

Tech Snacks: Formative Assessment

In the world of teaching, it's important to recognize that there are gaps between **what we think we're teaching** and **what is actually being learned** in the classroom. The continuous monitoring of these gaps, with the intent of closing them, is usually referred to as "formative assessment" (or sometimes less formally, "checking for understanding"). Even small formative assessment strategies can make a big difference in student learning.

"Checking for Understanding" using Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is different from "summative assessment," which may be used in the form of chapter quizzes, unit tests, papers, and final exams. Formative assessment is used not to measure students' success in reaching official course outcomes or standards, but rather to assess and improve instructional techniques and to help students understand and monitor their own learning. Incorporating formative assessment techniques into your classroom can help both you and your students "check for understanding" by evaluating student progress in real time.

Some high-impact formative assessment practices include:

- **Frequently stopping and "checking for understanding"** using a wide range of strategies to assess whether instructional practices have been effective; adjusting instruction pace and approach if students seem lost.
- **Pausing a lecture every 15 minutes or so and giving students substantial opportunity for guided practice** (small steps) to try out the process that you're modeling; then providing corrective feedback so that students know if they are right or wrong (and why) before you move on.
- **Incorporating "metacognitive" (self-assessment) opportunities within your instruction** so that students learn to check their own understanding of content and develop awareness about the effectiveness of their own learning strategies.
- **Providing clear expectations (e.g., goals, criteria, example work, etc.)** for student work performance as well as specific, actionable feedback so that students understand what their performance gap is and have tools to improve it.

Why should I use it?

Live, real-time assessment — Incorporating these techniques into your lectures will help you, as the instructor, evaluate student progress and understanding as you work through instruction.

Student engagement — Using an interactive lecture format (pausing to check for understanding), providing students with opportunities to practice, and incorporating self-assessment activities into your teaching can help students stay attentive in class.

Low-stakes, low-risk assessment — Many of these techniques are relatively low-stakes, which helps students learn and evaluate their knowledge in a way that is safe to “fail.” Our students tend to be more risk-averse; providing low-stakes “assessments” in class during your instruction gives them a place that is low risk with high value.

Examples of formative assessment activities at MSUN

- Checking in during lecture with polling apps (Kahoot!, PollEverywhere)
- Review session or games (Jeopardy, etc.)
- Minute papers, entrance slips, and exit slips
- Grade check assignments
- Mid-semester teaching evaluations or surveys

Other peer examples
