

Learner Assessment in Online Courses: Best Practices & More

April 2, 2019 • [Anthea Papadopoulou](#)

<https://www.learnworlds.com/learner-assessment-best-practices-course-design/>

Selecting assessment activities is a powerful way to achieve learning outcomes and to assure course completion. It determines the degree to which each of our goals has been reached-hence the degree to which your course is successful and valuable. How should someone design assessments in online learning?

Good course design that aligns competencies with outcomes is critical. Therefore, if you've kept in mind the fundamental questions "What do I want my students learn to do?" and "How will they show their skills, attitudes, and abilities"? It will be much easier to develop the appropriate assessment strategy.

Speaking about online courses, most instructors provide a final quiz at the end of their course and a passing score accompanied by a certificate. This is a good start to apply assessment but is it enough? Probably not. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic. This way, you can also show students their progress in the course and what they achieved in each step of the way. Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff (1996, p. 167) for example say that:

"In keeping with a learner-centered approach, assessment should be part of the learning-teaching process, embedded in-class activities and in the interactions between learners and between learners and teachers."

This assumption brings a lot to the table, which we are going to discuss here. There is a variety of ways you can and should embed assessment in your online course instead of just a simple exam at the end of it. So, it is time we share some valuable knowledge with you now!

Types of assessment in online learning

The first thing an online instructor should be aware of is the two different types of assessments that the educational theory indicates: The formative and summative.

Formative assessment

Formative assessment gathers information all the way throughout a course. This information is then used to guide teaching and to improve learning and performance. The key component of formative assessment is feedback, whether the assessment is a graded quiz or written assignment or student participation in a discussion forum.

Summative assessment

Summative assessment gathers and analyzes student at the conclusion of a course whether students have achieved identified goals. Summative assessments typically result in a score or grade. A culminating final exam or performance task is an example of a summative assessment.

Another important term to consider is the term "**Authentic assessment**". How can we bring the "real world" into online learning? Application activities, like case studies can be considered authentic activities. Authentic activities demonstrate not only acquisition of knowledge but the ability to apply that knowledge in professional or other settings. They become even more meaningful when we call students to reflect on what they have learnt. When the activities closely align with what they aim to learn learners are more willing to participate in your activities.

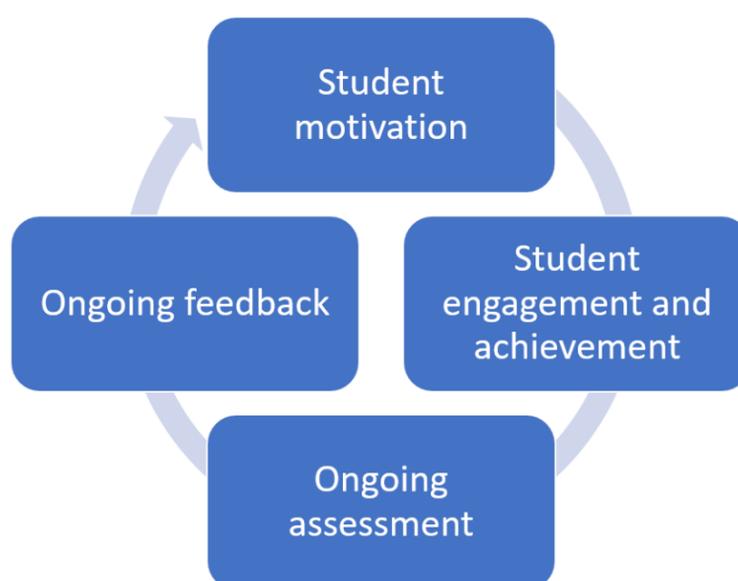
The importance of formative assessment and feedback

A successful online course needs to include summative as well as formative assessment. Ascertaining that the desired goals of learning have been met doesn't serve only the purpose to give a final score to learners. On the contrary, assessment activities should be integrated into several parts of the course, providing ongoing feedback.

This means that you can include questionnaires and mini scored- exams in several parts of your course, not only in the end. This kind of assessment aims to support learning until the desired level of knowledge has been achieved. Formative assessment provides:

- Evidence that learners engage and participate.
- Demonstrable measures of learner progress within the course.
- Ways to give feedback to learners.
- Opportunities for learners to apply their knowledge and skills and identify where they lack understanding.

This is the rubric of how your course should look like:



How should someone give feedback?

Exams and quizzes provide immediate feedback to students – particularly crucial for formative assessment. However, the most effective type of feedback for improving learning is specific to the individual student, and there is no getting around the fact that this type of accurate, timely and meaningful feedback is labour-intensive- when you have to comment assignments, for example.

Comments
Here you can provide detailed feedback to the user. Once you grade the assignment the user will receive a notification and then he/she can log back in and read your comments.

Score
Here you can set a score/grade for the assignment (from 0 to 100).

Submit

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Or when you have to write feedback to the text with feedback questions:

DESCRIPTION

Explain in what way a person's failure to apply the smoking cessation step process will impact his or her ability to stop smoking. Provide an example to illustrate your point.

RIGHT ANSWER (ONLY AS FEEDBACK)

Assessment Practices for Online Courses

What is the best way to apply all the above? Here is a practical guide on how you can create an assessment in your course following four crucial steps starting from today:

1 Link your assessment with the course objectives

Determine the required objectives for your course and determine specific assessment activities that will show learners mastery of them. Given that course objectives are measurable, it is effortless to design the assessments based on them. Read how you can [create learning objectives here](#). Learning goals, the teaching activities, and the assessment should be aligned, thus reflect and support each other. Form questions that assess what you expect your learners to have learned. This is an essential prerequisite of learner satisfaction and achievement.

2 Add assessments in every part of your course

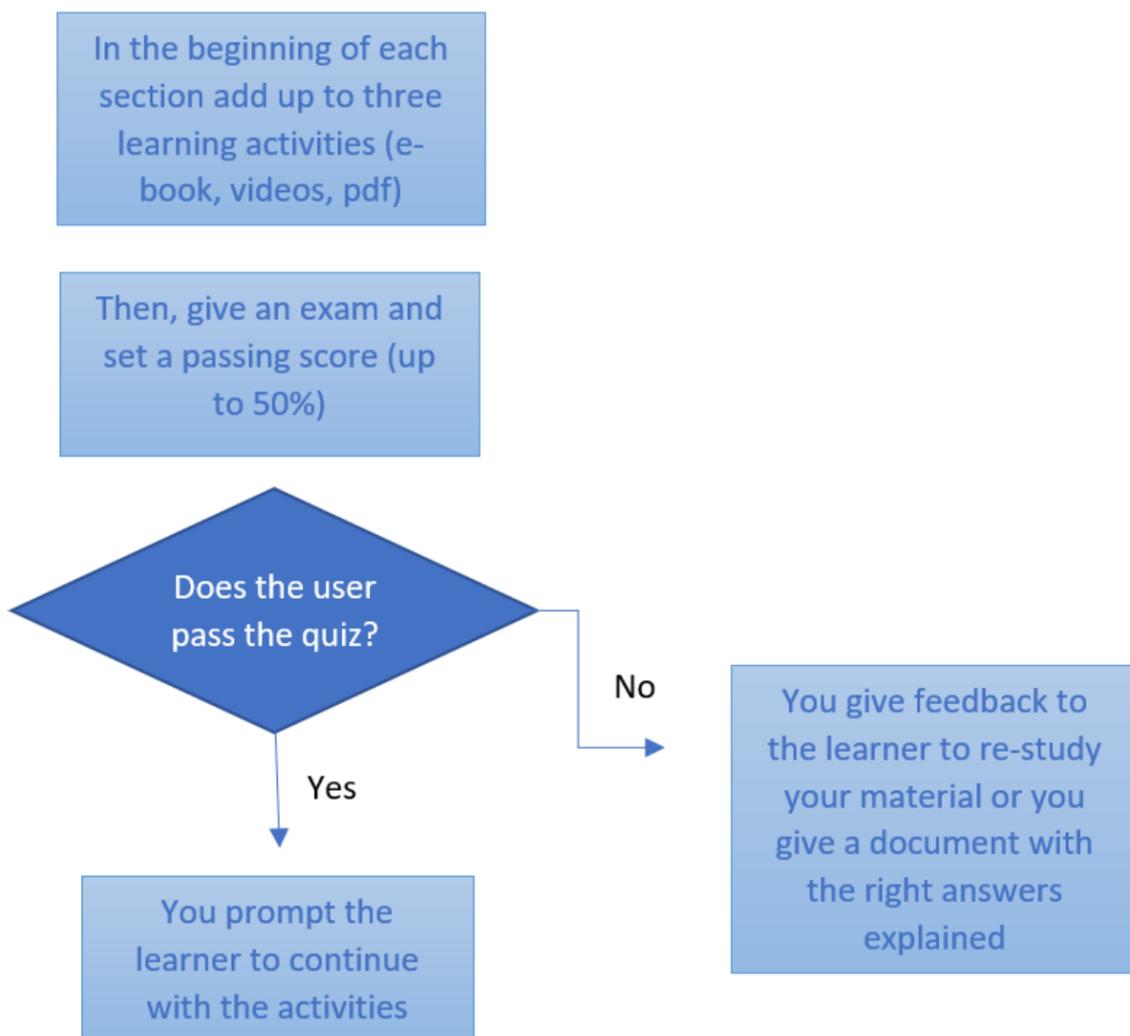
a) At the beginning of your course

Use quiz techniques to assess pre-existing knowledge of your learners to get to know them better and engage with them in the course. For example, you can use one of the two methods below:

1. Create quizzes with interrelated questions to introduce your topic. Background knowledge probes prepare learners about what they are about to learn.
2. Create one or more free response questions and ask learners to list ideas that are related to your course topic before they even begin studying.

b) Throughout your course

This is an example of providing an ongoing assessment.



Apart from quizzes also include assignments which you can visit anytime once submitted and provide feedback. Learners receive your feedback with an email and notification.

COURSE	USERNAME	QUESTIONNAIRE	SCORE	DATE	MANAGE
How Interactive Videos Benefit Online Courses?	Dragan Obradovic	Toughtful wish	-	2019-01-27 06:32:31	
How Interactive Videos Benefit Online Courses?	Dragan Obradovic	How about you?	-	2019-01-27 06:31:27	A+
How Interactive Videos Benefit Online Courses?	Dragan Obradovic	How about you?	-	2019-01-27 06:27:42	A+
The Complete Guide to Creating Awesome Interactive Videos	feminineandfierce	How about you?	-	2019-01-18 06:32:34	A+
LearnWorlds Onboarding	theobouk	Tickets	-	2019-01-16 12:39:58	A+
LearnWorlds Onboarding	theobouk	Tickets	-	2019-01-16 09:52:32	A+
LearnWorlds Onboarding	theobouk	Tickets	-	2019-01-14 12:51:57	A+

c) At the end of your course

Add assessment activities at the end of the course that includes questions from each of your sections. In the end, it is necessary to assess learners achievement based on a variety of assessment types:

- Questionnaires
- Graded assignments
- Questions inside videos and
- Discussion posts

In questionnaires (set as exams) you can set a higher passing score than before and congrats learners if they pass the score. You can also choose from a variety of options like duration in minutes, question order, number of tries, showing mistakes, etc.

If they fail, prompt them to repeat the sections they struggle with. Remember to always speak kindly in your feedback and expand upon the learner’s knowledge.

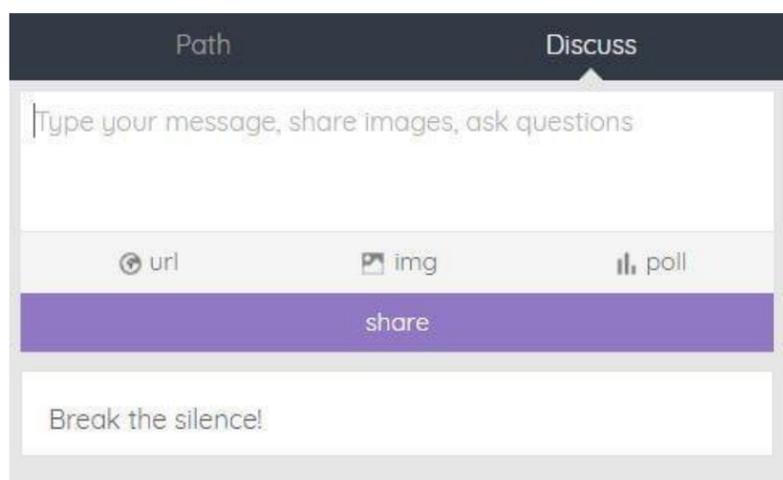
d) Through your discussion posts

Yes, assessment can take place also in your course discussions!

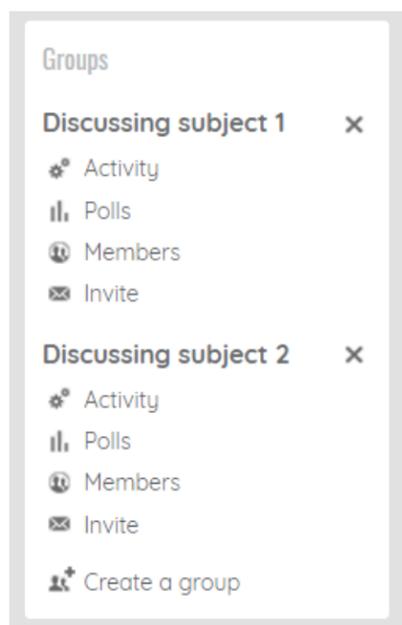
Sounds weird?

Sometimes you may not be satisfied with low-level tests and quizzes because they are too weak and do not assess critical thinking. Hence, they may not adequately represent what the student has learned.

Instructors now are searching for new ways to assess learner performance online, and much academic research has focused on learner assessment through discussions because it’s a place where instructors can provide valuable feedback.



You can initiate valuable learner conversations by posting several questions according to a plan on the discussion board or create forums/groups in your school’s community and let people discuss different topics.



Consider how many posts per week will you use and monitor and adapt your questions to the learners’ responses so that they don’t get repetitive and boring.

How can I evaluate learning outcomes through discussions?

A standard means of assessing conversations are rubrics. Rubrics are predefined criteria, which help to define the characteristics of a high – quality discussion. Rubrics also provide a range of categories that span the range of possible outcomes, from basic to exceptional performance on a task. Let people know about your evaluation system. Write a report of your evaluation and share it with them in a private message. They will appreciate this personalized approach!

A rubric can look like that:

- The learner can include and apply relevant course concepts, theories, or materials correctly.
- The learner can respond to fellow learners, relating the discussion to relevant course concepts and providing substantive feedback.
- The learner can apply relevant professional, personal, or other real-world experiences.
- The learner can support position with appropriate resources.

You can also use alternative assessment techniques by promoting learner contributions to the discussion board. Assist learners to create their understanding and provide the assessment that encourages them to do something to prove knowledge acquisition rather than taking a test or quiz. Prompting learners to do something also highly contributes to the retention of knowledge gained. Here are some examples of alternative assessment activities:

“Show and tell.”

Ask learners to document the steps they take a specific project or problem-solving you have taught through your course, and they have learned. Ask them to share this document with the rest of your learners. This way you not only assess learning but also enhance the sense of community in your class.

“Autobiographical sketches”

Encourage learners to write a two-page autobiographical note relating and discussing an experience in which they learned something significant related to your topic. Advise them to focus not only on what they learned but also why they learned from that particular experience and share it in the discussion.

Other products that occur through activities that assess learning and can be shared are:

- Diagrams
- Charts
- Photographs/Illustrations
- Articles
- Stories
- Songs
- Recipes

“Response to video”

Learners watch a video and respond with a written analysis to specific questions. Then, they share their thoughts with the rest of the learners.

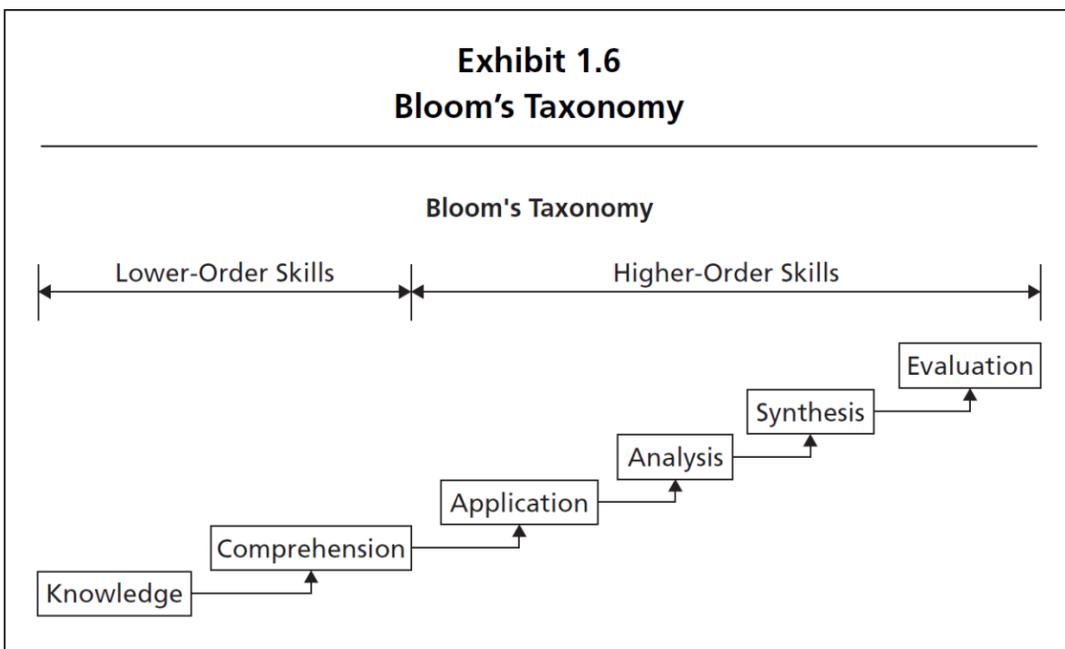
“Collaborative projects”

You can ask groups of two people to collaborate, promote their creativity and produce one of the above products together. Collaborative assessment strengthens the foundation of an online learning community. By learning together have the opportunity to deepen their learning experience, test out and share new ideas with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback. Although group projects, and particularly the assessment of those projects, can be more challenging in the online environment, establishing guidelines for collaboration and collaborative assessment can help with this task.

We can see how modern teaching opposes the one-dimensional perception of assessment as the result of tests and obtain a more holistic view that perceives assessment as an ongoing process which forms the course circle.

How should I form my questions?

Outcomes and learning activities are generally created with an eye toward moving students from basic levels of understanding of concepts to the ability to apply those concepts in a professional or academic setting, in other words, from what are considered to be lower – order skills to higher – order skills. To accomplish this, many educators have turned to Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956) for assistance.



Bloom’s Taxonomy lays out levels of outcomes regarding increasing complexity, which build on one another, and to which activities and assessments can be mapped.

To write course outcomes and assessment activities that match Bloom’s levels, an instructor would determine the cognitive level of the desired outcome and then choose action verbs that measure the outcome at that level. It cannot be overstressed that verb choice is critical to the measurement of outcomes.

Assessment questions could include the specific verbs suggested for each learning level. Alternatively, use the sample questions shown in this table:

Knowledge or Remembering	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
Who, what, when, where, how? How do we define...?	What are the main ideas? Give examples of...	How is...an example of...? How is... related to ...? Why is...significant?	What are the parts or features of...? Classify according to... How does...compare or contrast with...? What evidence is there for...?	What would you infer or predict from...? What ideas can you add to...? How would you create or design...? What might happen if you...?	Do you agree that...? What do you think about...? Prioritize and give a rationale for... Decision making — what is your rationale...? Criteria for assessing...

Give self-assessment opportunities

Reflection and self-assessment are essential components if you want your environment to become even more learner-focused. What you should do is urge learners to assess themselves! Self-assessment is an exceptional technique that will increase the learners' satisfaction. Be sure to:

– Incorporate your expectations for self-assessment at the beginning of your course (where you communicate your objectives for example).

– Provide learners a reflective diary (in PDF form), where they can record their reflections about their own experiences, opinions, attitudes, and feelings and encourage them to register all these at the end of each section. To guide this self-assessment provide personal reflection questions that are suitable for each learning section:

- In which degree have I realized...?
- At what moment did I feel most engaged?
- Which information did I find most affirming and helpful?
- Which information did I find most puzzling or confusing and do I need to study again?

Assessment Considerations and Tips

As part of your planning, you will need to make some choices about the types of assessment you'll use. Any activity with feedback is a potential assessment, either "formative" or "summative". What matters most is that the assessment:

- Is relevant to the objectives and goals of the course.
- Is appropriate for the level and scope of the course content.
- Is clearly outlined to students via logically organized instructions.

Next, make sure that you vary your mix of assessments so that you:

- Test competency, not memory: Assessment shouldn't be about what people know; it's about what they can do.
- Make sure that your assessments help your students develop a sense of confidence, which will, in turn, encourage them to stay engaged and complete the course.
- Let learners do it whenever they want to. If learners may have prior learning in the topic, let them prove it and 'test out' if they're competent.
- If you have an "end of course" final assessment, make sure that it covers all of the learning outcomes included in the course.

Conclusions

In this article, we showcased an online learning assessment. Why is it so crucial that you include assessments in your course? Because showing progress to your students as they move through the course is a surefire way to boost motivation. Demonstrate and celebrate milestones they achieve that take them closer to their goal with appropriate feedback.

Don't forget to include exams, authentic assessments, collaborative projects, self – assessments, and weekly assignments that include discussion assignments. Also, use rubrics that establish performance expectations and provide a sound basis for self – assessment.

Most of all, avoid the trap of looking solely at metrics completion rates. These are not always a good indicator of whether your student found value in your course. Instead ask your students. Did they meet their goals? If the answer is yes, this means that you have made a difference in their lives and that you are successful as a course creator.