

GIVING FORMATIVE FEEDBACK PRIOR TO SUBMITTING SUMMATIVE TASKS

Authors: Prof. Kay Sambell, Prof. Phil Race and Prof. Sally Brown

visit: <http://tlu.cit.ie>

email: tlu_team@cit.ie

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

We are often keen to encourage students to submit assignments in advance of their final submissions, but we need to be able to do this efficiently and effectively, since few of us have the time to provide detailed comments on drafts provided by lots of our students. The ideas set out here are designed to illustrate how we can help our students to improve their work-in-progress without making unfeasible amounts of work for the hard-pressed markers.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Anxious students, particularly in the first six weeks of the first semester of a programme can find it difficult to gauge the level of what is required of them (Yorke & Longden, 2004), and we don't want to damage their self-confidence and motivation (Dweck, 2000) by letting them struggle on alone only to get disheartened when their subsequent marks do not meet with their expectations. Their self-efficacy (and hence retention and ultimate achievement) will be improved by early practice and what Gibbs (1999) terms "a diet of early successes". Nevertheless, even towards the end of a degree programme or on postgraduate courses, students can struggle with knowing how best to direct their efforts, and early formative feedback can allay some of their fears, leading to better outcomes all round.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Some of these options are relatively quick and easy to enact, while others are more time-consuming and require more advanced planning, so those planning assessment support strategies need to choose the ones that best fit the stage of study, subject, and levels of confidence of students involved. You may want to use a range of them intensively in the early stages of the programme or use individual tactics later in the students' academic careers to help refresh their confidence and confirm that they are on the right lines. To provide formative feedback in advance you could try:

- **BRIEFING STUDENTS ON ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENTS** in a face-to-face session with plenty of time allowed for questions from any students struggling to work out what they need to do.
- **PROVIDING LEARNERS WITH AN ASSESSMENT RUBRIC OR MARKING SCHEME** that outlines the assessment criteria and provides some examples of the standard that is expected of the criteria. An example criteria might be "quality of writing". What then does "excellent" e.g. over 70% writing look like? The criteria that you choose should align with the module learning outcomes that the assessment is supposed to measure.
- **PREPARING A SET OF 'FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS' TO ACCOMPANY YOUR ASSIGNMENT BRIEF DOCUMENT**, using your prior experience of what students often struggle to master, to pre-empt some of the most common errors and anxieties.
- **SHOWING STUDENTS ON SCREEN IN FACE-TO-FACE SESSIONS SOME EXAMPLES OF WORK OF THE REQUIRED STANDARD** immediately after briefing them on the assignment, so that they can see what you are looking for. By making these available in an impermanent form, you can reduce the possibility that students see these as 'correct' solutions to be emulated (or copied).
- **LETTING THEM SEE** in class (or on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)) worked examples of the kinds of problems they are being asked to tackle with different variables from those in the actual assignment, so they can see how solutions are derived; Asking students to submit bibliographies to you prior to starting the main task including, say, three journal articles, one book chapter and four web sources they plan to use in their assignments, with annotations explaining how they found and selected these reference sources. This can give you an early formative opportunity to give feedback to students who are, for example, relying over-heavily on dated sources, or are using Wikipedia unthinkingly as their first port of call. This can also be an early preventative device to forestall students planning to plagiarise the work of others, since they are required to justify their selections.
- **ASKING STUDENTS TO BRING ALONG THEIR FIRST DRAFTS** to a lecture, and using say 10 minutes of class time to give them opportunities to check they are working on the right lines through giving the opportunity to ask any questions they like on the assignment topic.

- **PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES SIMILARLY FOR STUDENTS TO BRIEFLY REVIEW EACH OTHER'S DRAFTS IN PAIRS** in problem classes, workshops or seminars, and where there are discontinuities between students' approaches, enabling them to check with the class facilitator/lecturer who is closest to what is required in their approaches.
- **RUNNING QUIZZES IN CLASS TIME ON THE SUBJECT OF THE ASSIGNMENT**, using 'clickers' or other audience response systems to help them build confidence that they know what they are doing.
- **ASKING STUDENTS TO SUBMIT SHORT (FOR EXAMPLE, STRICTLY WORD-LIMITED) EXTRACTS OF WORK IN PROGRESS** to you electronically for you to provide 'quick and dirty' comments individually to confirm that they are doing well, or to advise on different approaches as necessary; Equally, these extracts could represent initial phases of the assignment e.g. a conceptual design, mind-map, flow-chart, user requirements, a schematic, etc.
- **REQUIRING STUDENTS TO SUBMIT TO YOU EXTRACTS OR FULL DRAFTS**, with you then posting anonymised examples on the programme VLE with your commentaries on what they are doing really well, how work could be improved, and what else they could try.
- **OFFERING DROP-IN 'SURGERIES'** (say for two hours at a well-publicised time) where students can pop in to talk to you without prior arrangement about any issues they are experiencing with their draft assignments. If you manage these occasions as a public rather than a private consultation, so that anything you say to anyone raising queries is shared with other students in the room at the time, this can be very time efficient. It is very likely that an issue raised by one student is shared by other students struggling to get the hang of what they need to do to do well.
- **SIMILARLY, YOU CAN OFFER ON-LINE WEBINARS OR OPEN CHAT SESSIONS** where students can raise issues and seek formative comments from you in a shared space. Making the times you are available time-constrained is likely to be more time-efficient for you than just having an open space for them to ask questions at any time, since these tend to cluster in the immediate period before the submission deadline.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Everything we do to help students produce good work at final submission stage is good for both students and those who assess them, avoiding wasted or replicated effort and helping students concentrate on what they can do rather than what they can't. Building in formative feedback prior to submission needs planning but can pay very high dividends in the long run.

REFERENCES

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