FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

EMPOWERING LEARNING THROUGH FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

Formative assessments are designed to provide students with feedback on their *current* performance, identifying both their strengths and areas in need of improvement. Unlike summative assessments, formative assessment tasks do not factor into a student's final grade, emphasising their use *for* learning rather than a judgement *of* learning. Formative feedback does, however, empower your students, guiding them toward enhanced achievement at the summative stage.

By building meaningful and timely formative activities into your teaching, students can remain engaged, and the burden of summative preparation can be lightened. In this guide we will focus on methods for helping you deliver effective feedback on your students' formative work, steering them toward summative success, all while streamlining your marking workload.

AN ASSESSMENT *FOR* LEARNING APPROACH

Formative assessment is a central component of the broader philosophy of *Assessment for Learning* (AfL), which underlines assessment as a tool to enhance learning rather than merely evaluating student performance.

Since the late 1990's AfL has become a central tenet of modern pedagogy. AfL is sometimes referred to as continuous assessment because it involves the continuous evaluation of student progress throughout the learning process. Real-time information regarding student progress / performance is used to:

- Provide timely, specific feedback to guide students in improving their learning strategies, effectively motivating and preparing them for summative assessment.
- Make instructional adjustments to enhance learning outcomes e.g., teachers can adapt their teaching methods, content and pacing.

Formative assessments are effective if they:

1. Clarify the expectations of summative assessments, especially for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). For SEN students, having clear and understandable instructions for assessments is vital. Additionally, practicing through 'safe,' low-stakes assessments is essential in aiding SEN students to reach their potential.

2. Clearly identify the areas of strengths and weaknesses to focus on.

3. Motivate students to engage with them because they are clearly linked to the summative assessment.

4. Minimise the need for staff to address common mistakes in summative submissions.

5. Are flexible in format so that all students can take part.

6. Keep students on task without overburdening them.

7. Allow enough time for their feedback to make a difference at the summative stage.

CASE FOR NEED – ASSESSMENT LITERACY

Formative assessments are essential in helping students develop their **'assessment literacy'** (Advance HE, 2012).

"Assessment literacy…is a good understanding of the terminology, protocols and processes associated with higher education assessment so as to be successful and confident learners" (Sambell, Brown, & Race, 2019, p. 1)

If students, particularly first years, do not have experience of a particular type of assessment before it takes place then the fear of failure can lead to 'sudden death' (Race, 2009), which can be a significant contributor to students leaving university. Providing opportunities for students to practice ahead of the summative assessment by taking part in 'low stakes' formative activities at an earlier stage can reduce this (Lines & Mason, 2005).

"I find formative assessments very helpful. I learn a lot from the feedback which helps me produce a better-quality essay for the summative assessment." – University of Reading student (2021).

FORMATIVE CHECKLIST

Questions to consider when building formative assessments into your programmes include:

- ✓ How will the formative task relate to the summative task?
- ✓ How can students' understanding of the summative assessment be developed through formative opportunities?
- ✓ How will formative work fit into the module's schedule to ensure students have time to receive feedback and incorporate it into the summative work?
- ✓ What methods of formative feedback will be used? (see later)

A DIALOGIC PROCESS

Effective formative assessment is a dialogic process because it involves an ongoing and interactive exchange of information and feedback between teachers and students, or among students themselves.

> The traditional paradigm of formative assessment is unidirectional, with teachers tending to be the givers of feedback (primarily through written comments and grades) and students the receivers. Winstone and Carless (2019) argue for a shift towards a more dialogic approach which highlights the role of students as active participants in the formative assessment process, rather than passive recipients.
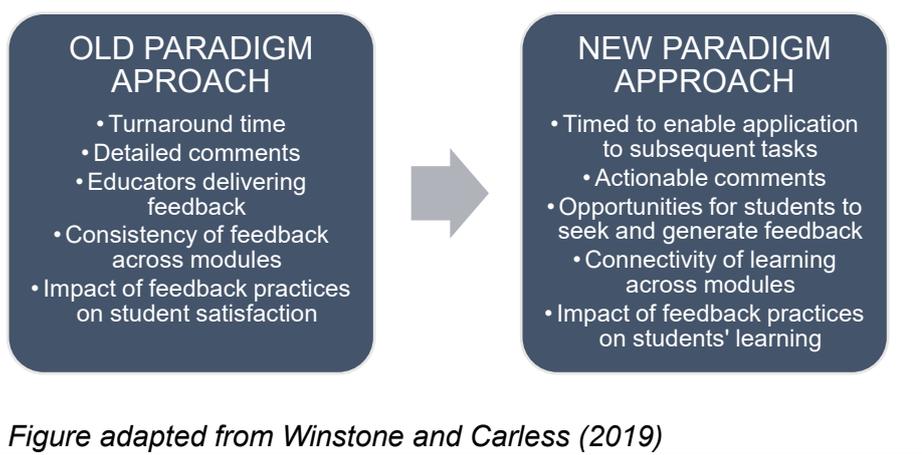>
> **OLD PARADIGM APROACH**
> - Turnaround time
> - Detailed comments
> - Educators delivering feedback
> - Consistency of feedback across modules
> - Impact of feedback practices on student satisfaction
>
> **NEW PARADIGM APPROACH**
> - Timed to enable application to subsequent tasks
> - Actionable comments
> - Opportunities for students to seek and generate feedback
> - Connectivity of learning across modules
> - Impact of feedback practices on students' learning
>
> *Figure adapted from Winstone and Carless (2019)*

What are the pros and cons to staff in taking a dialogic approach to formative assessment?

There are several pros and cons and ultimately it is about finding a balance that works for your programme – the most salient ones are described below:

- It can potentially *significantly reduce staff workload in providing written feedback on students' formative work* (e.g., essay drafts) – this is a serious concern, especially for those teaching large cohorts. This approach promotes more interactive and immediate oral feedback through activities such as Peer Review sessions (please refer to activity table overleaf), enabling teachers to address misconceptions on the spot and engage students in co-constructing knowledge.

- It *requires careful planning* to ensure that contact time is carefully balanced between dialogic interaction and coverage of the curriculum.

LINKING TO THE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

The University's [Curriculum Framework](#) outlines programme principles which underpin the curriculum and engender the range of attributes expected for graduates.

Taking an AfL approach with formative assessments helps to promote graduate attributes:

Self-Efficacy: When students receive regular feedback on their performance, they develop a sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy in their ability to improve and succeed in their studies. This lessens the likelihood of students falling behind or compromising academic integrity.

Communication Skills: Formative assessments often involve activities that require students to communicate their understanding and ideas effectively.

Self-Reflection: Formative assessments, especially those involving self-assessment and peer assessment, prompt students to reflect on their own work and the work of their peers.

> Formative assessments play a pivotal role in achieving the first programme principle which relates to *coherence*. Specifically **Principle 1.6,** which emphasises the need for assessments to be planned *across* a programme to shape learning and provide regular, timely opportunities for feedback and reflection.

WHAT DOES UNIVERSITY POLICY SAY ABOUT FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT?

The University of Reading's Assessment Handbook makes it clear that modules should have an appropriate balance of formative and summative assessment.

Going further, Schools must ensure that every student receives a minimum of one piece of formative or summative feedback prior to the winter vacation for each module taken during the first semester of their programme of study, preferably on an individual basis. Additionally, students must receive this feedback within 15 working days following submission of their work to ensure that it is current and can be readily fed-forward and actioned upon in time for the next task.

What does an "appropriate balance" mean?

Formative tasks play a crucial role in preparing your students for the graded summative assessment, and they come in various forms. Chances are, you've already incorporated some of these tasks into your teaching, even if you haven't explicitly labelled them as such. To gain clarity on this concept, it's beneficial to explore the different types of formative assessments available (refer to the table overleaf). Take stock of the ones you're already using and consider introducing new ones. While doing so, evaluate whether your current approach incorporates a suitable range of formative assessments to steer your students toward summative success.

Help! I have a large cohort and don't have enough time to provide formative feedback for each student!

- The policy is purposefully flexible and does not specify that feedback needs to be individualised, lengthy or even in written form (see also 'taking a dialogic approach' on Page 3).

- Various modes of providing formative feedback are available, as outlined opposite. Whilst these can reduce marking burden, they also make the process more accessible to a wider range of student needs, as well as improving assessment literacy.

Will students want to do formative tasks? Will they engage with the feedback?

- From a Spring 2021 Student Panel, 64% of students confirmed they would do formative assessments when given the opportunity, citing that these helped generate a sense of psychological safety as they could better understand the assessment criteria.
- International students found formative assessment particularly helpful to understand the format and nature of assessments.
- Mock exam papers were valued by most, especially when model answers were provided to check understanding, where feedback was absent, they were seen as meaningless.
- A quarter of students volunteered they would like at least one formative assessment per module.

> There is a dedicated placeholder in the University's Module Description Frameworks (MDFs) to describe any formative assessment tasks that you build into your teaching.

PROVIDING FORMATIVE FEEDBACK

Aside from providing feedback in written form, there are some other interesting and popular ways you can provide feedback on formative tasks which may be more time efficient. For example:

- Completion of a tick sheet to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the work.
- Peer evaluation in class with appropriate tutor support using a structured proforma.
- Whole-class verbal feedback on two strengths and two things to improve for a presentation.
- Generic verbal feedback to the class on practice tests.
- Short voice / video recordings uploaded to the virtual learning environment (VLE) highlighting strengths and areas for improvement across the cohort.
- Use of electronic voting systems (EVS) to quickly gauge group-wide understanding and tackle misconceptions effectively.

"Feedback influences students' learning, but bad feedback can be worse than no feedback" (Lent et al., 2022)

Providing effective feedback to your students can be challenging, particularly if you are new to it. CQSD has an easy 7C's guide for quality feedback to help you.

DIFFERENT IDEAS FOR FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

WHAT	HOW	WHY
Assessment briefing session	Dedicated, face-to-face session with students to brief them on the summative assessment and criteria.	Communicates expectations directly; reduces ambiguity; directly improves students' assessment literacy; provides a safe space for asking questions.
Writing an essay plan	Students draft an outline for an extended piece of writing during a workshop or tutorial, receiving immediate verbal feedback from teacher or peers.	Promotes clearer, structured thinking; reduces time spent on written feedback; improves planning skills; encourages peer learning and proactive refining of ideas.
Three example paragraphs of writing	Students write example paragraphs in class or in groups, receiving instant feedback from peers or educators.	Enhances writing skills; minimises written feedback load; facilitates immediate improvement; reinforces learning objectives.
Provisional data analysis	Students present bulleted ideas on interpreting findings in a seminar or discussion forum, receiving instant, collective feedback.	Encourages critical thinking; minimises time spent on individual written feedback; promotes collaborative learning; enhances understanding of data interpretation.
One minute practice presentation	Students give short presentations in a seminar with instant feedback from peers and/or teaching staff via proformas or tick sheets.	Develops presentation skills; reduces the need for extensive written evaluations; fosters a supportive learning environment; builds confidence.
Draft page of writing review	Students review each other's draft pages in a seminar, guided by discussion prompts or checklists.	Encourages peer learning; reduces educator's marking workload; promotes reflective learning; improves editing skills.
Practice questions for a test or exam	Students attempt practice questions in a controlled setting or via electronic platforms, discussing answers collectively afterwards.	Reinforces knowledge; reduces individual written feedback; identifies areas for improvement; increases exam confidence.
Solving one problem on a problem Sheet	Students solve one problem in class or groups, discussing solutions collectively.	Enhances problem-solving skills; reduces time on individual feedback; promotes collaborative learning; clarifies expectations for summative tasks.
Completing one entry in a portfolio	Students complete one portfolio entry in a workshop, receiving verbal feedback during or after the session.	Encourages reflective practice; minimises written feedback; provides clarity on portfolio expectations; reinforces learning objectives.
Use of exemplars	Students analyse anonymised work from previous cohorts, discussing quality and improvements in groups.	Provides realistic benchmarks; reduces ambiguity in expectations; encourages self-assessment; minimises individual feedback workload.
Prepare FAQs for summative assessment	Students collaboratively develop FAQs, discussing common concerns and clarifications. Teachers can add to these and easily repurpose for future cohorts.	Addresses common issues proactively; reduces repetitive individual clarifications; enhances understanding of assessment criteria; fosters collaborative learning.
Submission of bibliographies	Students submit bibliographies prior to assignments, receiving group feedback on source quality in a seminar.	Encourages proper research practices; reduces individual clarifications; fosters academic integrity; improves research skills.
Post anonymised extracts / drafts on VLE	Teachers post anonymised extracts or full drafts on the VLE with commentaries.	Provides diverse examples of good practices and areas for improvement; reduces individual written feedback; encourages self-assessment and reflection.
Offering drop-in surgeries	Conduct in-person or online drop-in sessions where students can discuss any issues related to summative assignments.	Addresses individual concerns efficiently; reduces the need for extensive written clarifications; fosters an open, supportive learning environment.
Interactive quizzes	Students take short quizzes with immediate feedback during a class or online session.	Reinforces learning; provides instant clarification; reduces time spent on individual written feedback; engages students actively in learning.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Formative assessments are instrumental in empowering students to practice and refine their understanding and skills, with formative feedback ensuring that students are well-prepared and positioned for success in their summative assessments. In this guide we have highlighted the importance of taking a holistic view to planning formative assessments across a whole programme or module, thus reflecting the continuous feedback model that is key to achieving an Assessment for Learning (AfL) approach. Going further, taking a dialogic approach to formative assessments is encouraged to facilitate interaction and co-construct knowledge with your students, improving assessment literacy and reducing ambiguity in expectations. Diverse (dialogic) formative activities, like peer evaluations, interactive quizzes and drop-in surgeries, can be leveraged to minimise written feedback load, suit different feedback preferences and learning needs, as well as different learning outcomes. For help in integrating formative assessments in your teaching, please contact the ADE (Academic Development and Enhancement) team.

> **To contact us and explore other guides in our Focus On: series, please visit https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources**

References and Further Reading

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