

Grade Less and Assess More: The Value of Ongoing Feedback

Written by Jan Lüdert

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JAN LÜDERT, NOV 13 2016

A key to effectively assess and evaluate teaching and learning is to offer feedback to students. Ongoing and formative assessment is especially valuable for students to observe their own progress and to identify areas for improvement. It equally holds value to instructors as it provides opportunities to evaluate whether or not intended class content is delivered in a meaningful and effective way.

In my teaching I witness intense anxiety by students when it comes to their class performance. Students are often petrified by the notion that they may not earn a good grade and particularly so during 'mid-terms' and 'final exams.' Such forms of summative assessment equally terrified me during my own studies. A significant reason for such stress is that there is a sense of finality to these types of assessment, not to mention that exams are often high stake in terms of overall grade percentage. Exams then matter primarily because they assign a grade at the expense of being a good measure to evaluate learning. By drawing on formative feedback strategies instead elevated stress levels as well as lack of effective evaluation can be largely alleviated.

Let me take as an example a student research project for an introductory class to Global Politics. After students have been introduced and are able to put into context available theoretical approaches, I ask them to brainstorm areas of interest for a research project in their study journals (Creating an online space for this entire exercise works great). By offering some guided questions, I assist students to formulate a specific research question. At this point students have not been marked but received written feedback on whether or not they have a feasible project. They are not only afforded a chance to "make mistakes" but students can still shape the direction of their own learning. At this stage, and a side benefit, students are often motivated and take ownership over "their" project.

In a second step, students are required to direct their attention to designing a research plan. The plan includes a working thesis, a justification of what theoretical approaches they intend to engage and what empirical expectations flow from them, as well as an annotated list of relevant scholarship. Drawing up a research plan offers students a way to conceptualize key arguments and create a basic framework for their draft that is informed by available scholarship. After grading the plan according to a rubric I take the time during lectures to help students 'fine-tune' their projects on a meta-level and subsequently through small groups of 4-6 students in emerging research clusters. For instance, we may run sessions on how to craft a thesis statement, how to write a paragraph, or how to cite scholarship and integrate data. What surprises me most is that students frequently comment that they rarely encountered such meta level exercises in their coursework.

In a last step, students write a draft paper and have the opportunity to present and receive written feedback in their small groups as well as from the instructor. Again, instead of grading students, the draft stage offers a chance to improve individual research projects towards a final graded paper. What I regularly observe at this stage is that students reflect on the feedback received as well as by revisiting previous class readings and by rethinking their own assumptions in light of the gathered evidence. They essentially emerge as critical thinkers who acquire skills off sequencing a large project into clear steps of brainstorming, planning, drafting and writing a research paper.

By staggering out processes along formative assessment strategy's as outlined I came to realize that students' stress

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dwindles while the quality of writing, the ability to apply theories and to analyze evidence greatly improves. In fact, I observe students enjoy the process and appreciate their own growth instead of churning out a paper the night before the due date. In addition to supporting students' development and growth these and other formative assessment strategies continuously inform my course instruction. They offer insights into when and how to provide specific content or additional guidance to the class as a whole or to individual learners.

About the author:

Dr. Jan Lüdert is the Head of Programs at the DWIH – German Centre for Research and Innovation New York City. He previously served as Associate Professor at City University of Seattle where he was the inaugural Director of Curriculum and Instruction. He has held positions as Visiting Research Scholar at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at City University of New York's Graduate Center as well as Research Associate with the DFG 'Dynamics of Security' project at Philipps Marburg University. He is an alumnus of Seattle's World Affairs Council Fellows and UBC Liu Institute for Global Issues Scholar programs. He is the author of *Non-State Actors at the United Nations* (Routledge); co-author of *The United Nations Trusteeship System* (Routledge); and editor of *Signature Pedagogies in International Relations* (E-International Relations).