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The Power of Purpose and Practice: Designing Formative Assessment That Students Actually Want to Do

Abstract

This case study examines an innovative approach to formative assessment in academic skills development that achieves remarkable student engagement through purposeful design and practical application. Dr. Laura Thomas has created a Level 4 academic skills module that transforms traditionally "dry" content into dynamic learning experiences through carefully structured weekly formative tasks that build sequentially toward summative assessments. The module demonstrates how formative assessment can move beyond token exercises to become meaningful learning tools that students actively value and engage with. Through strategic use of practical activities, clear purpose communication, and systematic habit formation, the approach achieves high engagement rates and student satisfaction in what students initially expect to be their "most boring module." The case study offers valuable insights into designing formative assessment that genuinely motivates student participation while developing essential academic competencies.

Keywords

Formative assessment, Academic skills development, Student engagement, Sequential learning

The Challenge of Academic Skills Development

First-year students arriving at university often face a significant gap between their previous educational experiences and the academic expectations of higher education. Academic skills modules traditionally struggle with multiple interconnected challenges: students perceive such content as inherently uninteresting, formative assessment often fails to generate meaningful engagement, and the disconnect between skills teaching and practical application limits learning transfer. Laura targeted these issues when developing a new Level 4 academic skills module for

approximately 50-65 sports psychology students. The module emerged from programme revalidation discussions where staff recognised that *"academic skills of the students coming in weren't kind of where we wanted them to be."* Rather than creating another traditional skills course, Laura designed an innovative approach that prioritises purpose, practice, and genuine student engagement.

The Innovation: Sequential Purpose-Driven Design

Structural Foundation

The module is across two semesters with carefully coordinated formative and summative assessment cycles. Semester 1 focuses on academic writing, referencing, and critical thinking skills, while Semester 2 addresses data management, presentation skills, and data visualisation. Each week builds systematically on previous learning, creating a scaffolded progression toward summative assessments.

The innovation lies not simply in covering these topics, but in how formative assessment is embedded within authentic, practical activities that students recognise as immediately relevant to their academic success. As Laura explains: *"Each week they then have to submit a formative task related to what we've done in the lecture... so for example, after the first lecture on how to use referencing. They have to submit a reference list where they have to reference a few journals that we've given them on the reading list, but they also have to source their own journals, so getting them to start developing those skills, ready to write an essay."*

Week	Content
1	Module introduction- Academic conduct and misconduct
2	Searching for journals and referencing
3	Academic reading and note-taking
4	Academic writing 1
5	Critical thinking
6	Academic writing 2. Assignment 1 Feedforward
7	Curriculum Enrichment Week

8	Data management
9	Data presentation
10	Infographics and posters
11	Presentation skills
12	Feedback- what is it? why is it useful? and how to use it. Assignment 2 Feedforward

The Purpose Principle

Every formative task connects explicitly to both immediate learning objectives and future summative assessments. Students don't complete isolated exercises but engage in meaningful components of larger academic projects. This approach ensures that formative work feels valuable rather than additional burden, creating genuine buy-in from students who can see direct connections between weekly tasks and their academic progress.

The referencing exercise exemplifies this approach: students don't simply practice citation formats in abstract examples, but build reference lists for sources they will actually use in upcoming essays. This creates immediate relevance and purpose, transforming a traditionally tedious skill into a practical tool for academic success.

The Practice Philosophy

Laura has developed innovative approaches to making traditionally passive content interactive and engaging. The critical thinking lecture demonstrates this transformation most dramatically through structured classroom debates. Students are divided into opposing sides on contentious topics like gender pay equity in sports, engaging in carefully moderated discussions that develop argumentation skills while maintaining academic rigour and professionalism. *"So we set kind of ground rules to the task before we start it. Remember this is an academic critical discussion. It's not personal. It's got to come from an academic grounding, like we don't talk over each other when your side's invited to talk, you put your point across in a professional way and then you counter."*

This practical approach extends beyond mere activity for activity's sake. Following the debates, students complete formative tasks requiring them to construct balanced

arguments and evidence-based conclusions, directly applying critical thinking concepts in structured written work. The combination of dynamic classroom engagement and purposeful follow-up assessment creates learning experiences that students value.

Implementation Strategies

Systematic Engagement Design

The module's success depends on several key implementation strategies that ensure consistent student participation. Laura requires submission through Canvas, creating accountability and enabling meaningful feedback provision. The predictable submission schedule (Friday at noon each week) establishes clear expectations and helps students develop productive academic habits.

Feedback provision represents a crucial component, though Laura has developed efficient approaches to manage workload implications. For some tasks, she uses marking rubrics rather than extensive written feedback, providing quick assessment while maintaining meaningful guidance. Common feedback comments are stored for reuse, and TSO (Teaching Support Officer) students have assisted with formative feedback provision, creating additional learning opportunities while managing staff workload.

Room Selection and Resource Management

Practical considerations prove essential for success. Computer room scheduling enables hands-on referencing practice rather than theoretical discussion. Classroom layout affects debate activities, requiring space for student movement and group formation. These seemingly mundane factors significantly impact activity effectiveness and student engagement levels.

Outcomes and Impact

Student Engagement Evidence

The module achieves remarkable engagement metrics that challenge assumptions about academic skills teaching. Despite students' initial expectations that this would

be their *"most boring module,"* it consistently receives the highest satisfaction ratings among first-semester offerings. Attendance rates remain substantially higher than other modules, and Canvas engagement statistics demonstrate active student participation in online components.

Laura reflects on this surprising outcome: *"It's the module that they give the highest overall module satisfaction to, which again is crazy when they've got two of the modules which are very content psychology very interesting for academic skills of this is how to write and this is how to reference and this is how to use Excel for that to come out as being one of the ones that they actually say this module was really interesting and good."*

Academic Skills Transfer

Evidence suggests that the approach successfully develops transferable academic competencies. Colleagues teaching subsequent modules report improved student writing quality and substantially better referencing practices. While systematic longitudinal tracking could strengthen this evidence, informal feedback indicates that the intensive formative practice creates lasting skill development that benefits students across their degree programs.

Institutional Recognition

The module's success has generated interest from colleagues seeking to adopt similar approaches in their own teaching. This organic spread of innovative practice suggests genuine educational value and practical applicability across different contexts and subject areas.

Critical Success Factors

- **Clear Purpose Communication:** Students understand why they are completing each formative task and how it connects to their broader academic development. This transparency creates genuine motivation rather than mere compliance, distinguishing effective formative assessment from busy work.
- **Practical Application Focus:** Every activity connects to real academic challenges students face. Rather than simulated exercises, students engage with authentic tasks that develop skills they immediately need and will continue using throughout their studies.

- **Systematic Habit Formation:** The predictable weekly rhythm helps students develop productive academic practices. By establishing consistent expectations and providing regular feedback, the module creates sustainable learning habits that extend beyond the immediate module context.
- **Dynamic Content Delivery:** Even traditionally dry topics become engaging through interactive delivery methods. The combination of structured activities, practical application, and peer interaction transforms passive content consumption into active learning experiences.

Broader Implications

Laura's approach demonstrates that formative assessment can become a powerful tool for genuine learning rather than mere measurement. The key lies in purposeful design that connects assessment activities to authentic academic challenges while providing structured opportunities for practice and improvement.

The module's success challenges common assumptions about student motivation and engagement with academic skills development. When students perceive clear value and purpose in formative activities, they willingly participate and demonstrate genuine learning gains. This suggests that engagement problems often reflect design issues rather than inherent student characteristics.

Most significantly, the case study illustrates how innovative pedagogy can transform traditionally challenging educational contexts. Through systematic attention to purpose, practice, and student experience, even the most mundane academic content can become engaging and valuable learning opportunities.

The approach offers valuable insights for any educator seeking to design formative assessment that students actively value and engage with, demonstrating that purposeful design and practical application can overcome traditional barriers to effective skills development in higher education.