

# **Assessing Middle and High School Social Studies and English**

## **Differentiating Formative Assessment**

**Sheryn Spencer Waterman**



EYE ON EDUCATION  
6 DEPOT WAY WEST, SUITE 106  
LARCHMONT, NY 10538  
(914) 833-0551  
(914) 833-0761 fax  
www.eyeeducation.com

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# Meet the Author

Sheryn Spencer Waterman is an educational consultant and instructional coach who specializes in curriculum design, differentiation, assessment, literacy, and mentoring. Her many accomplishments include “Teacher of the Year” in two schools, National Board Certification (renewed 2007), and Founding Fellow for the Teacher’s Network Leadership Institute. She came to the field of education after a career as a psychotherapist and consultant. She has contributed to many local, state, regional, and national projects to promote quality teaching, and she is working on a doctorate in teacher education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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### **Disclaimer**

Some of the strategies explained in this book are from a collection of ideas I have gathered as a teacher. I have made every effort to determine their sources; however, if the originators of any of them feel they need to be cited, please contact me. Send an e-mail to [author@eyeoneducation.com](mailto:author@eyeoneducation.com) and type my name in the subject line.

— Sheryn Spencer Waterman



# Preface

This book is for teachers and administrators who are committed to helping *all* of their students learn social studies and English language arts concepts and facts. In the first chapter, readers will find ideas that convert differentiation and assessment theory to practice. For example, I answer questions like “What is differentiation?,” “Why differentiate assessment?,” and “What is formative assessment?” I include ideas that teachers can apply generally to plan differentiated formative assessment schedules and how they might collaborate with others to improve assessment processes. Each chapter that follows provides detailed examples of how teachers might apply curriculum standards reflected in essential questions that help them to as clearly as possible determine what they want their students to know, understand, and do as a result of the classroom experience. The examples also suggest ideas for developing measurable objectives that teachers differentiate by readiness (three levels), interests, and learning styles. I chose to provide examples based on the psychological theories of Carl Jung (1923) and adjusted for the classroom teacher by Silver, Strong, and Perini (2007). I think these ideas provide one of the most useful models for differentiating formative assessment in middle and high school classrooms. Teachers will find step-by-step procedures that should inspire them to create their own lessons. I indicate places in the procedures where teachers might use a differentiated formative assessment (DFA) to determine whether they want to adjust their instruction for the whole class, for small groups, or for individuals. Meeting the needs of *all* students in middle and high school is a tremendous challenge, but if you chose this book, you acknowledge that you are willing to meet that challenge.

# Differentiating Formative Assessment

## What is Differentiation?

Differentiation is the process of tailoring instruction to meet the needs of *all* students. Teachers who choose to practice differentiated instruction (DI) do the following:

- ◆ Learn about their students in terms of the following: their readiness to learn content, their interests in conjunction with that content, and their learning or thinking styles that might allow them greater access to that content;
- ◆ Gather content resources that match students' readiness, interests, and learning styles;
- ◆ Choose a process, such as flexible grouping, individualized instruction, or lesson tiering to address students' readiness, interests, and learning styles; and
- ◆ Plan assessments that address students' readiness, interests, and learning styles.

This book focuses on embedding formative assessment within a procedure that addresses the overall process of differentiating instruction, including providing suggestions for three levels of readiness: struggling learners, typical learners, and gifted or highly advanced learners.\*

## Why Differentiate Assessment?

Differentiating assessment is the only *fair* way to evaluate students' learning. According to Rick Wormeli (2006), "What is fair isn't always equal, and our goal as teachers is to be fair and developmentally appropriate, not one-size-fits all equal" (p. 6). If we give every child the same assessment, we are not paying attention to students' different learning styles and academic readiness. This book is based on the idea that teachers make a curriculum plan that *aims* different kinds of learners toward a *target* learning focus. Then as the lesson proceeds, these teachers constantly check to determine how those students are progressing in order to adjust that plan. Those adjustments hopefully work to help students eventually hit that target. This book provides examples of what I call the *Assessment Target*, which I connect with the differentiation framework proposed by Silver, Strong, and Perini (2007). This framework which they base on

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\* For information about strategies for determining students' readiness, interests, and learning styles, and for suggestions for gathering content resources, see Northey (2005) or Waterman (2006). Also, for differentiating assessment ideas that address informal, preassessment, and summative assessment, see Waterman (2009).

the work of Jung (1923), suggests that students fall into one or more of four learning styles: mastery, understanding, self-expressive, and interpersonal. I show how to base an Assessment Target on one or more of these styles and also include learning styles from the *Multiple Intelligences* (Gardner, 1993) and from Dunn and Dunn (1993).

## How Can We Link Assessment That Teachers Differentiate with Theories of Learning?

It is important to connect differentiated assessment with theories of learning. What follows shows how specific researchers suggest choosing assessment processes based on theory (adapted from Herman, Ashbacher, & Winters, 1992, pp. 18–20). I have added how that theory applies specifically to assessments teachers differentiate.

- ◆ *Theory:* We construct knowledge from our interactions with the world. We learn when we use our prior knowledge in combination with our experiences from which we create meaning.

Applying theory to differentiated assessment suggests teachers should:

- Assess students' discussions and conversations.
  - Assess opportunities to show divergent thinking (multiple paths to answers that vary).
  - Assess various ways of demonstrating learning.
  - Assess critical thinking skills such as the highest levels of "New Bloom" (Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, Cruikshank, Mayer, Pintrich, Raths, & Wittrock, 2001).
  - Assess students' connections to their own experiences and prior knowledge.
- ◆ *Theory:* Learning occurs at all ages and stages and it does not occur in a linear and sequential manner.

Applying theory to differentiated assessment suggests teachers should:

- Assess students at all ages and stages of development in problem solving.
  - Not require mastery of basic skills prior to assessing students' abilities to have high-level discussions, solve complex problems, or demonstrate critical thinking.
- ◆ *Theory:* Students exhibit many and varied intelligences, learning styles, attention spans, ability to remember, aptitude, and developmental stages.

Applying theory to differentiated assessment suggests teachers should:

- Assess using a wide variety of tasks (not just reading and writing).
- Evaluate assessment products students choose.
- Allow enough time for complex assessment products.
- Allow time for students to think about their responses to assessments (do not use timed tests too often).
- Allow students to revise their work based on teacher and peer feedback.
- Address all learning styles when assessing learning.

### 2 ◆ Assessing Middle & High School Social Studies & English

- ◆ *Theory:* Students will be more likely to succeed on an assessment if they understand its goals, see representative models, and can compare their response to an excellent example.

Applying theory to differentiated assessment suggests teachers should:

- Discuss the goals of an assessment with students.
  - Allow students to have input into what might represent standard and excellent responses to an assessment.
  - Show students a variety of examples of responses to an assessment and discuss these examples with them.
  - Allow time for self and peer evaluation of assessments.
  - Make assessment criteria clear.
- ◆ *Theory:* Students' motivation, self-esteem, and the effort they exert affect their performance on and learning from any assessment.

Applying theory to differentiated assessment suggests teachers should:

- Relate assessment to students' real world interests and concerns.
  - Encourage students to see the connection between the effort they make and the results of their performance on an assessment.
- ◆ *Theory:* Students learn well in social activities, such as in collaborative group work.

Applying theory to Differentiated Assessment suggests teachers should:

- Assess students as they work in groups.
  - Assess using group products.
  - Assess students as they perform different roles within the group.
- ◆ *Theory:* Determining how students are learning material while they are learning allows teachers to adjust instruction to meet students' needs.

Applying theory to differentiated assessment suggests teachers should:

- Assess students often and in many ways while they are learning (i.e., formative assessment).
- Provide prompt feedback on formative assessments so that students know how well they are learning.
- Adjust instruction based on results of formative assessments.
- Use summative assessment based on evidence from formative assessments.

## **What is *Formative Assessment*?**

Formative assessment is any sampling of student ability *during* the learning process. This sampling is formative if it allows teachers to address the evidence of students' ability or lack of ability by adjusting instruction. Formative *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *feedback* work closely together. For instance, *assessment* is collecting or sampling students' work, *evaluation* is judging that work based on criteria, and *feedback* is letting students know specifically and accurately

how well they did in comparison to that criteria. The criterion can be a “right” answer, a rubric, or a product guide, and students should have access to those criteria on which teachers plan to evaluate their work. This method of formative assessment is called criterion-referenced testing (or assessment). It is not to be confused with norm-based testing (or assessment), which measures students against the performance of other students.

Prompt and accurate feedback is highly important to the learning process, especially for the process of differentiated formative assessment. Research tells us that the closer the sampling is to the adjustment of instruction, the more effective it is in terms of student achievement. For example, Wiliam and Leahy (2007) suggest three *time scale cycles* for feedback on assessments: short, medium, and long. They define short as being any time between five seconds and one hour, medium as being between one day and two weeks, and long as being between four weeks and one year.

### **Short Time Scale Feedback Examples**

When teachers check for understanding relatively soon after presenting a new idea, they are formatively assessing based on a short time scale. For example, teachers might explain a process (e.g., how to proceed with a lab, how to form groups) and immediately take an informal formative assessment from the class by asking for a thumbs up or thumbs down regarding whether students are ready to proceed. If any students put thumbs down, the teacher might call on a student with a thumb up to explain the process again. Immediate feedback from students is crucial for moving forward; however, the success of this kind of formative assessment requires that teachers develop the kind of classroom culture in which students feel comfortable expressing their lack of understanding. For example, if any student thinks he or she might be ridiculed for not “getting it,” this kind of formative assessment will not work well. Another short time scale for feedback is asking students to answer a few questions about the lesson at the end of the class. Their answers to these questions could serve as their “ticket out the door.” Teachers can see from these responses if all students understood the lesson, if some students did not understand it, or if there are whole-class misconceptions. With this information, teachers can address learning problems during the next lesson or take aside certain students for additional help.

### **Medium Time Scale Examples**

A medium time scale formative assessment could include next class pop or announced quizzes on the material covered in the previous class. For example, the “5 Question Quiz” (Waterman, 2009) is a great tool for measuring students’ understanding of previous class material. Teachers might evaluate these quizzes during planning or after school so as to provide feedback for the next class, or they might evaluate them while students are engaged in non-teacher-led work, such as a reading, writing, or research workshop. Teachers evaluate these quizzes to determine what they may need to reteach to the entire class; if they need to take aside those who have not learned and reteach them in a separate or special group session; or if they need to tier another lesson on the topic using a cooperative learning activity grouped by readiness. Another example of medium time for feedback is a test (e.g., short answer or multiple choice) or writing assignment at the end of a discreet set of concepts. These kinds of assessments can be made formative if teachers allow students to retake other versions of the test of the concepts or if they allow students to revise their written responses. The research stresses the importance of specific and accurate feedback on student work, making this strategy useful as a learning tool. One way to inspire students to do their best on the first try is to give extra credit if they do not need to take additional assessments. It is important to give students the grades they earn if they

do the work again with more success. Giving students partial credit may not provide enough incentive.

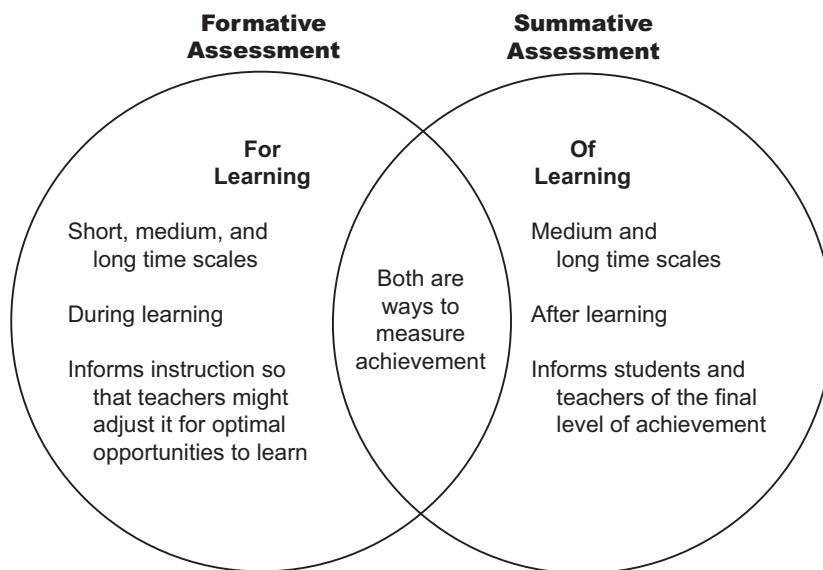
### Long Time Scale Examples

A formative assessment based on a long time for feedback could be a criterion-referenced or benchmark test of discreet learning objectives that the teacher or the district has determined. When students and teachers receive the results of these tests, teachers may regroup students for reteaching discreet learning objectives. One strategy is to regroup students for reteaching across classrooms so that the students might have the benefit of learning the material from another teacher. Another strategy is to use a homeroom period or a ninth block period to provide targeted instruction ranging from remediation to enrichment.

## Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is also an example of a long time scale and should be reserved for the purpose of showing what students have learned; consequently, teachers should only use it when they have finished teaching a topic or when others, including students, parents, other teachers, administrators, and district leaders need to know the final results of the teaching and learning. Figure 1.1 compares and contrasts formative and summative assessment using a Venn diagram.

**Figure 1.1. Compare and Contrast Formative and Summative Assessment**



## Formative Differentiated Assessments That Are Fair, Valid, and Reliable

Those who construct standardized tests are required to carefully address issues of fairness, validity, and reliability. If they do not show that their assessments meet certain criteria, these assessments are unacceptable. Although classroom teachers are not required to subject their assessments to these kinds of requirements, if they do not make some effort to address them, students may not achieve at optimal levels. Addressing these three issues is also important if teachers want to create *common* differentiated formative assessments. Here are some suggestions to help teachers think about addressing these issues in their differentiated formative assessments:

1. *Fairness* addresses test bias and assures that the language and topics in the assessment do not discriminate against anyone based on race, gender or ethnic group. If teachers want to make sure their differentiated formative assessments are fair to everyone, they may want to ask colleagues who are a different gender, race, and/or from a different ethnic group to review their assessment to look for issues of bias. They might make it clear to this person that they realize that biases are often hidden from us and that they will not be offended if their colleague identifies potential problems with their assessment.
2. *Validity* means that the assessment measures what it says it will measure. For example, if teachers want to assess their students' understanding of an important social studies concept, like democracy, they would design an assessment that measures students' understanding of that concept. Their assessment would be invalid if it asked students to show their knowledge of another topic or asked them to find best answers for specific social studies facts like dates and specific events. English Language arts teachers make their assessments valid in the same way. For example if teachers want to assess students' understanding of the writing process, they would ask students to write something; they would not usually assess students' learning through a multiple choice test, for example of grammar skills.
3. *Reliability* means that the assessment is consistent in various contexts and situations. For example, if teachers assess students in first period and they do well, but students in fifth period do not, they might question the reliability of their test.

### Responding to Formative Assessments: Regroup, Reteach, Remediate, and EnRich

Teachers use formative assessments to adjust their responses to students as individuals, in groups, or as a whole class. For example, if teachers assess learning for a specific concept and the majority of the class shows lack of achievement, then these teachers should consider presenting the concept in a completely different manner (i.e., reteaching). If only a few students fail to grasp the concepts, teachers may choose to group them (i.e., regrouping) for some kind of reteaching while the rest of the class continues with learning activities that deepen their understanding of the concepts (i.e., enriching). If only one or two students do not understand the concept, the teachers may consider suggesting that these students come for after school or during school remediation (i.e., remediating).

*In other words, the choices teachers make based on formative assessment of students' work can include regrouping, reteaching, remediating, and enriching.*

## Differentiated Formative Assessment Closely Connected to EEKs and KUDs and MOs

Most researchers and practitioners agree that the best unit planning begins with serious attention to the *Enduring Essential Knowledge* (EEK) that students must learn in their subject area (e.g., English, World History). Most school districts require teachers to use their district or state curriculum *Standards*, and some teachers still rely heavily on their textbooks to help them determine what is essential within a topic or concept in that subject area. Having a clear idea of the essential ideas for a unit helps teachers write the *Essential Questions* (EQ) that assessments will address. These EQs will also help teachers appropriately address what students *Know, Understand, and can Do* (KUD) for that unit. Because these EEKs, EQs, and KUDs must be measured, teachers must state them as *Measurable Objectives* (MOs) that can actually provide best evidence that learning is taking place. To provide evidence of a learning-results orientation, teachers should design assessments that address the MOs that closely align with the Standards, EEKs, EQs, and KUDs. If they are not closely connected, they will appear to be a waste of precious time. Also, teachers must develop clear evaluation standards that they make available to students prior to the assessment. Teachers may present these standards to students in the form of rubrics, product guides, syllabi with point systems, or other information about how they will grade student work.

## Differentiating Assessments Based on Learning Styles

Because teachers' learning styles often do not match their students' styles, it is important for teachers to do their best to accommodate all styles of learning as they assess it. Although it is a great idea to match students' learning styles with the way teachers assess them, unfortunately, learning styles assessments are not always reliable predictors of students' needs over time. Research tells us that students' learning styles vary from day to day based on their mood or events with which they are dealing. Also, many learning styles inventories are not normed for children and teens, and although it is important to consider learning styles, it is dangerous to assume that a student's learning style will be consistent over time; consequently, teachers should constantly assess students' learning preferences as they begin to explore a new topic of study.

## Formatively Assessing If Students Understand

Teachers who take the time at the beginning of the year to get to know their students' learning styles are better equipped to design differentiated formative assessments. It also helps to look for signs of understanding. Reynolds, Martin, and Groulx (1995) suggest that there are seven "Indicators of Understanding" that teachers might look for as they keep constant note of where each student might be in the learning process. Students who are learning have the following traits:

1. *Demeanor*: They have a brightness of their eyes.
2. *Extension*: They take the idea and run with it.
3. *Modification*: They do not have to follow the rules or pattern; they can do their own thing.
4. *Context*: They see the same patterns and ideas in other places.
5. *Shortcuts*: They know the information so well that they can take shortcuts.



6. *Explanation*: They can explain the topic to someone else.
7. *Focus*: They stay focused on the topic for long periods of time.

## Feedback Versus Grading

One of the most controversial aspects of differentiating assessment is how to make grading fair. If teachers do not assess and evaluate every student the same way, how can that be fair? Being fair when grading differentiated assessments brings to light the rationale for grading students at all. Many educators and researchers say that teachers should use grading sparingly as a means of determining how well students achieve on a predetermined standard. Also, *if grades are the only feedback we give students about their work, then we are not using assessment to help students learn, we are using it in a learning-stopping way.* What follows is a conceptual framework that shows the interaction among planning, assessment, evaluation, instruction, and feedback.

### Designing Differentiated Assessments (Method 1)

To design differentiated formative assessments, teachers may use a process that is spiraling and interactive (Figure 1.2 illustrates this process) as follows:

#### ***A Spiraling Interaction of Planning, Assessment, Evaluation, Instruction, and Feedback***

##### **Phase 1: Preassessment**

The teacher develops and administers a preassessment to determine the following:

- ◆ What *background knowledge* do students already have about this unit?
- ◆ How *ready* are these students to learn this material?
- ◆ What *learning styles* might students use to learn about this unit?
- ◆ What *interests* do students have to motivate them to learn about this unit?
- ◆ What *resources* do I need to help students access the information in this unit?

Preassessment is a critical step in designing differentiated assessments and the step that unit designers seem to most often leave out. Teachers who are eager to “get planned” for various reasons often fail to align their instruction and assessments with the needs of the students they teach. This assessment could be a simple written or oral survey. If teachers know what students already know, what they want to learn, how they want to learn it, and whether they are interested in it or not, they should have more success with the unit.

##### **Phase 2: First Evaluation**

Teachers must carefully evaluate this Preassessment. Students quickly realize if their teacher is paying close attention to the assessment or merely checking it off.