How do you measure if your students are achieving your learning outcomes? Are your students progressing as expected, or are they falling behind? Judging student progress can be a confusing task. You may wonder:

- How can formative and summative asssessments help me judge student progress? How can they help students judge their own progress?
- Are formative assessments worth it?
- What makes an effective formative assessment?

Why Formative Assessments?

Formative vs. Summative Assessments

What's the difference between formative and summative assessments? Summative assessments are intended to compare student learning to a particular benchmark, usually at a certain point in the course or the end of the course. These are "high-stakes" assessments that translate directly into grades. Formative assessments, on the other hand, are low-stakes. Formative assessments monitor ongoing learning and provide feedback to instructors and students.

Formative Assessments: For Teachers

Formative assessments can help you (the instructor) monitor student progress before they get to that "high-stakes" final exam or paper. Regular formative assessments can help you identify where students are struggling so that you can quickly address those problem areas. As this article in Edutopia describes, "If you are not routinely checking for student understanding, then you are not in touch with your students' learning."

> "Formative assessment is based on the idea that learners should learn to take control of their learning...formative assessment improves self-reflection in students and reinforces the idea that intelligence can be increased as opposed to it being a fixed entity."
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> Hall, M. The Characteristics of High-Quality Formative Assessments. *The Innovative Instructor Blog.*

Formative Assessments: For Students

Formative assessments help your students, too, since it gives them to practice metacognition, or "thinking about their thinking." Formative assessments, done correctly, get students asking the questions, where am I trying to go? Where am I now? How do I close the gap? (see this report by Hanover Research). Prompt, responsive feedback from faculty in the form of formative assessments can significantly improve student learning outcomes.

Examples of Formative Assessments

01 Exit Slips. Provide your students with a question at the end of class, and have them jot down an answer. Collect the answers as they leave the class (or, consider using an informal survey in Canvas if you are teaching a large course or an online course). The type of answers will tell you if the students are "getting it" so far.

02 Use the K-W-L strategy. Whatever method you choose, consider asking your students: what do you already **k**now? What do you **w**ant to know? What do you need to **l**earn? You may ask students to create Venn diagrams, postcards, or a drawing to express their thoughts.

03 Use student examples. Offer students two examples of a particular assignment, and ask them to discuss their reasons why one is better than another. Use an online discussion board in online courses.

04 Low-stakes writing. Give students 3-minutes to write about the topic (ungraded). Consider providing them with an open-ended prompt or question about what they have learned so far. You could also ask them to write one-sentence summaries of the topics to check their progress.