

Poetry feedback that feeds forward

A system of formative assessment can help students track progress, define and set goals on their own, peer evaluate more effectively, and ultimately contribute to gains in both academic skills, deep learning, and positive attitudes toward poetry in general.

Pooja Patel & Leslie E. Laud

The elusiveness of poetry can make it one of the most challenging yet captivating units for students to explore. In the universe of possible feedback teachers can offer, which type is most promising for moving our burgeoning middle level poets forward? How can middle school teachers use formative assessment to regularly monitor students' performance in poetry? How can this formative assessment best guide instruction and promote growth in poetry learning? How can teachers of young adolescents use formative assessment data that quantifies analysis and interpretation of poetry without severely restricting poetry instruction?

Poetry unit standards and common assessment

In an attempt to augment creativity, reading, and deep understanding, the three seventh grade English teachers at our school used standards to come up with five essential questions in poetry in order to focus instruction for an eight-week unit in poetry. Each of these questions helps to address the school standards and the Common Core State Standards (RL 7.4, 7.5 7.10), in reading, analyzing, and interpreting poetry (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). As customary school practice, all teachers teaching the same subject in a grade were required to use the same standards and curriculum, but each could deliver instruction based on her/his preference. As a result, one of the teachers (first author of the article) decided to use

formative assessments to guide her instructional lessons throughout this unit. She used the following guiding questions to do so:

1. What is the poem about?
2. What is the mood or atmosphere of the poem?
3. What poetic devices have been used and what is their effect? Please discuss at least one poetic device.
4. What is the message in the poem? What does the poet want us to think about?
5. What is your opinion of the poem? Why?

The message of the poem was defined as the interpretation of the poem, often linked to theme but encompassing more than that. It involves analyzing or unfolding what the poem is saying about the context of the world and what that would mean to the reader. CCSS.ELA RL. 7.1 requires students to support analysis using textual evidence and CCSS.ELA RL 7.2 requires that students determine and analyze a central theme or idea of a particular piece of literature. The fourth question asks students to delve into the analysis process when reading poetry. It asks them to identify a theme and discuss what the poet is trying to say about the theme in the real-world context. Consistent with exemplary middle level education's emphasis on relevance, students should make real-life connections to enable further building on the analysis process. This question is ultimately strengthened by the specific text support the student uses to prove his/her rationale of the message and its relevance.

Since poetry has a creative element, the English teachers wanted to devote some time for the students to work on writing and evaluating their own poetry. As a result, the unit was broken into two phases. Phase one consisted of skill building, where students read, analyzed, and interpreted poetry and one teacher (the first author of the article) used formative assessment. Phase two consisted of creative writing, where students created and evaluated their own and their peers' poetry. All three teachers planned to end phase one at week six of the unit and give the same summative assessment to evaluate students' understanding and interpretation of the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes and how clearly they expressed themselves in all five questions. They were given one grade on a 1 to 7 scale, where 7 stood for excellent or A+, 6 for very good or A, 5 for good or B, 4 for satisfactory or C, 3-1 needs improvement/poor or D and below.

Beginning the actual unit

Based on informal discussions on poetry, students had a variety of opinions on studying poems. Although some were excited and believed they had experience in reading, writing, and interpreting poetry, the majority of the students were either anxious or unenthused about the poetry unit because they thought poetry was either boring or did not apply to their lives. As a result, students were provided with more decision-making control of the skills they would work on during this unit, as providing choices often raises student achievement (Hattie, 2009), and consistent with emerging identities of middle level learners, such choices align with emphasis upon exploratory education so essential to middle school.

To get an accurate sense of each student's opinions on poetry, students filled out two surveys: one that was open-ended and one that asked them to rank each statement on a 1 to 5 scale (see Table 2). Their responses provided a clear picture of their thoughts not only on how they viewed poetry but on how relevant they thought it was to learn poetry and how they viewed themselves as poets. We know all too well that too often middle school students are especially likely to report being bored in class, more doubtful of their ability to do well, and uncertain of the value of the information they are studying (Marks, 2000), so this survey seemed important to clearly identify each student's thoughts about the topic. The surveys were given at the beginning of the

unit and at the end of the unit to see if opinions on poetry changed over time. This survey was the first of the two diagnostic assessments that helped us to evaluate students' prior knowledge and opinions in poetry (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005).

We then decided to add four formative assessments: the first to pre-assess student initial skills and the next three to track progress throughout phase one of the unit. The unit was broken up so students would have the opportunity to take four, 25-minute formative assessments that would ask them to dissect and analyze a poem and answer the five-essential questions in poetry. Since middle school students can produce better writing when they read a model and use a rubric to self-assess their work (Andrade, Du & Mycek, 2010), with a model (Appendix 1) and qualitative rubric they self-scored their work on an easy-to-track chart and set goals for learning during the upcoming lessons. The first formative assessment was our second diagnostic assessment for this unit, given that no explicit instruction or modeling on how to answer the questions was provided until after the assessment was given. After this assessment was given, both diagnostic measures, the surveys and the first formative assessment, would have been administered. As a result, a more complete picture on students' knowledge and impression of poetry was apparent.

Since the summative assessments focused on the written organization and analysis of the poems through the five-essential poetry questions, students were encouraged to set goals that would help them improve the way they organized their written responses and analyzed the poetry. Students were deterred from setting grammatical goals if other areas in content and interpretation needed work because editing was not a major focus in this unit. Rather, the goal sought to have students systematically direct their thoughts to improving their responses and understanding in one of the areas from the five essential poetry questions through self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2000). Specifically, they filled in the sentence, "*I want to work on question _____ because _____. Based on the model, I will work on _____ to improve my response.*" Students followed this model after the first and second formative assessment. They had more flexibility after the third formative assessment and no structure after the fourth formative assessment.

After this was done, they turned in their assessments, their scoring chart, and a copy of their goals, leaving

them with the rubric and the models. The class spent more time reading and analyzing the first formative assessment so the teachers could: (a) Make sure that students were evaluating themselves correctly; (b) Identify the level of mastery and skills on which each student needed to work; and (c) Evaluate the appropriateness of the goals they set.

After students completed and evaluated each formative assessment and created appropriate goals based on their results, they worked on meeting their goals. At the beginning of each lesson, the teacher led a collaborative practice session, working together as a class to dissect and analyze a poem. Orally, students would show they comprehend the poem, answer each question, and write out one response collectively as a class. As effective comprehension instruction is complex (Kamil, 2004), the teacher provided direct, explicit comprehension instruction known to show gains (Duffy, 2002). However, after the second week, the teacher only provided direct instruction on dissecting, comprehending, and interpreting the poem based on the five questions and did not write out one response. Those students that needed more support on writing out responses would work on building those skills during the latter portion of each lesson.

The latter portion of each class was differentiated according to students' goals. During the weeks when formative assessment one and two were administered, the students decided which question and skill they wanted to work on. During the weeks when the third and fourth formative assessments were administered, students worked on skills decided upon by the teacher, student, and peers. All decisions on what students would work on would be based on results from their formative assessments. In this manner, the formative assessment was used most effectively because both teacher and student feedback was immediate, providing suggestions for improvement and promoting student self-reflection (Wininger, 2005; Ross, 2006; Ruiz-Primo, 2006) Further, allowing students to make decisions in their learning based on formative assessment data is a key practice in differentiation (Laud & Patel, 2012).

Each lesson addressed practicing skills from the five essential poetry questions. Students worked on various activities, such as:

- dissecting poems (of varying difficulty) for certain questions and comparing them to various models,
- creating model responses,
- working in groups to interpret poems and answer certain questions,
- researching key poetic terms on the Internet and finding them in poetry,
- working with a partner to re-work an already written response,
- reading poetry interpretations found from the Internet and writing a response based on those interpretations,
- working with the teacher for more individualized support.

Those students who reached mastery would either create their own poems or engage in a research project around poetry that the teacher helped them choose. This was done in every class for the four weeks a formative assessment was administered. During these lessons, students were moving to different activities focusing on practicing different questions when they reached mastery or when they provided a strong case to move. Each placement was guided by data from the formative assessment and the goals.

During week six (at the end of phase one), students were given a 50-minute summative assessment for a final grade. The teacher gave the summative assessment at week 6 and not at the end of the unit because the students engaged in a creative activity in which they wrote their own poetry anthologies on a subject of their choice for the last two weeks of the unit. All students from all seventh grade classes, regardless if they were in the class that used the formative assessments discussed in this study, received the summative assessment at the same time. The students were allowed to refer to their goals to help keep them on track as they completed this assessment. Afterward, the students completed a creative poetry project where they created a poetry anthology based on a topic of their interest that included self-written poems and analysis.

To help foster excitement and enthusiasm around poetry, the teacher interspersed lessons in which students could propose poetry to be dissected together, or the class would look at unconventional poems (because of their form, sound, message) or forms of poetry like song lyrics. The teacher also added other creative components like asking students to come up with a sound track for a poem. When the students engaged in this activity,

they would have to think about the mood, atmosphere, and message of the poem, thus working on two of the essential poetry questions. In addition, students were encouraged to write and share impromptu poems while others tried to interpret the message. Finally, as a wrap up to lessons, the teacher constantly discussed students' views of poetry; what they liked about that day's activities; what frustrated them; how they connected to the poem; and if they found the message, form, and poetic devices relevant to their lives. Throughout the unit, students were encouraged to be honest about their opinions. The teacher used this feedback to help make decisions on the poems to use and the messages discussed.

Poetry is a hard unit to teach because of its ambiguous and open-ended nature. To help empower the students, students were encouraged to find their messages and interpretation in the poems. Creative and personal interpretations were applauded. Students were reminded that gender, age, race, ethnicity, and life experiences affect poem analysis and message interpretation. As a result, and in support of CCSS.ELA R.L 7.1, if students could provide textual support for their interpretations they were never told that they were wrong. Obviously, some interpretations are stronger, more appropriate, and better thought out than others, and that strength would naturally come out in the completeness and clarity of student responses. Yet, to build student confidence in reading and analyzing poetry, it can help to decrease the anxiety of being wrong, so students would view the task more positively.

What exactly was assessed?

Students were given a survey on their attitudes toward poetry in both short answer form and in numerical form in which they ranked statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Then they took four formative assessments in which they had to answer the five essential poetry questions; the first was given without any instruction and could be considered the pre-assessment. Then, they were given instruction and were asked to go back and self-score all pre-assessments, even the first one, for points. Then, they were asked to make goals about what they wanted to work on. They could consult with the teachers to determine which question they wanted to improve first. Then that week, during group work, they would engage in activities that would help them improve the question on which they wanted to work.

The exact breakdown of the weeks for the poetry unit was as follows:

Phase 1

Week 1—Introduction of poetry: Students completed surveys on poetry; were introduced to the five essential poetry questions; and were taught how to read, interpret, analyze, and connect to poetry. They were also provided with poetry-based key terms and definitions (i.e., metaphor, personification, assonance, rhyme, etc.).

Week 2—Formative assessment 1: Students were given the first formative assessment as a diagnostic measure on “Harlem” by Langston Hughes and were asked to self-score and set goals with a qualitative rubric and model. Before they were given the rubric or were asked to self-score, students went over the model and created criteria that would be on the rubric together. Creating criteria together helps middle school students evaluate themselves better and set appropriate goals, which results in stronger writing (Andrade, Du & Mycek, 2010). Students engaged in different tiered activities based on their goals and performance on the first formative assessment.

Week 3—Formative assessment 2: Students took and self-scored the second formative assessment on “Photograph” by Lucille Clifton with the model and qualitative rubric as a guide. Afterward, they set goals based on their performance and engaged in different tiered activities that matched their goals and level of mastery.

Week 4—Formative assessment 3: Students took and both self and peer-scored the third formative assessment on “The Breeze at Dawn” by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi with the model and qualitative rubric as a guide. As in week three, they then set goals based on their performance and engaged in different tiered activities that matched their goals and teacher goals and their level of mastery.

Week 5—Formative assessment 4: Students took and both self- and peer-scored the fourth formative assessment on “Hope Is the Thing with Feathers” by Emily Dickinson with the model and qualitative rubric as a guide. Again, they then set goals that they would work on for the final week before the summative assessment.

Week 6—Summative assessment & Project: Students complete the summative assessment on the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes. Students begin to work on a creative poetry project where they will create a self-written poetry anthology on a topic of their choice.

Phase 2

Week 7—Project: Students work on a creative poetry project where they will create a self-written poetry anthology on a topic of their choice.

Week 8—Project: Students will share their anthology with the class and self and peer-score the project. Students complete poetry surveys.

As they took the formative assessments and self-scored them based on models and peer feedback, they would self and peer score each question, then set new goals. During those weeks, created goals were used to drive instructional decisions. However, students also had the opportunity to work on improving other aspects in the poetry unit, so they could strengthen their analysis and interpretation in all five questions. Importantly, those students who hit the benchmark criteria in the middle of the unit (indicating they had mastered the expected standard for interpreting poetry) were given extension activities and did not have to work on skill building for the five essential poetry questions after that.

What happened?

The teacher (first author) and outside researcher (second author) then analyzed students' formative assessment results and their pre-unit and post-unit surveys on their attitudes, knowledge, and perception of poetry to see if their understanding, interpretation, written analysis and impressions of poetry improved.

First, we calculated the percentage of students' total scores on each formative assessment in four different ranges. These included students who received scores ranging from 0–3, 4–7, 8–11 and 12–14.

The results in Table 1 show how student performance from one formative assessment to the next gradually improved. On the first formative assessment 65% of

the students received a total score in the range of 0–3. However, on the second formative assessment only 12.5% of the students received a total score in that range. In fact, by the third and fourth formative assessment no students were scoring in the 0–3 range. There was also a steady improvement in the number of students who improved and moved from one range to the next from each assessment. In the first formative assessment the majority of the students (65%) scored in the 0–3 with an average score of 3.3. In the second formative assessment the majority of the student (70%) scored in the 4–7 range with an overall average score of 5.75. In the third formative assessment the majority of the students (52.4%) scored in the 8–11 range with an overall average score of 8.5. Similarly, the majority of the students (52.3%) scored in the 8–11 range in the fourth formative assessment. However, unlike the third formative assessment, more students (40%) scored in the highest 12–14 range in the fourth formative assessment. In the third formative assessment, only 10% of students scored in the 12–14 range.

Overall, these shifts in scores showed an increase in appreciation, understanding, and knowledge of poetry.

Data from the pre and post surveys was also analyzed and showed that students began to view poetry more positively. Their responses to the surveys were averaged. Table 2 shows the average scores for each question. For example, of the 40 students only five gave a score of one (strongly disagree) to the statement, “I have a negative attitude toward poetry,” during the pre-survey, whereas in the post survey, eleven students gave a score of one to the same question. Further, in the pre-survey only two students strongly agreed with the statement, “I clearly understand the purpose of poetry.” After the unit was taught, fifteen students strongly agreed with the same response. An increase in the frequency of positive responses was shown on the majority of questions. Overall, these shifts in scores showed an increase in appreciation, understanding, and knowledge of poetry.

The unit seemed to be transformational for many students. One of the strongest changes reflected their new

Table 1 Formative Assessment Scores Grouped by Ranges.

FA 1		FA 2		FA 3		FA 4	
Ranges	Percent	Ranges	Percent	Ranges	Percent	Ranges	Percent
0–3	65%	0–3	12.5%	0–3	0%	0–3	0%
4–7	32.5%	4–7	70%	4–7	37.5%	4–7	7.5%
8–11	2.5%	8–11	17.5%	8–11	52.4%	8–11	52.5%
12–14	0%	12–14	0%	12–14	10%	12–14	40%

Table 2 Averages of student responses from poetry attitude survey

Survey Questions	Pre Ave	Post Ave	Change
I enjoy reading poetry for pleasure.	3.0	3.2	0.2
I have a negative attitude towards poetry.	2.6	2.1	0.5
I read poetry on my free time.	2.0	2.0	0
I do not know how to write poems.	2.7	1.4	1.3
I would like to read more poetry.	3.0	3.1	0.1
I only read poetry in school.	3.0	3.2	0.2
I clearly understand the purpose of poetry.	2.7	4.1	1.3
I would like to learn about poetry.	3.5	3.1	0.4
I can only learn about poetry in school.	2.1	1.8	0.3
Poetry does not connect to my life.	2.9	2.2	0.7
I can improve my comprehension skills by learning poetry.	4.0	4.2	0.2
All poetry is "old" and talks about topics that bore me.	2.0	1.7	0.3
I share my feelings by writing poetry.	2.3	3.1	0.8
I can improve my writing skills by learning poetry.	4.1	4.0	0.1
Everyone else is better and reading poetry.	2.5	2.4	0.1
Poetry is a foreign language to me.	2.3	1.8	0.5
I write poetry on my free time.	2.1	2.0	0.1
A major element of poetry is rhyming.	3.0	2.6	0.4
I will try to read more poetry.	3.1	3.0	0.1
I know how to understand and interpret poetry.	3.1	4.4	1.3
I have not been taught about poetry.	2.6	1.1	1.5
I have a lot of information about writing poetry.	2.5	4.2	1.7

1-strongly disagree 2-disagree 3-neutral 4-agree 5-strongly agree

belief that they no longer do not know how to write poems, which decreased nearly a point and half on the 5-point scale from 2.7 to 1.4. They claimed to now know a lot of information about writing poetry (1.7 increase). A large

increase in the belief that they had been taught about poetry is noted, but more importantly there was also an increase in their confidence in understanding and interpreting poetry, going from an average score of 3.1 up to 4.4. More effectively, they also changed attitudes toward a greater belief that poetry connects to their lives (.7 change), and the possibility that they can share their feelings via poetry (.8 change). As educators strive to instill not only knowledge but an appreciation for the subject matter, the change in half a point (.5) toward have a more positive attitude toward poetry is especially gratifying.

Finally, when students took the summative final unit assessment, they received the best grades ever since the teacher (first author of paper) had begun teaching this unit five years ago. No students failed, which had not happened before. Well over half the class received A's, which was unprecedented. The fact that the students fully understood what was expected of them and pursued individualized tasks and goals throughout the unit seems to have resulted in far greater learning, engagement and overall enjoyment of poetry.

Essentially, formative assessment helped students track progress, define and set goals on their own, peer evaluate more effectively, and ultimately seemed to contribute to gains in both academic skills, deep learning and attitudes toward poetry in general. It also helped teachers to get a sense of where each student was quickly without excessive time spent grading so that they could more effectively teach students at their level. The teacher who used systematic formative assessments in her classroom used the same essential questions, poems, and criteria from the previous year. In fact, any minor changes in criteria were to make it more sophisticated and essentially more difficult. The only change made was in the instructional delivery, where the teacher gave the student a formative assessment each week, asked them to evaluate their performance, and set goals for future lessons to improve their understanding. Since summative test scores improved, one way to explain this growth is because of the use of formative assessments. When students were able to evaluate themselves and base goals on their evaluations, they were able to differentiate

Table 3 Final Grades

CA	N	%
C	2	5
B	12	30
A	19	48
A+	7	18
Totals	40	100

their instruction based on what they needed to learn and what they would have liked to learn. The focus, driven by data, helped students spend most their instructional time on skills that they had not mastered. Regular formative assessments not only helped to keep track of their level of understanding, but ensured that students were consistently learning what they needed to learn to reach a higher level of mastery at the criteria than in years prior.

Teachers are encouraged to use formative assessment to differentiate lessons in their classrooms. The transition may seem daunting but if you start slowly, make small changes, clearly identify your teaching goals and student learning goals, understand that many ways allow you to engage in formative assessment, accept the error that you may make throughout the process yet keep your eye focused on teaching each student at their appropriate level while silencing the possible negative self-talk you may encounter, you will meet the task of using formative assessment in your classroom with success. As one student reports on the post survey, “First, I wasn’t very positive about this [poetry unit], and didn’t like the unit, but now, I have learnt about poems and know that poems are very interesting, and that there are many meanings to it. It has also become easier for me to understand and analyze poems, so I liked this unit.” This is a similar experience you can feel as you tackle using formative assessment in your classroom and use it to guide your instruction.

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Pooja Patel teaches at the United Nations International School in New York City. E-mail: ppatel@unis.org

Leslie E. Laud is the Director of thinkSRSD in Wellesley, Massachusetts. E-mail: leslie@thinkSRSD.com

Appendix

Model Response to "Harlem" by Langston Hughes

(Preassessment/Formative Assessment 1)

What happens in the poem? (What is it about?)

In this poem, the narrator is asking questions about dreams that have not been addressed or are delayed "deferred." He begins to predict what will happen to dreams, if they have not been achieved or addressed, in question form "Does it stink like rotten meat?" He asks a series of questions trying to figure out the answer. Ultimately predicting that the dream just hangs heavily or possibly "explode[s]" and disappears.

What is the mood/atmosphere like?

I think the mood/atmosphere in this Langston Hughes poem is inquisitive and negative. The mood is inquisitive because there are many questions. The various questions help the reader to begin to think of answers and ask further questions, hence eliciting the inquisitive atmosphere. Further, I think the mood is negative because first it is talking about dreams that are never met. That, in itself, is very negative. Imagine having a dream and giving up on it. Also, the questions the author asks have negative connotations "Does it dry up?" or "Does it stink like rotten meat?" or "Does it explode?". The author does not allude to any positive ideas in his questions further showing that mood is negative, hopeless, and sad. Ultimately, he is talking about a dream not followed which shows ultimate lack of hope, which is sad.

What poetic devices have been used? List one and explain.

In this poem, Langston Hughes uses many poetic devices. One that I see is similes. A simile is a type of figurative language that compares two things using the words "like" or "as." In this poem, Hughes uses similes in many instances. One in particular is "Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?". This is a simile because it is comparing the unattained dream to a raisin. It is saying that when the dream is not achieved then it shrivels up and becomes small and ugly. He is showing that dreams are beautiful when you work for them but when you don't they can turn ugly, because the thought of not achieving your dreams could possibly haunt you for your lifetime.

What is the message? (What does the poet want us to think about?)

Hughes is trying to make the reader think about the importance of dreams. He is stressing that we all have dreams and that we should all work towards them. We should not be afraid of our dreams or ignore them, for when we do they change and become ugly. Perhaps they show an ugly version of us or they are a burden to us "Maybe it just sags like a heavy load." because of the guilt we feel when we don't strive hard to accomplish it. At other times, it may remind us of a bad memory "Does it stink like rotten meat?" especially if we had the chance to accomplish our dreams but did not work hard enough. Further, Hughes is saying that if we are not in the present, always working on our dreams, they may ultimately disappear and never be seen again "Or does it explode?"

What is your personal opinion of the poem? Why?

I like this poem because it connects to my life. It reminds me that my dreams are important and that I have to work hard in my life to achieve them. I should not wait until tomorrow to achieve my dreams because it may be too late. So, I have to work on them today. I may not achieve all my dreams and that is okay, but I have to go to bed trying to accomplish as many of them as I can. I believe in myself and I know that the loved ones in my life believe in me to. So, I have to keep working on making my dreams a reality. This poem is a good poem because it reminds me of this and encourages me to keep striving forward. I really like the format of the questions because it makes me ponder about what would happen if I don't work to achieve my dreams.

Additional Resources from AMLE

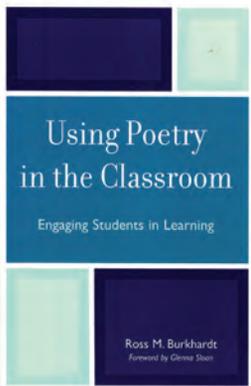
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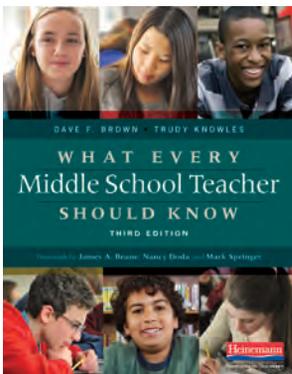
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