Chapter 8
Formative and Summative Evaluation in the Assessment of Adult Learning

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ABSTRACT

Assessment is an important, yet poorly understood, process in adult education. This chapter examines the differences between two important types of assessment/evaluation, formative and summative, and examines how these are incorporated into the literature of adult learning. Focusing on the literature of program planning in adult education, the authors identify a disagreement in the common definition of the terms and consider the impact this could have on educational planning for adult programs. Adapting a formative assessment model that focuses on short-, medium-, and long-cycle formative assessments, examples of all three types currently used in adult education classrooms are provided. The model is then telescoped out to the program level, where a long-cycle formative assessment is identified using a military graduate school as an example. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of the importance of formative assessment and a call to educators to more effectively incorporate it into adult learning.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

As the title indicates, this chapter will deal with the important, yet often misunderstood, concepts of formative and summative evaluation and their criticality to the assessment of adult learning. After identifying how these terms will be defined for our purposes, in order to create a common language for the discussion of formative and summative

evaluation, the current literature of adult learning and assessment will be briefly examined to clarify how these terms are currently used by major voices in the field. The bulk of the chapter will be spent examining each term to illuminate their importance in adult learning and clarify their use. Specific examples will be provided in order to clarify how the terms differ and the myriad of techniques that can be used with both to improve student learning in the classroom or the operations of adult learning programs. The processes of as-

sessment and evaluation are of critical importance to adult education. Many adult learning programs are created in nontraditional or accelerated settings and do not conform to the normal parameters of programs in higher education. Particularly in the case of adult higher education (Kasworm & Marienau, 1997) the positive use of assessment serves not only as a catalyst for the improvement of student learners, but also as a form of evidence for the validity of the programs and student performance. Taken as a whole, the chapter will strive to make clear the importance of formative and summative evaluations and provide possible methods that can be used to implement them in adult programs.

Assessment is one of the most important words in adult education, yet often one of the scariest. Many faculty members, full or part time, and academic administrators shy away from assessment because of the negative connotations that it carries in elementary and secondary education. Some shy away because they deem it to be too hard and not worth the effort. Many of these individuals view assessment as one thing: the process by which the educational world makes judgments on student performance, normally to award grades or determine levels of performance on standardized tests. This chapter will deal with this process of making judgments on student performance, but will also lay out other uses for assessment of student learning that can have significant impacts on the learning and teaching that occurs in adult classrooms. We will deal with two different types of evaluation which are both used for assessment, but have different purposes for their use. These are, predictably, formative evaluation and summative evaluation.

Before going further, it is important to define two terms which are often used interchangeably in the United States, but for our purposes will have different definitions. The terms, assessment and evaluation, are often used synonymously to refer to the process of making judgments on any number of different items or events. Many authoritative sources have different definitions or uses for the two terms (Bloom, 1969; Ecclestone, 2006; Heritage, 2007; Scriven, 1967; Taras, 2005, 2008; Wiliam, 2006), so we will endeavor to provide the definition that will be used throughout this chapter. The obvious exception to this definition will be when using the words of other authors who have chosen to define or utilize the two terms differently than we have here. The term "assessment", for our purposes, will focus on judgments concerning student learning or student work. It refers to teachers making judgments that cause them to provide feedback to students for their improvement, judgments that cause teachers to modify the curriculum, or those judgments that are used when determining grades based on a final product. When a teacher uses a test, paper, or any other valid instrument (formal or informal) which allows them to identify where a student is on the learning continuum, that is assessment. If a teacher gives a pre- and post-test in mathematics to measure student knowledge, that is assessment. If an adult education faculty member asks students to answer questions about where they would put themselves on the learning continuum in order to gain familiarity with their confidence and knowledge, that is assessment even though no grade or score is involved. Both examine student performance or placement on the learning continuum. The term "evaluation" will be used when making judgments about all other things that are measured for the various purposes in academic endeavors. For example, if a university maintains data on the per student cost of certain programs and uses that to make determinations on what programs it can afford to keep, that is evaluation. In the same way, the term "evaluation" is also used to refer to the process of making judgments holistically (Taras, 2005). The process of program evaluation, which will only receive scant attention here, may use assessment data along with other evaluative data as part of the overall judgment process by which a specific program or set of programs is evaluated.

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