

Ep. 009: Formative Assessment

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Formative assessments can sound like a formidable undertaking. But they don't have to be.

Dr. Julie-Ann McFann, CTLT's Program Team Lead, shows us how little, frequent "check-ins" can help us know if our students are really getting it. She helps us wrap our brains around the differences between formative and summative assessments and the differences between assessing and grading. We'll also explore how using formative assessments might assuage your students' constant craving for study guides.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

JULIE-ANN: And I'm Julie-Ann.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee, joining me today. Dr. Julie-Ann McFann. She is the team lead for our programming here at CTLT. And does faculty development. Hi, Julie-Ann.

JULIE-ANN: Hi, Jim, how are you?

JIM: I'm great. And I am so glad to have you on. We've been talking, we've been conspiring to get you on the show since we were, you know, the since the inception of this. Yes. And there's one important topic I'd like to talk about today, something I have really, I have a real hard time getting to grips with. And it's this idea of formative assessment. In a nutshell, what is formative assessment?

JULIE-ANN: Formative assessment is, while students are forming their learning, you do a check in to see if they are actually on track for learning. It's a little different than what's called summative assessment, where you are gauging whether they've actually learned the material, and most often you put a grade with it. But formative assessment is a way to do kind of a check in while they're learning it's low stakes versus summative, which is usually high stakes or higher stakes, then formative.

JIM: So does it does it matter what kind of information you're testing for? I mean, is it just vocabulary stuff? Or can it be higher level concepts?

JULIE-ANN: Oh, this is what's so cool about formative assessment. It is anything, anything you're teaching on, and it doesn't even have to be testing, it can just be students talking to each other, to say, this is what I'm learning? And is this the same thing that you've learned? And in that conversation, they can say, Oh, wait, I'm totally off base and the other can go? I know the answer. Neener. Neener. Neener.

JIM: Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: So, it's those little moments that you enjoy and teaching? Yes.

- JIM: Okay, so we'll spend a majority of our time today, I think, talking about how to do formative assessment, because I think that's a better the best way for us to understand it. But stepping back a little bit, before we get there. Let's talk about what's the real value in doing formative assessment? What's the value to the students? And what's the value to us as teachers.
- JULIE-ANN: So, I would say the biggest value in formative assessment as it helps students take ownership of their own learning. So often as instructors, we say, why aren't they? Why are they only caring about what their grade is, I want them to become passionate about what they're learning, by doing formative assessment along the way, that before you do an exam, or some sort of paper, something, students can say, Oh, I am learning this. And this is pretty awesome. Or if they're not learning it, then they can say, Oh, hey, I need to do something about this. And I need to figure out how to learn it. And it enables the students to know whether they're learning before the exam, because all too often students think they know the material, they get it. You ask the question, any questions, and you get the crickets, because the students think they know. And then they get their exam back. And they're thinking, Oh, maybe I didn't know this as well as I thought I did. So by doing the formative of assessment along the way, it enables them to have a better grasp of their own learning.
- JIM: So, in other words, when we ask that question, okay, does anyone have any questions before you take the test? That's really in a way an unfair question. Yeah, the students because how would they know what they know? And what they don't know exactly? How do they gauge that? Okay, so that, alright, so that makes a little bit more sense. So to better define the difference between formative and summative assessment, say like a chapter reading quiz, typically is at a formative exercise or that be just like a quick multiple here are five multiple choice questions about the chapter you were supposed to have read for today.
- JULIE-ANN: It actually all depends on how it's been used, okay? By the instructor, in my happy teaching land, it would be used as a formative assessment technique, so that the instructor can say okay, here's what my students are understanding from this chapter. And here's what they're really miss understanding so I can fine tune my teaching to go after what they don't understand what they do understand. I don't have to spend 40 minutes teaching that because they've got it but there are a lot of people who do use it as a summative way and they put it in the grade. book. And I think it kind of defeats the purpose.
- JIM: Yeah. And I confess I occasionally still in the courses I teach will use reading quizzes. And I guess it's probably a leftover. It's kind of a vestige of a time when I really felt like I needed to incentivize the reading in some way other than being prepared to discuss the material in class, or tying it into maybe a more a higher level sort of assessment as just a way to apply a couple points to try to incentivize actually doing the work every week.
- JULIE-ANN: And that's, I think that's legitimate if you make it low stakes, so I think a big difference between formative and summative is how much of a final grade does this go towards? So if you want to, if you're worried about whether students will actually do the

reading, or do this low stakes kind of assessment, yeah, you can toss some points in there, and and say, you know, these all will add up over the course of the semester.

JIM: Right. And we want to save a little time in today's show, maybe to touch briefly upon the difference between grading, and learning. Yeah, and all of that. But so just to make sure I understand, and so folks listening, maybe are clear on this. The difference between a formative assessment and summative assessment is not the kind of assessment you're doing in that the structure of the assessment. So you could have a multiple choice quiz. That is formative

JULIE-ANN: Yes.

JIM: Or it could be something it doesn't mean it. You know, it's not like an essay is a formative type of assessment, whereas a true false quiz is not.

JULIE-ANN: Correct. Okay. In fact, there is a body of thought that an exam, like a midterm can also be used as a formative assessment, right? Say that fast. And in terms of when you give the exam back, you ask the students to think about, what did they get right? What did they get wrong? Why do they think they got the things they got wrong? Wrong? Did they study did they misunderstand? And the things they got? Right? Did they actually know it? Or did they just guess, right? And so you can actually take a midterm and turn it into a formative tool, and then build upon it in later assessment or exams and so forth.

JIM: Yeah, I think a lot of us when we teach on the university level, we try to do a little bit of that. Certainly, I think the spirit is there. I think we would like to think we maybe do more of it than we actually do. So I it seems to me that the key to successfully implementing a formative assessment in your course, is to formalize these ideas and not just have that little Kota at the you know, as you're handing back papers, and you ask them, Hey, what did you find was hardest on this, but come up with some way to structure that and maybe even measure it?

JULIE-ANN: Yes.

JIM: Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: There's a technique called an exam wrapper. That makes it more overt, where you ask the students, I don't know why it's called an exam wrapper. Because nothing is really wrapped around the exam. But...

JIM: It maybe it was one day, back back when you know, dinosaurs roamed the earth and everything was on paper.

JULIE-ANN: You'd said you wouldn't talk about my childhood. So. So, in that you it's a formal statement, where you ask the students to answer those questions about what they got right? And what they got wrong. And how much time did they spend studying and so forth? And you ask them to turn that in. What is their plan of action? Going forward? How are they going to learn the information they missed? And have them turn that in? And then a couple weeks later, or before the next exam, you give it back to them and

say, here's what you said last time, just as a reminder, and that has proven to be pretty effective.

JIM: I think what we can do is here at CTLT, we have exam wrappers for our Opscan evaluation service. Yes. So what what some people don't know is that we're also in addition to doing teaching and learning and professional development for faculty, we offer several support services, including we're where everyone brings their Scantron sheets to be to be graded. So what we can do is we can link to some of that material, yes, on the show page for this episode. And that may give people kind of a better idea of what one of these...

JULIE-ANN: ...might look like.

JIM: Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: And you in the, the nice thing is you can tailor it according to whatever your needs are, there is no right or wrong. One way to do it.

JIM: Okay, so how would I introduce what are some easy steps that I could take to introduce some formative assessment into my teaching?

JULIE-ANN: One of the easiest ones is a CTLT standby called think pair share. Okay, think pair share is I alluded to it earlier, where you stop the conversation, and perhaps you ask a question on your PowerPoint or overhead? Or document camera document camera back to the dinosaurs. Yeah, exactly, exactly. Um, and say, Okay, think about this question related to whatever concept you've just been teaching, write it down, talk to your neighbor about it, and decide if you got the answer, right, or what your thoughts are about it. And then it's a whole class you kind of debrief. And just doing that process, the students are able to gauge whether they've learned or not. And then in the debriefing, it enables you to determine what you may need to reteach, or if they've got it all. So that's one method. Another method is on on our campus, we call it the ticket out. Other places, they may call it a minute paper or muddiest point or something like that, where you get you tell them, I always encourage a three by five cards so that they don't right, on and on and on. Right? What are you still confused about? Or if you had to tell a friend about the difference between Freud and Erikson? What what are the major differences between their areas of research, and then you read their responses. And as what happened to me one time is my students had flipped the two and said, Freud only studied men. And Erickson only studied crazy Victorian women. And I was able to go back to the next class and say, um, you've got it backwards. Freud is the one that thought all women were crazy. And that's why we debunked him since then. But that enables you to get a read on how well they're learning. It was an eye opener for me, because I thought I was quite clear.

JIM: Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: And explaining the difference between the two of them. Yeah. And then I could go back and explain. And it also enabled my students to know on the spot when I came back and went, Oh, my God, you guys, you got it backwards.

JIM: Right.

JULIE-ANN: They remembered that.

JIM: Yeah, cuz that was a special moment.

JULIE-ANN: Yeah.

JIM: it was, yeah, the routine, right.

JULIE-ANN: Um, and then there's also we talked about, like reading quizzes earlier. There's a strategy called just in time teaching. And it's, again, where we're able to gauge what students know, before we actually teach on the topic. We, you can use the ReggieNet quiz tool to have them complete some questions about it, you have the due date early enough that you can look over them. And then again, you teach about it in class. And one of the things that came up when I was teaching a workshop on formative assessment, was this idea that the formative assessment would be spread out the same way we do like a midterm or final. And one thing to keep in mind is, you should be doing some sort of formative check in two or three times in a class session. So you don't want it to be like this really big thing. Using clickers is a way of checking in with your students. And that's a formative assessment right there. Really, you could turn anything into a means of a check-in or a formative assessment.

JIM: Do you hear from faculty? I'm curious about students attitudes, when they encounter this sort of thing. Because again, I think that both for instructors and for students, this may be kind of a new experience. I don't remember. Maybe Maybe I had teachers growing up who used formative assessment, but they were pretty darn stealthy about it. I don't remember encountering a lot we were always studying for the next test. And so do you hear from faculty members that students are a little agog? Or reluctant? Or you know, because there are no points tied to it either, and students live and die by those those points, it seems?

JULIE-ANN: Well, what I found actually not so much for faculty members is from students when they're doing the mid... when I'm doing a midterm chat, is that they appreciate that the professors take a moment to make sure that they're learning and they've indicated that it does help them get a sense of, are they learning, are they not learning and it's on the spot. They know what they then need to study versus, oh, I've got this and then bam, they fail an exam or something like that. So based on feedback that I've gotten from, from students in midterm chats, they appreciate it, okay. From faculty. When I hear, Oh, I can't do formative assessment. What I usually find out is they're making it too big. They're making it bigger than it needs to be. Right, instead of something simple on the spot, there's, there's a book I would like to there's actually two books I want to recommend.

JIM: Okay.

JULIE-ANN: And our library carries both of them, I believe.

JIM: And we'll put links up to him.

JULIE-ANN: We'll put links up.

JIM: Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: One is a classic by Tom D'Angelo, and or excuse me, Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross.

JIM: Right.

JULIE-ANN: Who wrote the classic classroom assessment techniques. And I was always use this in my workshops, and say, hey, just go through, find some ideas that you can pull out, maybe adapt something like that. There's a more recent one by one of Patricia Cross's protegees. Elizabeth Barclay, who was here a few years ago as a keynote speaker for us at our symposium.

JIM: Right.

JULIE-ANN: And she co authored it with Claire Howell-Major, called learning assessment techniques. And it's along the same lines, both of these are along the same line is they have one or two pages of ideas. And you just flip through it and see oh, oh, yeah, I can do this, or I can't do that.

JIM: They're almost like catalogs of assessment techniques.

JULIE-ANN: Yes, yes.

JIM: Yeah. No, it's great. You didn't go shopping for what what might?

JULIE-ANN: Exactly, exactly and whatever. You might need it for.

JIM: Sure.

JULIE-ANN: I use them when I have to get some new ideas like yeah, oh, yeah, I could do this.

JIM: Yeah, that's pretty good. Let me ask you one other thing about the student perspective on formative assessment. You know, the other thing I hear from students, when I go in and I do a midterm chat or some other consultation is I hear Yeah, but we need a study guide, or we want a study guide, the study guide seems to be this big area of emotional concern for the students. Is there kind of their security blanket for learning? Is there a relation between these little formative assessments and a study guide? Is it a way to get students to create their own? Finally, the dream?

JULIE-ANN: I think I'm so glad you asked this question. Actually, there is some literature about this,

JIM: Okay?

JULIE-ANN: Where there's instructors who actually tell their students to create their study guides. And I think, say, hey, think about what questions we've asked in class, what have we talked about, and they say, I'm not going to give you a study guide, but during maybe a class session that would normally have been devoted to reviewing for a test or

something like that. They break them into groups and tell them to make a study guide. And then they perhaps put it up on ReggieNet or something like that. And then after the test, when they give the test back, they show, here's the study guide that you guys created. Here's the test I created before you created that study guide. Look how everything matches up so beautifully. Right? You don't need no stinking study guide for me, right? You've already got it all. Yeah. And, and again, it helps the students take ownership, it helps them give that confidence. It's the I'm going to go jargoning on you. It's metacognition, the more they think about their own learning in their own thinking, the more their learning will stick. And so the formative assessment helps with their metacognition, forcing them to create their own study guide helps them think about what they're learning. As long as we're not doing the work for them, they're going to learn, but too often instructors get frightened, and they do the work for their students.

JIM: Right. So, that brings us to kind of our final point for today, because we are running a little low on time. The difference between grading and assessing. What is the difference between grades and assessment?

JULIE-ANN: So, this is a great question because we as professors have a tendency to mix the two up.

JIM: Oh, yeah.

JULIE-ANN: And so I'm, I have some notes in front of me, if you hear the paper rustling. That's, that's me looking at my notes, because I'll make sure I get this right. Assessment basically, is feedback. It is used to determine what a student knows or can do. It's just feedback if it can impact their advancement, perhaps to the next step, maybe a placement, a placement test, perhaps, or ultimately, it can impact grades. Now grades are actually much more high stakes. According to the research. It is an accepted level or standard number letter or symbol indicating a student's level of accomplishment or a determination of the quality of something like academic work, it is actually to tell people going forward. Here's what the student is able to do or their potential.

JIM: It's a certification.

JULIE-ANN: It's a certification.

JIM: Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: It's this student has learned this material and can go on to the next

JIM: I see.

JULIE-ANN: And that's where where things like, well, he tried so hard. So I gave him a little nudge on the grade. Yeah, can come back and haunt, right, because trying hard is not the same as indicating that they have actually learned. Gotcha. So it is, um,

JIM: So A for effort really is just for effort it.

Yeah.

JIM: Does not it does not indicate a level of certification a level of skill or complete.

JULIE-ANN: Right. Certainly. Yes.

JIM: Exploration.

JULIE-ANN: Yes. So it's, yeah, it's basically a grade is a professional opinion of how well this student has done in your course. So

JIM: It sounds to me that if we can, if we incorporate formative assessments in our teaching, then we can have more confidence in the grades being actually what the grades are supposed to be.

JULIE-ANN: Yes!

JIM: Do I did I get it?

JULIE-ANN: Yes!

JIM: All right. 22 minutes. And that's all it took. So there's hope for all of us. I guess. If I can get it everyone can. Julie-Ann, thank you so much for joining us.

JULIE-ANN: Thank you for inviting me.

JIM: We will have you back again, sometime. We'll talk a little bit more about grades and assessment, I think down the road. And formative assessment is always a topic.

JULIE-ANN: Yeah.

JIM: I think we can revisit so

JULIE-ANN: And and we will also talk about how to make sure your exams actually grade, or actually assess what you're hoping they'll assess.

JIM: I look forward to it. And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about what we talked about today, about our podcast in general, and how to subscribe by going to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Just click on the podcast link on the upper right of the page. for Dr. Julie-Ann McFann and everyone here at CTLT. I'm Jim Gee, Happy Teaching.