

# **Fancy A Prize?**

## **Motivating Students Using Competitions in Formative Assessment.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to demonstrate a method of motivating students to engage in formative assessment as a tool for achieving learning outcomes. More specifically, the author will explore one formative tool used in practice as an additional aid to summative assessment with third level students in a tutorial environment. The practice to be discussed is the use of a “poster competition”. Through the introduction of an additional incentive, for example prizes for best entries and peer recognition, the research will illustrate that learning and interaction can be accelerated, even more so than the use of formative assessment alone.

Qualitative research provides insight and is a useful way to collect attitudinal data and is deemed to be the most appropriate methodology to answer the above aims. A focus group will be used to assess the benefits and drawbacks of the poster competition. It is proposed that non-academic (that is, non grade related) incentives can offer a valuable tool to practitioners when trying to increase class participation. The outcomes of the research were two fold. Firstly, that creating an ongoing creative learning environment can be achieved without the need for continuous assessment. Secondly, formative assessment can contribute in a meaningful way to the achievement of learning outcomes.

**Key Words:** Formative Assessment, Poster Competition, Achieving Learning Outcomes, Teaching and Learning in Marketing.

## **Introduction**

Overcoming student apathy is a major challenge facing module instructors (Shanahan, Hermans, and Haytko, 2006). Engaging students and encouraging active participation is an ongoing challenge in higher education (Kumar and Lightner, 2007). Numerous articles from multiple teaching disciplines have reflected on, researched and assessed the benefits of using techniques such as games, multimedia interaction and role-plays. These “games” can be used in many different ways; as a memory retention tool (Shanahan, Hermans, and Haytko, 2006), to engage students (Doyle, 2001) or to achieve module learning outcomes (Drea, Tripp and Stuenkel, 2005). Primarily, these games are used as a means of formative assessment. Formative assessment “*refers to assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning*” (Sadler, 1998, p. 77). Used correctly it can motivate students to actively engage in classroom discussion and to take ownership of their learning outside of the classroom.

This paper aims to demonstrate a method of motivating students to engage in formative assessment as a tool for achieving learning outcomes. More specifically, the author will explore one formative tool used in practice as an additional aid to summative assessment with third level students in a tutorial environment. The practice to be examined is the use of a “poster competition” conducted with second year students of an honours degree programme. The research will illustrate that learning and interaction can be accelerated, through the introduction of an additional incentive (for example prizes for best entries and peer recognition) even more so than the use of formative assessment alone. It is proposed that non-academic (that is, non grade related) incentives can offer a valuable tool to practitioners when trying to increase class participation.

## **The challenges of assessing students**

Traditional summative assessment techniques generally take the form of exams, in class tests, and assignments. Such techniques when applied alone can often lead students to “*play a strategic game*” whereby the learning becomes secondary to completing the task and receiving a grade (Atkins et al, 1993; as cited in Hinett and Knight, 1996, p.4). Indeed, research from Hinett and Knight (1996, p. 6) showed that second year students

“viewed assessment as a separate entity to learning”. Such views may be a result of exposure to an educational system that focuses on summative assessment as the key measure of the achievement of learning outcomes. This perception of education as a series of tasks to be completed may leave students ill-equipped for the skill set required in postgraduate employment (Shanahan, Hermans, and Haytko, 2006).

Sadler (1998, p. 77) believes “grades and marks do not deliver as much formative effectiveness as tailored comments, and in some situations can be counter productive, particularly with learners of lower ability.”

### **Formative assessment as a learning tool**

Ruben (1999, as cited in Mungai et al, 2005, p. 1) believes formative assessment can improve on traditional “one way information dispensing methods”, promoting interaction and active learning. The competitive element of games can also be intrinsically motivating and energise the in-class atmosphere (Nemerow, 1996).

Summative assessment rarely includes qualitative feedback, which is a vital aid to personal development (Hinett and Knight, 1996). Quality feedback is the key to successful formative assessment. Formative assessment offers students an insight into their level of knowledge about a topic before their GPA is affected and without the pressures of a typical exam situation (Sadler, 1998). The key focus of formative investment is on the learner, it answers the question “how am I doing?” instead of “how did I do?” (Starkman, 2006, p. 41).

### **Poster competition**

A poster presentation is an effective method of communication with a group in a non-threatening and informal way (Shelledy, 2004). Typically a poster involves the visual presentation of information in a concise manner and may include many different formats including pictures, narrative, graphs, screen shots etc. (Ferguson, 2006). As a result, posters offer students greater flexibility and freedom of expression than traditional presentation tools. This more informal approach can lead to more interaction and

feedback as students are not as threatened as they may be with a speech (Ferguson, 2006).

Tiagi (1998, as cited in Mungai et al, 2005, p. 3) discusses the key characteristics of well constructed games. These include being goal orientated with obstacles to overcome, a clear set of guidelines, and a clear time frame for completion. These characteristics help to ensure consistent and effective game playing. The poster competition also adds in the additional competitive element as an extrinsic motivator.

Brownlie (2007, p. 1426) believes poster presentation is underestimated as a pedagogical tool and that “Posters can work very effectively... as pedagogical tools in advancing critical thinking skills”. The development of critical thinking skills features frequently as a learning outcome in many different disciplines and posters are used across these multiple areas including the sciences, nursing, physiotherapy, psychology and business (Brownlie, 2007).

Using competition as a motivator has received criticism in the past (Kohn, 1992. as cited in Gordon and Gillespie, 2006). However, studies have suggested that students enjoy this method of learning (Bergin and Cook, 2000, as cited in Gordon and Gillespie, 2006) and that it is beneficial as a classroom tool (Ediger, 2001).

Research conducted by Gordon and Gillespie (2006) found several positive outcomes from creating a competitive environment including motivating students to put in their best performance, teaching them flexibility, adaptability and teamwork. Ediger (2001, p.10) believes competition in the classroom can be beneficial if “those competing have positive attitudes towards each other”. This supports the use of the poster competition with second year students who are familiar with each other and have an established camaraderie. Furthermore, Hess and Brooks (1998, as cited in Ferguson) believe the “sheer novelty of creating a poster can increase interest and motivation among students”

### **How to conduct a poster competition**

The poster competition is easy to follow. Students are provided with a one page brief which contains the requirements for the task and provides a list of brands for students to choose from (Appendix 1). Students are required to work in groups of two or three to design a poster representing their answers to four questions on one of the listed brands. The choice of brand was restricted to the list provided so that students would focus immediately on the task at hand instead of deliberating too long over which brand to analyse. The brands were chosen for this group of students as they were found by Millward Brown Optimor to be the 10 most powerful global brands of 2007 ([www.millwardbrown.com](http://www.millwardbrown.com), 2008).

The module in which the poster competition was used was Marketing Strategy. This module was deemed to be compatible with the poster competition due to the creative element of the indicative material. The aim of the competition is to test the competency of the students in areas covered in the previous three weeks of lectures, namely the skills to creatively assess brands. It is aimed at achieving the module learning outcome aimed at demonstrating developed and strengthened analytical and critical thinking skills. One of the central themes of the module is creativity, so students are given no notice of the competition to ensure responses are based entirely on individuals' analytical skills and perceptions. The time frame for completion was fifty minutes during a one hour tutorial. After class, the posters were collected and assessed on a number of different variables; completeness of answers, visual appearance and creativity. There was also a prize for effort to ensure students of all capabilities featured in the award presentations.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research provides insight and is a useful way to collect attitudinal or “soft” data (Domegan and Fleming, 2007), and is deemed to be the most appropriate methodology to answer the aims of this research. Formative assessment is based on the individuals learning and therefore qualitative methods are capable of answering the research questions. An experiencing focus group was used to evaluate the success of the poster competition. An experiencing focus group is made up of participants who have

actively experienced the subject of the research, in this case the poster competition (Domegan and Fleming, 2007).

Observation was also utilised as a research method during the tutorial session when the poster competition took place. Unstructured natural observation involves recording notes deemed to be relevant on an event as it occurs (Domegan and Fleming, 2007). Students' interactions with the task and with each other was monitored and observed throughout the session. This was compared with their behaviour in other tutorial sessions where the competitive element was not utilised.

The sample group consisted of forty 2<sup>nd</sup> year students of the BA (Hons) in Business Studies degree in Griffith College Dublin. This cohort was selected for participation in the research as the size of the sample was deemed most appropriate out of the available groups. Furthermore, the students were familiar with higher education and typical teaching methods, while not under the pressure of final year exams. Also, for the same reasons, second year students are quite susceptible to apathy in the class room. This assumption is supported by the research of Ediger (2001).

Participants were asked to reflect on the poster competition exercise and evaluate it under the following areas:

- ❖ The use of the competition as an engaging learning tool.
- ❖ The level of motivation to participate and the drivers of that motivation.
- ❖ The potential to incorporate the posters into summative assessment.
- ❖ Any suggestions for future improvements.

The focus group lasted approximately one and a half hours and took place in an informal and relaxed environment one month after the poster competition had taken place. This time allowed students to reflect on the exercise and also to experience other tutorial methods utilised for the module.

## **Findings and analysis**

The purpose of the findings and analysis section is to draw the secondary and primary resources of research together to compare and contrast the topics of motivating students and using competitive formative assessment techniques. The layout of the section is by theme and the implications of each result are given. The research question under discussion is provided at the top of each section for clarity purposes.

**On the poster competition as an engaging learning tool:**

Overwhelmingly the students reported that they found the poster competition to be an engaging activity. They found it interesting, fun, and something different from normal classes and lecturing which got them interested early on in the class. They viewed the purpose of the tool as an activity in measuring their own skill sets for evaluating brands and an exercise in creativity. While three students could initially not see any point to it in terms of educational value the overwhelming majority deemed it a memorable learning experience.

Many students also reported the competition had motivated them to conduct further research into the brands listed, with several students actually investigating the way in which the list had been compiled by Millward Brown Optimor.

When compared with other sessions with the group, students' engagement levels were much higher during the competition than during other tutorial activities.

**On the lack of warning/preparation for the activity:**

The students unanimously felt the competition should definitely be kept as an "ad-hoc" activity. Students felt the lack of notice meant they had to be spontaneous, which added to the creative element. They also felt it added to the quality of the tool as an assessment. As one student noted; "We had to on the spot recall everything we knew about the brand and it meant that it was based on our own perceptions rather than researching what someone else thought."

It was also felt that the lack of warning gave all students an equal footing in the competition. Students commented that if advanced warning had been given some students would not have prepared, this would have meant the group would be at differing levels of preparation.

Additionally, students felt that the lack of warning ensured they were able to self-assess their own knowledge on particular brands in a very tangible way. In other words “Am I able to design this poster and answer these questions? If not, why not?” This finding resonates with Sadler’s (1998) findings that formative assessments provides the student with not just external feedback, but also an insight into self-assessment.

**On formative assessment and motivation:**

“The competition definitely helped- the prize was not the motivation, the competitive element is what got us interested- wanting to win!!”

The students felt that having the competition was a key contributor to the level of engagement achieved. They felt that having some external motivation was important, one statement which was widely supported was “if you didn’t provide any incentive, we would still do it but probably would not have gotten so involved or so excited about it.”

The students also felt the incentive accelerated the process as everyone dived straight in and there was a good atmosphere in the room. This feedback supports the research of Gordon and Gillespie (2006) by demonstrating an enhancement of the learning experience through competition in certain groups, namely students who have worked together as a team previously and have a shared camaraderie.

The researcher observed high levels of participation and immediate interest in the competition. There was a noted eagerness to begin the session. Motivation levels were considerably higher than in previous and subsequent tutorial sessions.

**On achievement of Learning Outcomes:**

The students were asked, unprompted, which (if any) of the module learning outcomes were being formatively assessed in the exercise. Students reported that demonstrating developed and strengthened analytical and critical thinking skills were the underlying principles of the task.

Supporting Brownlies (2007) arguments, they felt the competition was related to the module learning outcomes, as it was a very “free” and creative exercise similar to the underlying philosophy of the module (thinking outside the box). It encouraged them to think differently about brands and enhanced their learning overall.

### **On improving the activity:**

Students felt it would have been better if the group had revisited *all* of the posters at the prize giving ceremony and looked at each groups’ poster instead of just the prize winners. They felt strongly that the poster design be carried out in one class; “not on our own time or revisiting at a later date”, but felt the fifty minutes time frame was too short. Consensus was that one to one and a half hours would have been more appropriate.

There was a lack of consensus with regards to the list of brands. Some felt they should have been able to choose their own brands while others thought that giving the list was better. Some students believed that by choosing your own brand it would increase the levels of creativity and help improve your interest. Others felt that the list presented more of a challenge and that it meant students had to think carefully rather than just “reel off the usual suspects like Ryanair”.

In other words, the list took them out of their comfort zone. One remarked that as the list was of the brands that are the most valuable, “obviously they are doing something right so they are who we should focus on”. Others felt the list was appropriate but that the option should be there to pick ones own brand if they wanted. It would appear, there is no one right answer and the method of applying the tool could vary depending on individual circumstances and the discretion of the moderator/instructor.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence from the focus group was that competitions encourage students to engage very quickly with tutorial activities. Overall, students felt that the tool was an engaging learning tool and a helpful review of the recently covered topic. Formative assessment was widely supported as an important part of student development, with feedback being the critical component.

The poster competition provided students with feedback in a number of areas, which encompassed not just the theory previously covered, but also their creative skills. It also offered students an opportunity for self-evaluation and peer review.

The evidence of teamwork in the finished products was tangible. Observation of the task being undertaken clearly indicated that the spirits in the room were high and participation levels were above normal for this cohort of students.

Interestingly, the majority of the students felt the poster competition would work well as a summative assessment method. They proposed conducting the competition as we did in class followed by a reflective portfolio.

Several students also mentioned using the competition as formative assessment but then following it up with a summative assessment method such as a presentation to the class or a research assignment where the poster would act as their hypotheses followed by researching the brand selected and producing a follow up report supporting or changing their original thoughts.

An approach such as this could achieve several aims; it would offer students some insight into how they are progressing on a course and also achieve the summative assessment requirements that most modules have at a later date. This concept may warrant further research to assess its applicability.

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Top 100 Most Powerful Brands, [www.millwardbrown.com/mboptimor](http://www.millwardbrown.com/mboptimor) (2008) Accessed February 25th 2008

## **APPENDIX 1: Tutorial Handout**

### **TESTING YOUR INDIVIDUAL SKILLSETS!! POSTER COMPETITION**

According to Millward Brown Optimor, here are the 10 most powerful global brands of 2007, plus brand value:

1. Google--\$66.4 billion
2. General Electric--\$61.9 billion
3. Microsoft--\$55 billion
4. Coca-Cola--\$44.1 billion
5. China Mobile--\$41.2 billion
6. Marlboro--\$39.2 billion
7. Wal-Mart--\$36.9 billion
8. Citigroup--\$33.7 billion
9. IBM--\$33.6 billion
10. Toyota Motor--\$33.4 billion

Choose one of the brands from the list above and design a poster summary representing:

1. Any trends in the environment of recent times which may have an impact on the brand (Positive or Negative)
2. A breakdown of the segments the brand is targeting, including how they are segmented (What characteristics are used?)
3. Who are their main competitors (Direct, indirect and potential)
4. What values the brand represents and how these are communicated.