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Marzano, Robert. (2010) *Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading: Classroom Strategies That Work*.

Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

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Does a grade accurately reflect what a student understands at the end of a semester of learning? That is the question my school district has been asking as more graduates arrive at post-secondary institutions in need of remedial coursework. As a chemistry teacher in a comprehensive high school, I find myself wondering whether my students who have earned As and Bs in my course will pass placement exams to avoid remedial coursework at the colleges they attend. We have implemented standards-based grading in my school district in order to address this concern of whether grades have any meaning related to what a student really understands in a course. This new system of grading removes work habits, such as attendance and participation, from the grade and focuses solely on whether a student has reached proficiency on the identified standards of the course he or she takes. This shift in

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grading practices and norms has removed points from assessments, such as quizzes and tests, and replaced them with proficiency marks. These changes have created the need to revisit the practice of assessing students, something Robert Marzano has addressed in his book, *Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading*.

As part of the *Classroom Strategies That Work* series from the Marzano Research Laboratory, this book distills research and theory on formative assessments into practical classroom strategies that can be used to increase student achievement. Marzano makes the case that when standards-based grading is rooted in a “clear-cut system of formative assessments,” there most likely will be a positive effect on student achievement (p.18). He dissects the many types and uses of formative assessments that can be used to inform both teacher and student on how to improve performance in the learning process. From this analysis, he argues that the use of formative assessments drives a need for a new grading scale that best represents the progression students follow when learning concepts. This new scale is an “attempt to create a continuum that articulates distinct levels of knowledge and skill relative to a specific topic” (p. 44). He uses this new scale to show how formative strategies can be used to design a wide variety of assessments that track student progress and lead to a meaningful student grade.

The *Classroom Strategies That Work* series of books by the Marzano Research Laboratory typically begins with a strong summary of research and theory. *Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading* provides an excellent historical perspective about what educators once thought regarding formative assessments in the academic community in comparison to how it is viewed today. It is this historical perspective that drives the need to care about formative assessments and the practice of standards-based grading in education today. Marzano identifies the varied uses of formative assessments in both formal and informal processes in the classroom. By providing this context, he takes the reader through a logical progression on how formative assessments can structure the grading systems we have in place. In this progression, he discusses misconceptions that have previously guided grading and how to correct for them by using specific formative assessments that guide the process of learning.

The book is structured with exercises in each chapter that encourage reflection on the concepts that were covered. By providing these exercises, the book should work very well at promoting discussions in most professional development settings in schools so that teachers can unpack the strategies in the context of their own learning environment. As a strength of this book, these exercises along with templates for grade tracking are also reproducible on a website for individual use in the classroom or in professional development sessions. These templates can be used by a teacher as a gradesheet to monitor the progress of student learning. I can see these resources in the book as a useful tool in my own professional development responsibilities with colleagues. Marzano provides multiple examples of how to work within traditional assessment and grading systems while providing the reader with flexibility on how to implement the concepts in this book into practice. Marzano scaffolds understanding and application of these concepts with many examples of assessments and grade books that teachers can use as models in their own discipline and practice. Marzano's examples provide a great diversity in terms of disciplines that are used to apply the concepts into the practice of teaching.

Marzano's theoretical framework is that there are instructional strategies based on research that can be applied, with only minor variations, to any classroom context to increase the achievement of students in many subject areas. A book of strategies will not necessarily increase achievement because learning is affected by the context in which it occurs. Marzano attempts to compensate for this by providing a great number of examples from different disciplines on how formative assessments and standards-based grading can be implemented. The examples from my own discipline gave me ideas on how to apply the concept of learning progressions to chemistry tests I write.

A weakness of this book is that Marzano does not directly address the subjective nature of assessing student learning. Teacher judgment always plays a role in assessments and determining an overall grade for a course. There should have been a clear conceptual framework at the start of the

book that addresses the ethics that may guide how a teacher should interpret the evidence of learning.

The Marzano paradigm is that you can take research and theory into the classroom with concrete strategies that will work in a wide variety of learning contexts. Whether you agree with this paradigm or not, this book provides a significant contribution to the body of literature on formative assessments and standards based grading. As a practicing classroom teacher, I strongly believe that the *Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading* premise of integrating formative assessments with standards based grading will increase student achievement results because of the number of concrete strategies Marzano offers that teachers can actually use. These strategies will foster metacognition in both students and teachers about the progress that is made towards learning objectives in any discipline.

The book is an excellent departure point for professional development teams that want to articulate learning progressions and assess them in ways that promote student growth. A key theme throughout this book is making grades more transparent to support the formative process of learning. When the levels of learning are more clearly articulated in assessments, students can adapt to improve their own achievement. The models provided in this book for tracking learning and reporting grades will inspire teachers to develop additional models that can be used in the classroom and fit a specific learning context.

About the Reviewer

Alec Barron is a doctorate of education candidate at the University of Colorado, Denver. He also works as a high school chemistry teacher and teacher leader in the Aurora (CO) Public Schools. He has worked to develop standards-based grading in his school district and is interested in how these reforms translate into student success at the post-secondary level in science.

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