The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies

Volume 83 | Number 1 Article 3

January 2022

Formative assessment to help students decode, process, and evaluate social studies information

Cory Callahan
University of Alabama - Tuscaloosa, cwcallahan@ua.edu

The prepositional phrase "for learning" is a succinct, nearly self-explanatory definition of formative assessment; still, it may be helpful for social studies teachers and teacher-educators to revisit the notion, especially within a context of research-based instructional approaches. Formative assessment can be understood as a process that centers round activities and assignments intended to promote learners' learning and improve teachers' teaching (see Clark, 2011; Rezk, 2021); students are afforded opportunities to further develop their thinking skills and teachers are provided data with which to adjust subsequent instruction (see Black & Wiliam, 2010; Clark, 2012). The explicit focus on improving future learning contrasts sharply with summative assessment (i.e., assessment "of learning") which primarily features teachers assigning grades for past learning (Dixson & Worrell, 2016).

A review of related literature suggests the following six-step formative assessment process: (1) crafting learning goals, (2) establishing performance levels toward meeting those goals, (3) providing students timely feedback directly related to their accomplished performance levels, (4) offering students guidance for improving future performance, (5) evaluating each student's performance, and (6) reviewing student-performance to modify subsequent instruction. Each aforementioned step is described below.

Crafting Learning Goals

Formative assessment, as with any process of information analysis developed to promote exemplary performances, should begin with crafting clear learning goals (see Gilbert, 2013). In a classroom context, teachers can develop a manageable number of specific learning goals—between three to five—and design instructional activities and assignments to help students accomplish those goals (see Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). The learning goals should concentrate on the most appropriate characteristics of student-work that can demonstrate the skills and content knowledge intended to be developed by the assignment (Brookhart, 2013). In other words, learning goals are a teacher's answer to the question: What are the three to five most important outcomes students should know and be able to do as a result of the activity? When assigning students tasks to complete, teachers can communicate how the learning goals are important to students' lives and concerns, and then explain how the goals are embodied throughout the specific assignments. It may also be helpful for teachers to instantiate learning goals by displaying successful models of previous performances on similar, yet not identical, assignments (Hendry, et al., 2012). An explanation of an assignment's learning goals can help establish relevance and direction for students who are often "bombarded with so much information… that they may have difficulty prioritizing (important) concepts and knowing which information they need to focus on" (Ryan, Cooper, Tauer, & Callahan, 2019, p. 116). And, as it concerns the subsequent

assessment of assignments, crafting clear learning goals can provide reasonable limits for the feedback and guidance teachers provide.

Also, because formative assessment developed by classroom teachers can sometimes be thought to yield less "psychometrically robust" results than those developed by test publishers (Dixson & Worrell, 2016, p.154), a discussion of learning goals can also demonstrate transparency and work to increase reliability and validity. Others have argued that teachers' judgments about assessments can be defended; "teachers know their students, understand various dimensions of students' work, and have clear notions of the progress made, [therefore] their subjective perceptions may yield very accurate descriptions of what students have learned" (Guskey, 1996, p. 17-18).

Below are examples of learning goals that reflect an inquiry-based instructional approach; they are intentionally generalizable and need revision according to a teacher's discipline-specific context.

- Students will craft and support reasonable arguments to answer an open-ended (i.e., compelling or central) question
- Students will use evidence to justify their reasonable arguments to answer an open-ended question
- Students will use dialectical reasoning as they posit an answer to an open-ended question
- Students will think in disciplinary (i.e., economic, geographic, historical, etc.) ways
- Students will use visual elements to enhance the persuasiveness of their arguments

See Appendix A for examples of learning goals and several performance-based, interpretive assignments designed to help learners decode, process, and evaluate social studies information. The assignments are informed by research into disciplined inquiry (see Saye, 2017), alternate assessment (see Towles-Reeves, et al., 2009), interpretive work in the social studies (see Monte-Sano & Allen, 2019), and using visual documents as powerful resources (Callahan, 2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Callahan, Howell, & Maddox, 2019; Maddox, Howell, & Callahan, 2020). Appendix A is also intentionally written in a generalizable fashion; instructors are encouraged to individualize its goals and assignments for their particular contexts.

Establishing Performance Levels

The next step in an effective formative assessment process is to differentiate performance levels that communicate the degree to which each student has

accomplished each learning goal. This step coheres with research into standards-based assessment that seeks meaningful alternatives to traditional grading systems: point accumulation, percentage scores, and "omnibus" letter grades (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011, p.1). One alternative is to measure students' performance levels: the degree to which they met well-defined standards (See Brookhart & Nitko, 2008; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, et al., 1993). Establishing performance levels requires a teacher to "define graduated steps of performance (to) indicate a student's development" and clearly define "thresholds between each level" (Welsh, et al., 2013, p. 28). The number of performance levels should reflect the thresholds a teacher can meaningfully describe when differentiating between student performance; this is very likely four or five, which corresponds to most schools' A, B, C, D, and F grading requirement (Brookhart, 1999; see also Guskey, 2004).

Next, teachers would establish specific criteria for each performance level and assign it an appropriate label. It has been suggested when formulating performance level criteria, teachers begin by writing "the performance level [they] intend for most students to reach," a Target Level, for instance, "and then adjust the remaining descriptions" (Brookhart, 2013, p.26-27). To take a learning goal mentioned above—Students will use dialectical reasoning as they posit an answer to an open-ended question—a description of the criteria for a Target level of accomplishment could read "Student's product provides a direct answer that acknowledges, explores alternate perspectives" (see Figure 1). The two levels of accomplishment to a lesser extent (i.e., Acceptable and Developing) could include criteria such as "Student's product provides a direct answer that acknowledges a perspective" and "Student's product provides information without a direct answer," respectively. The level of accomplishment to a greater extent (i.e., Advanced) could include "Student's product provides a direct answer that acknowledges, explores alternate perspectives AND attempts to resolve conflicts in an answer."

Figure 1. A learning goal and criteria-based performance levels

Learning Goal	Advanced Level	Target Level	Acceptable Level	Developing Level
Students will use dialectical reasoning as they posit an answer to an open-ended question	Student's product provides a direct answer that acknowledges, explores alternate perspectives AND attempts to resolve conflicts in an answer.	Student's product provides a direct answer that acknowledges, explores alternate perspectives	Student's product provides a direct answer that acknowledges a perspective	Student's product provides information without a direct answer

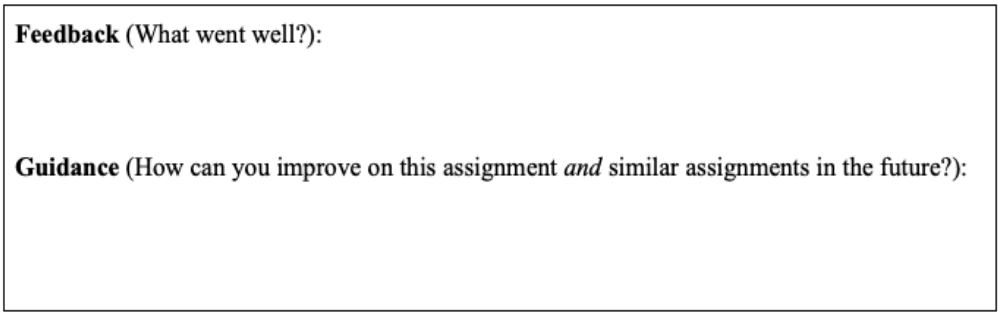
The above step would be repeated for each learning goal. Also, it should be noted that this assessment approach results in a qualitative, criteria-based report that likely needs interpretation to fit within stakeholders' expectations of quantitative, traditional scores. For example, teachers' grade books, whether online or paper, are likely to be formatted for traditional scores; therefore, a discussion of interpreting criteria-based assessment is required. Much of this discussion is included below in the *Providing Evaluation* section of this article.

Providing Feedback and Guidance

The next steps are to provide students with feedback and guidance. Feedback is explicit, contextualized information about students' respective work in relation to the learning goals; guidance is advice about how students can improve their performance on subsequent assessments. Feedback and guidance (see Figure 2) should cohere to, and be derived directly from, students' performance levels toward meeting the learning goals.

Feedback written as descriptions of students' products through a lens of "what happened" in relation to the learning goals can be useful information (Wiggins, 2004). A specific, concrete account of how the resulting product did and did not demonstrate each learning goal can provide students with knowledge to turn their errors into new learning opportunities (Fook, et al., 2016). It has been suggested that effective feedback is best delivered in user-friendly and non-judgmental language that plainly describes to what degree the student's work met expectations (see Wiggins, 2012). It is important to emphasize that "phrases like 'Good job!' are useful only when followed or proceeded by specific (descriptions) justifying the praise… Otherwise the only 'feedback' transmitted is that the (teacher) was pleased… for whatever reason" (Wiggins, 2004, p. 5).

Figure 2. A template for providing feedback and guidance



Along with feedback, students benefit from guidance, descriptions of what could have been done differently to improve performance on the assessment and, importantly, how to improve future performances (Black & Wiliam, 2010). While

feedback simply describes what happened, guidance answers the questions "What needs to be improved" and "How can it be improved?" (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007, p.64). Attentive study and internalization of guidance as described above can help students improve their ability to process and comprehend information (see Clark, 2012: "self-regulated learning").

Feedback and guidance should be returned to students relatively quickly. The less time it takes to supply helpful information to students, more likely it is to effectively help students minimize the gap between their current performance and the expected level (McCarthy, 2017; Sadler, 1989). Feedback and guidance received several days later—when new topics and additional assessments have been introduced— will likely be unhelpful. This could be a challenge for teachers, as the demands of planning, implementing, and assessing powerful instruction can be daunting, especially with large class sizes and several course sections to facilitate. However, as mentioned earlier, teachers would be justified in narrowing the scope of their feedback and guidance to the learning goals. Indeed, some teachers have reported that, after adopting an assessment approach similar to the one described in this article, their time commitment for grading *decreased* (Scriffiny, 2008).

Providing Evaluation

Next, teachers need to assign a value judgment—a grade—for each product generated by students. Teachers should ensure the grades accurately reflect and clearly communicate the degree to which students' resulting products met the established learning goals. For criteria-based assignments like the examples shared here, grading can be a challenge because students, administrators, and parents tend to expect grades to be reported in points, percentages, or letter values. Therefore, unless a school has adopted an entirely standards-based grading and reporting system, which is rare (see Peters & Buckmiller, 2014), the results of a formative assessment approach that measures students' performance levels must be interpreted for traditional expectations. Researchers have suggested translating criteria-based scores into traditional grades through a type of proficiency scale (Marzano & Haystead, 2008; Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). This translation would include assigning each performance level a point value: Advanced could be assigned four points; Target, three points; Acceptable, two points; Developing, one point; and no attempt would earn zero points. The total number of points could then be divided by the number of learning goals (i.e., averaged) to result in one score that corresponds to a traditional grading and reporting approach (see Figure 3). This process is similar to how secondary schools and colleges calculate grade-point averages (Guskey, 2013).

Figure 3: A proficiency scale translating a criteria-based assessment (with four learning goals) into traditional scores

Evaluation*

_____ (*total score above*) / 4 (*the goals*) = _____

4.00—3.51	A+ (97-100%)	2.84—2.99	B+ (87-89%)
3.26—3.50	A (94-96%)	2.67—2.83	B (84-86%)
3.00—3.35	A- (90-93%)	2.50—2.66	B- (80-83%)
2.34—2.49	C+ (77-79%)	1.84—1.99	D+ (67-69%)
2.17—2.33	C (74-76%)	1.67—1.83	D (64-66%)
2.00—2.16	C- (70-73%)	1.50—1.66	D- (60-63%)
0.00—1.49	F (50%)		

*standards-based into traditional scores

A benefit of the criteria-based assessment and reporting approach such as the one described above is that it tends to communicate "grades that are more meaningful and reliable. With modest training and experience, different teachers considering a specific collection of evidence of student learning can generally reach consensus" (Guskey, 2013, p. 72).

Rubrics

The above steps of formative assessment—crafting learning goals, establishing performance levels, and providing feedback, guidance, and evaluation—converge at the development of a rubric. The term is derived from the Latin word "rubrica" which expresses "the use of (the color) red… to mark or signify something of importance" (Marzano, et al., 1993, p. 136). In contemporary educational contexts it refers to the important framework of fixed expectations that can be presented to students with an assigned task to communicate learning goals, performance levels, and their associated values. Rubrics, it should be noted, are not usually stand-alone guidelines for assignments; students are likely to need additional directions, procedures, explanations, and to have their questions answered. Still, to promote the skill of self-regulated learning, a rubric could be formatted to function as a type of checklist, affording students the opportunity to compare their performance against the expectations prior to formally submitting their work. For example, the learning goal shared earlier concerning dialectical reasoning could be presented as a student-friendly, first-person question: "Have I explored alternate perspectives in answering the assignment's question?" Decades of research "at all grade levels and in different disciplines" suggest that rubrics used formatively can help students improve the "quality of their performance" (Brookhart, 2013, p. 12).

Appendix B is an example of an generalizable rubric that could be used with the types of performance-based, interpretive tasks similar to those described in Appendix A. The rubric includes an emphasis on the research-into-practice suggestions mentioned earlier (e.g., the use of visual elements to accentuate the persuasiveness of students' arguments); not all performance-based, interpretive tasks will include each of these features. Also, the featured rubric would require revision to match specific formative assessment task requirements for each teacher's instructional context.

Adjusting Future Instruction

The final step in the formative assessment process is for teachers to think deeply about the information learned from students' completed tasks and modify instruction accordingly. Holistic analysis of feedback and guidance can identify areas of knowledge and skills where students need additional support and allow teachers to promptly address those areas (McCarthy, 2017). Having reviewed students' generated answers to the formative assessment task, teachers can then modify future instruction if needed. For example, teachers could begin the next class meeting with a review or re-teaching episode to emphasize specific skills or content knowledge for which few students demonstrated "Target" or "Advanced" performance levels. Teachers could also develop appropriate remedial activities, differentiated specifically for each student who needed additional practice.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was not to thoroughly explore individual concepts that tend to underpin powerful social studies instruction (e.g., disciplined inquiry, alternate assessment, interpretive work in the social studies, and using visual documents as evidence). Rather, this article intended to posit a possible contribution that a synthesis of elements from the above concepts, as they concern formative assessment, could make for teachers and students in social studies classrooms. Teachers who assign students to complete performance-based, interpretive assignments and employ a formative assessment process to evaluate them can help students develop the powerful skills of decoding, processing, and evaluating social studies information.

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Appendix A: Learning Goals and Interpretive Assignments

Generalizable Learning Goals	Guidance to Inform Interpretive Assignments
Students will craft and support reasonable arguments to answer an open-ended question.	**Currency Design.** Students are to create a completely new and original currency design—either paper bill or coin—for an assigned time period. Students should include both a "front" and a "back" design, and they may want to ask themselves: What people or event(s) from the assigned time period merit the most commemoration? What visuals might represent them? What pithy phrasing or wording might be included to complement the visuals? Students should be sure to include written annotations to justify their decisions.
Students will develop historical empathy.	**Undelivered Mail.** Students are to create a personal letter from the perspective of one of the historically significant individuals they have recently studied written to another. Students are obviously writing a work of fiction; however, it should be *historical* fiction. Every aspect of the letter should be based on students' understanding of the facts of the past (i.e., philosophies, contexts). The letter should have a clear purpose (i.e., an issue of concern) and should minimally include: (1) an INTRODUCTION describing the date and clearly explaining the context of the letter (When and why is it being written?), (2) a RESPONSE to an issue of concern (What is the reason for writing the letter? Agreements and Disagreements?), (3) a CLOSING with advice for future action (How issues could be handled differently? What lessons should be gleaned from this person's experiences?). Students should remember this letter of historical fiction is written entirely from the perspective and context of the historical person: without ahistorical observations, conclusions, or anachronisms. (adapted from: "Undelivered Mail" by Rhina P. Espaillat from *Playing at Stillness*. © Truman State University Press.)

Students will use visual elements to enhance the persuasiveness of their arguments.	**Bookmark**. Students are to create a bookmark for a reader in an assigned time period. (Bookmarks are place-holders to help readers keep their place in a book while reading; they are often made of silk and other fabrics, leather, wood, paper, or cardboard; they became common following the invention of the printing press. Embroidered bookmarks in the Victorian Era were considered collectables and were often given as gifts). As "bookmark designers" students need to take into account both function and form; it should be able to hold a reader's place in a book and also it should be aesthetically pleasing and represent, commemorate, or memorialize something significant: an event, an idea or movement, a person, etc. Students should be sure to include written annotations to justify their decisions. (information from: The World of Bookmarks: http://www.miragebookmark.ch/wb_history.htm)
Students will use dialectical reasoning as they posit answers to an open-ended question.	**Advertisement**. Students are to create an advertisement that could have been found in-context for an assigned time period. This could be either large billboards, smaller posted bills, online or newspaper ads, etc. Students are to remember that this advertisement is to be persuasive and specifically attempt to influence others' thinking and acting (i.e., buying something or visiting somewhere); they should be persuasive! Students should also add appropriate-for-class graffiti from an opposing viewpoint. Students should be sure to include written annotations to justify their decisions.

Students will evaluate the importance of information.	**Acrostic Poem.** Using the letters in an assigned term, students are to create an acrostic poem; this is a poem where a poet takes a significant term and uses the letters of that term as starting points for each of the poem's lines. Also, each line directly relates to the term itself. Students' acrostic poems should demonstrate an understanding of the content material and skills they have recently studied. (adapted from: http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/acrostic/)
Students will craft and support reasonable arguments to answer an open-ended question.	**Postage Stamp.** Students are to create a postage stamp—not necessarily to scale—that could have been found in-context for an assigned time period (perhaps best if assigned for an era after 1840 when postage stamps were first introduced [in the United Kingdom]). Students should remember that their stamps should commemorate, observe, memorialize, celebrate, or pay tribute to historically significant events, people, movements, etc. What visuals might represent them? What pithy phrasing or wording might be included to complement the visuals? Students should be sure to include written annotations to justify their decisions. (information from: https://www.bbc.com/news/business-48844278)

Students will craft and support reasonable arguments to answer an open-ended question.	**Dust Jacket.** Students are to create a dust jacket for a 21st century reprint of one of the historically significant publications they have recently studied. Students should include "front cover" and "back cover" and "inside the sleeves" designs to accurately represent the contents of the book. Students should be persuasive; the dust jacket should encourage people to buy the book and explore its ideas. (adapted from gustavus.edu "Suggestions for Assignments" as alternatives to research papers)
Students will evaluate the importance of information.	**Illustrated and Annotated Continuum**. Provided with several historically significant terms, students are to gather data and begin to assess them in relation to the question "Which of these was the most influential during the assigned time period, and why?" Then, on a new piece of paper students are to draw a line with a far-left point that reads "Most Important" and a far-right point that reads "Least Important" (see the example below). |----------| Most Least Influential Influential Step 1) students PLOT each term on the continuum according to the space they believe it should occupy. Step 2) students draw an appropriate ILLUSTRATION: this does not have to be perfect, but each term should have its own, individual drawing that fits well with the term as they understand it. Step 3) students write an insightful ANNOTATION: each annotation does not have to be overly lengthy but it should explain why they plotted the term on the continuum as they did. Students should be sure to demonstrate an understanding of the content material and answer the overall question.

Students will develop historical empathy.	**Sensory Figure.** Students are to create a sensory figure for an historically significant individual. Students are to gather data (from previously made notes, or a new collaborative or independent search) and begin to think deeply about their life, contributions to society, and in general better understand the details surrounding their life. Students then draw a rough sketch of the individual and then draw arrows that point to the nose, an ear, an eye, the mouth, a hand, and a foot (i.e., "Achilles's heel"). Where students have drawn an arrow, they describe what that individual would be experiencing in historical context. For example: Nose - What would they be smelling? Ear - What would they be hearing? Eye - What would they be seeing? Mouth - What would they be saying? Hand - What are five of their deeds, accomplishments? Foot - What is one of their weaknesses or hardships experienced? (adapted from Teachers' Curriculum Institute. (1999). *History Alive! Interactive Student Notebook* [Sensory Figure]. Palo Alto, CA: Teachers' Curriculum Institute. p. 58)
Students will craft and support reasonable arguments to answer an open-ended question.	**(Live) Museum Display.** Use of a variety of media (including, perhaps, themselves) to create exhibits that engage the viewer with varying perspectives on a historical or contemporary issue. The display may leave a decision about a compelling question to the viewer or seek to persuade toward a particular interpretation. (adapted from the Persistent Issues in History Network's Powerful Learning Strategies, http://pihnet.org/)

Appendix B: Sample Formative Assessment Rubric

Interpretive Assignments Rubric (and Checklist)

	Advanced 4 points	Target 3 points	Acceptable 2 points	Developing 1 point
Answer the Question Have I explored alternate perspectives in answering the assignment's question?	Provides a direct answer that acknowledges alternate perspectives AND attempts to resolve conflicts in a final answer	Provides a direct answer that acknowledges alternate perspectives	Provides a direct answer that acknowledges a perspective	Provides information without a direct answer
Support with Evidence Have I purposefully selected evidence to support my answer?	Supports the answer with multiple pieces of evidence that, without errors, are reasonably interpreted AND synthesized	Supports the answer with multiple pieces of evidence that, without errors, are reasonably interpreted	Supports the answer with multiple pieces of evidence that, with minor errors, are reasonably interpreted	Supports the answer with a piece of evidence that, with minor errors, is reasonably interpreted
Apply Disciplinary Concepts Have I explored or organized knowledge in discipline-specific ways described in the assignment?	Explores or organizes knowledge in discipline-specific ways (civic-, economic-, geographic-, or historical-thinking) AND integrates this knowledge to persuasively support the answer	Explores or organizes knowledge in discipline-specific ways (civic-, economic-, geographic-, or historical- thinking); contains up to one error	Explores or organizes knowledge in discipline-specific ways (civic-, economic-, geographic-, or historical- thinking); contains errors	No discernible attempt to explores or organize knowledge in discipline-specific ways (civic-, economic-, geographic-, or historical- thinking)
Use Visual Elements Have I used visual elements to clearly communicate ideas that support the answer?	Drawings, graphic prioritization, spatial positioning, color coordination, dotted lines, etc. depict clear, justifiable relationships AND, cohere with other elements to enhance persuasiveness of answer	Drawings, graphic prioritization, spatial positioning, color coordination, dotted lines, etc. depict clear, justifiable relationships	Drawings, graphic prioritization, spatial positioning, color coordination, dotted lines, etc. depict relationships that are unclear; unjustifiable	Drawings, graphic prioritization, spatial positioning, color coordination, dotted lines, etc. depict no discernible relationships between ideas.

Evaluation*

_____ (*total score above*) / 4 (*the goals*) = _____

4.00—3.51	A+	(97-100%)	2.84—2.99	B+	(87-89%)
3.26—3.50	A	(94-96%)	2.67—2.83	B	(84-86%)
3.00—3.35	A-	(90-93%)	2.50—2.66	B-	(80-83%)
2.34—2.49	C+	(77-79%)	1.84—1.99	D+	(67-69%)
2.17—2.33	C	(74-76%)	1.67—1.83	D	(64-66%)
2.00—2.16	C-	(70-73%)	1.50—1.66	D-	(60-63%)
0.00—1.49	F	(50%)			

*standards-based into traditional scores

Feedback (What went well?):

Guidance (How can you improve on this assignment *and* similar assignments in the future?):