

DESIGNING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT



Associated Assessment and Feedback Policy Principles:

AD2: There is a course-wide emphasis on assessment for learning.

AD4: Assessment approaches value student diversity by enabling appropriate opportunities to personalise the learning journey.

AF3: Students are supported in developing their ability to seek and use feedback information from a variety of sources.

Focus Questions

- What makes for effective formative assessment?
- Why is it important to achieve a balance between summative and formative assessment?
- How can assessment 'for' learning be deployed in assessment design and practice?

What do we know? Contemporary perspectives

A feature of modern modular course structures is that the majority of assignments have a summative function (assessment-of-learning). In summative assessment the stakes are high for students, which may lead to them taking strategic approaches to their studies, potentially limiting their broader learning. Students often look to summative assessment tasks to tell them what it is that they should be learning, especially if there is little in the way of formative assessment to help guide them. It should be noted here that both summative and formative assessment have capacity to promote learning, but it is easy for summative assessment to become the focus of students and staff.

Assessments need to encompass a simultaneous focus on attainment of standards and on student learning development – what [Boud \(2000\)](#) refers to as the 'double duty' of assessment.

An emphasis on assessment-for-learning is relevant here because it means using approaches that help learning to take place as widely and effectively as possible ([Sambell et al., 2013](#)). Good assessment-for-learning practice creates low-stakes, formative, opportunities for feedback as students progress. It is important that the role of formative assessment is subjected to careful design and deliberate planning alongside summative tasks, to ensure that key learning outcomes are being addressed and engagement in tasks prompts the kinds of learning desired.

In a practical sense, formative assessment is how we shift the focus from our teaching to student learning. Key to this shift in focus is ensuring that there is ample time and opportunity within and across modules for students to benefit from feedback they receive and put their learning into practice in subsequent activities. Consider, for example, assessment tasks that take place at the end of a module. On the one hand, these tasks may be useful for providing students and tutors with a focus for learning; on the other hand, it is a particularly poor time to be providing feedback information on which students are expected to act. Similarly, instances where multiple, stand-alone summative assessments occur in a single module can have the effect of adding to student and staff workloads, as well as restrict opportunities for formative assessment and timely feedback.

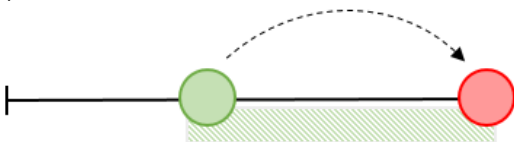
Designing in low-stakes formative assessment strategies is recognised as being integral to effective teaching practices, enhanced student motivation, engagement and higher levels of achievement. Black and William (2009) present five major strategies for effective formative assessment: (1) provide regular opportunities to clarify and share learning intentions and criteria for success; (2) engineer effective discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding; (3) provide feedback that moves learners forwards; (4) activating students as instructional resources for one another; (5) activating learners are owners of their own learning.

What can we do? Reviewing practice

As educators we tend to operate on the basic assumption that formative and summative assessment can be combined within a singular task. However, research in assessment generally shows that when summative and formative assessment are combined in the same activity or context, the demands of summative assessment tend to win out. This can limit the use of assessment methods that have demonstrable value for learning, such as feedback on draft work and peer-learning.

When the decision is taken to include a single summative assessment task in a module, it is important that separate, but related, formative activities are made available that provide students with timely feedback on their emerging understanding and skills relevant to subsequent summative tasks (see (a) below).

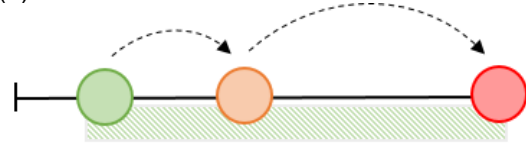
(a)



Deciding to include low-stakes opportunities for feedback effectively opens up the formative plane between lower-stakes tasks and their higher-stakes (summative) counterparts. Here the fundamental design principle is that these tasks provide 'developmental feedback' to students on their progress. This might include such activities as tutor-guided discussions around student understanding of tasks, criteria and standards; peer-led discussions of exemplar work preceding draft work; encouraging self-review and reflection on feedback received on draft work.

Early experiences of formative activities will necessarily be tutor-led, enabling deliberate practice aimed at developing student understanding and confidence relative to different assessment tasks and approaches. The aim should be to gradually encourage students to adopt more active, participative and dialogic roles in assessment and feedback processes. With this mind, where multiple summative assessments are to be included in a single module, these tasks should be designed so as to be linked or 'phased' as parts in an integrated assessment experience, with careful thought given to combinations of low and medium-stakes (in-course assessment) tasks and the role they play in student learning development (see (b) below).

(b)



Discrete, isolated summative assessment tasks can add disproportionately to the workloads of students and staff, particularly if neighbouring modules follow the same pattern of assessment. Ensuring such tasks are but parts in an integrated and coherent module and course assessment strategy, means that students benefit from timely and relevant feedback and do not become overwhelmed by the workload of high-stakes summative tasks. It can also lessen student dependency on tutors for the provision of feedback, offering greater opportunity to engage students as active agents in the assessment and feedback process through judicious use of peer-led approaches.

Course teams are encouraged to think about how assessment and feedback work across the full programme of study. This involves careful course-wide planning and sequencing of assessment tasks so that: students are supported in seeing the links between tasks and modules (and levels); assessment and feedback activities build on previous experiences as student progress, ensuring that there are opportunities for students to carry forward feedback to use in related but increasingly challenging tasks and contexts.

It is vital that students are given guidance on summative tasks and where possible given the opportunity to engage in focused practise. What kinds of developmental activities do you offer your students and how is this achieved at module level?

Clear, consistent and relevant formative assessment and feedback protocols are central to productive student learning. How are the summative assessment tasks you set at module and course-level designed to help students develop their learning? To what extent are there specific formative episodes (i.e. draft work; peer review) built into course and module assessment approaches and how consistently are these enacted at course-level?

Useful Resources

Bearman, M., Dawson, P., Boud, D., Hall, M., Bennett, S., Molloy, E., & Joughin, G., (2014), *Guide to the Assessment Design Decisions Framework*, <http://www.assessmentdecisions.org/guide>

Black and William, D. (2009). [Developing the theory of Formative Assessment](#). Educational assessment, evaluation and accountability, Vol. 25, pp. 5-31.