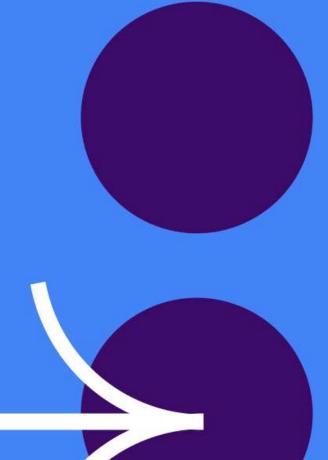# What Engaging Assessments Look Like In Online Learning Environments

Ensure success in online and blended environments by creating assessments that test students on more than just rote memorization

When we think of assessments, we usually think of tests and exams. While these are an important part of an instructor's toolkit, there are many other methods and use cases for assessing students. Creating feedback loops between students and the instructor, particularly in online and blended learning environments, is one of the most valuable outcomes of any assessment. Here we explore how high and low-stakes assessments positively impact student learning and provide more than 20 examples to try in your classroom.

Assessments allow instructors to view their students more holistically by taking stock of their progress throughout the term. Educators can apply assessments to many practical and proactive uses. This includes determining a student's readiness to advance or identify where they may need further assistance. In the COVID-19 era, when many students are learning remotely, creating effective assessments is even more important. They provide insights into where students are succeeding and where they may need further assistance.

While there are many types of assessments, they generally follow a similar process:

- Instructors formulate specific statements of the intended learning outcomes for their students.
- They select and create the means of measuring student achievement and progress toward those outcomes.
- They devise learning experiences to guide students toward those outcomes.
- They apply assessment tools and methods to a given learning experience to determine how effective the learning process was in meeting their goals and how it may be improved.
- They adapt and adjust their educational programming to accommodate the discoveries made in these analyses. And, they use these insights to devise new assessment methods and improve existing ones to further promote and advance student learning.

Types of Assessments

Different types of assessments are usually classified according to their purpose. Assessments can also be classified based on the point in the educational process that they come into play. **Pre-assessments**, for example, are applied prior to beginning a new unit or term. These are designed to provide educators with a baseline view of student knowledge and understanding around a given topic. Other common types of assessments are administered during an educational unit or at its conclusion.

Assessments FOR learning

Student assessments for learning evaluate how well a student comprehends a particular lesson or skill while learning is still happening. Put simply, they provide a moment in time snapshot of how individual students are faring. They are designed to allow educators to monitor each student's progress and create a feedback loop they can also use to guide students and improve upon the teaching process. With this information, instructors can adjust and adapt lesson plans and classroom management strategies accordingly. One of the main benefits of this type of assessment is being able to quickly identify at-risk students before it's too late.

To be effective, assessments for learning must be actionable and ongoing. In other words, they must involve specific actions for students to take to demonstrate their learning. And they must be used at least intermittently throughout the learning period to properly evaluate student understanding. One of the most common types of assessment for learning is the formative assessment.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Educators administer this type of assessment in order to assess a student's progress while learning is underway. They allow educators to adapt and improve their teaching techniques to meet each student's needs relative to that learning.

Other benefits and uses of formative assessments include:

- Refocusing student attention on the learning process, including its importance, instead of on external rewards like grades or standardized test scores
- Empowering students with feedback that helps them understand where to focus and how to build on their strengths
- Increasing student awareness of areas of need and interest, allowing them to steer their own path of learning and growth
- Providing students with more immediate and practical feedback
- Reducing achievement and learning gaps and raising and/or accelerating students' educational achievement

Formative assessments are considered low-stakes assessments and aren't usually graded. Some examples of formative assessments include:

- **Minute papers** – Students write short papers in one minute summarizing what they just learned. Other similar approaches that allow teachers to provide students with immediate feedback include essays, journal entries, worksheets, creative works (art, performance, design) and lab results.

- **Exit tickets or exit slips** – Teachers pose quick questions to students upon the completion of a lesson to assess their comprehension, comfort with the material and areas of difficulty. Similarly, at the beginning of a lesson, teachers can present admit slips or admit tickets with questions for students to answer. These are used to assess how well they recall and understand the material they learned in the previous lesson.

- **Self-assessments** – Teachers ask students to reflect on their own individual progress during the course and express what they learned. This includes what they're struggling with and what they feel they need to do to fulfill the expectations of the coursework and their own personal learning standards. Similarly, teachers can implement peer assessments in which students provide feedback to one another.

Assessment OF learning

Assessments "of learning" are designed to help educators evaluate achievement upon the conclusion of a lesson or term. Educators usually administer this type of assessment at the end of a learning unit or grading period to determine how well a student absorbed the material. Assessments of learning typically compare each student's achievement against a standard or benchmark, such as the class average. Assessments of learning usually culminate with a grade that communicates a student's achievement relative to their peers. One of the most common types of assessment of learning is the summative assessment.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Educators administer summative assessments upon completion of an educational period. The goal is to assess student retention and comprehension of the material covered in that term.

This type of classroom assessment differs from an ipsative assessment (described in the section below). A summative assessment compares student performance against a set of criteria. An ipsative assessment, on the other hand, compares student performance purely against that student's own prior performance.

Another way teachers may use summative assessments is as "practice tests" to help students prepare for future assessments, such as exams or a major standardized test.

Many schools also use forms of summative assessment as benchmarks at interim periods during coursework. Because they are more comprehensive than most formative assessments, they provide bigger picture insights into how closely students, in general, are meeting the expectations of the course.

Summative types of assessments are considered high-stakes assessments because they are typically graded and have a bearing on a student's ability to progress academically. Examples of summative assessments include:

- End of lesson, chapter or unit quizzes
- Midterms or end of semester tests and standardized tests
- Performance tasks or demonstrations of learning. These include capstone projects that students work on throughout the semester with a presentation or formal report serving as the finale.

Assessments AS Learning

Similar to assessments for learning, these also take place throughout the instructional period. The main difference is that assessments as learning engage students in the assessment process. Consider encouraging students to devise specific assessments pertinent to their own educational achievement. These can then be used to evaluate and measure their progress. This way, students are not only empowered to excel but also develop valuable skills in critical thinking and problem-solving. Two common types of assessments as learning are self-assessments and peer-evaluated assessments.

IPSATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Ipsative assessments evaluate student progress by examining the student's previous work in the course, unit or school year. As opposed to other forms of assessment that compare the student's prior work to a particular set of criteria, this type of assessment evaluates the student's achievement by using their own incremental performance as a benchmark. This type of assessment focuses more on the educational progress of the student rather than how well they conform to a uniform set of standards. Examples of ipsative assessments include:

- **Performance assessments** – Such as student portfolios of work or other demonstrations of learning
- **Capstone projects** – Extended projects students work on throughout the assessed period, like a semester or full high school education. A best practice here includes providing students with iterative feedback throughout the project.

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENTS

These provide teachers with the data they need to evaluate the understanding of a particular topic by a student or group of students. Examples include:

- Classroom discussions
- Flow charts
- Graphic organizers
- Journal entries
- KWL (Know, Want to know, and Learn) charts
- Mind maps
- Real-world case studies
- Short quizzes
- Student interviews
- Student reflections

Teachers can also use diagnostic assessments to benchmark a student's progress. This can be done by providing the same assessment at the beginning and end of a unit and comparing the two results.

Assessments that build skills for the workplace

Remote assessments can also be beneficial when they're tailored toward real-world skills and settings, such as research. Collaborative assessments, meanwhile, in which students work with one another on a project or assignment, could be challenging to coordinate and execute in remote settings. Nevertheless, devising assessments that compel students to collaborate in spite of their remote circumstances has many benefits beyond the classroom. By learning and practicing collaboration in alternative ways, students will master the required technology while developing a critical skill for success in the modern workplace.

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