Culturally Responsive Formative Assessment Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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FAQs

- Why does culturally responsive formative assessment matter?
- What do we mean by *culture* in culturally responsive formative assessment?
- What do we mean by *responsive* in culturally responsive formative assessment?
- What do we mean by *formative assessment* in culturally responsive formative assessment?
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- How are *conventional* and *culturally responsive* formative assessment different?
- Why are you calling this assessment? It just sounds like good teaching!

Why does culturally responsive formative assessment matter?

We believe that students and families should feel seen, welcomed, and valued in school. However, conventional assessment tools and practices too often frame students' knowledge and skills in terms of deficiencies or weaknesses. This risks alienating students and families. In addition, it can cause educators to miss important aspects of what students know and can do.

The solution is not to reframe negative statements about learning in positive terms: *You have answered 4 of 9 questions!* or, *You are still working on 3rd grade writing conventions!* Instead, culturally responsive formative assessment seeks to understand, not judge, and highlights the funds of knowledge students bring from home and community.

Funds of knowledge include students':

- academic and personal background knowledge
- accumulated life experiences
- skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social contexts
- world views structured by broader historically and politically influenced social forces

By understanding students' funds of knowledge, educators can build bridges between school knowledge and the knowledge that comes from experience, culture, and communities. These bridges serve multiple purposes. They can help teachers design culturally responsive learning experiences and connect school knowledge connects to what students already know. They can enlarge our definition of school knowledge so that people of all backgrounds can see their values and experiences reflected in the curriculum. They can also initiate meaningful collaborations between communities and schools. These are critical elements in increasing student engagement and achievement in meaningful ways.

By helping educators to understand students' funds of knowledge, we hope that culturally responsive formative assessment will contribute to students and their families feeling seen, welcomed, and valued at school.

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What do we mean by culture in culturally responsive formative assessment?

Culture refers to shared systems of meaning-making that affect our actions, interactions, feelings, values, beliefs, expressions, identity, use of language, and sense of belonging. *Culture* is not singular or fixed, and cannot be understood through lists of foods, characteristics, holidays, beliefs, or clothing, even though these can all be meaningful aspects of different cultures. Instead, to understand *culture* is to understand that our backgrounds, experiences, and identities combine in complicated and personal ways. Thus, meaningful differences can exist between those who identify with the same cultural group.

Most simply, *culture* points to how our experiences and backgrounds affect our beliefs, actions, interactions, and ways of making meaning. *Culture* may include customs, languages, beliefs, shared histories, and perspectives associated with our national, ethnic, racial, and/or religious identities. It can also include family, community, and regional traditions, attitudes, and ways of acting and interacting. Our access to material resources and opportunities is relevant to our experience of the world and can affect our expectations, activities, and understandings of self and others.

Whether or not we actively identify as a member of specific cultural groups, culturally responsive formative assessment recognizes the importance of students':
1. Funds of knowledge: culture, experiences, interests, identities, language, backgrounds, motivations, aspirations, values, feelings, and relationships
2. Decision-making: strategies and approaches, logic of the learner
3. Academic processes: understandings of process and engagement in process
4. Conceptual understandings: experiential basis for understandings

Since these aspects of learning are influenced by our backgrounds and identities, we include them when referring to *culture*.

Our conception of culturally responsive formative assessment builds on the scholarship and practice of culturally responsive education, which emphasizes the importance of students' cultural, racial, and ethnic identities, their linguistic backgrounds, and an individual's culturally and socially constructed experiences, interests, and values.

What do we mean by responsive in culturally responsive formative assessment?

Culturally responsive formative assessment doesn't ask educators to evaluate a student's culture. Nor does it demand teachers to become experts in students' cultures. It doesn't involve lists of characteristics that apply to students from various backgrounds, since these lists perpetuate stereotypes. Instead, culturally responsive formative assessment starts with an educator's reflection on their own experiences, assumptions, values, and preferences to understand how they are culturally influenced – and to recognize that they are not universally held.

Culturally responsive formative assessment also involves learning how implicit and explicit bias and societal structures value and reward some experiences and backgrounds over others, since

these dynamics affect learning and interactions at school. Finally, culturally responsive formative assessment asks educators to engage in inquiries about their students' funds of knowledge and to be responsive: willing to act on what they learn even if it changes what and how they teach.

> ### Critical Reflections for Educators
> - How do my experiences, assumptions, values, and identities affect my observations and interpretations of learners?
> - How do implicit and explicit bias, unexamined hierarchies, and power differentials in society and schools affect my classroom and my students' experiences?
> - How can my observations and interpretations of learners be as inclusive and non-judgmental as possible?

What do we mean by formative assessment in culturally responsive formative assessment?

Neither conventional formative assessment nor culturally responsive formative assessment require grades or scores. But there are also key differences.

First, culturally responsive formative assessment replaces *judgment* with *understanding*. Judgment (or evaluation) is so central to the conventional exercise of assessment that it can be difficult to imagine what could replace it – and why we'd even call it assessment without it. For example, even though teachers often don't assign grades or scores in the process of formatively assessing student work, they often tell students what score they *would* earn if the essay, project, assignment, or problem were being scored today. Or they provide feedback that is based in an assessment tool that was designed to generate scores, such as rubrics. Or they tell students how far their work is from the goal, along with suggestions for improvement.

All of this plays an important role in education. But judgment is limited without understanding. Consider the people you care about. While we certainly judge aspects of our friends' and family members' decisions, personalities, or interactions, we also understand and describe them in a myriad of other ways as well. In fact, it would probably ruin our relationships if judgment was our only means interacting with the people we care about.

While judging learners' performance is one way to understand their learning, our understandings are constrained if judgment is our only tool. Judgment allows us to proclaim that a student's essay is not well organized; understanding allows us to understand what the student was trying to accomplish and to glimpse the potential in what might appear to be a mess. Anyone can do the former. Teachers need to be able to do the latter.

Using assessment to understand a learners' culture and experiences requires this shift from judgment to understanding. After all, judgment is a major obstacle when we try to understand cultures and experiences different than our own.

In addition, judgment can interfere with our understandings of academic skills and concepts. Consider "voice" in writing. Voices aren't "good" or "bad," but that's how conventional writing assessment tools ask us to think about and describe voice in writing. Instead, voices can be

grating, or ingratiating, or distant, or haughty, or scattered, and these voices can affect how the reader relates to the writing. A more complex understanding of voice emerges from these descriptions over time, allowing students to develop multiple voices in their writing to affect readers' experiences instead of chasing an ideal voice or trying to find their "one true voice."

Shifting from judgment to understanding forces a corresponding shift in the purpose and conception of *feedback*. In conventional formative assessment, *feedback* is based in a judgment of "where students are" on an evaluative scale. But in culturally responsive formative assessment, *feedback* is more accurately described as *engagement*.

Conventional formative assessment is typically described as a process that informs teachers and students about their progress and informs instruction.

Steps of the conventional formative assessment process:

1. Teachers or students set or clarify learning goals or targets.
2. Teachers elicit evidence of learning. (*Teachers give students a task to complete, a question to answer, or a problem to solve*.)
3. Teachers (or students) evaluate the evidence of learning. (*Teachers judge the student's performance on an evaluative scale*.)
4. Teachers give feedback that either tells students what they need to do next or shows them where they are compared to the learning goal or target.
   – and/or – Teachers analyze the evaluation to determine instructional next steps.

The process of conventional formative assessment revolves around evaluation and feedback; it determines *what* should be evaluated, prompts the student to provide an *object* of the evaluation, informs the student *how they have performed* on the evaluation, and determines next steps as a *result* of the evaluation.

There is a valid role for evaluation and feedback within assessment. But they don't fit in culturally responsive formative assessment because a learner's interests or other cultural assets shouldn't be evaluated or judged, and there's little reason to give a learner feedback about them. But a learner's interests and other cultural assets are a critical part of their learning and should therefore be understood and engaged.

Similarly, learning goals have a place in education and in assessment. However, culturally responsive formative assessment does not begin when teacher or student sets a learning goal. Instead, culturally responsive formative assessment begins with an inquiry into an aspect of learning that lies beneath performance.

Steps of the culturally responsive formative assessment process:

1. Inquire into the aspects of the learner and the learning that lie beneath the surface. (See "Questions…" below.)
2. Consider how skills and content are embedded in socially, culturally, and personally meaningful activities. How can these activities be leveraged to engage learners more deeply?
3. Use what you find to support the learner's engagement and/or to design culturally responsive learning experiences that lead all learners deeper into the learning.

Aspects of learning that lie beneath performance are listed below, followed by questions which capture the spirit of culturally responsive formative assessment inquiries.

What does it mean that some aspects of learning "lie beneath" students' academic performance? See this short video on the [Iceberg Metaphor](#).

Questions that start culturally responsive formative assessment:

Culturally responsive formative assessment begins with inquiries into the aspects of learning that lie beneath performance. Questions overlap since inquiries have multiple starting points. They must fit your context, so adapt in the spirit of understanding learners and their learning.

<u>Funds of knowledge</u>: culture, experiences, interests, identities, languages, backgrounds, motivations, aspirations, values, feelings, and relationships

1. What relationship does my student have with school? With the subject? With the skill or knowledge? How have those relationships developed over time and through experiences?
2. How might my students' interests, experiences, languages, and background help me understand how they engage with me, school, the subject, and/or the skill or knowledge? How can I learn more?
3. How does my student feel about school, the subject, or the skill or knowledge? What experiences have shaped their feelings?
4. How is this skill or knowledge wrapped up in important relationships or social networks that give the skill or knowledge its meaning? How can these relationships be embedded and honored in the way that I ask students to engage this skill or knowledge my classroom?
5. What language(s) does my student speak and/or read and/or write?
6. How does my student feel about their abilities in each language?
7. How do students use language(s) in different contexts? (home, school, with friends, with different family members, etc.)
8. What aspect of my students' cultures and languages are a part of the learning process?
9. How is teaching, education, or this subject or skill viewed in students' language and culture?
10. Are my teaching practices alienating students because of cultural or linguistic differences?
11. Based on what I've learned about my students, what experiences could I design to help them engage more deeply and form productive relationships with this skill or knowledge?
12. How can I honor what students already know even as I ask them to learn something new?
13. What bridges can I build between students' funds of knowledge and this concept or skill?
14. How can I incorporate what my student knows into a learning experience for the class?
15. When were students most engaged in class so far? Why? How can this engagement be facilitated in creating culturally responsive learning experiences?
16. Can students see their identities represented in my class: authors, topics, theories, scholars, researchers, theorists, historical figures, practitioners, and materials I make available? If not, how can I work towards inclusion in the future and address students' sense of inclusion now?
17. What aspects of students' intrinsic motivation[i] can be nurtured in my class?
18. To what degree might school policies and classroom practices undermine students' intrinsic motivation? To what degree can I rethink these policies and practices?

19. How are students' aspirations served by these skills and knowledge? Are these aspirations woven into classroom activities to strengthen their knowledge and skills?

20. Are my students' aspirations different than the aspirations schools ascribe to students as motivation for effort and achievement (e.g., to get a good grade, get into college, get a better job, etc.). How might any differences shift the way I present knowledge and skills?

21. Does this skill or concept serve goals that are at odds with values or activities important within students' cultures? Has it been used historically as a tool of oppression? If so, what does that mean for how I ask students to engage with it?

22. In what ways are features of communications (use of language, symbols, images, body language, intonation, norms of interaction, roles, etc.) culturally influenced, and perhaps different than my own? What can I learn that will allow us to communicate more deeply?

<u>Decision-making</u>: strategies, approaches, logic of the learner

1. What decisions do students make as they engage this project, problem, question, or skill? How do these make sense even if they aren't conventional or lead to correct answers?
2. How can I provide opportunities for students to actively make decisions rather than telling them what to do next? How can I balance the need for guidance, creativity, and autonomy?
3. How can students see themselves as decision makers even though they are beginners who need and/or want guidance?
4. What factors affect how different people make decisions differently? How can I highlight and honor differences in decision-making while guiding students deeper into this subject?
5. How can I provide opportunities for students to use their languages to make decisions?

<u>Academic processes</u>: students' understandings and engagement

1. What understandings do students have about this academic process? Where do they come from? What experiences will deepen their understanding of and engagement in this process?
2. How can each student experience this process in ways that are personally meaningful?
3. Most academic processes are as creative as they are algorithmic (i.e., the writing process, the mathematical problem-solving process, historical inquiry, the scientific process). How can I provide guidance while encouraging creativity, autonomy, and experimentation?
4. How can I encourage and highlight different ways that different people engage this process?
5. Does this academic process mirror or conflict with processes that are familiar to students within their linguistic and cultural experiences? (e.g., collaborative vs. individualistic process, etc.) Can I adapt the academic process to honor my students' linguistic and cultural assets?

<u>Conceptual understandings</u>: experiential basis for understandings

1. Does the concept/content I am teaching honor students' cultures and languages? If not, how can I adapt it to honor students' culture and expressions of knowing and understanding?
2. What conceptual understandings lie beneath the answer the student gives, solution they propose, or approach they take? What experiences have contributed to these understandings? How do they make sense to the student, even though they may differ from the concept I am trying to teach? What bridges can I build to negotiate the difference?
3. Do students have experiences in multiple languages that might help them build this concept now? If so, how can they access and express those experiences in this setting?

4. What experiences have led students to construct this concept in this way, even if it isn't conventional? How can I value their experiences even as I design experiences that lead them to construct the concept differently?
5. How can this concept help my student navigate their reality *now* vs. *You'll need this someday*.
6. Do students have multiple pathways to develop understanding? (e.g., languages, modalities)
7. How can I provide opportunities for students to express their understanding of this concept in multiple ways? (visual, oral/written, languages, movement)
8. How can I help students bridge their understanding of the content/concept from one language to another?

Teachers don't judge what they learn in the process of these inquiries. It would be damaging for teachers to judge students' interests, culture, languages, or experiences. The goal of these inquiries is to understand, not judge or evaluate. Through understanding, we hope education can be experienced by students and families as the process of *working with* rather than *doing to*.

With inquiry as the starting point, teachers don't give students feedback in the sense of telling them where they are on an evaluative scale or relative to learning goals or standards. Instead, teachers use what they learn to interact with students in ways that honor their funds of knowledge, further engage them in learning, and deepen their relationship to the subject/skill.

Who are these questions for? I don't want to be invasive!

Culturally responsive formative assessment doesn't require teachers to snoop into students' personal lives. Students may not be able to articulate answers to the questions in this document, or they may not want to. That's okay. The questions have value even without specific or immediate answers, and teachers can also gather answers from a variety of sources over time.

Teachers can start by simply keeping these questions in mind as they plan, teach, observe, and respond to students. Even without immediate answers, these questions remind us that students are whole human beings whose experiences shape how they interact with skills, knowledge, and school. We should assume nothing, except that we probably know very little about the experiences that have formed students' relationships with skills, subjects, or school itself. This understanding alone can reduce power struggles and prevent hurt feelings and harmful generalizations of students' character or abilities.

Even without answers, the model of learning behind these questions highlights how skills and knowledge are embedded in socially, culturally, and personally meaningful activities. School doesn't have to provide isolated practice to prepare students to engage in these meaningful activities *later*. Instead, teachers can structure learning experiences around these meaningful activities from the very beginning. Doing so can nurture intrinsic motivation, foster sophisticated academic understandings, build community, and help students forge strong relationships with skills and knowledge. *What model of learning supports these questions? See this short video.*

Teachers can gather answers to these questions from a variety of sources over time. For example, they can engage students in discussions or writing projects about the experiences that have contributed to their relationship with the subject, which fosters learners' self-awareness in addition to providing information for teachers. Teachers can ask students to describe their decision-making as they work on problems or projects. They can talk with families about

students' experiences with skills and knowledge at home. They can learn how knowledge and skills are valued and enacted in the community by participating in community activities and asking community and cultural leaders about meanings attached to various activities and skills.

Culturally responsive formative assessment is not traditional assessment with the goal of ranking, quantifying, or judging students' work or learning. Instead, it's a career-long practice of inquiry with the goal of understanding, informing instruction, and helping students forge stronger relationships with learning, skills, and knowledge.

How are conventional and culturally responsive formative assessment different?

1. Conventional formative assessment attends to *student performance*; culturally responsive formative assessment attends to *aspects of learning that lie beneath performance*.
2. Conventional formative assessment relies on *evaluative judgments*; culturally responsive formative assessments seeks not to judge, but to *understand and describe*.
3. Conventional formative assessment uses *feedback* to show students "where they are" on an evaluative scale; culturally responsive formative assessment reframes feedback as *interaction and engagement*.
4. Conventional formative assessment is sometimes used to generate *data points* as part of teacher or district decision-making; while culturally responsive formative assessment yields information, it cannot generate data points. To score information gathered through culturally responsive formative assessment would be to fundamentally change its nature, undermine its usefulness, and possibly damage relationships needed to gather it. Instead, information gathered during culturally responsive formative assessment is part of the *relational dynamic between teachers, students, skills, and knowledge*.

While culturally responsive formative assessment improves students' academic performance over time, it also serves goals that are neither secondary nor incidental: it contributes to the pursuit of democratic, multi-cultural, and anti-racist schools and society.

Why are you calling this assessment? It just sounds like effective teaching![ii]

Bingo! The whole reason for formative assessment's debut on the educational scene was to reclaim assessment *for* teaching and learning – and, thereby, *for* teachers and learners. Unlike standardized tests or even performance assessments, formative assessment was never designed to generate scores or other reports that could be used by external stakeholders. Instead, formative assessment was designed for teachers and students.

After all, while scores on standardized tests or even performance assessments can be used by external stakeholders, they cannot, in and of themselves, help teachers teach or help students learn. In fact, some assessments don't require teachers to do the assessing; anyone with a bachelor's degree and an answer template or rubric can be trained to score a math problem or judge the better essay.[iii] Sometimes, human beings aren't required at all; these functions have already been outsourced to Artificial Intelligence (AI).[iv]

From its inception, formative assessment has distinguished itself by promising to support teachers' teaching and thereby to support students' learning. However, we believe that formative assessment has not always delivered on this promise. Sometimes, formative assessment simply takes standardized test scores and asks teachers to reteach based on the results. When it goes beyond using test results formatively, formative assessment hangs its hat on feedback, suggesting that if teachers tell students *where they are*, improvement will happen. This assumption is just that: an assumption.

We know that feedback has effects that are as complex as the people giving and receiving the feedback and the context in which the exchange takes place. Sometimes feedback clarifies and sometimes it paralyzes. Sometimes feedback leads to deeper investment in the work and sometimes it distracts or even undermines the work itself. The point is that feedback cannot be formative assessment's magic potion, dispensed as part of a treatment plan guaranteed to work.

Human learning is not governed by simplistic formulas with predetermined inputs and predictable outputs. Instead, human learning is complex: wrapped up in relationships; embedded in communities and culture; subject to values, needs, motivations, emotions, and interests; often rife with resistance. If formative assessment is to deliver on its promise, it must explicitly address these complexities and help educators navigate them, rather than offering simplistic formulas: *evaluation + feedback = results*. We believe that culturally responsive formative assessment addresses the complexities of learning in ways that will support it.

It has become commonplace for publications about formative assessment to remind readers that the Latin root of assessment is *assidere*, which means, "to sit beside." It's a compelling image, especially to educators who are weary of the effects of accountability mandates on classroom assessment. "Sitting beside" implies *proximity, relationship*, and *understanding,* contrasting with the image of standardized testing: *distance*, *objectivity*, and *judgment*.

But how is this image realized? What do teachers *do* when they sit beside students? Do they discuss their standardized test scores? Do they explain all the things students did right or wrong on an assignment? While there may be legitimate places and times for such conversations, they still position the teacher as judge (or as agent appointed to explain the judgment), leaving the promise implied by the image of teachers sitting beside students unrealized.

In our conception of culturally responsive formative assessment, teachers never sit beside students to judge their performance. This is not a version of, "Everyone Gets a Trophy," since criticism is not replaced by praise, whether indiscriminate or specific. Instead, teachers who practice culturally responsive formative assessment sit beside students to learn from, about, and with them. And they use what they learn to engage students more deeply in the learning. In this way, culturally responsive formative assessment feeds learning without requiring teachers to step outside the teaching and learning relationship to analyze a spreadsheet.

Culturally responsive formative assessment is not a tool, gimmick, or strategy. Instead, it is a career-long method of inquiry into the complexities that characterize learning. These inquiries don't result in a worksheet or lesson guaranteed to produce success on a particular learning target. Instead, through these inquiries, teachers can learn to see students for who they are, engage students more deeply in subjects and skills, and make subjects and skills more inclusive

of all people. In the process, hopefully students and families will experience schools as more welcoming.

- *What's the iceberg metaphor for skills and knowledge? See this short video.*
- *What can culturally responsive formative assessment look like? See ELA and Math Examples.*
- *What questions start a culturally responsive formative assessment inquiry? See Questions…*
- *What are some additional types of classroom assessment? See Classroom Assessment for Teaching and Learning*

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[i] We refer to intrinsic motivation as described in Self-Determination Theory: when an individual experiences the work as motivating for its own sake, for personal growth, or for community-related goals. A long line of research establishes the positive effects of intrinsic motivation on performance, creativity, persistence, and well-being. Deci and Ryan identify three human needs that underly intrinsic motivation: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. While no one can "give" someone else intrinsic motivation, teachers can set up conditions that allow students' intrinsic motivation to thrive. Conversely, they can also set up conditions that undermine intrinsic motivation through the use of extrinsic motivators. Since notions central to intrinsic motivation (relatedness, personal growth, and community-related goals) are culturally influenced, teachers' ability to set up the conditions that allow students' intrinsic motivation to thrive are well-served by their awareness of how individuals experience relatedness, personal growth, and community-related goals differently based on their different experiences and backgrounds.

[ii] Early scholarship on culturally responsive education elicited similar responses. Gloria Ladson Billings addressed this in 1996 by publishing, "But That's Just Good Teaching!": The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. We channel the spirit of Ladson Billing's response but add a layer specific to assessment.

[iii] See, for example: the qualifications listed for the position of "Reader/Evaluator" for Measurement Incorporated (MI), which scores Smarter Balanced summative assessments for Washington state.

[iv] For example, Pearson listed 417 job openings on 5/8/21. 50 were for, "Senior Software Engineer, Automated Math Scoring."

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