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## Using “Live” Assignments for Formative Assessment

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### Using “Live” Assignments for Formative Assessment

Posted on [June 7, 2022](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)

At the [Teaching the Teachers Conference](#) a few weeks ago, [I gave a demonstration](#) of a formative assessment style we've been using at my institution for the past year and a half: a live assignment, AKA the Research Practicum. The presentation was virtual; COVID struck, of course, and I couldn't get on a plane and fly to Portland. Fortunately, the nature of this assessment lends itself *beautifully* to a pivot to virtual because it is *already* entirely virtual. The Research Practicum uses Zoom or some other video conferencing platform and asks students to research while sharing their screen as their professor observes.

Yes, you are reading that right: for this assessment, you meet with each student, individually, for an hour on Zoom and watch them research. Here is some background information, before you dismiss this assessment as impractical or intimidating or insane.

The Research Practicum was born out of the pandemic, when Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law professor and Director of the Law Library Ingrid Mattson piloted an assignment with her remote winter intersession legal research course: instead of completing their research assessments in writing, as was the norm in the course, students could meet on Zoom and complete the assignment “live,” talking through their process and asking for help as they went. Students were at first apprehensive; as I've joked to most of my own students, *if my boss watched over my shoulder while I did research, I'd be nervous too!* But then, students finished the assignment and something unusual happened: they asked to use the same format for their next assignment.

The Research Practicum fills a gap in the law school curriculum acknowledged by many, [even the ABA](#): a lack of formative assessment—the kind of assessment that helps students and professors check in with their learning and understanding *throughout* the semester, rather than at the end. In the Research Practicum, students receive immediate feedback and suggestions for improvement. Students who are, for whatever reason, hesitant to ask questions in front of their entire class can ask questions one-on-one. And it certainly doesn't hurt that the assignments are scheduled to last an hour, a significantly shorter time commitment than what most of them budget for written research assignments. Nerves aside, students overwhelmingly *prefer* the live assessment format to the written format.

Our instructors—a combination of full-timers at Cardozo and adjuncts—like it, too. The Research Practicum gives you the opportunity to observe, in real time, each individual student's research process. You learn about their research quirks (like trying to use commas as a search term connector), the skills they might need to review (like browsing the table of contents of a statutory code), and the concepts they don't understand (like the difference between the Federal Register and the Code of Federal Regulations). You get the chance to redirect each student and answer their questions without needing to write any of it down—and without wondering, after the fact, if they

even read your written feedback, anyway. A bonus? As soon as each meeting is over, you are done grading. No late nights with papers.

If you're spending this summer working on your syllabus and assignments for the upcoming academic year, I encourage you to consider this kind of assessment model. It is incredibly adaptable and can be reworked to fit your needs. Any existing assessment you have can easily be converted into this format, so long as the assessment asks students to research *something* and that thing is relatively easily found.

Here's our procedure; I encourage you to adapt it to fit the needs of your curriculum and your students:

1. **Students register for individual timeslots to complete the Research Practicum assignment.** The amount of time you set aside varies based on your course and your calendar. Typically, we do each assignment over the course of one or two weeks, which is manageable with 25 students.
2. **The professor sends Zoom links to each student.**
3. **The professor and student meet on the Zoom call. The call should be recorded.**
4. **The professor shares or sends the fact pattern to the student and gives them as much time as needed to read through it.** The process of sending the fact pattern to the student can take many forms depending on whether you want students to do any pre-meeting research: you can post it to a course page for all students to see in advance; you can email it to the student a few hours before their individual meeting for the assignment; you can share your own computer screen with the fact pattern on it once the meeting begins; you can send it via Zoom chat once the meeting begins.
5. **The student shares their computer screen or browser window.** *(As an aside, a fun side-effect of this format is that students gain some sympathy for their professors teaching virtually; many of them have not screen shared before and show frustration with the process, acknowledging it is more difficult than they expected).*
6. **The professor begins to ask the student research questions based on the fact pattern.** They observe as the student does research for an answer or a source. The professor can offer suggestions, tips, or hints throughout. The student can ask questions, consult their notes, use Google, and do anything else they might do when researching without their professor observing.
7. **After the assessment is complete, the professor assigns a grade on a rubric based on the student's performance.**
8. *Optional:* the student completes a post-assignment reflection, wherein they consider what they did well, what they can improve on, and give themselves a grade on the rubric.

That's it! Assessment done. We schedule these assignments for an hour, but often they are faster. You could certainly make them shorter, which would make it easier to do live assignments with bigger class sections. You could make many changes, really, to make the format fit into your course and to meet your student's needs. The point is that students really like getting this kind of immediately applicable feedback. Give it a try, it's worth a shot!

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#### **4 Responses to Using "Live" Assignments for Formative Assessment**



**Stephanie Farne** says:

June 8, 2022 at 12:13 pm

This sounds great. I am definitely going to try it in my next ALR class. Thanks for sharing.

[Reply](#)

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**Joyce Manna Janto** says:

June 9, 2022 at 9:47 am

I highly recommend this method of assessment. I've been doing it for years, paired with a more in-depth written exam. My students have a half hour to answer 3 randomly chosen questions while I watch. The students initially dread the idea of doing research with me looking on, but ultimately they say that is was a positive experience.

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