



CHAPTER 5

Getting Started with Digital Content Design

DESIGNING STRONG DIGITAL CONTENT is one of the most important parts of creating an effective bichronous online classroom. In this chapter, you'll look closely at the choices that shape asynchronous learning. This includes what content you build yourself, what you might purchase, and how to combine the two in ways that work for students. You'll explore how design decisions around navigation, color, font, and consistency can improve comprehension and the student experience. You'll also dig into the instructional side of digital design, which includes structuring feedback and formative assessment so students can monitor their own progress and teachers can use the data to improve synchronous instruction time.

These ideas connect to the following ISTE Standards for Educators, pushing teachers to design intentional digital learning experiences and use data to guide student progress; and Education Leaders, as leaders work to build educator capacity and ensure that technology solutions meet student learning needs through quality assurance of digital content.

- **Educators/Designer:** 2.5.a Accommodate Learner Differences
- **Educators/Analyst:** 2.7.c Use Data to Guide Progress
- **Education Leaders/Empowering Leader:** 3.3.b Build Educator Competency, 3.3.d Use Tech to Meet Student Learning Needs

Digital Content for Asynchronous Learning

Now that we’ve established many of the synchronous elements of your virtual instruction, let’s turn to asynchronous learning. This likely forms the backbone of your bichronous program, so it is incredibly important to ensure that your student-paced online content is high-quality. If not designed well, it can be detrimental to your students’ entire online experience. When it is designed well, asynchronous online learning can really level up your entire online classroom or program.

An obvious key component of any bichronous online classroom is the digital content delivered to students. But what online courseware should you use? Teachers may choose to design their own digital lessons within a learning management system. A school or district might have a subscription to adaptive learning software or full online courseware that a teacher chooses to use. And maybe a combination of the two makes the most sense for some classrooms. Whichever approach you choose, you can apply it more effectively if you understand why you might use adaptive software, rely on digital solutions that come with district textbook adoptions, purchase full online course platforms, or create your own digital lessons.

There are several pros and cons to each approach (see Table 5.1 for a summary). What works for one school may not work for another, and that is okay. Much like what we have discussed around creating your perfect blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning, there is no universal “right” decision. There are only correct choices for your students and school needs.

Table 5.1 Digital Content Options

CONTENT TYPE	PROS	CONS
Teacher-Created Digital Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy-in and ownership of digital content • Easier to teach and understand content you designed • Honors your unique instructional style • Flexibility • Cost savings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-consuming • Limited by your technical ability or the tools available to design
Purchased Digital Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dynamic, professional content • Technical responsibility falls on company • Adaptive capabilities more often available • Little prep time needed for you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of flexibility in many options • Not as tightly aligned to your state, district, or classroom needs • Cost

CONTENT TYPE	PROS	CONS
Hybrid Approach to Digital Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can leverage adaptive content while maintaining flexibility • See the benefits of both types of digital content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost • Purchased content may not integrate directly into the platform that holds teacher-created content • Depends on the flexibility of the paid platform and what editing or revising is available

Designing Your Own Content

As mentioned in Table 5.1, there are many advantages as well as some drawbacks to creating your own digital content.

Here are a few advantages:

- **Buy-in and ownership.** When you design your own content, whether you are creating interactive slides in Canva or Google Slides, building a self-paced interactive experience in Nearpod, or building a module directly in your learning management system (LMS), you naturally have a stronger understanding of the content and can teach and facilitate those digital lessons with greater efficiency. This may not be the case if you are using online materials from a canned online curriculum, especially for the first time.
- **Flexibility of online instruction.** Just as teachers teaching the same course may not teach in the exact same manner, giving yourself the ability to design the online experience yourself honors differences in instructional styles and allows you to take full ownership of the digital learning experience, which can be very beneficial for students. Some teachers lean into visual storytelling using tools such as Adobe Express or Genially, while others build clean, structured modules right inside Google Classroom or Canvas. The kind of maximum flexibility you are afforded when designing digital lessons from scratch is generally unavailable with purchased online lessons.
- **Cost savings.** Often online learning solutions that can be purchased by a classroom teacher, school, or district can be expensive. Designing your own content ensures that the benefits of online learning are not just for those with a budget to purchase software. There are free and low-cost tools or tools available within platforms that your district has already purchased that make it possible to build professional-quality lessons without a big budget.

Disadvantages to building digital content from scratch:

- **Time-consuming design process.** There is a lot to understand about designing digital content for the way students learn online, and the process is complex, even with AI-assisted features found in so many digital tools. As you gain more experience designing and curating digital content, the process will likely speed up. That said, I do not want to downplay the amount of time and effort that teachers spend designing high-quality digital lessons.
- **Limitations in the design work that can be done.** There are sure to be some constraints when writing digital lessons in-house using your district's learning management system or productivity suite of tools. You are likely not an elearning designer by trade and there's a good chance you don't have access to advanced elearning authoring platforms like Articulate or Adobe Captivate. Although many tools exist to help in designing dynamic content, your content will likely appear more professional and have more features when purchased from a for-profit course or software provider because of the availability of trained staff to do the development work.

Using Purchased Digital Content

Similarly, there are many advantages as well as some drawbacks to using purchased digital content.

Here are some key advantages:

- **Dynamic content.** If you want to use the most dynamic content, purchased online courseware could be the best option for you. Companies like Stride, Edmentum, and StrongMind have developers on staff who can create professional, dynamic content. Online instructional content that is purchased is more likely to have all the enhancements and extras that are not quite as feasible in teacher-created and curated content.
- **Ease of maintenance.** The responsibility of keeping up with dead links and providing technical support is in the hands of the company and not solely the teacher (although the ability to troubleshoot and be flexible will be important regardless).
- **Potential for personalization for each student.** One way this can be achieved is through the use of adaptive content. For example, tools like IXL, i-Ready, DreamBox, or Exact Path modify the level and sequence of content based on how students perform. Purchased

content created by skilled developers will generally have a greater capacity for this type of sophisticated content. It is far more difficult (but not impossible) for an educator creating do-it-yourself online lessons to build this level of individualization into their digital learning experiences.

Drawbacks of purchased content:

- **Less flexibility for teachers.** The ability to add, remove, and edit content and assessments is important when you want to meet the individual needs of each student. If you do not have the ability to modify instruction for students, differentiation and personalization become even more difficult.
- **Standardization across U.S. states.** Generally speaking, online content that is created to be sold widely is not always as tightly aligned to individual state standards as what could be created in-house. Taking that a step further, it is even harder to ensure that content that is often inflexible in nature can be adjusted to align closely with a district's or school's established curriculum maps.

LEADERSHIP LENS

Considerations for Choosing an Online Learning Platform

The levels of customization available vary from product to product, so if purchased content is the route you or your school decide to take, investigating the options will be important. The more flexible and data-rich the platform is, the easier it will be to personalize learning within your school's model.

When you're researching online learning platforms, keep these questions in mind:

- **Can you customize it?** Look for platforms that let you edit and revise lessons, add resources, or turn off content that doesn't work for your students.
- **What data is available?** Make sure the platform offers useful analytics that teachers can actually use to adjust instruction.
- **Is it accessible?** Closed captions, translation options, and other accessibility features aren't just nice to have. They are essential. Read more about this in Chapter 9.
- **Will it integrate?** Check if it syncs with your student information system (SIS) or learning management system (LMS). It's good to know ahead of time if manual data entry will be necessary.
- **What kind of support is included?** Find out if initial onboarding is available along with ongoing training and responsive support.

Combining Purchased Curriculum and Original Content

Of course, in some instances, a combination of teacher-created and purchased content might be the best decision for your online classroom. As a matter of fact, if you have purchased, adaptive software available to you already, I highly recommend that you take a hybrid approach to designing digital content. You can leverage the adaptive nature of professional content while working it into a teacher-designed digital lesson that is artfully created by the person who knows the students the most.

In general, I recommend thinking about purchased digital software as content within your designed lesson or making purchased online curriculum your own through synchronous lessons or asynchronous additions. When you use purchased online software without thinking about it as an all-in-one solution, you can take advantage of the benefits of both types of digital lessons while bypassing the cons of working solely with a paid platform.

Ensuring Quality across Online Learning Curriculum

Teaching and learning in an online environment do not necessarily always mirror the best practices of face-to-face teaching. While some aspects of good teaching ring true regardless of the environment, there are aspects of virtual education that create unique opportunities and challenges that must be addressed in different ways. For this reason, once a decision to either purchase online content or design courses in-house has been made, a process should be put in place to evaluate the quality of online content. If purchasing online courses, a critical eye looking for good course design will assist the leadership team in making the best decisions about vendors. When creating online courses in-house, these design principles should be a part of the professional learning plan and built into the course design process. There are nationally accepted standards for online learning that can guide this quality assurance work.

Three leading organizations in online education—the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA), Quality Matters (QM), and the Community Advancing Digital Learning (DLAC)—provide oversight for the National Standards for Quality Online Courses, Online Teaching, and Online Programs. These standards represent the benchmarks and guidance for K-12 schools

and districts looking to create and improve online opportunities for students. Get your copy of these standards at nsqol.org.

The National Standards for Quality Online Courses cover the aspects of a well-designed online class. However, designing the course is only half the work. There are also national standards available for high-quality online teaching and designing a whole online program. The standards for online courses are especially helpful when creating an online course design evaluation process. If purchasing course content or hiring out another online program for a district's online options, understanding both the design standards and the standards for teaching and learning is important. You can choose to use the standards for online courses to design your own rubrics for quality assurance or use an outside certifying organization such as Quality Matters that can help with this process.

LEADERSHIP LENS

Quality Matters Course Evaluation Process and Certification

Quality Matters (qualitymatters.org) is another organization recognized in the online learning community for creating standards and processes for quality assurance of digital content. They are internationally recognized and serve as the gold standard in online course certification. Quality Matters began as a higher education organization but has since gained popularity within K-12 schools and districts.

Teachers and district leaders can work with QM through the design process and work on revisions as part of their evaluation. Once a course has achieved proficiency according to the QM standards, a Quality Matters certification can be applied to that course. This certification is widely recognized as an indicator of quality for online courses. While the evaluation process is a paid service by QM, there are several free quality assurance resources on the site worth checking out.

If the staffing is not available to provide this type of evaluation in-house, paying for the Quality Matters services could be a viable option to ensure quality of courses. Even with the staff in place, this certification can be a helpful tool when marketing course offerings outside of a school district.

Designing the Look and Feel of Your Online Lessons

Let's begin to look at what should be addressed and considered when designing digital lessons, whether or not they are paired with adaptive or purchased content. There are several factors that can influence the success or failure of online learning when we design digital materials.

Getting Feedback on Your Digital Lesson Design

As you continue to design digital content for your students, seek feedback on your designs early and often. Even the most experienced instructional designers should get constructive feedback on the digital content they create. Let's face it: Being unbiased about our own designs can be very difficult. Everything makes sense and seems intuitive when it comes from your own mind. If you are designing on your own, reach out to a peer, a friend, or a student for some honest feedback. It will only improve the quality of your work and, ultimately, the academic achievement of your students.

Presentation Matters

To begin, the presentation of our digital content has an impact on how students comprehend the information presented. You probably have shared a similar sentiment to your own students at some point. They could submit work that demonstrates an incredible level of understanding of the material, but if it is not presented well, that message can get lost. The same is true for your online lessons.

Simply introducing digital content into your classroom via blended learning is not transformative in and of itself. William Horton, author of *E-Learning by Design*, said, "unless you get instructional design right, technology can only increase the speed and certainty of failure" (2011). Technology in general is a great amplifier. It can amplify good instruction, but it can also amplify bad practice. The good news is we can design in a way that will improve a student's likelihood of retaining the information shared in our digital lessons.

Building a Consistent Visual Brand

Consistency is the key to beautiful and functional design. If you have ever given students a collaborative activity using a tool like Google Slides, you probably know exactly what happens when consistency is missing. If five students are working on one Slides presentation, that presentation will likely have a minimum of five different themes, a cavalcade of fonts, and an abundance of color—none of which complement each other.

Those kinds of presentations are hard to focus on and generally not very aesthetically pleasing. I like to call these types of slide decks Frankenslides. The same thing can happen to your online lessons when you design each presentation, page, or piece of content separately from the overall design strategy for all of your digital materials. Don't create a monster like this.

Why is this important? We must think about our digital lessons as the actual classroom for our students. Generally speaking, we understand the impact of consistency in our brick-and-mortar spaces. You might have a home office set up in your own home. If you do, you probably can attest to the impact of working in a similar space dedicated specifically to productivity. When a student walks into a traditional biology classroom each day, they are a part of the same environment. This is why many schools prefer to have students complete standardized testing in the same place where they learn each day, because consistency of learning environment improves students' testing performance (Houdek, 2018).

If that consistency of environment has an impact on achievement, then what is the implication for our online learning activities? When we design each digital lesson or presentation or document in a way that looks, feels, and operates differently from each other, we are in essence creating a brand new digital classroom with each piece of content. Consider the experience your students have when they “walk into” your digital classroom space each day. Does it feel like the same classroom, or are they having to relearn the space every day?

Don't make Frankenlessons online; consider the elements of consistency that can improve the functionality of your digital materials and your digital learning environment as a whole. You can ensure consistent design if you consider three important things when designing your online activities: navigation, color, and font. I like to think about combining these three elements to create my digital content “brand” and to keep that consistency in all of the learning experiences I create online.

AI IN ACTION

Visual and Design Consistency Made Easy

Creating consistent, accessible design takes time. Let's be honest, not all of us feel confident about picking the right font or color scheme. I often feel like one of those people! The good news though is AI tools are getting better at taking some of that guesswork off our plates.

Design platforms like Canva and Adobe Express now include features that suggest layouts, font pairings, and color palettes for you. Canva's Magic Design (canva.com/magic-design) can even generate slide templates or other Canva designs that match your existing digital brand. Adobe Express offers AI-generated template, image, and other design suggestions (adobe.com/express/ai).

AI won't replace your eye for design or the decisions you make about what works best for you and your learners. But it can take some of the pressure off so you can focus on the most important parts of the lesson.

Designing for Simple, Predictable Navigation

Your digital content should be organized in the same way, so students know how to move from one lesson to the next every time they jump online. What this looks like will vary based on the platform in which you house your digital content. As you look to design in that space, consider the following:

- How lessons are organized and shared with students
- Where students go to get to lessons each day
- How students navigate and use buttons
- What naming structures lessons use

Creating simple, clean pages with obvious, simple navigation is imperative. Cluttered pages with buttons and icons hidden or inconsistently placed hinder your students' ability to open a lesson and get started immediately. Clear cues for the learner about where to start and where to click, along with plainly labeled buttons, are helpful. It is also a good idea to start your first few lessons with a video demonstrating the navigation. When you create icons or buttons, using the same icons throughout your lessons and placing them in the same location on each page will build familiarity and help with creating consistent navigation.

If you're in doubt, err on the side of providing more clarity. It is almost impossible for you to make navigation too obvious in your digital content. The intuitiveness of the navigation

is one of the first impressions you give any person who views your digital lessons. A well organized, easy-to-navigate lesson will allow your students to start a lesson with confidence instead of frustration.

Reflecting on your own digital learning environment, what other navigation considerations would you add to this list?

... Orienting Students to Online Learning

Part of helping ensure clear navigation and expectations for students is having a strong onboarding process. Nicole Zumpano, Director of Distance Learning at Triton College, created a three-page document on strong orientation practices for online students. These recommendations are geared toward higher education, but most of the points made are universal to students in Grades K-12, as well.

Find her suggestions at bit.ly/OnlineOrientationIdeas and consider what strategies you can use in your own student orientation process.

Choosing Accessible and Effective Colors

When choosing colors for your digital content, a good guideline is to use no more than three. These three are the colors that will be used primarily throughout your digital materials. Consider this use of color as part of your online classroom brand.

On a related note, the use of colored fonts should be very limited. All instructional text in your online lessons should be black on a white background. You may have students with vision impairments that would benefit from white text on a dark background, but for the majority of your learners, black font will be the easiest to read. Colored fonts are difficult to read on a screen, especially if you are asking students to do any amount of sustained reading. (Chapter 9 takes a deeper look at how color choices impact the accessibility of digital content.)

Selecting Readable Fonts

Continuity in font selection is another aspect of design consistency that helps students navigate content efficiently and easily find the information they need. When planning out your digital content brand, use the same one or two fonts throughout the entire design. Two fonts can help you create hierarchies that are useful for students, but any more than that can be too much. These fonts should be easy to read. Most people choose a sans serif font for web design. Keep the script, ornate, and novelty fonts to an absolute minimum.

Consistency in type size can be helpful in ensuring readability. Sizes in the 12- to 16-point range are most common for elearning content. Anything below that (but especially anything below 10) should not be used online.

Additionally, consistent text alignment is important. You might be tempted to center text on a page, but if it's anything but a heading, centered text for sustained reading is really difficult for our eyes to track and read. Keep all blocks of text left-aligned for maximum readability.

If you want to see models of strong design in action, check out:

- **Google for Education Learning Center (edu.exceedlms.com):** Notice the clean layout, clear navigation buttons in each course, and limited color palette.
- **CommonLit Digital Lessons (commonlit.org):** Navigate to the target lessons and see the consistency of font and color which makes reading longer text passages easy to follow online. CommonLit also has clear buttons that make it easy to navigate.
- **Canva Design School (canva.com/design-school):** Explore these lessons to notice how their use of consistent fonts, color, predictable navigation, and clear visual hierarchy of text mirrors the same choices you will want to make as you build your own digital “classroom brand.”



Tools for Choosing Colors and Fonts for Your Digital Content

If the task of pairing colors and fonts for maximum effectiveness seems daunting, help is just a click away. Several online tools enable you to test out your design ideas and provide pairing suggestions.

- **Adobe Color (color.adobe.com)** can help you select color palettes for your elearning designs. You can use it to find complementary colors, explore existing palettes, or extract color combinations from images you upload. Adobe Color is also available within Adobe Express.
- The maker of the image creation and editing tool Canva, **Canva Color Tools (canva.com/colors)** offers great resources for color selection. The tools include a color palette exploration tool, a color palette generator, interactive color tools, and information about the meanings behind colors to help you select colors that send a specific message.
- Canva also offers an online font tool, **Canva Font Combinations (canva.com/font-combinations)**, that is simple to use. You select a starting font, and the Canva Font Combinations tool presents you with font combinations that complement your selection.

- **Fontjoy** (fontjoy.com) is a simple tool that enables you to generate and explore font pairings to choose the right combination for your digital content.

Designing for Learning: Instructional Decisions that Matter Online

Design is not only about looks, or as Steve Jobs said, design is “not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works” (Walker, 2003). We can make design decisions that help make our instructional content function better (as well as look nicer). To do so, however, we may have to design for online learning differently than we would for a traditional classroom experience. We interact with online materials in different ways than we interact with print materials or more traditional in-person learning.

That said, it is also important to note that some elements of lesson design are just good teaching regardless of environment. We are not going to throw out good practice simply because we are moving online. However, some things certainly need to be given specific attention and creativity to make best use of the online learning environment.

Quick Win: Learning Objectives

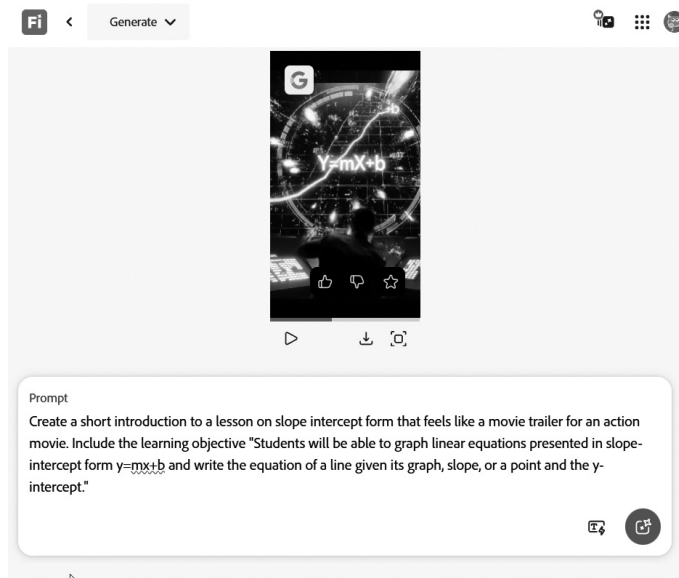
It is a great idea to start each lesson with the learning objectives for students. Recent research continues to show what many K-12 teachers already know from experience. If used correctly, focused attention and understanding of a lesson’s objectives can mean academic gains and more student ownership (Northeastern University, n.d., University of Colorado, 2007). A 2025 study on online learning specifically found that goal clarity helps students monitor their progress and increases their confidence as they move through digital lessons (Li et al., 2025). While this study in particular examined older students, the takeaway applies across grade levels. Clarity helps learners of all ages understand where they are headed and helps them stay invested in the learning.

When most people begin to share learning objectives in elearning content, they format it in a bulleted list. However, simply writing a bulleted list of objectives at the beginning of a lesson will often result in students skipping over it, as it is not part of the core content. How can we draw attention to the lesson’s objectives?

Consider these creative ideas for introducing a lesson:

- Some elementary teachers I've visited use a secret agent theme for all of their content, starting their lessons with some dramatic audio that states, "Your mission should you choose to accept it..." then launches into the learning objectives.
- In a live synchronous class, show the students an image that represents the learning objective. Then launch a one-question poll having students predict the day's learning objective before revealing the focus for the day.
- Health or PE teachers could use a short video or image with speech bubble from a "health and wellness coach."
- James Totton, a virtual school social studies teacher, starts many of his online units with a mandatory phone call or videoconference to discuss the learning objectives and make a plan for the learning. Although his learning objectives are in a bulleted list, the value comes from the conversation with the student where he can draw their attention to it specifically.
- Try creating a twenty- to thirty-second "lesson trailer" for your lesson. This doesn't require any video editing skill either. AI tools like Canva and Adobe Firefly (Figure 5.1) make it easy to create professional looking videos with only a text prompt.

5.1 I used Adobe Firefly to create a short introduction to a lesson on slope-intercept form using only a text prompt.



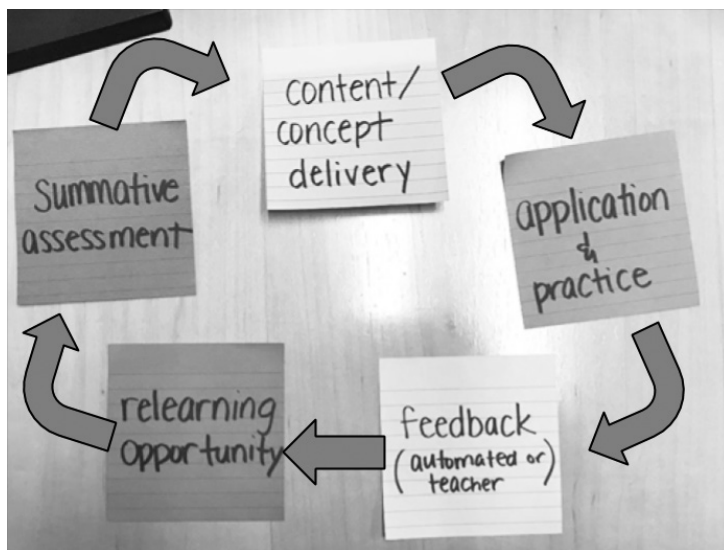
Moving Students through the Gradual Release Model

It is easy to fall into the trap of creating online lessons that are a series of slide shows or videos followed by quizzes or other forms of summative assessment. It is important to design our digital lessons in such a way that the teacher has an opportunity to identify a student's understanding *before* the summative assessment.

When taking a look at your digital lessons, consider how you are designing each lesson to gradually release responsibility to students. Presentations, text, and video are all great modalities to deliver content. However, we should allow students some time to practice or learn the material in a more hands-on way before being given a final grade.

To do this, build in practice, short formative assessment, and multiple opportunities for feedback before giving a summative assessment. As Robert Stake, Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, described it, "When the cook tastes the soup, that's formative. When the guests taste the soup, that's summative." (Scriven, 1991). Formative assessment is the true tool we can use to guide instruction (Figure 5.2).

5.2 As you design your lessons, consider how you are delivering the content and then moving through a cycle of formative assessment and instruction before giving a summative assessment.



Not everything a student does in an online lesson needs to be for a grade. As a matter of fact, each lesson does not even require a formal, graded assessment. However, there should always be opportunities for formative assessment present in every digital lesson. The Michigan Assessment Consortium describes formative assessment as an ongoing process where teachers and students gather and use information during instruction to adjust teaching and learning in real time (Chiaravalli, 2019). In learning, whether online or not, we should always value feedback over a grade. Ultimately, summative assessment should be a small component of your overall assessment strategy within your digital content, much like in a traditional classroom space.

Designing for Feedback, Not Just Grades

As you are looking for ways to provide formative assessment in your digital content, think about how you can create low-stakes checks for understanding with the goal of learning and improving. These formative assessments should be short and frequent with a focus on learning, not punitive grades.

Probably the first type of assessment many of us think about in online lessons are those that are submitted privately to the teacher to be graded or given feedback by the instructor, often in the form of a quiz or similar assignment. These opportunities for interaction directly with the teacher are critical, as Chapter 8 discusses further. However, there are multiple ways that you can incorporate formative assessment in your digital lessons to improve the learning experience for students and the grading and feedback experience for you.

Self-Reflection as a Formative Check

Having students think about their thinking is a great strategy to get an idea of where students are in their understanding of a concept. You can use quick reflection activities to give students a chance to share questions or what they do not quite understand. Reflection activities are short and do not need to take much time, but they can give you a wealth of information. Chapter 6 explores multiple strategies for reflection while examining other benefits of this kind of formative assessment.

Building Peer Interaction

Leveraging the power of peer feedback and assessment can be a helpful formative assessment strategy as well. Getting students to interact with each other can benefit the learning,

as learning is social. It also can lighten the load for the teacher, moving some of the feedback responsibility to the students. Check out Chapter 8 for an in-depth look at building opportunities for interaction in your digital lessons, complete with formative assessment ideas to encourage student cooperation and collaboration.

Using Automated Feedback Wisely

Sometimes it is helpful to find opportunities for students to get feedback immediately, without having to wait for the teacher to provide it. Part of building student agency in our classrooms is helping students use their own data to make decisions for their learning. For that reason, using formative assessment or practice tools that generate feedback automatically for students is beneficial.

One way we can do that is through the use of games and simulations. Interactive learning objects and practice games allow students to practice and get automatic feedback on their progress. Plus, using games for this purpose can alleviate some of the stress for students when it comes to assessment. Games are fun and engaging and honestly do not necessarily feel like assessment, so the focus can be on learning and improving.

... Games and Interactives to Explore

STEM-Focused

- PhET Interactive Simulations (science and math virtual labs)
- Legends of Learning (game-based science and math practice)
- Prodigy Math (gamified math practice)
- CK-12 Simulations and PLIX (free science and math interactives and labs)

ELA Content

- CommonLit's guided reading mode (immediate feedback on text-dependent questions while students read)
- ReadTheory (adaptive reading practice)
- NoRedInk (writing and grammar interactive practice)

Cross-Content Tools

- Gimkit or Blooket (engaging practice games)
- Kahoot! Smart Practice (adaptive practice after a live or asynchronous Kahoot! game)

Rethinking Traditional Assessments in Online Spaces

Additionally, you don't have to completely eliminate multiple choice, true/false, or other more traditional assessments in your digital content in exchange for purely authentic assessment. As a matter of fact, I think automatically graded tests and quizzes online can be a powerful learning tool. Now, let me be clear, a digital lesson that uses automatically graded quizzes as the only form of assessment is probably not a good idea. If students can Google all of the answers to your quizzes, how can you be sure they are learning the material? We also know that multiple-choice quizzes are not a good gauge of mastery for all learning objectives.

However, I think these automatically graded traditional assessments can be great when they are low-to-no stakes and used by the student as a quick check of their mastery. Instead of using traditional assessments at the end of your lessons to determine proficiency, use them as a tool for student agency. Using short, self-grading surveys or ungraded quizzes can allow students to quickly determine how well they know the information, without having to wait for the teacher to get around to giving them that feedback. Based on their performance and looking at their own data, students could self-select the next piece of content to view and reflect on.

AI IN ACTION

Generating Fresh, Low-Stakes Practice

Creating regular, meaningful formative checks for understanding takes time. That's where AI can help lighten the load. With the right prompts, AI tools can assist teachers in generating practice questions, exit tickets, quick writes, or multiple-choice items that align with your learning objectives, without requiring hours of preparation.

Here's an important reminder, though. AI doesn't replace teacher judgment. It gives you a starting point, but you still need to review, revise, and refine what the tool generates to ensure it's clear, accurate, and aligned. Think of it as a draft generator.

In my home state of Indiana, our Department of Education has released item specifications for our primary standardized test for elementary and middle school students. These documents spell out the types of questions our students are likely to see on those tests. I can load those documents in my favorite generative AI tool and train it to create additional practice questions that mirror the complexity in those specification documents. It's a great starting point for designing with the assessment in mind first.

Try this! Use AI to create some practice questions that range in difficulty or depth of knowledge levels for your next lesson. Then, edit them to match your lesson's goals and context. You'll save time and give your students targeted practice that supports their learning.

Reflection and Extension

After reading Chapter 5, take some time to consider how its ideas apply within your context using the questions below.

- What will your digital content strategy be? Will you use teacher-created lessons, purchased software, or a hybrid of both? What are your current restraints and resources that will influence this decision?
- Considering your digital content strategy, how will you address the cons that may be associated with that type of digital material?
- What quality assurance practices will you put in place? What evaluation process will you establish to ensure content aligns with state standards and district curriculum maps? What process will you establish to ensure consistent quality across your digital content, whether built or purchased?
- What timeline and rollout plan makes sense for implementing new digital content in your school or district?
- Thinking about the digital learning platform you have available to you (whether it is a learning management system, Google Classroom, website, or something else), what elements of navigation consistency will be important to consider?
- Create your digital brand style guide. What colors, fonts, and font sizes would you want to use in your digital content?
- Map out a digital lesson you have coming up. Identify the aspects of direct instruction, formative assessment, the opportunities for feedback and remediation, and the summative assessment. What is graded and what is not graded? Are there enough opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery before a final grade?