

TechMatters: Let's "Go Formative": Exploring a Digital Platform to Enhance Teaching and Learning

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As instruction librarians, one of the challenges that we face is the “one-shot” instruction session. The issues with this type of teaching are numerous and run the gamut from lack of student engagement, to dealing with poorly conceived library assignments designed by faculty, to a lack of time to cover “everything students need to know about the library.” Perhaps most frustrating of all, however, is the fact that we may never encounter these students again and be able to properly determine whether our instruction was effective. Although we often attempt to evaluate their learning at the end of a session via quick quizzes and/or surveys, these methods do not afford us the opportunity to readily correct misunderstandings or improve the quality of instruction for those particular students. One way to address this problem is by conducting formative assessments.

What is Formative Assessment?

Simply put, formative assessment takes place during the student learning process. The goal is to allow instructors to gain feedback that they can use to identify gaps in student understanding and adjust their teaching in the moment. It also allows students to identify areas of strength and weakness in their own understanding so that they can target their own efforts towards improvement. Such assessments are typically low stakes, and often ungraded. They are generally smaller, more focused, and more frequently administered than summative assessments (e.g., tests or exams given at the end of a unit or course).

What is Formative?

<https://goformative.com/>

Formative (aka “Go Formative”), is a free online platform that allows instructors to create bite-sized assignments, collect student responses, and provide feedback to students in real time—in other words, to construct and conduct formative assessments. It works on a wide-variety of devices including desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Assessments can include an assortment of question and content types requiring students to read, write, watch and respond to video, and even draw their answers. In addition, Formative allows instructors to upload previously created assignments and augment them to allow online responses.

Getting Started

Formative accounts are free for both instructors and

students. With a free account, teachers can create unlimited assessments using all standard question types (see list of types in the next section), view live student responses, and provide feedback to students. Additional features, such as the ability to create assessments using “advanced” question types (e.g., audio response, categorization, resequencing, and graphing), provide group scoring and feedback, and batch upload documents, are available with a paid (\$12/month) “Premium Teacher” account (see: <https://goformative.com/pricing> for a full list of features).

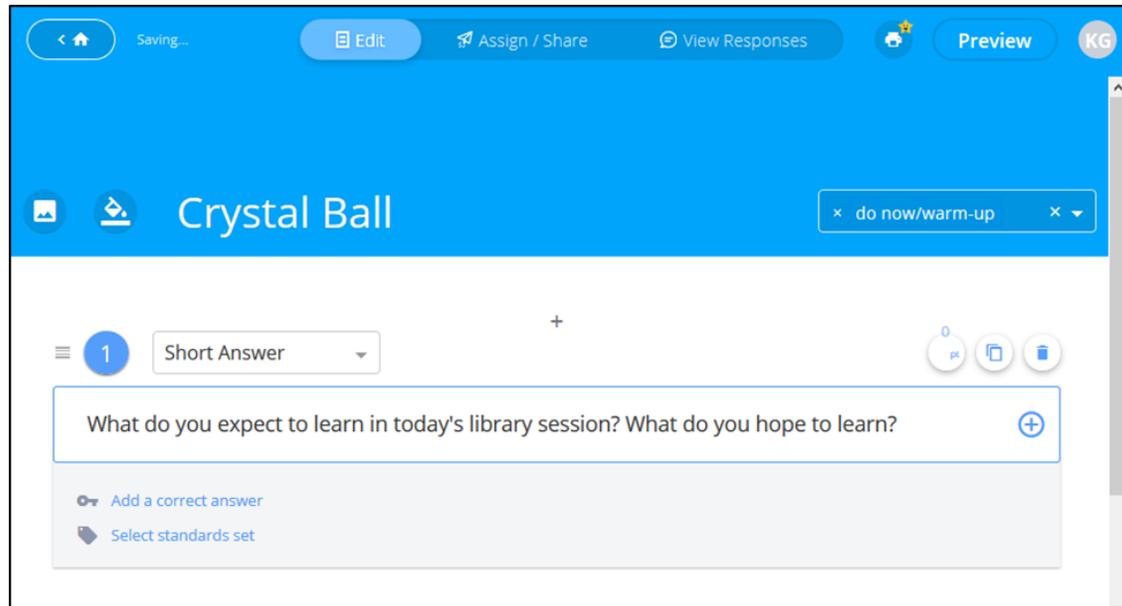
To create a free teacher account, first click on the “Sign up” link in the upper right-hand corner of the site and select “I’m a Teacher!” Create a new account by providing an email and password, or alternately you can sign in using a Google or Clever account. You will be prompted to provide the name of your school, the name you use with your students, the “grades” you teach (Higher Ed and Adult Ed are both options), and the subjects you teach (library instruction would seem to fall under “Other”). Once you review and accept the privacy policy, you will be taken to your account’s dashboard page where you can begin to build assessments.

Creating a “Formative” Assessment

As soon as you create your account, the template for your first “formative” is automatically generated and, once you click on the “Create/Upload” button, will appear on the left-hand menu in your dashboard with the name “Untitled Formative”. Simply click on the title to go to the Formative editor.

Once in the editor, first change the title of the assessment and then select an “Assignment type...” from the drop-down menu of options including choices such as classwork, homework, pre-assessment, reflection, quiz, worksheet, and more.

Next, click on the blue “+” icon to begin adding questions to your assessment. This will bring up a list of question types including true or false, multiple choice, multiple selection, short answer, essay, and show your work (aka draw your answer – this can be done via a mouse on desktop/laptop or using a finger on a tablet or smartphone). Options that are available only to premium users (e.g., audio response) do appear on the list but are greyed-out unless you sign up for a free trial or pay for access. After selecting a question type, you can then add your specific question. If your assessment will be graded

Figure 1: Use the Formative editor to create an assessment

(or if you just want students to be able to judge the quality of their response based on an assigned point value), you can also provide a correct answer and indicate the number of points a student will receive for such a response.

In addition to questions, you can also add a variety of content types to your assessment. These include images, videos (e.g., YouTube), a white board, a text box, and even the option to embed content from another site or application. To see how your “formative” will appear to students, click on the “Preview” button.

If you are not starting from scratch and you already have your assignment or classwork in PDF or DOC form, another option is to upload an existing assignment from your files, and then modify it into a digital assessment by adding answerable questions just as you would if creating the “formative” from scratch.

Conducting the Assessment

In order to administer your formative assessment, you need to “assign” it to your students. Do so by clicking on “Assign/Share” in the menu and then choosing “Assign to Students”. For a one-shot instruction session, you would likely want to treat the participants as “Guest Students” since you won’t likely have a class list. Before clicking the “Assign” button, you have the option to edit settings that control whether and when students will receive scores, whether they will see “correct” answers, and whether they can edit their response after submission. Once you do click the “Assign” button, you will receive a URL (e.g., <https://goformative.com/join>) and a “join code” (e.g., MLZJUJ) to share with students. Using this

information, students can use their preferred device to access and then respond to the “formative.”

On the other hand, if you are using Formative in a more traditional course where you will be conducting assessment over multiple class sessions, you might opt to “Create a Class” with which you can share content. You can create a class on the fly from the “Assign/Share” screen, or you can do so from the “Classes” menu on the main dashboard. After creating a class, you need to add students, which you can either do yourself by manually entering student information or have students do individually via a sign up URL and system-generated “class code.”

Viewing Student Responses

To view student responses, either during or following the assessment, select “View Responses” from the menu toggle bar (see Figure 2). From this screen, you will be able to view the answers provided by all your students at the same time. While the default view displays student names, you can choose the “hide names” option to suppress them. This is a useful option if you want to share the responses with the class while allowing feedback to remain anonymous.

From this screen, you can also provide direct, real-time feedback to individual students. To do so, simply click on an individual student response. This will open up a feedback panel on the right-hand side of the screen where you can type a message directly to the student; it will show up instantly right below her response on her own screen. Similarly, if you are conducting a scored assessment, this panel is where you can give students par-

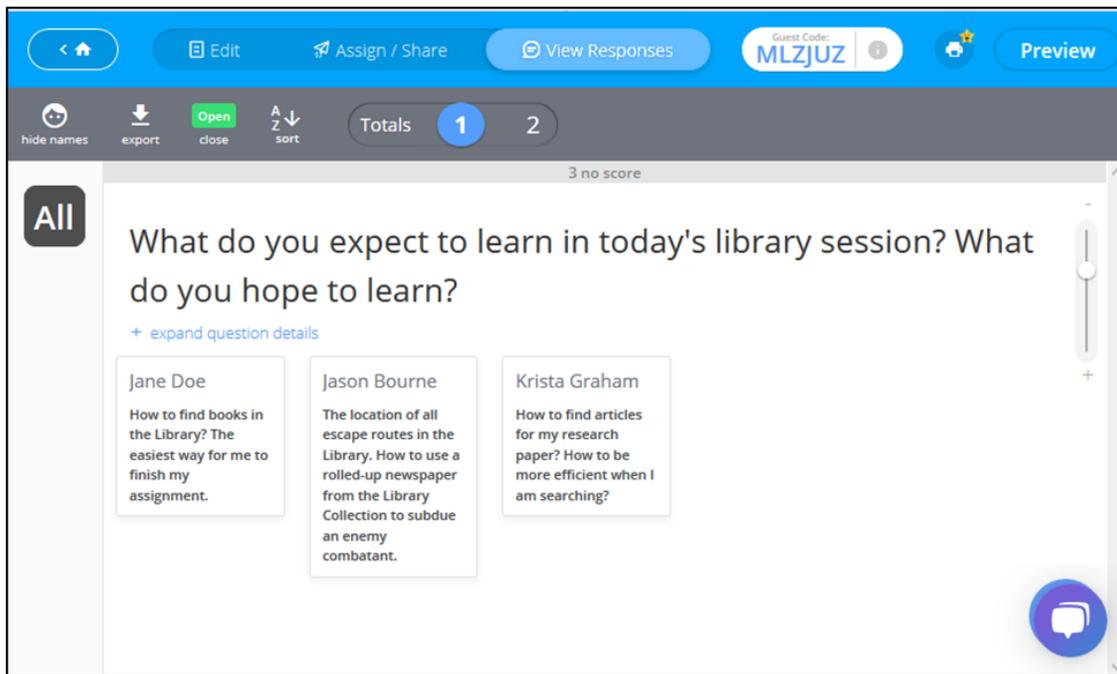
tial credit for a wrong answer, if you so choose, by clicking on their answer and using the slider next to the points score. When your grading is complete, you can use the “export” option to download student responses and scores into a spreadsheet application such as Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets.

Conclusion

Formative assessment can be a very effective tool in addressing some of the challenges inherent in library instruction. When thoughtfully deployed these techniques can allow librarians to quickly gather and use data to

make meaningful improvements to student learning. Because of their nature, instructors can easily incorporate formative assessments into active learning activities and then use the results to guide their teaching approach throughout the remainder of a session. Although certainly not required to conduct this type of assessment, digital tools such as “Formative” can simplify the process of designing and administering assessments, viewing and using the gathered data, and engaging students in learning. Try it, and I think you will find it a useful tool for incorporating regular assessment activities into your library instruction.

Figure 2:
Viewing student responses to Question 1 for a two-question assessment.



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What books or articles have influenced you?

L. Dee Fink’s *Creating Significant Learning Experiences, 2nd Edition*.

- My very first week as a librarian, I was sent to meet with a colleague, the amazing Donna Ziegenfuss at the University of Utah, to learn about Fink and backward design. It’s been instrumental to my instruction and outreach work ever since.

Safiya Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression*.

- I first encountered Safiya Noble’s powerful and important work at ACRL back in 2015, and I so wish I had encountered her earlier. I refer to her work pretty much every time I teach.

Carol Kuhlthau’s work on the Information Search Process

- I still remember having a bit of a breakthrough moment when reading Kuhlthau for the first time. Kuhlthau’s exploration of the affective aspects of information searching really resonated with me, and it’s what draws me to information literacy instruction and outreach.