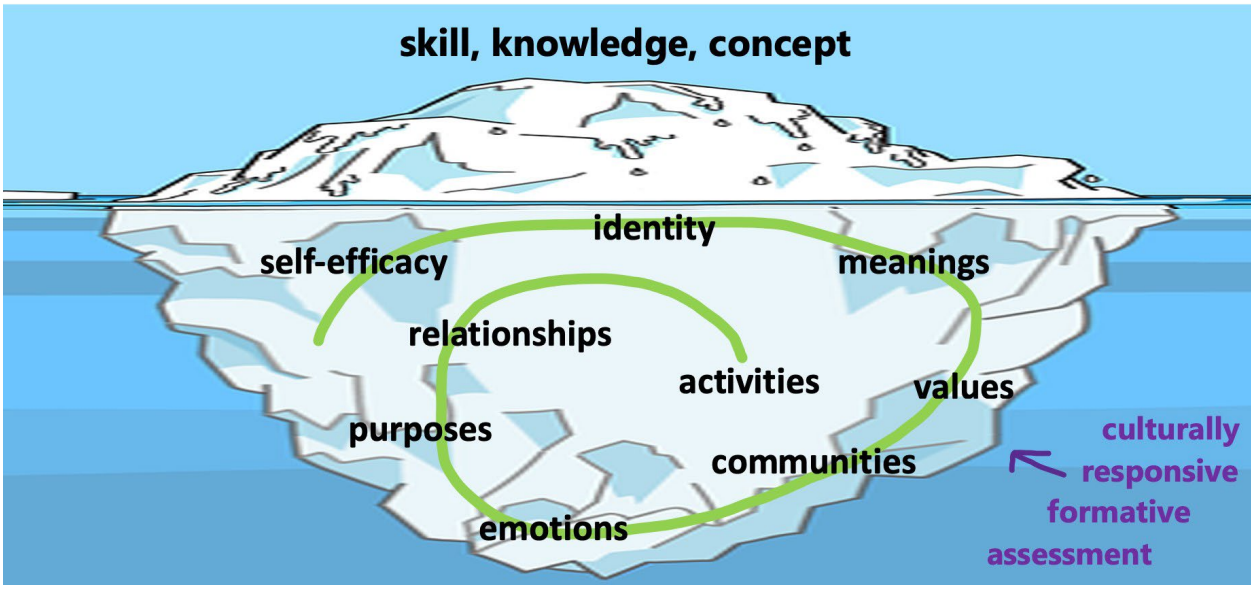
Questions that Begin Culturally Responsive Formative Assessment

By Maja Wilson and Serena O'Neill

Culturally responsive formative assessment isn't about judging students' academic performance – it's about understanding the aspects of learning that lie beneath performance. That's because skills and knowledge are like an iceberg: a submerged, hidden experiential base gives stability to the visible skill or knowledge.[i] When we "cram" for an exam, we may forget everything we studied if the knowledge has an insufficient experiential base. On the other hand, stubborn misconceptions can be well supported by experiences. These misconceptions can't just be corrected; they need to be understood and then rebuilt through new experiences and reflection.



The experiential base for skills and knowledge doesn't just include practice. It includes aspects of human experience that surround our activities: relationships, emotions, motivations, meanings, values, aspirations, community, culture, and languages. For example, reading for Maja is layered with the belonging she felt while her mother read to her and the anxiety she felt waiting her turn during round-robin reading in 4th grade. For Serena, math is an interconnected web anchored by threads of stress and frustration from timed multiplication tests in elementary school and struggles with abstract concepts of pre-calculus in high school. It includes her excitement in college from the marriage of math and science as she examined the eruptive histories and active deposits of new lava flows as they crackled and crawled across the ground. Math finally had meaning. That's just the start of Maja and Serena's experiential bases for reading and math.

Judging these aspects of learning can hinder understanding and relationships, so many conventional formative assessment tools such as rubrics aren't appropriate for culturally responsive formative assessment. However, when teachers use inquiry to understand these aspects of learning, they can design learning experiences that deepen the learning, improve academic performance, and help make schools a welcoming place for children and their families.

How do conventional and culturally responsive formative assessment differ? See FAQs.

Aspects of learning that lie beneath performance:

1. Funds of knowledge: culture, experiences, interests, identities, languages, backgrounds, motivations, aspirations, values, feelings, and relationships;
2. Decision-making: strategies and approaches, logic of the learner;
3. Academic processes**:** understandings and engagement;
4. Conceptual understandings: the experiential basis for understandings.

Questions that start culturally responsive formative assessment:

Culturally responsive formative assessment begins with inquiries into the aspects of learning that lie beneath performance. Sample questions are listed below. Questions must fit your context, classroom, and students, so adapt these in the spirit of understanding (not judging) learners and their learning. Questions overlap since inquiries can have multiple starting points.

Funds of knowledge: 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 student's interests, experiences, languages, and background help me understand how the student engages 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 might this skill or knowledge be wrapped up in important relationships or social networks that give the skill or knowledge its meaning? How can these relationships be embedded, acknowledged, 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 use these language(s) in different contexts? (home, school, with friends, with different family members, etc.)
7. How does my student feel about their abilities in each language?
8. What aspect of my students' cultures and languages do I need to be aware of that are a part of the learning process?
9. How is teaching, education, this subject, or this skill viewed in my students' language and culture?
10. Are my teaching practices alienating my students because of cultural or linguistic differences?
11. Based on what I've learned about my student, what experiences could I design to help them engage more deeply and form a productive relationship with this skill, process, or knowledge?
12. How can I acknowledge and honor what my student already knows even as I ask them to learn something new?

13. What bridges could I build between my student's funds of knowledge and what I'm asking them to do in this class?
14. How can I learn from what my student already knows and incorporate this into a learning experience for the whole class?
15. When were my students most excited or most engaged in class so far? Why was that? How can this engagement be facilitated in creating culturally responsive learning experiences?
16. Can my students see their identities represented or reflected in my class: in the authors, topics, theories, scholars, researchers, theorists, historical figures, modern practitioners, and other aspects of the knowledge and skills they encounter in the materials I make available? If not, how can I work towards more inclusion in the long-term while addressing my students' sense of inclusion in the short-term?
17. What aspects of my students' intrinsic motivation[ii] can be nurtured in my class?
18. To what degree might school and classroom-based policies and practices undermine students' intrinsic motivation? To what degree can I rethink these policies and practices?
19. How might my students' aspirations be served by the skills and knowledge I am teaching? Are these aspirations woven into the classroom activities that serve to strengthen their knowledge and skills?
20. Are my students' aspirations different than the aspirations that schools sometimes ascribe to students as motivation for effort and achievement (e.g., to get a good grade, to get into college, to get a better job, etc.). How might these differences shift the way I present knowledge and skills?
21. Does this skill, concept, or understanding serve goals that may be at odds with values or activities that are important within my student's culture? 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? How might my students' communications be different than my own? What can I learn about communication in their cultures and languages that will allow us to communicate more deeply?

Decision-making: strategies, approaches, logic of the learner

1. What decisions is my student making as they engage this project, problem, process, or question? How do these decisions make sense to my student, even if they aren't conventional or don't lead to a "correct answer"?
2. How can I provide opportunities for my students to actively make decisions (and thereby practice decision-making) rather than by always telling them what to do next? How can I balance students' simultaneous needs for guidance, creativity, and autonomy?
3. How can my student begin to act and see themselves as a decision maker even though they may be a "beginner" who needs and/or wants 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 engage in decision making?

Academic processes: students' understandings and engagement

1. What understandings does my student have about the academic process I'm asking them to engage? Where do those understandings come from? What experiences do they need to deepen their understanding of this academic process (and their engagement in it)?
2. 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?
3. How can each student experience this process in ways that are personally meaningful?
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 might be familiar to my student within their linguistic and cultural experiences? (e.g., whether a process is collaborative or individualistic, etc.) Can I adapt the academic process to honor my students' linguistic and cultural assets?

Conceptual understandings: experiential basis for understandings

1. Does the concept/content I am teaching honor my students, their cultures, and their languages? If not, how can it be adapted to honor students' culture of learning and expressions of knowing and understanding?
2. What conceptual understandings lie beneath the answer the student gives, the solution they propose, or the approach they take to a problem, question, or task? What experiences have contributed to these understandings? How do they make sense to the student, even though they may differ from the conceptual understandings 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 the student to construct this concept in the way that they have, even if it might be considered a "misconception"? How can I acknowledge their experiences and concept construction even as I try to build experiences that lead to a different concept construction?
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 their understanding? (e.g., languages, modalities, etc.)
7. How can I provide opportunities for my student to express their understanding of this concept in multiple ways? (visual, oral/written, languages, movement, etc.)
8. How can I help students bridge their understanding of the content/concept from one language to another?

Engaging these questions effectively and respectfully requires teachers to:

- consider how their own experiences, assumptions, values, and identities affect their observations and interpretations of learners
- reflect on implicit and explicit bias, unexamined hierarchies, and power differentials in society and schools
- commit to non-judgmental observations and inclusive interpretations of learners

What can culturally responsive formative assessment look like? See ELA & Math Examples.

How do conventional and culturally responsive formative assessment differ? See FAQs.

What are different kinds of assessment? See Assessment Terms.

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[i] This metaphor expresses ideas central to constructivism. As a theory of knowledge, constructivism emphasizes how we construct knowledge as an interaction between our experiences and ideas. We believe that constructivism cannot be fully realized in teaching without the practice of culturally responsive education, since our experiences are influenced by culture. Teachers cannot adequately help students to construct knowledge without "…using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106).

[ii] 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.