

5 Fantastic, Fast, Formative Assessment Tools

I thought I could read my students' body language. I was wrong. As an experiment, I used Socrative when I taught binary numbers. What I learned forever changed my views on being a better teacher.

Why Formative Assessment Makes Better Teachers

[Formative assessment](#) is done as students are learning. [Summative assessment](#) is at the end (like a test).

Here's what happened in my classroom. I was teaching my hardest topic of the year -- binary numbers, where students learn to add ones and zeros like a computer. It looks harder than it is, and many of my students will shut down and not even want to try. So I taught how to count in binary numbers, and we worked some examples together. After a few minutes, two students piped up.

"We've got this, it's easy," they said. "Can we move on?"

I looked at the other students and asked, "Do you have this?"

They nodded their heads furiously up and down in a "yes."

My teacher instincts said that everyone knew it, but I decided to experiment. So I wrote a problem on the board. Students were already logged into Socrative, and a box opened up on their screens. Each student typed in his or her answer to the problem. They clicked enter, and all of their answers appeared on my screen beside the name of each student.

I was floored. Guess how many knew the right answer? Two! Just the two students who had spoken up and *no one else!*

I taught for another few minutes and gave them another problem. A few more solved it, but not everyone. We took the problem another way and then another few thought it was easy. Finally, after about ten more minutes of teaching, everyone was mastering the problems. Their test scores proved it.

But the end result was not what you think. It didn't take me longer to teach binary numbers. You see, I don't move past binary numbers until all of my students are scoring 90 percent or higher. And as a result of this experience, *I taught binary numbers and all of the accompanying standards in three days instead of my usual five, and no one had to come for after-school tutoring.*

I am sold.

Good teachers in every subject will adjust their teaching based upon what students know at each point. Good formative assessment removes the embarrassment of public hand raising and gives teachers feedback that impacts how they're teaching at that moment. Instant feedback. We can do this now. Here's how.

Formative Assessment Toolkit

Learn the strengths and weaknesses of each tool. You'll need several to meet every classroom situation. These are my fab five tools for formative assessment.

1. Socrative

Socrative can be used for quick quizzes and also on the fly, as I've already shared. Here's another feature. Before class, I create quizzes that we can play as a game called Space Race. The website automatically divides the class into teams. Kids know what color team they're on and can look at the rockets racing one another on the board. I don't always record the grade, particularly when I know I have more teaching to do.

The advantage of Socrative is that it gives me percentages that I can use as a grade if we're ready for that. You can even use it for traditional quizzes if desired.

2. Kahoot

Kahoot lets us build fun quizzes. Students use computers, cell phones, or other devices to join in the game. You can create flashcards for review. You can also embed videos and use Kahoot as part of the teaching process, or students can create review games to share. One disadvantage is that students can use aliases. While I can see overall how the class is doing, unlike Socrative, I can't see the patterns of which unfamiliar nickname is struggling.

Otherwise, I knew this one was a winner when I finished ten minutes early on the last day of school and one class asked to play SAT vocab review in Kahoot.

3. Zaption

I'm in-flipping my class and using videos. But just as we know that it's better to ask questions throughout the text rather than only at the end of the chapter, you should also ask questions after a topic is covered in the video and not wait until the end. **Zaption** lets you embed questions within the video. Students can't move forward in the video until they can correctly answer the question. Whether you're [flipping your classroom](#) or [in-flipping](#), this is a powerful tool.

You'll need to upgrade your Zaption plan to embed it in your learning management system, but you can test it out on their site for free to see if it works for you.

4. Backchannel Chat Tools

Backchannel chat -- a live chat that accompanies class discussion -- is a great way to do exit ticket activities. While these chat tools aren't anonymous, [Chatzy](#), [Today's Meet](#), or [Ning](#) can be powerful. Students can take notes as you teach together, and you can check for understanding by having them type answers to questions. Another riff on this would be group note taking in [Google Docs](#). (If you need to have anonymous chat, you could set something up in [Google Forms](#).)

One tip: If I ask a question and want everyone to answer, my rule is that you cannot repeat a previous answer -- each response must be slightly different and add something to what we know. Afterward, export the chat and share it with the class as notes for the day.

5. No BYOD? Plickers and Mobile Scanners Rock

But what if you have no computers, no cell phones, no nothing? Do you have a smartphone or tablet? If so, you've got two simple answers.

For verbal questions: Log into [Plickers](#) and create a page for each student. This tool will code in the student's name and answers. Hand each student their plicker card and ask a question. The student will hold the card up in the direction of their answer. Looking at the class through the camera on your smartphone inside the Plicker app, you'll see the name of each student and whether he or she got the

answer right to the question you just asked! BAM! (Hat tip to [Richard Byrne](#) for teaching me about Plickers in [a recent interview](#).)

For quick quizzes: [QuickKey](#) is one mobile scanning app for the iPhone. There are several others, such as [ZipGrade](#) and [GradeCam](#). The disadvantage of this method is that your questions must be multiple choice. You print out the short form and students bubble it in. Use your smartphone to immediately know what students know with a snap of a picture.

Can You Teach Without Formative Assessment?

Test scores should never be a surprise. You don't need to be a mind reader. You just need a formative assessment toolbox, and you need to use it every day.

I invite you to share your formative assessment tools and tips in the comments, because there are dozens if not hundreds of ways to assess. Our students need us to be excellent teachers, and formative assessment is one way to do it.