Xchange Episode 8 – Formative Assessments

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MICHAEL AVIS: Hello, everyone. Welcome to XChange, the podcast by faculty, for faculty. As usual, I'm Michael Avis, faculty facilitator and professor, and I'm joined here again with Nicki Monahan. How's it going, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: It's going all right, Mike. I keep hearing from faculty that they're putting into practice so much of what they've learned since last spring about teaching and learning remotely, and it's really inspiring to hear good news stories. But I also know that this is still a period of huge adjustment and a steep learning curve. So it's a challenging time as well. How are you doing, Mike?

MICHAEL AVIS: Well, as a parent, it's been a challenging week. We're in week two, I believe, of my children's school year, and all three of them have been home already for the whole week or part of the week. So we've all had COVID tests. We've all been down to St. Mike's and waited in line. So that's been great.

NICKI MONAHAN: Oh, sure.

MICHAEL AVIS: But thankfully we've all tested negative. So, you know, that's past, but --

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- the working environment has been really difficult because I really -- never really know what to expect and when to expect it. But one of the things that -- about the work is it got me thinking about our students. And I kept on thinking, you know, "If it's hard for me to work, how hard must it be for them to be either full-time or part-time students? What are they -- how are they feeling, and what are their challenges?"

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah, Mike, I know it's really challenging for our faculty who are parents, and I'm glad to hear you all tested negative. But no, this uncertainty is really difficult to deal with. And I think our students deal with a lot of uncertainty as well, and some of them are parents, too. This back-and-forth in schools must be really tough. But, you know, this is a really good time in the semester when it's a great idea to get a clearer sense of how our students are doing and how they are experiencing these new learning environments.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. So we're calling today's episode "A Chat About Formative Assessment: Three Ways to Get Formative." So stay tuned.

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NICKI MONAHAN: So going into week four or five is not too late to get a clearer sense of how our students are experiencing their learning environments. Sometimes we only see things from our own perspective, and it's a really good idea to have multiple lenses to look through as we evaluate our learning environments for our students. I have a good friend who's a prof at York University. And it's her first time teaching online. And she's using Zoom for the first time and after week two, I checked in with her, and I said, "How are

things going?" And she said, "They're going great! I'm having a good time and I'm learning how to use this technology." And I said, "That's fantastic." And then I paused and I said, "How are they going for your students?"

MICHAEL AVIS: M'hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: And there was this dead silence.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: And it was really clear to me that she knew things were going well for her from her perspective but wasn't quite sure how it was going for her students because she hadn't really asked. So today, we're going to talk about the importance of gathering some feedback from our students, getting some different assessment methods, and finding different ways to learn from your students how they're experiencing learning. So we're going to talk about on-the-fly feedback or assessment using a chat box in Collaborate. We're going to talk a little bit about faculty-created assessments tools, and some of you are already familiar with Stop, Start, Continue or something similar like that. And then finally, we're going to talk about using the Performance Dashboard on Blackboard to engage in early intervention when our assessment is that maybe our students are struggling right from the beginning.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. And remember, Nicki, that yes, Blackboard is one of our -- is our primary LMS, but whatever other tool you're using, whether it's Teams or something else -- we're encouraging Teams or Blackboard, but the same kinds of ideas apply to any platform that you're teaching on. Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely. Good point, Mike. And we know that our faculty are choosing the platforms that they're using, but regardless of whether you're primarily teaching asynchronously or if you have synchronous components or --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- whatever platform --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- you're using, this is a really good time in the semester to find out really directly from your students how they're doing and how they're experiencing the learning.

MICHAEL AVIS: So how do we use this --

NICKI MONAHAN: So it's obvious --

MICHAEL AVIS: How do we use this chat box, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: Okay. So the chat box is a really immediate tool. And one of the things we hear from faculty is that students really like to use the chat box. We know a lot of our students like to text, and the chat box is really similar to texting. So since that tool is there when you're using live synchronous sessions, it's a really great way to just stop every 10 or

15 minutes or so and check in with your students -- check in for understanding, check in for clarification, check in to see if they're on the same page as you. And there's some really easy techniques that faculty tell us that they use. So, for example, maybe you're lecturing or you're talking about a concept for 10 or 15 minutes, and you just want to pause and say, "Okay. In the chat box, if you understood what I was saying, give me a thumbs-up, or if it wasn't super clear, give me a thumbs-down. Or if I can continue, give me a thumbs-up, and if you want to pause for questions, give me a thumbs-down." And that's a really quick and dirty sort of technique for checking in student understanding. I know that some faculty members also use things like emojis, you know. And they can use that for a cheque-in, but they could also use it as a very quick formative assessment tool. I'm going to take 30 seconds, and I want to see from everybody give me a picture of your face, whether it's happy --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right, right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- confused, et cetera. We also know --

MICHAEL AVIS: I'm a big -- I'm a big --

NICKI MONAHAN: Go for it.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- fan of the emoji and the gif, so I --

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- I send gifs like crazy because I think that they're just so --

NICKI MONAHAN: I know you do.

MICHAEL AVIS: They're great ways to express how you're feeling at that moment. So yeah, I think emojis are. And also, you know what? For students, it's entertaining. It breaks the monotony of maybe just a long or sort of lecture-style piece to have them do that. It's entertaining for them as well.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. And we've talked about those things as sort of a student engagement, especially a --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- check-in or short, one-word answers. But in this context, we're talking about using them as feedback from the learners and a very quick way to assess --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- whether or not your students are understanding, ready to move forward, on board with you, et cetera. You know, another quick strategy is to use scaling questions. You know, so again, you could do that around understanding a concept. On a scale of one to five, with one being completely confused and five being completely clear, you know, where are you at in terms of these last concepts that we've just gone through? So this --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- is what we call sort of, you know, on-the-fly, immediate, in-the-moment assessment of your students' understanding or learning. And it's one of the quickest and easiest ways to get really immediate feedback just about something in particular that you may be teaching. And if you're teaching really critical concepts in those synchronous sessions, why not ask your students --

MICHAEL AVIS: Sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- every 15 or 20 minutes, "Hey, are you getting it? Are you with me?" And if they're not, then you can -- then you can take questions right then and there, or then you can put them into breakout groups to explain concepts to one another. But it's a -- it's an immediate kind of strategy for assessment.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. And this is the kind of thing that we would do in face-to-face classes, so why not --

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- do the same thing in our online classes. Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely.

MICHAEL AVIS: So after that, let's say we're now into week two or three. Are we in week three now of the term, I believe -- going into week three?

NICKI MONAHAN: We're coming to the end of week three.

MICHAEL AVIS: Wow.

NICKI MONAHAN: So by the time people hear this podcast we're going to be in week four.

MICHAEL AVIS: Four. Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: So.

MICHAEL AVIS: So.

NICKI MONAHAN: Definitely time to get some assessment from your students.

MICHAEL AVIS: That's right. That's right. So they've had some time to be with you, and you've had some time to be with them. And you've probably worked through your course outline. You've started the sort of the going through some of the outcomes that you're working through in your course. So now is a really good time to check in and say, "Okay, where are we as far as my teaching style? Where are we as far as content? Where are we as far as your comfort in the class and how you're learning online?" And we often use that -- we often use what's called a Stop, Start, and continue practice, which is asking them three questions: What would you like me to stop doing? So what is it that, you know, is not working for you as a learner? What would you like me to start doing? So what is something that I'm not doing that might help you achieve those outcomes and help you better

understand? And what, finally, do you want me to continue? What is it that you like, that's working for you, and that you would like to see more of? So that's a fairly common practice that we use. And at this time in the term, it's a really good way to figure out, you know, where -- sort of get the lay of the land and see where we are. However, we've --

NICKI MONAHAN: And Mike, how do you think you could use that Stop, Start, Continuing? And people frame those questions differently.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, of course.

NICKI MONAHAN: Sometimes I used to ask my students, you know, "What's helping you learn?"

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: "What's getting in the way of your learning?" How do you think you could use those concepts of Stop, Start, Continue differently, whether you have a synchronous session or if your students are primarily learning asynchronously? What might be some of the different strategies, Mike?

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. So that's a -- thanks for the question. We are in the challenge of doing synchronous and asynchronous, hopefully mixing the two. So the Stop, Start, Continue might be slightly different if you're in a mainly synchronous class or if you're in a mainly asynchronous class. So in synchronous, you know, one of the simplest ways is just to give them a questionnaire, so just to ask them, "What would you like me to stop? What would you like me to start? And what would you like me to continue?" But I think because we're in a synchronous session, there's a lot of richness that can be gained by putting them into groups and having them brainstorming and talk about what are some of the things that are working for them as a group. So one of the things you could do is put them into a breakout room, maybe at the end of the -- at the end of your class. Put them in a breakout room and ask them these questions. And give them some time in a live conversation to brainstorm, you know, what's working and what's not. That's a really good method. I think the questionnaires can be a bit passive. So you can give that to them and you're probably -- I'm not sure what kind of return you're going to get with those. But if you're building it into your class, it's certainly you're going to get some -- hopefully some rich feedback from your students. So using that sort of technique in class is a really good way to do it. With the asynchronous, things are slightly different. So a lot of people have already put their course together. They've had it -- they have it organized for 14 weeks. They know what's going to happen each time, and each assessment is predictable. However, there are certain things that students might need outside of what you've already created in your asynchronous course. So can you ask them questions and say, "Hey, I understand, you know, we're in week four. We're in Module 3 or 4, for example. What do you need from me as your professor to help you work through these asynchronous components?" Maybe it's something like more office hours. Maybe it's something like more contact or better feedback. There's lots of things that can happen in an asynchronous class, even though your weeks and your modules are already set out. So, yeah, I think that's a --

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely, Mike. And, you know, sometimes the request for feedback -- or we're essentially getting a formative assessment of our course design.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Sometimes it's really general, but we can also ask for specific feedback. So maybe -- you know, one of the things that I know in the past that I struggle with is I always thought my instructions about assignments were crystal clear.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yes, sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: But if you have, let's say, for an example, a discussion forum on an assignment, and you're getting a lot of questions, that in itself is feedback that maybe your instructions weren't so clear. And we can also ask our students for specific feedback about specific elements of the course, so are the instructions for Assignment Number 1 clear to you? If not, what else do you need to know?" So, you know, Stop, Start, Continue or "What's working well for you in this course? What are you struggling with?" Those are general requests for feedback, but we can also get really specific if we're starting to notice that students might be struggling in a particular area of the course.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right. And that's the third element we're going to look at -- is how do we get really specific? We've heard the words "big data" and "analytics" being thrown around a lot for a lot of us, me included. I know it's useful. I don't really delve into it that much, but I know it's a valuable way to get feedback. So both Blackboard and Teams do offer some fairly rich data that we can use to check in on our students' progress. One of the most basic ones is we all, hopefully, at this point are using our Blackboard Gradebook so that we can see -- you know, so that we can see what our students are -- how our students are involved and we can put -- post the notes -- sorry -- the marks for them. But one of the things you're going to see in your grade -- in your Blackboard Gradebook is last access. And that's the first thing I usually look at. So I can see when is the last time that each student has accessed the Blackboard shell?" So if I have a fairly detailed analysis or a detailed explanation that I want them to do, I can see that they've actually gone in at the time that the assignment has opened or that -- let's say I was in a class. I can see that they've actually attended that class just by whether they've accessed it or not. So that's an easy, sort of quick win on just tracking what your students are doing. There are also a couple more sort of more detailed things that you can do in Blackboard. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail, but I would like to just highlight them for all of you. There's an evaluation tab in the Course Tools section, and it has four parts to it. It has Course Analytics, Organizational Reports, Performance Dashboard, and Retention Centre. And I have actually used the Retention Centre in classes, and I find it very useful. So just quickly, what you can do with the Retention Centre is you can set some standards that you would like your students to meet. And if students are not meeting those standards, Blackboard will flag them for you as the professor. And it will tell you and notify you "Hey, seven of these students have not reached these basic metrics that you set out." And there's lots of different metrics that you can create. So for those professors who have large classes and they can be really hard to keep track of, this is a really good way to get some data on the performance of your students, and that's a really, really good and powerful tool to use. All the other ones are useful in their own way. We

don't have the time nor the knowledge to go through all of those right now, but I just looked on Cornerstone yesterday, and there are -- every week, there are sessions being given on Cornerstone that talk exactly about this. So if you're interested in how to create some of that data and use some of that data for your feedback, there's a -- there -- for example, there's one on grade centres and rubrics. And if the session's on grade centres, grade centres will go into how to use the Retention Centre, so. And same with Teams. Teams will give you analytics about who's been in, who's left messages, who's commented. So those analytics for you as a professor are really powerful tools, especially now, because everything is happening online, and it's kind of hard to lose -- you know, to lose your students just in all the complexity of what we're doing.

NICKI MONAHAN: That's so true, Mike. I used to think about it sometimes, you know. And when I used to work out in the gym on that seventh floor at 200 King and I'd run into students in the gym that I hadn't seen in my class and I'd think --

MICHAEL AVIS: Right, right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- "Wow," you know, and I would -- they look so embarrassed they wanted to walk the other way. And I'd say, "No, don't go away. It's not too late."

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: But I'm really glad you brought up that issue of retention, because we know -- and we had so much research done on retention -- we know that early intervention is a really important component of retention.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yes.

NICKI MONAHAN: So we can use that data. So, for example, use the data to reach out to students who maybe even in week four haven't even accessed your Blackboard course yet. We can go that extra mile. And we know at these really challenging and difficult times, sometimes we do need to go that extra mile to support our students. So maybe you can send out an email expressing your concern and, you know, your willingness to support student success. Maybe give them an opportunity --

MICHAEL AVIS: Sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- to let you know what barriers they might be experiencing to accessing the course materials or the synchronous sessions. So, you're right. If we have that data, we can really use it to foster student success through early intervention. And I've also heard faculty say, you know, what then -- when they're working with students on MS Teams and students are working maybe in groups that are set for the entire semester and they're creating projects or documents together that they can go in and check on MS Teams. And maybe they see that there's a member of a group or more than one group who hasn't yet contributed to a shared document. This might be a great time to work with those groups and address that issue of non-engaged team members. And again, in group work, early intervention works well, too, because it saves you that headache that we've all had, you know.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Groups at your office door, and now it's going to be at your virtual office door, in week 13 saying, "Hey, yeah, but so-and-so never showed up to our Team meetings." So I know you've worked with groups and MS Teams and you've used some of the data there to really help foster student success as well as, you know, early intervention to support successful group work.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. As a COMM professor, I did my research. The research assignment, which was 30% of the final, I did a debate, a debate with group work. And people -- the students were in Teams, and they were working for weeks the second half of the term trying to do the research, trying to organize. And for me to be able to drop into each group, and especially in Teams and in -- and in -- if you use the group function in Blackboard, it works very nicely -- is you can just drop in and say, "Hey, I know your topic was this. Here's an article that I found that you might be interested to read" or asking them a specific question or asking them if they need help. So being able to drop into these groups as you go is very, very helpful and very useful.

NICKI MONAHAN: So I think one of the key things we've been focussing on is, you know, early is better. And so, you know, in summary, there's lots of different ways to do formative assessment. And every faculty member might have their own particular strategy or tool that you use, and maybe you need to adapt it. But whether your course is designed asynchronously or has synchronous components, the key is, you know, to quote the Nike t-shirt, "Just Do It." By week five at the latest, you should really have some clear, specific feedback from your learners about how they're experiencing your course, what's going well, what's helping them to learn, what's getting in the way of their learning, are there accessibility issues. And hopefully they're going to give you lots of positive feedback, but they may also suggest some changes, and you may need to tinker a little bit. There are lots of things that we can't change midstream, but we can certainly offer support, and I think that's a key ingredient, now more than ever, to help our students be successful.

MICHAEL AVIS: And you know what? It just -- this brought to mind a previous episode that we talked about. And we were talking about the humanity of online learning -- how to bring our humanity as professors and our concern for our students and their well-being -- how to bring that forward. And this is a great opportunity to let that come to the forefront, right? Once you've got that feedback, you know, don't be afraid to be flexible and understanding and enthusiastic. So when someone says you're doing a great job at this, take that and say, "You know, I have worked hard." You deserve it, right?

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: But yeah, getting these -- getting this feedback and acting on it and having it reflect how you work with your students moving forward is a really great way to, like I said, bring that humanity, what we talked about previously.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. So a formative assessment, it's really feedback about how your students are doing.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: Are they moving towards achieving the learning outcomes? And what's their sense of how you're doing in terms of supporting them to be successful? And maybe this is also a time to do a little self-reflection. We want all of our faculty to be self-reflective practitioners and think just for yourself. Take some time in week four or week five. Take a deep breath, pause, and ask yourself, "What am I doing well?" Give yourself a pat on the back for all of your hard work. And then maybe there are some things that you know you need to change and something that you might need to do to step up your game.

MICHAEL AVIS: Right, right.

NICKI MONAHAN: But it's a critical time, and we know that our students appreciate when they feel like we're listening to them about their experiences.

MICHAEL AVIS: Absolutely.

NICKI MONAHAN: So we hope this has been a useful session on formative feedback. We always appreciate you listening, and stay tuned for the next episode of XChange, the podcast for faculty, by faculty.

MICHAEL AVIS: Take care, Nicki.

NICKI MONAHAN: You too, Mike. I hope your kids stay healthy and you do as well.

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