

April 2016

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Recommended Citation

Roberts, Emily (2016) "Formative Assessment for Literacy in Online Contexts," *Michigan Reading Journal*. Vol. 48: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol48/iss3/6>

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Formative Assessment for Literacy in Online Contexts

by Emily Roberts



Emily Roberts



My name is Emily Roberts and I am a sixth-grade teacher at Michigan Virtual Charter Academy (MVCA). Our school is a virtual, public school that is open to all students in the state of Michigan, which results in a highly diverse variety of learners. One of the main differences between a virtual setting and a traditional brick and mortar setting is that students learn through a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous lessons. Asynchronous lessons are built into each student's personal account from the beginning of the year, while synchronous instruction occurs in a Blackboard Collaborate classroom. As a teacher, it is my job to intertwine the pre-made, asynchronous lessons with my live instruction in a way that utilizes best practices in literacy.

Formative assessment is an example of a best practice that allows me to see my students' prior knowledge before planning instruction. It also helps me to know, during instruction, where my students are in their learning of new concepts. For example, if I were teaching a lesson on figurative language, then I would want to know my students' experiences with similes and metaphors. If they are already proficient with these topics, then I can move on to teaching them about idioms and personification. Throughout my lessons, I also want to know if my students are actually learning what I am teaching, so that I know when to review and when to move on. I have been teaching at MVCA for three years, and during that time, I have learned that formative assessment is not specific to any one school setting. It is a necessary aspect of literacy instruction, regardless of the instructional setting. However, there are adjustments that can be made to increase success when implementing formative assessments in a virtual school.

One way that I implement formative assessment in a virtual setting is to greet students with a bell ringer as they log into Blackboard Collaborate. A bell ringer is a short activity to engage students as soon as they enter class. In a brick and mortar setting, this is a great way to give teachers time to complete attendance or a variety of other tasks, without losing valuable instruction time. In a virtual setting, I use bell ringers because students cannot physically log into a class until the actual time a class is scheduled to begin. This means that depending on a student's computer and internet connection, some students are able to get into class immediately, while other students are stuck logging in for the first five minutes. Having a bell ringer gives students that are waiting for class to begin a chance to focus their attention on an introductory question for the day's lesson. For example, my students have logged in to see questions such as, "What examples of irony did you find on pages 130 – 137?" or "How would you describe what irony is to a friend?" Because all answers come to me privately, students are not able to see the examples that their peers come up with. After five minutes, we have a short discussion to engage students that log in at the last minute and we begin class. I use this information to gauge how much time we need to spend reviewing content or to know if we are ready to move on to new objectives. This is really important in a setting with a mix of asynchronous and synchronous lessons because

students are completing lessons independently between the ones that I teach. Using bell ringers allows me to ensure that students are engaging with these asynchronous lessons in an appropriate way while understanding the main ideas presented. Bell ringers in any setting are a helpful way to get a quick snapshot of student thinking. Did they understand and remember content from yesterday's lesson? Were they successful with picking out the main ideas from their reading homework? These questions are quickly answered within the first five minutes of class with a bell ringer.

Another way that formative assessment is introduced in my lessons is through the use of tools within Blackboard Collaborate. Tools, including chat and polling surveys, are great for capturing a quick snapshot of student knowledge. When using chat, I have the ability to make it private so that all messages are only seen by me or to keep the chat open so that it can be used as a running discussion between all students. This is a great tool to quickly check for understanding of vocabulary, to see the connections that students are making between texts or characters, or to have students make predictions. The brick and mortar equivalent would be having a small, personal whiteboard for each student, having them write their answer, and then holding it up so that the teacher can see all students' answers. This achieves the same goal of having each student "voice" an answer without influence from another student. It is an immediate form of formative assessment.

Another tool I use frequently in Blackboard Collaborate is the polling survey. Similar to chat, polling tools also allow me to gain immediate feedback either publicly or privately. I can ask students a simple yes or no question, a "do you agree" question, or a multiple choice question, and I am able to see the results immediately. Similar polling tools can be found on websites such as Socrative, Kahoot, and Quizalize. All of these resources require the use of some device, whether it be a clicker, a cell phone, or an iPad, but they are a

fun way to engage students in a whole class setting while obtaining individual feedback to see how students are doing in a lesson.

A final way that I use formative assessments with my virtual class is through Google Drive. This tool allows me to see more of my students' thinking outside of live classes. One area where this is really helpful is throughout each step of the writing process. Students each have their own Google Folder and any work we do in writing is housed in this folder. This is similar to having a two-pocket folder for students to place all of their writing in, but it has the benefit of being online. Students are able to access their writing from any location with internet access, and so am I. The worries of students taking their writing home and losing it are eliminated because everything in their Google Folder is automatically saved. Google Drive allows me to assess my students' writing ability at any time and without struggling to have students scan in their writing to send it to me. Because my writing instruction is based around mini-lessons, I can quickly identify students who are struggling to complete an outline and pull them into a small group mini-lesson. Google Drive has become one of my favorite ways to gather information about how my students are doing, because it allows me to assess their writing without requiring them to complete any extra assignments.

Within Google Drive, another specific tool is Google Forms. I currently use these forms as an exit ticket for both synchronous and asynchronous aspects of my students' learning. Students click the link that is sent to them, enter their name, and then answer multiple choice, checkbox, short answer, and paragraph questions that I have created. The response spreadsheet gives me a beautiful print-out of pie charts, showing me at a glance the questions with which my students are struggling. I can also access short answer and paragraph responses in a single spreadsheet, rather than opening a new file for each student. Using Google Forms for formative assessment has really helped to

guide my lesson planning in a virtual setting, but it can also be a helpful tool for teachers in a brick and mortar setting. Classrooms that have access to iPads or other devices can use Google Forms in a similar way for exit tickets. It can also be used in a flipped classroom setting where students complete the Google Form after watching a short video for homework. Teachers are able to see exactly what students already understand before beginning the lesson the next day.

Formative assessment is a crucial aspect of any literacy curriculum. There are many ways to include formative assessment in instruction, regardless of the school setting. Adjustments need to be made to fit the setting of a virtual school, but the results are worth the time and effort. Teaching in a virtual setting, with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous lessons, does not need to be a guessing game. Formative assessments can provide the link to connect these two types of instruction.

Author Biography

Emily Roberts has been a teacher at Michigan Virtual Charter Academy for three years. MVCA is based out of Grand Rapids, but Emily is currently residing in Ann Arbor while teaching sixth grade students from all over the state of Michigan.
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