**Transforming our students from passive listeners to confident assessors through the introduction of a programmatic approach to formative assessment**

**Introduction**

The current trend in education at the moment is to adopt a programmatic approach to assessment generally, however, much of the literature in this area focuses predominantly upon summative assessment. In order to effect real improvement in the learning journey for students, I would argue that we also need to take a programmatic approach to formative assessment and assessment support.

We often received feedback from students asking for more formative activities and help with assessment preparation. Students stating that they didn’t know what to do with the feedback they received and there seemed to be a lot of confusion surrounding the merits of different forms of formative assessment activities such as peer evaluation and self-assessment. At the same time, lecturers were finding it hard to squeeze lots of valuable formative activities into an already full to bursting curriculum.

In response to this feedback, together with a desire to implement a new approach to formative assessment across the entire programme, I have developed and am currently implementing a new formative assessment strategy for our first year students in the Law Department. The intention is that this strategy is rolled out to our second and third year students over the next 2 years.

The key proposal for the project was to take a programmatic, horizontal approach to formative assessment. So, instead of concentrating on what each individual module can offer in terms of assessment support, I would focus upon what our students are being offered in terms of assessment support across the entire year (and the entire programme eventually).

One of the key challenges that I sought to address was the fact that students did not see how learning, skills development and (in particular) feedback received in one module could be applied to their other modules.

Interestingly, once you start to think about formative activities across a particular programme or year rather than in relation to a single module, then you stop thinking about how to prepare students for a particular assessment and start thinking about the learning and study skills that you would like students to develop during the course of the programme. You naturally move from a very narrow focus to creating more wide - ranging and skills centric, formative assessment activities.

**Key aims of the project**

The fundamental objectives of the project are to:

* expose students to a full suite of different learning experiences across the programme;
* facilitate the prioritisation of particular skills in different modules, allowing module co-ordinators to deal with particular skills in depth, rather than trying to cover everything;
* promote an adjustment of (both student and lecturer) focus from simply assessment support or formative assessment to the development of key learning and study skills; and
* empower students to become confident assessors through honest reflection upon, and full engagement with, self-assessment, peer assessment and feedback/feedforward.

The overarching objective I suppose, is influenced by the work of Irons & Elkington, who assert that *‘A key challenge is finding ways of thinking about assessment that have the desired positive, consequential influence on student learning for the long term, not just relative to a single assessment task or module’* (2022, p.198). Consequently, the real aim of the project is to try to ensure that assessment has a long term effect on student learning and skills development that goes beyond a particular assessment, module or even programme and remains with the student throughout their undergraduate studies and into life beyond university.

**Factors influencing our choice of formative assessment activity**

In designing our chosen formative activities for our first year undergraduates, I was guided by Irons & Elkington’s ‘*three categories of practice for successful formative assessment:*

* *clarifying and sharing an understanding of assessment criteria;*
* *creating opportunities for assessment practice, rehearsal and review; and*
* *providing assessment feedback that moves learning forward.’* (2022, p.53)

In addition, it was essential that I used a variety of formative assessment activities as recommended by (Race, 2014) so that all learners had an opportunity to play to their strengths, to enhance their existing skills and to develop new abilities and competencies.

The project also considered (Sambell’s, 2013) six conditions that encourage assessment for learning, in particular focussing upon on condition six; developing students as self-assessors and effective life-long learners.

Finally, as recommended by (Irons & Elkington, 2022) and (Sambell, 2013), I spent a great deal of time considering the sequencing of these formative activities and ensuring that students were taken on a learning journey comprised of progressively challenging tasks.

So, the kind of learning journey that I created started with a marking activity to improve students’ assessment literacy, I then incorporated some short form (low risk) self-reflection and peer review exercises into the curriculum to give students plenty of practice and finally more complex activities are integrated, that require students to put all that they have learned so far into practice by reflecting on their work, engaging with the feedback they have received over the programme and developing personal action plans with the underlying aim of transforming our students from passive listeners to confident assessors.

**Clear & effective messaging**

Clear and effective messaging is obviously critical to the success of this kind of project. This messaging needed to take place throughout the academic year and through various different mediums.

Firstly, I created a clear assessment support guide. Whilst this guide summarised and explained the benefits of different forms of formative activity, it also provided students with an overview of the various formative activities that they would undertake through the year together with an explanation of the key skills that they would develop, so that they could easily track their progress throughout the year and have a clear overview of their learning journey.

I also delivered an assessment support workshop in the first few weeks of term. This was an opportunity to discuss the project as a whole and to explain our programmatic approach generally and its expected benefits to students. I also used this time to work with students, really interrogating what students think feedback is, identifying the many different forms of feedback, considering who can give feedback, developing an understanding of the value of non–tutor feedback and understanding what to do with feedback once it is received. There was also a real focus on exploring the advantages of peer evaluation, self-assessment and reflection and linking this to the development of lifelong learning skills.

One of the most important aspects of each formative activity is that students acquire skills and knowledge that they can apply to all of their modules not just the one that is running the formative assessment activity. The key idea here is one of transferability. So, if students have for example, a formative assessment activity in their public law module on developing their critical reasoning skills then we will:

* emphasise to students the transferability of skills learned in this activity to other modules and their future careers; and
* ensure students understand that the feedback they receive in one particular formative assessment activity can be used to help them improve their performance in other modules.

Finally, students will be asked to bring in the feedback that they receive during the academic year to their one-to-one meetings with their academic advisers. During those meeting academic advisers will work with students to help them recognise how feedback in one module can be applied to other modules that they study and guide students in the creation of personal action plans whereby they reflect on the feedback and feedforward that they have received and set objectives for the future. Students will also be encouraged to self-reflect on their experiences and keep a log of the new skills that they are developing and to identify gaps in their knowledge and skills were further development is required.

**The marking activity**

I thought I would look at two of the formative assessment activities (one that has already taken place and one that we are intending to run later this academic year) in a little more depth. The first one is a marking activity that took place half-way through Semester 1.

It was a large workshop for about 150 students. In the first part of the workshop students were asked to answer a short problem style question on their own. As we were only at the early stages of the course at this point, it was be a short form question that we gave students 25 minutes to answer. In the second part of the workshop we did do two things; firstly, discuss as a group the key legal issues that they should have covered in their answers and secondly, examine the marking criteria for first year law students (students were provided with the marking criteria in advance of the workshop to review).

In the third part of the workshop students were divided into small groups and provided with six student scripts to grade using the marking criteria that was discussed earlier in the workshop. I used the interactive presentation software Mentimeter to introduce real time voting and polling into the workshop. Students agreed on their grade in their groups and voted using Mentimenter. I then asked particular groups to provide reasons for the grade that they awarded and to identify particular strengths and weaknesses in the scripts. The groups often differed in their views and lots of interesting discussion and debate took place (particularly in relation to the marking criteria) before the actual grades and feedback for each of the six student scripts were revealed.

Finally, as a post-workshop activity, students were asked to reflect on what they learned in the workshop and to identify three particular areas of strength and three mistakes or areas of weakness in their own answer and explain how they intend to build on their strengths and correct their mistakes and improve going forward.

The student feedback from the session was extremely positive, students commented that they were now more familiar with the marking criteria, had a good idea of what a successful answer looks like and were aware of the key pitfalls to avoid and felt more confident generally about answering problem style questions.

**The rapid feedback and peer evaluation exercise**

The second activity is a rapid feedback and peer evaluation exercise that will take place mid-way through Semester 2:

This will consist of a two hour workshop for students. In the first part of the workshop students will answer another problem style question on their own. This will be a longer exercise than the previous activity replicating more of an exam style question, taking fifty minutes to complete. Students will be given a guideline answer to review on their own for fifteen minutes and then the guideline answer together with the relevant marking criteria will be discussed in plenary.

In the second part of the workshop students will work in pairs, swapping their written answers and providing one another with feedback. As a post - workshop activity, students will be asked to reflect on their work and the feedback they both provided and received in the workshop and to set out a plan of action going forward which will be discussed in their next tutorial.

**Is it really as simple as that?**

Obviously, we know how challenging students can find activities such as peer evaluation and so this activity will be fully scaffolded throughout the year. This will be done by firstly completing the marking activity that we have just discussed, so that students are familiar with the marking criteria and feel confident in taking on a more challenging activity having completed a similar but shorter writing task earlier in the year. Secondly, by employing shorter peer evaluation exercises earlier in the academic year that include an opportunity for students to have a go at designing their own peer evaluation assessment criteria.

It is also essential that students are reminded of the benefits of peer evaluation throughout the year and immediately before completing these kinds of activities. Otherwise students can jump to the conclusion, reflected in the observations by Cassidy (2006) in his study; that they lack the expertise to review another student’s work. It is only through practice and discussion that students will eventually come to appreciate that peer evaluation is not just about getting feedback on their work but that the real benefit comes from reviewing and assessing another’s work. This is recognised by Bloxham & Boyd who emphasise the importance of explaining to students the rationale behind self and peer assessment by helping students to understand *‘the academic standards of the module, developing the skills of judgement and giving feedback, learning from each other, and preparation for lifelong learning as they learn to monitor their own progress rather than rely on a tutor to do it.’* (2007, p.62)

Finally, it is imperative clear questions or short questionnaires are created to assist with the provision of feedback to help students to really focus on what they are looking for. These can be as simple as asking students to write down:

* three things that your peer did well;
* three things that your peer needs to do to improve; and
* three things that you will take forward from this activity into your own learning

By the end of this activity students should not only be clear on what is expected of them in written assessments but more importantly they should be able to recognise the strengths and weaknesses in their own work which will enable them to continuously improve going forward. Also, having marked a peers’ work students should start to develop fundamental study skills such as evaluation, judgement and critical analysis and be able to incorporate what they have learned, from providing a peer with feedback, into their own work.

**Some final thoughts and key takeaways**

When thinking about formative assessment consider adopting a programmatic approach as this will allow you to adjust your focus from simply assessment support to the development of key learning and study skills. As a result of this approach students should start to see links between their modules and the emergence of these transferable lifelong learning skills.

Try to facilitate the prioritisation of particular skills in different modules, allowing module co-ordinators to deal with particular skills in depth, rather than trying to cover everything. This will ensure repetition of activities and skills is avoided and will enable you to expose students to a full suite of different learning experiences.

Finally, think carefully about the sequencing of activities, try to take students on a learning journey comprised of progressively challenging tasks, developing key employability skills such as critical analysis, evaluation, and judgement along the way and ultimately transforming them into confident assessors who are able to learn independently and achieve continuous improvement.

**References**

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