Questions that Begin Culturally Responsive Formative Assessment Inquiries

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 includes all the 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 sense of belonging she felt with her mother and the anxiety of waiting for 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.

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 (e.g., scientific or writing process)**:** understandings and engagement
4. Conceptual understandings: the experiential basis for understandings

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.

Steps of the culturally responsive formative assessment process:

1. Inquire into the aspects of the learner and the learning that lie beneath the surface.
2. Consider how skills and/or content are embedded in socially, culturally, and personally meaningful activities. How can these activities be used to engage learners?
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.

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.

Questions that start culturally responsive formative assessment inquiries:

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.

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 students' interests, experiences, languages, and background help me understand their engagement with me, school, the subject, skills, 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 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 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[ii] 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 students' aspirations different than the aspirations schools ascribe to students (e.g., grades, college, jobs). How might any differences shift how 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?

Decision-making: 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 maker seven 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?

Academic processes: 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?

Conceptual understandings: 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, the solution they propose, or the 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 the student to construct this concept in this way, even if it might be considered a "misconception"? How can I acknowledge their experiences 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 ways to develop their 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, etc.)
8. How can I help students bridge their understanding of the content/concept from one language to another?

Critical Reflection Questions 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'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.*
- *How do conventional and culturally responsive formative assessment differ? See FAQs.*
- *What are additional types of classroom assessment? See Classroom Assessment for Teaching and Learning*

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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.

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