Implementing Continuous Assessment in a First-Year History Skills Module

Abstract

This case study examines a skills-based transition module designed to support first-year university students in developing essential academic competencies while fostering reflective practice. The "Making History" module serves 80-100 Level 4 students through a carefully structured portfolio assessment comprising three equally weighted components: an initial skills reflection report, a referencing knowledge quiz, and a final reflective synthesis piece. The assessment design prioritises student voice and authentic experience over deficit-based skill remediation, creating low-stakes opportunities for early success while building academic confidence. By integrating personal tutor support with reflective assessment, the module enables early identification of student needs and targeted intervention strategies. The approach demonstrates how continuous assessment can break down learning into manageable components while encouraging students to become reflective practitioners who actively engage with their academic development. While challenges include staff development needs for marking reflective work and increased assessment loads, the module succeeds in creating student-focused, authentic assessments that celebrate growth and build essential academic skills. The case study offers valuable insights for institutions seeking to design effective transition modules that balance skill development, student support, and academic rigour for first-year students.

Module Overview

- Level: First year
- Number of students: 80-100
- Topic: Making History (skills module)
- Purpose: To help students transition from A-level to university and develop essential academic skills

Assessment Design

Portfolio consisting of three components spread equally over the module:

- **Skills reflection report (33.3%):** Students write a 600-word reflective piece discussing the skills they brought to university, their concerns, and areas for improvement. This report is linked to their personal tutor meeting, allowing tutors to provide targeted support and guidance based on the student's self-assessment.
- **Referencing quiz (33.3%):** A quiz designed to test students' understanding and application of referencing skills, which are crucial for academic writing but often overlooked. The quiz aims to highlight the importance of referencing and provide a low-stakes opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge.
- **Final reflective piece (33.3%):** In this 600-word reflective assignment, students discuss their learning journey throughout the semester, reflecting on the skills they have developed, the challenges they faced, and how they have grown as learners. This piece encourages students to connect their experiences across different modules and celebrate their achievements while identifying areas for further growth.

Motivation for Continuous Assessment

- To break down assessment into manageable parts and reward the learning process
- To encourage students to become reflective practitioners
- To provide a more comprehensive understanding of individual students' needs and progress

Advantages

- Helps identify students' needs early on (e.g., neurodivergent students)
- Encourages students to reflect on their skills and learning experiences
- Provides a low-stakes, easy-win assessment for first-year students
- Allows students to write in their own voice and develop confidence

Challenges

- Some colleagues struggle with marking reflective pieces and applying the grading criteria

- Increased marking load for staff due to multiple assessments and formative work

Lessons Learned and Advice

- Make the assessment student-focused and authentic to their experience
- Focus on rewarding and developing skills rather than framing them as deficits
- Provide clear instructions to minimize student confusion and anxiety
- Consider the balance between formative and summative work to manage staff and student workload
- Collaborate with colleagues across disciplines to share best practices and innovative approaches