**

1. [*Tweets that mention AllThingsPLC » Blog Archive » Grading Formative and Summative Assessments -- Topsy.com*](http://topsy.com/trackback?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032&utm_source=pingback&utm_campaign=L2) says:

[October 27, 2010 at 1:09 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1459)

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Chris Lindholm, Jeff Jones. Jeff Jones said: AllThingsPLC: Grading Formative and Summative Assessments: By Rick DuFour We received a question about gradi… <http://tinyurl.com/28fcjve> [...]

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + *brooklawn* says:

[December 7, 2010 at 9:17 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1525)

Our school is required to give both formative and summative assessments. After extra help is provided, how many times would you allow a student to retake a test if he or she continues to fail?

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + - *Dick Dewey* says:

[December 17, 2010 at 1:01 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1572)

Thank you for writing and asking your question.

Toward our mission of quality learning for ALL students, our corollary affirmation speaks to “whatever it takes.” As a pragmatic classroom coach, I would be inclined to pursue an alternate strategy with this student (vs. retaking the same test). I would look at the scaffolding of knowledge and skills, re-examine (with the student) what the student does know and can do (vs. what he doesn’t know and can’t do…..YET), and then re-build a “winning streak” from that point.

Dr. Richard Stiggins does a wonderful job of relating the importance of “building winning steaks” in the classroom. His Seven Strategies FOR Learning are incredibly powerful toward this end.

Students who understand the learning targets (in student-friendly language), are assessed on fewer targets more often and are involved as “users of the data” rather than “victims of the data,” are in a much better position to participate in and find more frequent and consistent success. And, when they don’t find the expected success, it is much more of the “not YET; give me another crack at it” response that is typical of a “user of data.”

Thanks,
Dick Dewey, PLC at Work Associate

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + *Nehal* says:

[December 7, 2011 at 3:43 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-2349)

I totally believe that formative, rather than summative assessment should be mostly implemented in schools. Summative assessment could be used primariliy as a means of determinging what the students actually learned, and what they are behind at, then definitely a formative approach should take over from there to ensure that the student finally acquired the knowledge necessary to be an active participant in his classroom community, and school in general. I believe by doing so, the focus would be on what the child is actually learning, not just a teacher, or school, getting off the hook by teaching a lesson, giving an assessment, and going on to the next level without giving much thought to whether there was actual ‘learning’ in the process or not. My problem is that in my school, summative learning is the main idea, and the school principal and administration refuse to change, or bend the rules. Once an assessment is given, the teacher is required to move on without stopping for any child. How do we bring change in such schools? How can I, as a new teacher, broach this subject with my veteran colleagues and school administration? I feel many teachers are as frustrated as I am by this matter, and it also lead to student and parents frustration as well. Thank you.

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

1. *shrhodes* says:

[October 28, 2010 at 6:50 am](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1460)

When you are talking about a systematic schoolwide approach to intervention, you mention that the teacher is not responsible for providing the intervention but that it is an administrative responsibility. What do you mean?

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + *Rick DuFour* says:

[November 1, 2010 at 8:16 am](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1463)

I mean that when a teacher has taught a unit the best way she knows how, and most students have learned but some have not, it is unrealistic to believe the teacher can address the needs of the struggling students at the same time she is trying to move forward with the other kids. It is equally unrealistic to assume that teacher can chase down kids who won’t do their work and provide the supervision necessary to ensure they do their work. So what happens when kids don’t learn or won’t do their work? It shouldn’t fall solely on the teacher to solve the problem. The administration needs to create a structure that ensures those students get extra support and devote extra time to their learning through systematic intervention. The teacher has an obligation to continually seek more effective ways to teach, but the school has an obligation to create systematic interventions. For examples, check out the schools on allthingsplc listed under [evidence of effectiveness](http://www.allthingsplc.info/evidence/evidence.php).

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

1. *ecahr* says:

[October 28, 2010 at 8:00 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1462)

I am a little confused right now after reading this information. I was under the impression that formative assessments were used to inform your daily instruction and not to be included in their grade because most of the formative assessments are isolated skills that you are teaching day-to-day, whereas the summative is the concept in its entirety. I believe Rick Stiggins says to take the mode or median when looking for the grade and not to average because earlier learning is just that learning. Help??

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + *Rick DuFour* says:

[November 1, 2010 at 8:18 am](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1464)

Both Rick Stiggins and I believe that good teachers are using formative assessment when they check for understanding each day, almost minute by minute in their classroom. There are also times when we assess students with homework, quizzes, and assignments that we may not grade because we are simply gathering evidence of student learning so we can make adjustments in instruction and provide individual students with targeted instruction. At some point, however, we stop to use more formal assessments – for example a test at the end of the unit. So let’s say a student fails the test – a test that assesses a skill you said was essential. If you give the student an F and move on, it is a summative assessment regardless of whether you use median or modes when you determine a final grade at the end of the semester. I contend that if the student fails to demonstrate he has learned the essential skill, the school should require the student to access its system of intervention and continue working and learning in a small group setting. This intervention should never remove the student from new direct instruction. When the student has done the extra work he should be given another opportunity to demonstrate his learning on form B of the assessment, and the lower grade should be dropped and replaced with the new grade. In this way the assessment is formative in that we use it to identify students who are not learning, we provide them with targeted instruction, and we give them another opportunity to learn. It is formative because we are using it to inform both the teacher and student what needs to happen next in the learning process.

So I think Rick is wrong when he says any assessment that receives a grade cannot be formative. I would much rather require the student to keep working until he is proficient rather than assign a failing grade. When I pressed Rick on this he argued that the student shouldn’t take the unit test in the first place until the teacher is sure the student is proficient. I don’t think it is realistic for a high school teacher with 150 students to individualize instruction to the point that he is administering tests to each of those students at different times based on each student’s proficiency.

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + - *educate4life* says:

[February 17, 2012 at 1:06 am](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-2859)

I am new to this forum but stumbled upon this thread. I am a high school mathematics teacher. I have a few comments and am interested in your response. The school I am teaching at has an “open access” policy. That is, any student can take any class regardless of their previous performance. In addition to this, I teach closer to 200 students, not 150. That is, five (5) sections at forty (40) students. Does formative assessment work when students are misplaced? In theory, formative assessment sounds spot-on. However, when we (teachers) are dealing with increased class size and students without an adequate foundation, does the formative process give us information that we do not already know? I guess what I am asking is, what are the requirements in order for this model to be successful/meaningful? In mathematics, do the students need to “pass” the summative assessments in previous classes in order to have valid formative assessments?

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

1. *RDeen Huerta* says:

[November 3, 2010 at 1:40 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1469)

I attended a Principals Academy at BYU last year and heard either Rick or Becky DuFour explain about daily 5 question assessments (or maybe they were called 5 minute assessments) and how to use them to inform teaching. Could I get an expanded explanation of that?

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + *Becky DuFour* says:

[November 9, 2010 at 8:11 am](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1473)

We think you are referring to a math quiz that Principal Garrick Peterson from Lakeridge Junior High School showed as an example of a formative assessment his math team used. He and some of the teacher leaders participated in the fishbowl PLC at Work Progress Report. We shared your question with Garrick. The following is his response:

“There is nothing sacred about five question assessments. What is critical for us is that once we have taught a standard the best we know how to teach it we are able to (1) determine which students are proficient in that standard. The reason this is critical, is if they are not competent in that standard we need to immediately get them into our intervention system to help them learn that standard. If you go to the [Lakeridge Junior High School](http://www.allthingsplc.info/evidence/lakeridgejuniorhighschool/index.php) page, you can read more about that intervention system. The goal of our school is to have every student competent in every standard, so as soon as we are finished teaching a standard we need to assess and determine who needs more time to learn.

The second reason we give these formative assessments is to determine how effective our instruction was. This is critical for collaborative purposes. Having a common pacing guide allows us to give the assessment on close to the same day. Having teachers compare data from these assessments during collaboration time is the catalyst for great collaboration leading to improved instruction and increased student learning.

In summary: it is not about the number of questions – it is about creating formative assessments tied to a standard. This can be 5 questions, 8 questions, 10 questions…it doesn’t matter the number of questions. The teachers need to determine the questions and the number of questions to determine if the student is meeting mastery. Once that is determined, the assessment results can be analyzed by the members of the team. Through their analysis, the teachers can identify “next steps” in the learning process for students and adults.

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

1. *jwharton* says:

[December 7, 2010 at 2:16 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1515)

In my school we are starting to use learning goals. I have been quizzing my students every week over the past two weeks of learning goals. Every week they can retake a concept that they received a bad grade on. If they receive a perfect score on a concept on two different occasions I have told them that they have mastered that topic. I am quizzing using a formative assessment and am giving a midterm and final during every trimester. I am not grading homework because I think of it as practice. I do many problems in class over each concept. What do you think are the cons of using such a model? Are there any really good benefits of grading the homework as opposed to not grading? Any other ideas.

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)

* + *Dick Dewey* says:

[December 17, 2010 at 1:08 pm](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=1032&cpage=1#comment-1575)

Thank you for writing.

Although there are no definitive cookie cutter protocols, your efforts are to be commended. You are likely finding more students experiencing ‘winning streaks’ due to your formative and personalizing strategies. (NOTE: See Dr. Richard Stiggins work on “Building Winning Streaks” for students.)

With respect to your question regarding the grading of homework, we need to be mindful of the fact that the role of homework, from a historical perspective, was less than well-defined (think Sputnik and rush of efforts in schools to increase the rigor). Further, “….there is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary students. There is only a moderate correlation between homework and achievement in middle school. Even in high school too much homework may diminish its effectiveness and become counterproductive” (Cooper, et. al., 2006). This and similar other research findings have sparked a very emotional debate regarding the efficacy homework; and, we don’t see an end to this debate in sight (yet!).

What we do see are highly effective educators, like you, using homework for what it is – a formative tool for learning, responsive teaching, and further learning (not grading). In the absence of such, grading homework is fertile ground for the promotion of zeros and subsequent (unrealized) misuse of the power of zeros in the grading formula. Further, given the uneven playing field for our students relative to homework (e.g. unequal resources at home; the overabundance of homework that our students are receiving across the curriculum; etc), grading homework as standard practice becomes a source of frustration and discouragement, as it places our most underserved students further ‘at risk.’ “The consequence of grading homework can be the difference between passing or failing for some students….Grading homework is simply not best practice” (Craft, 2009).

That being said, as you are meeting the needs of many more of your students BECAUSE of what you are doing, there will likely be a few students still not learning at high levels (in spite of what you are doing). This, of course, represents an opportunity for supplemental or more intensive interventions. Be sure to keep focus on the many students you are helping with your efforts vs. the likely imperfections of any one set of strategies in meeting the needs of ALL students.

Thanks,
Dick Dewey, PLC at Work Associate

[Log in to Reply](http://www.allthingsplc.info/wordpress/wp-login.php?redirect_to=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.allthingsplc.info%2Fwordpress%2F%3Fp%3D1032)