

Assessment and feedback in an online context: Checking understanding

Evidence Based Education

What's the idea?

Moving from the classroom to online learning presents new challenges, including around assessment and feedback. Many of the principles of good feedback and assessment can still apply to the online environment, they just need to be reframed to fit this new context. Regardless of the setting, there are some key considerations around assessments that teachers need to bear in mind.

For example, first and foremost, good assessment practice is purposeful. We need to target precisely the 'what', i.e. what we want to assess and the why, i.e. for what purpose we want to assess it. In the current context, for example, this might be to check understanding to inform what we do next as teachers, to support pupils' learning by encouraging them to recall information and thereby strengthen its memory, or to provide feedback to pupils so they can redraft and improve their work. This Compact Guide focuses particularly on checking pupils' understanding.

What does the research say?

In a classroom environment, teachers can use proxies and nonverbal cues for pupils' understanding such as smiling or nodding or quite simply students signalling that they haven't understood a particular topic - although such proxies are often poor indicators of learning, so should be interpreted cautiously for this purpose. But we also have the opportunity to walk around the classroom to see how they are progressing. In an online environment, it is more difficult to get

this regular feedback so it is important to incorporate opportunities to check on students' learning. This means we need to be much clearer about the output that we need from students to assess their learning; while planning learning activities, assessment already needs to be at the forefront of teachers' minds. Activities used to generate the outputs needed can include well-targeted questions (such as MCQs) or curriculum-aligned tasks, although teachers working with students remotely should be aware of the potential for such outputs being the work not solely of the individual student concerned.

How does this work in practice?

One approach to checking understanding that works well online is using quizzes. A Compact Guide by Jose Picardo covers some practical advice on selecting and using online quizzing tools, whilst another Compact Guide in this series covers the use of Hinge Questions, which are a helpful way to assess pupil understanding.

Good assessment is often about generating actionable and meaningful information - so for it to be worthwhile, we also need to make sure we take action based on what we learn about pupils' level of understanding, for example adapting the next bit of teaching to take into account any gaps or misconceptions identified through the assessment activity.

One other advantage of quizzes is that they also support learning through retrieval practice. Research around retrieval practice shows that the process of retrieving information from the mind strengthens its memory. Quizzes are thus not only a good way to test pupils' learning but also help them to remember information. However, it is important that the information students

are retrieving is accurate or that they receive feedback if their answers are inaccurate. Retrieval practice works best when we create desirable difficulties. A question is desirably difficult if students have the prior knowledge to be able to answer it, but are challenged in doing so. If questions are too easy, students are not challenged and do not benefit from the retrieval effect.

Applied to an online environment, this means that teachers should give students sufficient opportunities to recall and apply information instead of mainly providing them with input. Online learning might hence be a good opportunity to test students' knowledge on topics teachers have taught a couple of months ago through online quizzes. Students can also design their own questions to test each other.

Top tips

- Ensure that the assessment you design is purposeful and provides meaningful, actionable information
- Make sure to formulate questions that help you to assess what pupils have learned already and where they might need some more support, as well as helping them to test their own learning
- Be clear about the purpose of quizzes. Students need to know that they are low-stakes or no-stakes tests and that they are designed to help their learning
- By getting students engaged in designing questions, they get the additional benefit of revising study material while they put together a question board. Younger pupils, for example those in primary school, will benefit from more structure, such as partially-completed templates or prompts - in fact these may be helpful for all pupils!

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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- Evidence Based Education (2020). Assessment and feedback in an online context. Podcast available online.
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- Rosenshine B (2012) Principles of instruction: Research-based strategies that all teachers should know. *American Educator* 36(1): 12–19.
- Wiliam D (2011) What is assessment for learning? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*. 37:3-14.