Is fine tuning possible with grade-focused students?

In our service-learning courses, students work with real people and record and reflect on these experiences, to learn appropriate professional behavior, and how to think creatively and respond to changing circumstances. Many of our students are “strategic” learners, characterized by alertness to assessment and intention to achieve the highest possible grades (Entwistle et al., 2000). They display a need to be correct that overrides the opportunity to explore ideas, trouble shoot and problem solve. Additionally, the slavish allegiance to one correct answer prevents many from engaging in the ‘messy’ processes of trial and error, formative feedback and assessment, reflection and refinement (Dewey, 1938). They not only avoid the benefits of proximal learning, they also deny themselves the benefits of ‘cognitive play’ that Vygotsky (1962) encourages. An ‘end of term binge’, their rush to get work done at the eleventh hour, can occur because many seem reluctant to take advantage of formative feedback opportunities (i.e. fine tuning) during the term. Accompanying this binge is the concomitant expectation of immediate feedback from the instructor and the equally unrealistic expectation of their own spontaneous comprehension of the material without adequate assimilation time. In our session we will provide participants with a summary of formative assessment examples (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and invite discussion and suggestions about the pros and cons of each, as well as implementation strategies that enhance student motivation and timely engagement.


“…in higher education, formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower students as self-regulated learners.” (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

**CONTEXT/BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS FOR OUR RESEARCH** - learners’ previous experiences with summative assessment, group work, content-laden/focused courses, minimal variation in assessment, and their perceived successful application of strategic and instrumental approaches to achieving grades
**Formative assessment examples:**
Small group collaborative work done at regular intervals with group process roles/functions built in
Online follow up activities in solo, 2’s, 3’s, small groups (eg. forums, wikis, etherpad)
Optimizing social networking opportunities
Blogs and/or other alternative ‘creative writing’ options—peer assessment and/or comment
Monte Carlo format quizzes
Show what you know exams
Matrix options (eg, 5 topics, 5 applications; can only do an application ONCE and then have to do a different one as learners shift from one topic to the next)
Choose your poison—an array of different assessment options timed on a bi-weekly schedule with choices built in
Translate the feedback: learners tell teacher what they perceive the feedback is saying to them; peers tell other peers what they perceive the feedback is saying to them
Master classes (volunteer only)
In class ‘bell-ringers’ with set up prep and follow up debrief
Digital literacy assignments
Unobtrusive assignments that apply course concepts

**Pros:**
Many ways to engage with subject matter and with peers
Novel assignments and exams
Improvement possible over time; teacher can actually see and assess the degree and kind of change
Possible to see the process aspects of student work
Acknowledges diversity across a number of spectra; lots of variety in format and content
Dispersed practice AND dispersed percentages — no one form of assessment can fail the student

**Cons:**
Many students are not used to doing many ‘mini’ assignments and may feel overwhelmed
Assessing must be organized or teacher will be buried
Group process must be discussed and understood early in term to avoid habit based group issues
Time management issues can be deadly

**Implementation strategies to enhance timely engagement and student motivation:**
Locking access at the due dates (while maintaining options for other types of work)
Flipping the classroom to facilitate ‘new types of assignments’ early in the term
Optimize the online environment
Invite students to create the formats, content and rubrics of assignments/assessments
Brief assignments/assessment to allow for swift turnaround of feedback
Relevant assignments with post grad meaningfulness built in
Balance of content and process
Do less better (threshold concepts with deep engagement)

Gail Frost  
gfrost@brocku.ca
Maureen Connolly  
mconnolly@brocku.ca