



What Makes Utah Compose a Formative Assessment Tool?

What is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment has been around for decades in various programs and practices.

Benjamin Bloom, so well known for his Taxonomy of Learning Domains, emphasized the need for instructional differentiation that matched the needs of each student. Based on his landmark study of how tutors worked with students, he maintained that adding more time for those who needed it as well as re-teaching would allow all students to be successful and that assessments should be used to give students feedback and to serve as guides for correction (Bloom, 1968).

According to a policy brief on formative assessment published by the National Council of Instructors of English (2010), excellent formative assessment emphasizes the following: quality of student work instead of the quantity; coaching and encouragement for improvement rather than grades; student-instructor dialogue as opposed to lectures; and as many chances for success as necessary, concentrating on a few increments of understanding at a time.

Many educational researchers in the field today prefer the term *assessment FOR learning*, to clearly differentiate it from summative assessment, or *assessment OF learning* (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004; Stiggins, 2004). The term *assessment for learning* clearly indicates the crucial role assessment should have in learning. Students are assessed as they learn so that instructors and students know what comes next – more practice, instructional intervention, or moving on to the next concept (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

What Does Formative Assessment Look Like in the Classroom?

Many types of formative assessment happen naturally in the classroom, as instructors give specific, timely feedback to students on their learning and then work to strengthen understanding of concepts. They do this when they ask for exit tickets or when they ask for a quick “thumbs up” check for understanding. They do this when they coach a student through a project or scrap an entire lesson plan because students are “not getting it.” Formative

assessment does not result in a grade in the grade book. Formative assessment guides both instructors and students in making decisions during learning about what additional learning needs to take place.

There are also more formal methods of formative assessment. The Utah Compose practice-writing program is one of these methods.

How Does Utah Compose Fit In?

Utah Compose is a tool that allows students to practice writing in a low-stakes environment and receive timely feedback on their efforts as they practice. Utah Compose offers several forms of feedback to the writer. First, it provides in-text conventions and sentence fluency feedback. Students receive scores for each of six writing characteristics, so that they can see which areas need improvement. They may also receive targeted feedback on one or more characteristics. A lesson may be suggested to help with improvement in a specific trait.

Outside of the automated feedback, instructors also can leave “sticky notes” and messages for students to give them suggestions or corrections on which students should focus. There is also a place for instructors to score content accuracy and textual evidence, which are not automatically scored by the Utah Compose system.

Using Utah Compose should be a partnership among the student, instructor, and program. The goal in using Utah Compose is not to earn a specific overall score, but to improve on each trait using the feedback and suggestions from both the program and the instructor.

It is important to note that while Utah Compose is an excellent tool for student writing practice, it is merely one tool in an instructor’s toolbox for teaching writing. Just as a contractor cannot build a house with only a hammer, instructors cannot teach writing solely with Utah Compose. Used in conjunction with a writing program that includes instructor modeling, instruction, and assessment, Utah Compose can help students increase their writing skills and confidence.

References

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