

7 Ways to Do Formative Assessments in Your Virtual Classroom

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Pen-and-paper pop quizzes are no more: thumbs-up/thumbs-down, hand signals, online polls, discussion boards, and chat boxes have become the new mainstays of formative assessments in virtual classrooms.

These quick pulse checks help teachers make sure that students are grasping key concepts—and identify holes in their understanding. “Good teachers in every subject will adjust their teaching based on what students know at each point,” says Vicki Davis, a director of instructional technology in Albany, Georgia, underscoring how crucial ongoing formative assessments are in the classroom.

Teachers don’t need to completely reinvent their traditional formative assessments, however, according to Mike Anderson, an educational consultant in Durham, New Hampshire. He recommends that teachers modify familiar practices—like exit tickets and think-pair-shares—so they work virtually. “Formative assessments might feel harder now in virtual classrooms—you can’t just walk around class and look over a kid’s shoulders—but I’m not sure they have to be harder.”

In fact, many of the popular digital apps and sites like Nearpod, Flipgrid, Padlet, and Seesaw, can actually work in tandem with the tried-and-true assessments that teachers honed in their classes pre-pandemic. Nearpod, for example, enables teachers to embed short quizzes, polls, surveys, and games into a lesson so that teachers can check for understanding before moving on to the next concept.

But don’t go overboard, says Andrew Miller, director of teaching and learning at the Singapore American School, emphasizing that teachers should be careful not to overwhelm students with too many virtual assessments and too many new tools. Focus on two or three tools at most, he recommends, and be sure you always define a clear and differentiated purpose for using each. It’s also important to remember non-tech solutions, like the simple but invaluable one-to-one conversations that can yield information about students’ progress—and their well-being.

“In our distance learning environment, we run the risk of being further isolated. By scheduling individual sessions with students, we can assess their learning and provide feedback with a real human connection,” Miller says.

Here are some different ways that teachers can use formative assessments in the virtual classroom:

1. Dipsticks

Like using a dipstick to check the oil in a car, teachers can use short, quick checks virtually to make sure that students are on track—both academically and emotionally.

At the start of a live class, pose a general question about the previous day’s lesson, like “Does everyone feel comfortable with what we learned about [fill in the blank]?” and have students respond individually by dropping an emoji or a thumbs-up/thumbs-down in their chat box or video window. Students can also hold up a sticky note or piece of paper to the screen with a response. They don’t all have to be serious questions; funny questions can help get students engaged at the start of a lesson. In this Twitter thread, teachers share fun question ideas like: “Are Pop-Tarts a kind of ravioli?” and “Would you rather have no elbows or no knees?”

Another option: Ask students a more specific question about content you’ve recently covered, then have them assess their understanding on a 1–5 rating scale. They can hold up the appropriate number of fingers as signals during a live class online. The popular stoplight approach also works. Ask students to show a color based on how they feel about the topic you’re teaching: green—go ahead to the next topic; yellow—proceed slowly as I’m still processing; or red—stop, I don’t understand.

2. Digital Journals and One-Pagers

Not all students process information at the same speed or like to raise their hand and be acknowledged publicly during class. After-class reflection exercises that give students a private space to reflect a little more deeply, and signal both what they understood and what they did not, are easy to continue remotely.

Teachers can create a “Journal Jot” online document for each student using Google Docs or a platform like Blackboard to measure how well students are retaining information, recommends Rebecca Alber, an education professor in Los Angeles, California. In their journal, students can respond individually to prompts like K-W-L: what they know, what they want to know, and what they learned; or 3-2-1: three things you found out; two things you found interesting; one thing you didn’t understand.

Teachers can also adapt Jill Fletcher’s one-pager activity to virtual settings. Fletcher, a curriculum coordinator in Kapolei, Hawaii, asks students to write down key themes, questions, and ideas about a topic or lesson on a single page (kind of like a study guide), and include artwork or imagery if they would like. Have students create their one-pagers in a tool like Canva or Google Slides, or they can draw them by hand and submit as a photograph.

3. Elevator Pitches and Tweets

To help students synthesize important takeaways from a lesson, ask them to take one to two minutes during live class time to summarize everything they learned on a particular unit by typing it into a Google doc, in a chat box, or on a virtual message board like Padlet.

You can also ask for student volunteers to share their elevator pitch, or verbal summary of what they learned, with the class in 60 seconds or less. As a 21st-century spin, Matt Levinson, a principal in Seattle, Washington, suggests having students summarize the lesson in a tweet or Instagram post, staying to character limits.

4. Square, Triangle, Circle

Giving students choice with formative assessments is really important, says Anderson, as not all students show their thinking the same way.

Anderson recommends Square, Triangle, Circle, an activity wherein students choose a shape and its associated question prompt. A square means something that is now “squared away” in their thinking. Choosing a triangle tasks students with extracting three important ideas from what they learned, while a circle asks students to discuss something “circulating”—ideas that are not yet fully formed—in their minds.

For asynchronous learning, students can write their responses independently in an online document as a reflection exercise. Or, in a synchronous lesson, teachers can make the exercise collaborative by asking students to pick a shape and then dividing them into groups based on the shape they chose. Students can briefly discuss their reflections with classmates in breakout rooms and share back to the class to close out the learning.

5. Make Art Your Assessment

While teachers may question if old classroom standbys (and popular classroom wall decorations) like collages, mind maps, and sketches can work virtually, teachers we spoke with say they're still finding ways for students to use art, music, and drama to share their thinking.

Students can create an ad to describe and market a particular concept, draw a comic chronicling a historic event or explaining a scientific principle, write a poem or a song, or act out a chapter from a book or scene from a play. Using a phone, students can record themselves using apps like Voice Memos or photograph/film their work with the phone's camera to upload and share virtually.

6. Peer-to-Peer Evaluations

When learning outside the classroom, it's especially important to foster relationships between students. You can do both at the same time, drawing a bead on what your students have learned while encouraging deeper peer connections.

Assign each student a virtual buddy for the week, or pair off students at random to get them talking across the class—and assessing each other's learning.

In pairs, students can be placed in breakout rooms on Zoom or another videoconference platform to do many of the same activities they once did in the classroom to check for understanding. Give each student a general rubric, or use the [TAG feedback](#) process to evaluate their peer's assignment; have them share the feedback with you as well. Or have students teach each other a concept while recording themselves (audio or video) and upload the file for you to review. These activities can also be adapted for asynchronous learning using tools in Google Classroom.

For synchronous classes, organize a talk show panel. Assign three to four students roles to represent different ideas or themes of a unit, such as having students in history class impersonate leaders from different countries during World War II. Have each student discuss their perspective in front of their peers, and allow the rest of the class to ask questions to probe their thinking.

7. Virtual Exit Tickets

Using exit tickets, or students' responses to prompts or questions on a slip of paper at the end of class, is a popular formative assessment practice that easily transfers online.

Teachers can keep a running Google Doc for each student to keep the information private, or broaden it to the whole class by posting questions on a platform like Flipgrid so that students can see and comment on others' responses.

To get a wider view into students' thinking, use open-ended prompts like these:

- What I found most interesting today was...
- Today was hard because...
- What do you understand well?
- What's something that's still shaky?
- What's something I [teacher] don't realize?
- What takeaways will be important three years from now?
- How does this relate to [something learned before]?
- How would you have done things differently today?
- Today was hard because...