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Knowing that frequent assessment increases learning and retention, coaches who encourage teachers to plan to use formative assessment to inform instruction can impact student learning in powerful ways.

Oftentimes, teachers attempt a formative assessment in the course of instruction by asking several questions orally of students during class presentation or discussion and using student responses to guide further instruction. Typically, such assessments occur spontaneously, when students indicate some confusion or the teacher is not sure he or she is completely understood. Yet because formative assessment can be not only an instructional tool for teachers, but a learning opportunity for students as well, developing a pool of higher-level questions pertaining to each lesson and planning when to ask those questions during instruction can improve both instruction and learning. Such an assessment is more than checking for understanding: asking the class, “Any questions?” does not constitute effective formative assessment, as such a question demands no reflection or critical thinking on the part of students. What an effective formative assessment needs to provide is both a challenge to students’ ability to analyze, synthesize, and summarize and the time for students to apply their own prior knowledge, experiences, and attitudes toward making sense and meaning of the new content. Using formative assessment as an instructional strategy in this way requires deliberation by teachers regarding the best times in a lesson for such student cognitive processing.

When written formative assessment, embedded in instruction, is used, teachers will need to develop expertise in several areas. Instructional coaches can be instrumental in guiding teachers in the first area of expertise and that is the development of what Dylan William calls “hinge-point questions.” These are diagnostic questions asked at pivotal points in any lesson that assess understanding effectively and efficiently. Students should be able to respond to these questions in a very short time and receive immediate or almost immediate feedback from the teacher.

Beyond the design of these important questions that can be answered in five minutes or less, teachers need efficient ways to score student responses. One solution to this is suggested by the Collins Writing Program. Type Two writing, which John Collins describes as “frequent low-stakes quizzes”, provides a structure for scoring short written responses. First, include a number in the question such as “List and briefly describe at least four discrete steps you would follow to solve the given problem.” Or, “Read the following student response and explain three

reasons this answer would not receive full credit on a test.” In each of these responses, students are asked to underline and number the required components in their writing. When these steps are followed, the teacher is able to evaluate student responses by skimming, thus learning about student understanding and misunderstanding.

The results of frequent formative assessments provide information to guide the teacher in making decisions about next steps in instruction. The results also inform the student about their learning and progress and, with guidance, result in student action steps to enhance their own learning

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