Formative Assessment – Describe a learning continuum

[Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. The logo for the Victoria State Government. Formative assessment - describe a learning continuum.]

NARRATOR: Hi, I'm Pam. I'll be presenting this video about how to describe a learning continuum.

[A flow chart with three stages: Plan, Assess, Review. The Plan stage lists "describe a learning continuum," "develop a formative assessment rubric," and "design a task," unpacking parts 1 and 2 of the Guide to Formative Assessment Rubrics of the Victorian Curriculum, F to 10. The Assess stage lists "collect evidence," "moderate," and "interpret and uses evidence," unpacking part 3 of the guide. The Review stage lists "improve rubrics," "refine learning continuum," and "refine task," which is part of review and refine for best practice.]

NARRATOR: This is the first video within the Plan section of the Formative Assessment videos. This video relates to describing a learning continuum that will act as a focus of Formative Assessment. This unpacks a section of part 1 of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Guide to Formative Assessment Rubrics. Describing the learning continuum is the first step of the process of writing and using Formative Assessment rubrics.

The purpose of this video is to explain how to describe a learning continuum that is useful for Formative Assessment purposes. Before we begin, we'll define Formative Assessment. Formative Assessment is any assessment that is used to improve teaching and learning. From this definition, almost any assessment can have a formative function even if it also has a summative or reporting purpose. Within these videos, however, we will be looking primarily at assessments that are purely formative.

Forming an assessment is shaped by the idea that if we can identify where the student is in his or her learning, then we can select the content or skills that the student might be ready to learn next and use this information to develop a targeted instructional plan that will help the student achieve the next phase in learning.

A learning continuum helps teachers with formative assessment by describing what it looks like to become increasingly sophisticated in a part of the curriculum. This video takes you through the steps required to write a learning continuum. To do so, you need to consider student learning as the ability to demonstrate increasingly sophisticated skills or deal with concepts of greater complexity. We describe these changes as occurring along a continuum. Put simply, a learning continuum aims to describe what it looks like to get better at something.

Useful learning continua consist of descriptions of phases of learning at points along the continuum. The name phases here represents a series of statements that describe increasing levels of sophistication or complexity within a specific topic or set of skills. Typically, useful learning continua describe four or more phases of learning.

For the continua to be useful for formative purposes, the phases need to be a suitable size to inform teaching. The size of changes in sophistication between the phase descriptions in a continuum is referred to as the grain size. The ideal grain size for a continuum depends on its purpose. You will be used to the continua described within the curriculum documents. These continua have a relatively coarse grain size where the descriptions lay out what a student typically learns in one or two years.

A learning continuum of smaller grain size might be more useful to inform teaching decisions within a topic where students are expected to make quite a bit of progress in a short time. When a topic is the focus of intensive teaching and learning, a smaller grain size helps teachers identify smaller changes so they can set more detailed goals and give specific feedback. The grain size should not be so small it can be achieved in one lesson or so big that movement through the phases seems unachievable.

To decide on the right grain size for a formative assessment learning continuum, start with the curriculum. There are three options for how to use the curriculum to help write a learning continuum. There are more details within the Guide to Formative Assessment Rubrics, and there is a template included with this module for each option.

The first option is to use the continuum as described in the curriculum documents.

[In the VCAA’s Guide to Formative Assessment Rubrics, option 1 is page 6.]

NARRATOR: The second option is to flesh out a single curriculum level into a number of smaller phases.

[In the VCAA’s Guide to Formative Assessment Rubrics, option 2 is page 7.]

NARRATOR: The third option is to write a learning continuum which spans the gap between curriculum levels.

[In the VCAA’s Guide to Formative Assessment Rubrics, option 3 is page 9.]

NARRATOR: When using curriculum documents to help write finer grained learning continua, it is a good idea to start with the achievement standard and then look at the related content descriptions before you start writing. Once you know what they say, put the curriculum documents away and draft the phase descriptions based on your professional experience. This is a great thing to do collaboratively so that you have someone to bounce ideas off. The best learning continua are typically developed by expert teachers working collaboratively and sharing their knowledge and experience. Finally, check back with the achievement standards and content descriptions to make sure your phase descriptions have not diverted from their original intentions.

The aim for phase descriptions is to describe what students do, say, make or write. This ensures that the learning continuum stands alone and doesn't need other documents or discussions to help teachers interpret it. A good phase description will bring to mind a student that you have taught or currently teach. You should start each phase with "Students at this phase... Blah, blah blah," to help focus on the learner.

The previous slide referred to using your professional experience to help you work out the phase descriptions. Sometimes it can be difficult to describe the phases from experience alone. If you're in this situation, it can be helpful to look at samples of work from different students or you can refer to developmental taxonomies like SOLO or Bloom's taxonomy, to help you write the descriptions. You may find that simply using the lists of verbs provided with a developmental taxonomy can help. If you choose to use a taxonomy, you do not have to have a phase for every level. Just choose what works best in the context.

Now you are ready to write your formative assessment rubrics, which will help you to identify your students' level of ability on a learning continuum.

[More information available at vcaa.vic.gov.au. Authorised and published by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.]