MAKING SENSE OF ASSESSMENT IN OUR "NEW NORMAL"

By April Gonzalez

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> *"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."*
> *– Benjamin Franklin*

We are in the midst of a crisis, with the stability and safety we found in our daily work as educators upended. However, educators have an opportunity, in the midst of disruption and change, to shift our ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and especially, assessment. The position K-12 educators find themselves in with regard to exclusively remote learning is uncharted territory that has caused, or will inevitably cause, us to question what and how to assess learning within this structure.

We have the opportunity to reimagine our assessment system in the online and remote learning setting. Although online learning and blended learning have occurred in higher education for some years, and we can look to that work for guidance, K-12 educators need to reexamine the purpose of assessment as a means to, in the words of education reformer Grant Wiggins, "help students learn better and teachers to instruct better." This opens doors beyond quizzes and tests. Even online, we can employ assessment strategies that promote higher-level thinking skills, are performance-based, and signify the value of authentic, rich, and meaningful learning.

Educators in both higher and K-12 education are highlighting a number of concerns and questions about assessment during this unprecedented time of unparalleled remote learning:

- How can we encourage meaningful and authentic online learning through assessments?
- What role does reflection and self-assessment have in students' learning remotely, and ours?
- How can students demonstrate what they know in the context of remote learning?
- How can we assess students in the context of remote learning when it is not possible to collect qualitative data through observation?
- In what ways can authentic learning experiences and performance-based assessment support learning in the distance learning context?
- When students are not fully engaging in learning online, how can fairly assess them? Are there grading practices to consider?
- Is creating valid and reliable assessments even a possible reality under these circumstances?
- Do students have multiple ways in which they can demonstrate learning?
- How can "just-in-time" and meaningful feedback through formative assessments support students in the online setting?
- How can educators provide high-quality feedback in an online setting?

SPIRE'S ASSESSMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide robust and frequent opportunities for students to reflect on their learning.

- Use formative assessments that ensure growth-oriented, "just-in-time" feedback.

- Limit higher-stakes summative assessments.

- Provide students with authentic assessments connected whenever possible to real-world situations.

- When it comes to grading, first, do no harm.

> *"Learners need endless feedback more than they need endless teaching."*
>
> Grant Wiggins
> Author and Assessment Expert

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Just as is the case in the traditional classroom, instruction, learning, and assessment should not be happening *to* students but *with* them. We assess students as a way to quantify and qualify their knowledge and understanding, and we assess as a way to inform instruction. Simply put, we assess learning for students and for educators. We are in this together, especially now, and offer the following recommendations:

1. Provide ample opportunities and strategies for students to reflect, self-assess, and build their metacognitive skills. Opportunities to reflect on learning help students to understand how they learn, what they have learned, and what they still need to learn. This is especially important in the context of online learning, when students are often learning asynchronously and self-paced. This kind of independent learning relies more heavily on students being able to reflect on their learning and performance.

2. Use formative assessments to provide both students and educators with ongoing information about learning and opportunities for "just-in-time" feedback. W. James Popham notes that "formative assessment is a potentially transformative instructional tool that...can benefit both educators and their students." Remote learning has been a transition for both educators and students. Formative assessments that are low-risk and high-yield give teachers an opportunity to provide more continuous feedback and also provide teachers with valuable information about the instructional practices and tools that are successful in remote learning. With information, teachers have the opportunity to "transform" their remote instruction.

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3. Limit higher-stakes summative assessments. In our current environment, students are not equitably positioned for success on summative assessments. Some older students are providing child care and even holding jobs that are essential to their families. A heavier reliance on lower-stakes formative assessments, which inform both student learning and instruction, provides opportunity for ongoing feedback so students can reflect better on their learning.

4. Use strategies to differentiate assessments, such as a tic-tac-toe board with activities aligned to standards and targeted learning goals. Not only does this empower learners with choice but also multiple ways for them to "show what they know." Given the challenge many students face with learning more independently, differentiating for content, process, and product will provide learners an opportunity to "show what they know" by supporting their strengths and learning styles.

5. Provide students with real-world scenarios and authentic assessments. When students see real-world connections and relevance, they are more likely to be engaged in learning. Authentic learning, in the context of a pandemic, is a must. Students are well aware that COVID-19 has changed their lives, and their ability to fully attend to learning may be compromised now. Through learning activities such as inquiry-based, project-based, problem-based, or service-learning, students can develop higher-level thinking skills and engage in meaningful learning.

6. In the spirit of Hippocrates' cautionary advice, espcially relevant during a pandemic, to "First, do no harm," reconsider grading practices and final evaluations. Pass/Fail may be an option during these unusual circumstances of remote learning. Some colleges and school districts are adopting this especially for higher-stakes situations that involve credits needed for graduation or promotion.

In the midst of our current challenges, educators can choose to succumb to the idea that "this is the best we can do under the circumstances" and assess in a perfunctory manner. Or, alternatively, educators can design assessments with a focus on the formative development of students that will help both students and teachers learn. There's never been a more important time to reflect deeply on our instructional practices and take an authentic approach.

ASSESSMENT RESOURCES

ARTICLES AND RESOURCES

What Will Happen to School Grades During the Coronavirus Pandemic (The Conversation)
Despite focusing on the Canadian education system, this article has many parallels to issues arising in the U.S., including post-secondary transition and the importance of formative feedback.

What Reality TV Taught Me about Everyday Assessment (Phi Delta Kappan)
While a number of us are spending free time binging reality TV, this article draws insight from comparisons between assessment and shows like *The Great British Baking Show, Project Runway,* and *Top Chef.*

Formative Assessment in Distance Learning (Edutopia)
Among the keys noted in this article are having a clear purpose, collecting data over time, and maintaining a focus on feedback.

3 Ways Online Reflection Promotes Learner Agency in a Time of Urgency (Global Online Academy)
In virtual learning environments, getting students to reflect on their own learning – to self-assess – is critical. This article frames approaches to fostering student reflection during online learning.

53 Ways to Check for Understanding (Edutopia)
Many of the ideas on this helpful list could be easily modified for virtual learning.

A New Normal: Assessment and Distance Learning (What's the Story? Vermont)
This recorded Zoom session features several experts and many good recommendations for assessment during virtual learning.

Formative Assessment (Dylan William)
This two-minute video featuring an assessment expert provides a brief primer on the importance of formative assessment.

FOCUS ON FEEDBACK

Three Tips For Providing Effective Feedback Online (The Wiley Network)
Even though this article targets college instructors, the author's three tips are also relevant to the K-12 setting, especially high school.

Seven Keys to Effective Feedback (ASCD)
As educators work hard to enrich online learning, feedback to students is receiving more attention. The late Grant Wiggins, one of the fathers of the Understanding by Design approach, defines feedback as "information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal." He argues that high quality feedback is goal-referenced, tangible and transparent, actionable, user-friendly, timely, ongoing, and consistent.

APPS AND DIGITAL TOOLS FOR ASSESSMENT

[75 Digital Tools and Apps Teachers Can Use to Support Formative Assessment](#) (NWEA)
This comprehensive list provides a summary of the different tools that are, in the author's words, "free or awful close to it."

[The Best Quiz and Game Show Apps for Classrooms](#) (Common Sense Education)
This article provides reviews of apps like [Quizlet](#), [Quizzizz](#), and [Kahoot](#) that may be especially helpful to teachers during distance learning.

[10 Best Math Tools for High School Students](#) (Common Sense Education)
The tools described in this review provide the "customization, tracking, and differentiation students need to be prepared for learning beyond high school."

[12 Ways Technology Can Support Authentic Learning](#) (South Carolina ETV)
Though not specifically addressing assessment, this article identifies a number of online tools like [Flipgrid](#) that can facilitate formative assessment and foster student reflection about their learning.

[Criterion Online Writing Evaluation Service](#) (ETS)
ETS is providing free access to this Grades 4-12 tool through June 30.

Other tools that have been recommended to us include:

Elementary Math: [Boddle](#), [iCompute](#), and [Prodigy](#)
Elementary Language Arts: [Literably](#), [Raz-Kids](#), and [WriteReader](#)
General Elementary: [Brainpop](#), [Freckle](#), and [MobyMax](#)

SPIRE LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

The Spire Leadership Group is publishing [free resources](#) for educators and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Follow the links to our two most recent resource documents:

[Supporting Children During the Trauma of COVID-19:](#) This document lists a variety of resources supporting children during the trauma of COVID-19.

[Supporting Children with Disabilities](#): This document provides a list of websites with resources for parents and teachers of children with disabilities.

The [Spire Leadership Group](#) is an education-focused consulting firm based in Philadelphia. Spire Leadership is led by founder and president Tim Matheney, who previously served as a high school principal, the New Jersey Department of Education's Chief Intervention Officer, and the founding Executive Director of the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders. Spire's team includes Consulting Associate April Gonzalez, a veteran principal, assistant principal, and curriculum supervisor. For more information on Spire Leadership, please email Tim ([tim@spireleadershipgroup.com](#)), call 732-309-2296 or visit [spireleadershipgroup.com](#).