

Formative Assessment During Distance Learning: Recapturing “In-the-Moment” Observations that Inform Instruction

What does formative assessment look like during distance learning? Without proximity, how can teachers gather and act on “in-the-moment” information – the behaviors, emotions, and situations that affect learning and inform instruction?

Formative assessment is designed for the complex realities of classrooms: the mix of relationships (social, academic, and cultural) that shape teaching and learning. As teachers participate in these relationships, they observe and interpret information in real time to make hundreds of decisions that no scripted curriculum can anticipate. **This process of observation, interpretation, and action (a process that is planned-in-advance as well as responsive-in-the-moment) is formative assessment.**

To be so nimble, formative assessment often operates outside the bounds of grades, scores, tests, and quizzes. It can start with a simple observation. A teacher notes the distressed look on a student’s face while reading. More information is needed to take action. Maybe the student isn’t interested in the story, and a thoughtful book recommendation is in order. Maybe the student is worried about where she will stay tonight, and the school’s social service network needs to be activated. Maybe the student just needs time or conversation to work through the frustration of a passage she doesn’t understand. **This process of formative assessment isn’t about grading; it’s about learning.**

This might appear spontaneous, and sometimes is. But teachers can also plan for it. For example, when teachers give students time to read and write during class, they don’t just ensure that students have enough time to complete their work; they give themselves opportunities to make these “spontaneous” observations and decisions. Teachers might do this without labelling it, “formative assessment.” But that’s what it is, and it’s a vital part of the art and science of teaching.

During distance learning, how can teachers collect and act on this kind of “in-the-moment” information? Distance learning isn’t any one thing, of course¹. For some, distance learning involves packets of printed materials mailed back and forth. For others, it involves email, Zoom meetings and online discussion forums. Just as no list

¹ OSPI’s guidance for [Continuous Learning 2020](#) includes a list of “Questions for Educators to Consider” on page 21 that should guide distance learning, whatever form it takes.



of formative assessment strategies applies to all classroom settings, no similar list applies to all distance learning environments. Instead, what follows are two considerations with questions and activities that teachers can adapt to initiate the formative assessment process.

Note about formative assessment with our youngest learners during remote learning: The questions and activities listed below rely on students' ability to articulate the factors that affect their learning – their experiences, circumstances, feelings, and preferences – verbally, or in writing. The ability to recognize, verbalize, analyze, and manage feelings is a part of social-emotional learning, and teachers' responsibility to support students' growth in this area is described in [Washington's Social Emotional Learning: Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators](#). ELA teachers (like other teachers involved in the expressive and communicative arts) are uniquely positioned to integrate social-emotional learning into the curriculum. When the formative assessment process overlaps with social-emotional learning, it also goes further, because it asks teachers to make decisions on the basis of students' needs. **When this work takes place remotely, the challenges increase, especially for teachers of our youngest learners.**

Under normal circumstances, teachers rely on their observations of behavior and affect to help students articulate their experiences, circumstances, feelings, and preferences. That's because students' ability to articulate the factors that affect their learning differ both individually and developmentally. For example, first graders who are just learning to write will likely be less able to articulate their preferences through writing than eleventh graders. **These developmental differences mean that teachers of our youngest learners will need to consider even more creative adaptations of the questions and responses outlined below.**

Adaptations for our youngest learners might involve phone and virtual conferencing, art projects, and communications with families and caregivers. OSPI's guidance, [Continuous Learning 2020](#), includes several sample surveys in Appendix C to help determine a student's access to technology (pp 57-60). These can be useful starting points for formative assessment conversations about "Learning Contexts," with several caveats. First, the surveys do not currently allow for more nuanced understandings of household access to technology. For example, a household might have a laptop computer. But how many people need to use that laptop? In addition, the surveys do not include information about a student's preferences and challenges when it comes to using the technology used by their teachers. To adapt the survey for



formative assessment of learning contexts involves adding some of the questions and considerations listed below.

When feasible, teachers of our youngest learners might ask parents or caregivers to be involved in responding to the questions below. However, it is important to consider the increased demands on parents and caregivers who may be working remotely while supervising their children's learning. In addition, some students will have limited support or the support of siblings.

Formative Assessment Consideration: Learning Contexts

Category	Explanations, Sample Questions, and Possible Actions
Overview	<p>Ask questions about the contexts in which students are learning and their preferences when it comes to remote learning. Act on new understandings of students' varied contexts and preferences. Questions might involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the physical, social, and emotional realities of distance learning• materials students are working with• interruptions and distractions and how students deal with them• challenges and benefits of remote learning vs. learning in classrooms• preferences when it comes to communication, activities, materials, logistics, routines, technology, etc.
Why it matters	<p>When teachers gather with students in classrooms, we often take the learning context for granted because it is common. Everyone sits at tables in groups, for example, with access to the classroom library. Even interruptions are common to everyone in the room, and so you can make real-time adjustments without discussion: the lawnmower is particularly loud after lunch, so you postpone the reading quiz. Of course, external factors affect students differently even when everyone is gathered in one place, and so additional efforts must be made to respond accordingly. But during this period of distance learning, none of the contexts in which students learn are common. To understand students' realities and preferences, then, we must ask.</p>



Category	Explanations, Sample Questions, and Possible Actions
<p>Sample Questions</p> <p><i>[Adapt to your own context and needs]</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step by step, take me through your new “school day.” What does it look like? Feel like? Feel free to inject your account with humor, sarcasm, earnestness, or any of the other attitudes and “voices” that make you, you. • Draw a picture of yourself as you do your schoolwork. Include details that help me see where you are, what is around you, and who might be nearby as you work. • When we learn together in the classroom, there are sometimes interruptions and distractions. [Insert details specific to your class’ experience.] What do interruptions and distractions look like right now when you’re working on ELA assignments? How do you handle them? What works and what doesn’t work for you? • [For students who have multiple teachers for multiple subjects.] What assignments and activities across all your classes are working well for you, and why? [Insert examples that fit within the range of your agreed-upon methods of delivery to help students know the range of things you’re asking about – from class websites to emails from the teacher to packets of activities, etc.] I may not be able to replicate these assignments and activities in our class together, but I may be able to learn something about your preferences that helps me adapt what we do. • What words and phrases describe what your new “school day” looks and feels like? • Interview a classmate about their new experience of “school.” (Interview questions can be generated by a class brainstorm, etc.) • [Craft a question to solicit information about the challenges and preferences students have when it comes to using the forms of technology involved in their distance learning experience. Even when all students have online access, this does not mean they all have 24-7 access to a computer with internet access; some may be working on phones, or may need to share computer time with siblings and/or caregivers.]



Category	Explanations, Sample Questions, and Possible Actions
Genres & Formats	Depending on your method of delivery, the resources and materials available to all your students, the focus of your class, and the age of your students, these questions can be adapted into a variety of formats and genres with different writing purposes and audiences. If students are comfortable with a reading/writing workshop model in which they're making daily independent decisions about topic and genre, they could be given a choice of genres in their responses. Like any writing project, you can share your own response to the question to model expectations and possibilities. In addition to the benefits of modeling, students have never experienced their teachers teaching from home, and may be curious what that looks like!
Sample Genres & Formats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter (or email) to the teacher • Descriptive vignettes • Interviews with a classmate for a class newspaper on remote learning • Survey • Drawings • Hourly diary entries • Video or photo diary • T-Chart of a typical school day next to a day of remote learning (categories might be included such as place, activities, people, materials, etc.) • Description of your day in the style of an author you're studying • Play-by-play commentary (after genre study of sportscasters) • Class blog entries • Conversation (with student or caregiver) • Word clouds • Haikus! <i>Sitting on my couch</i> <i>Next to my sister and dog</i> <i>I write this haiku</i>



Category	Explanations, Sample Questions, and Possible Actions
Possible Actions	<p>The actions you take will vary widely depending on what you learn, your relationship with students, your access to resources, and your ability to make adjustments in the curriculum. Possibilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with individual students to problem-solve (or even just acknowledge) challenges they're experiencing • Adaptation of communication, activities, timing, deadlines, and even curriculum to leverage benefits and preferences while mitigating challenges • Ongoing communication of tips and strategies for remote learning based on the needs and ideas that students communicate • Requests to administration for resources given communicated needs and challenges
Notes	<p>While these questions help initiate the formative assessment process, they're not designed to assess writing ability or performance. Instead, they're designed to help teachers assess a range of factors that affect students' learning experiences. One way to encourage participation without the promise or threat of grades is to communicate that you're asking these questions because you truly want to understand students' experiences; their answers will help you to make this a more productive (and perhaps even enjoyable!) experience for everyone.</p> <p>You might want to collect and share back student responses, from reporting on the results of specific survey questions to sharing a collage of student drawings. Just be mindful of sharing sensitive details regarding students' situations; it might be more appropriate to share the range of strategies that students use for dealing with distractions than details about physical environments that might highlight inequalities or make any student self-conscious.</p>



Formative Assessment Consideration: Students' Process

Questions about process are best served when students experience the work they're engaged in as meaningful. As Katie Wood Ray reminds teachers of writing, "...it's difficult for students to answer questions about their thinking when the work they are doing doesn't require them to think."² In addition, OSPI's guidance on "Student Learning and Grading" ([Continuous Learning 2020](#)) repeatedly recommends that learning be "for learning's sake" and give students meaningful opportunities to engage with content.

Category	Explanations, Sample Questions, and Possible Actions
Overview	<p>Ask questions about students' process and thinking before, during, and after assignments. Act based on new understandings of individual differences in students' experiences. Questions might involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How students begin, continue, and finish their work• Where ideas come from• Students' thinking (reasoning)• What students do when they experience frustration or challenges• What motivates students• What part of the process students find most engaging and most challenging• How students feel about their work• What point in their process students need the most support
Why it matters	<p>Scholars and practitioners in English Education have long acknowledged the importance of process, especially when it comes to the teaching of writing. As Donald Murray famously put it, "Process cannot be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from sausage³."</p> <p>In other words, students cannot learn how to write simply by studying what good writing <i>looks</i> like when it is finished. They</p>

² See Ray, Katie Wood. "What Are You Thinking?" Educational Leadership. vol. 64, no. 2, 2006, pp. 58-62.

³ See Murray, Donald. Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Learning and Teaching. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1982.



Category	Explanations, Sample Questions, and Possible Actions
	<p>also need to learn to navigate the writing process, which varies from writer to writer and from writing project to writing project. Teachers can facilitate a focus on process in various ways: when teachers model their own writing process, ask students to reflect on and share particulars of their writing processes, and discuss strategies with students for working through the complications that arise in various stages of the writing process.</p> <p>When students have time to write during the school day, teachers have an opportunity to observe and discuss students' process in real-time and interact when necessary – formative assessment at its best. Many teachers already ask students to submit written reflections on process when they turn in writing projects. This practice of written reflection provides a model for distance learning, when teachers don't have the opportunity to observe and interact in real-time as students work.</p> <p>A focus on process isn't relegated to the teaching of writing; any complex work worth doing requires an investment in (and understanding of) process. Teachers can ask questions about process for work undertaken during distance learning, and act on the understanding they gain to support their students as they work.</p>
<p>Sample Questions</p> <p><i>[Adapt to your own context and needs]</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were your initial thoughts and feelings when you received this [assignment/project/name of the assignment/description of project]? Why? • How did you begin working? What did you do first? • What was your biggest challenge as you worked on this project? What did you do when you encountered this challenge? Why? Did it work? • Did you talk with anyone about your assignment/project? If so, describe the conversation. Did the conversation help? In what way? • Did you consult any sources of information on your own that helped you complete this project? [Insert list of possibilities, depending on the assignment.] If so, what did you consult? At



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	<p>what point in the process? What made you think of consulting this source? Did it help? Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever worked on something like this before? If so, what was different or similar this time? • I notice ____ about your project. Tell me more about this. How did it come to be? • What made you decide to ____? • What were you thinking when you ____? • When you got stuck, what did you do to get unstuck? • Describe the most interesting part of working on this for you. • What are you most proud of? • What aren't you sure about? • If you were going to do this all over again, what do you wish that you had known or had done first? • What do you most hope that I notice about this? • Give advice to next year's students as they complete this assignment, based on your own experience. What should they expect? What can they try if they run into the challenges that you ran into? <p>The questions listed above lend themselves to the end of a given assignment or project, but they can be further adapted for any phase of a long-term project. For example, for an extended research project, you might ask questions specifically about students' process as they shape their research question, or try different search phrases, or make sense of complex/conflicting sources, or begin to draft an engaging introduction, etc.</p>
Genres & Formats	<p>These questions can be answered through simple verbal or written statements that are communicated during a phone conversation or through email, or included as a reflection paragraph at the end of a writing project. However, they can also be as creative as you desire, depending on what your goals are, the focus of your class, and the age of your students.</p>
Sample Genres & Formats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note at the end of an assignment • Letter (or email) to the teacher • Phone/zoom conversation



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview with a classmate • Gizmo survey • Class discussion (through zoom or discussion board) so that students can share challenges, successes, and strategies regarding process • Collaboratively created <i>Chutes and Ladders</i> game that highlights setbacks and breakthroughs that students might experience during a long-term, complex project
Possible Actions	<p>The actions you take will vary widely depending on what you learn, your relationship with students, your access to resources, and your ability to make adjustments in the curriculum.</p> <p>Possibilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional support for the class if a certain part of the process proves to be challenging for most students (e.g., you learn that most students struggle to come up with ideas, and so maybe a class brainstorm or a lesson on where ideas come from will help) • Communication with individual students to problem-solve (or even just acknowledge) challenges they're experiencing • Adaptation of communication, activities, timing, deadlines, and even curriculum as you learn what students need for a particular assignment • Adjustments to the assignment structure the <i>next time</i> you assign it, based on what you learned • On-going discussion of process with the class – often, students generate strategies that work for others
Notes	<p>Sharing responses with the class can serve several purposes (whether you collect and send them back out, or whether the responses are initially shared during class discussions): to remind students that everyone works differently; to support a focus on process; to share strategies that work for others; and to normalize the frustrations and challenges that are inevitable in complex, creative work.</p> <p>While these questions help initiate the formative assessment process, they're not designed to assess writing ability or</p>



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	<p>performance. Instead, they're designed to help teachers assess students' process – not to <i>grade</i> process, but to <i>understand</i> and <i>support</i> it. One way to encourage participation without the promise or threat of grades is to communicate that you're asking these questions because you truly want to understand students' process and experiences; their answers will help you to make this a more productive (and perhaps even enjoyable!) experience for everyone. Also,</p> <p>discussion of process is just something that people who are enthusiastically engaged in the same activity <i>do</i> with each other, as any number of Facebook groups attest to!</p>



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