

Case Study Title	Building assessment literacy through guided analysis of coursework tasks: Using the Time and Effort on Task template with first-year undergraduates at a Scottish University
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Course information	Participants were first-year students on a credit-bearing skills module at the University of the West of Scotland. The module focuses on academic, personal, and professional development and is taught face-to-face through weekly workshops. The module was delivered to multiple programmes within the general area of Social Sciences.
Assessment information	In this pilot study the students chose which assessment task they wished to focus on from any of their current modules. They were introduced to the toolkit during a workshop on time management and independent study.
Aim of the pilot study	To assess the utility of the Time and Effort on Task (TET) Toolkit when introduced during an active learning workshop related to independent study. Undergraduates in first year created an action plan for an assessment task of their own choice, using the TET template and with guidance from staff.
Research question	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Do we observe an increase in self-reported confidence for assessment tasks generally, after using the Time and Effort on Task Template? 2) What are students' perceptions of the template, after using it to plan for an assessment task?
Institutional Ethics Approval Code	Education & Social Sciences: 2025-24033-19066

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Contents

Rationale	3
Methodology	3
Design	3
Participants	3
Procedure	4
Consideration of ethical issues	5
Findings	5
Quantitative Data	5
Qualitative Data	6
Discussion and Reflection.....	7
Conclusions	9
References	9
Appendix 1: Survey items	11
Appendix 2: Example of a student-completed template.....	13

Rationale

The participants in this pilot study were new to assessment tasks in higher education. When the workshop took place, they were still within the first half of their first term – the ‘encounter’ phase of their transition to university (Coertjens et al., 2017). Expectations about workload vary and are dependent on the level of academic experience prior to university (Money et al., 2017), suggesting that first-year students and students new to a particular system need more support in how they understand and work on assessments. Their assessment literacy for higher education was at an early stage, and the workshop as a whole was designed to support its further development. It therefore began with a discussion of the meaning of independent learning, the types of assessments they would encounter on their course, and the grading system. The student planning template from the TET toolkit was introduced in the second half of the session, and then students were given the chance to fill it in for a coursework project of their choice from any module on their programme of study.

The free choice of coursework task provided an important element of self-determination, potentially increasing student motivation to engage with the task. Opportunities for students to practise judging their own responses to assessment tasks need to be provided, so that students can learn to identify what is good about their work and what could be improved (Smith et al, 2013). In this case, students could also choose how they wanted to work within the workshop – either digitally, or via hard copies of the template (with the majority choosing the paper handout). While tutors can provide guidance, ultimately this planning template is designed to foster and support independent learning, and the responses given to the questions, including estimates of time and effort are highly personal. For example, judgements of mental effort are inherently highly subjective (Wolpe et al., 2024). For this reason, it was emphasised throughout that the plans were personal and individual, and that the students should expect their answers to differ from those of their peers.

Methodology

Design

This pilot study used an anonymous online survey method, with two time points for data collection. The first survey was conducted in class just before the students used the TET planning template, the second was completed just after using the template, at the end of the workshop session.

Participants

Participants were first year students on the Psychology, Criminology & Psychology, and Social Work programmes at UWS. Each participant attended one of 9 workshops

delivered by two staff members. A total of 131 students consented to the study and contributed some data. There were 113 women (86.3%), 10 men (7.6%), and 8 (6.1%) who selected 'prefer not to say' or missed out the question. The percentage of participants in each age category is shown in Table 1. On the questions about their time use and other commitments outside university, 85.5% were commuter students, 6.9% were in full time employment, 61.8% were in part time employment and 26.7% had caring responsibilities.

Age category	Percentage of the sample
18-21 years	56.5%
22-30 years	26.0%
31-40 years	8.4%
41-50 years	3.1%
51-60 years	0.8%
Did not disclose	5.4%

Procedure

Introducing the Toolkit to Students

The tutors delivering the workshop met in advance of the session to review the slides and make sure there was a shared understanding of how the session would proceed. One of the workshops was delivered online, but the others were delivered in person. The tutors introduced the toolkit within the second half of a more general workshop on time management and independent study. In the face-to-face workshops, students were provided with a choice of either digital or hard copies of the template document. They were asked to think about how it might be applied to a coursework task in one of their other modules. The tutors had some familiarity with their other modules and were able to help them find assessment information. They also drew on the collective knowledge of the class to help identify upcoming assessments. While students completed the template, tutors circulated amongst the class providing guidance and answering questions. The online workshop had only a very small number of attendees, who were temporarily put into individual break-out rooms, which afforded them some privacy while the tutor visited in turn to see if there were any questions. At the end of all sessions, tutors reminded students where they could find the toolkit resources and encouraged students to use the template throughout the term, updating it as needed for the chosen coursework task, as well as using it for other assessments.

Data Collection

Anonymous, online student data was collected before and after using the template as a class exercise. They accessed the surveys using QR codes which led to the QuestionPro software, on their personal devices. Although all students were asked to complete the questionnaires as part of the workshop, they could choose whether or not to submit the data to the study with explicit response options offered for either choice. Only data from students opting-in to the study are included below. The surveys were linked by means of an anonymous code word that students created during the first survey.

Pre-intervention survey: The questions are shown in [Appendix 1](#). The four questions about coursework confidence were combined into an overall confidence scale with a possible minimum of 4 and maximum of 40, which showed reasonable internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$). There then followed a series of demographic questions asking about age, gender, commuting to university, paid employment and caring responsibilities.

Post-intervention survey: The first set of 4 questions were repeated from the pre-intervention survey, and the combined scale from these questions showed good reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$). A set of direct evaluation questions about the toolkit came next, which were a mixture of open and closed questions yielding both quantitative and qualitative data.

Consideration of ethical issues

Anonymous questionnaires were chosen to mitigate the risk of perceived coercion, given that the students are in a dependent relationship with the researcher (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics). A further consideration was that these students were still in the 'encounter' phase of the transition to higher education (Coertjens et al., 2017), where they were trying to navigate an unfamiliar environment during the initial weeks. A likely lack self-efficacy for assessment tasks at university was another factor underpinning the choice of anonymous questionnaires as the data collection method.

Findings

Quantitative Data

Across the whole sample, it was possible to link 119 students with complete responses on the self-reflection questions between Time 1 and Time 2 using their anonymous codewords. The average score on the self-reflection questions was 24.28 ($SD = 5.70$) before working with the template, and 27.13 ($SD = 5.98\%$) afterwards (see Figure 1). A Shapiro-Wilk test suggested that the distribution of scores deviated from normality both before ($W = 0.97, p = .039$) and after ($W = 0.97, p = .004$) using the template, with a negative skew evident from inspection of histograms. Therefore, a Wilcoxon signed-

ranks test was used to compare performance at the two time points. This showed a statistically significant increase in confidence, $z = -6.19$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size, $r = -.74$.

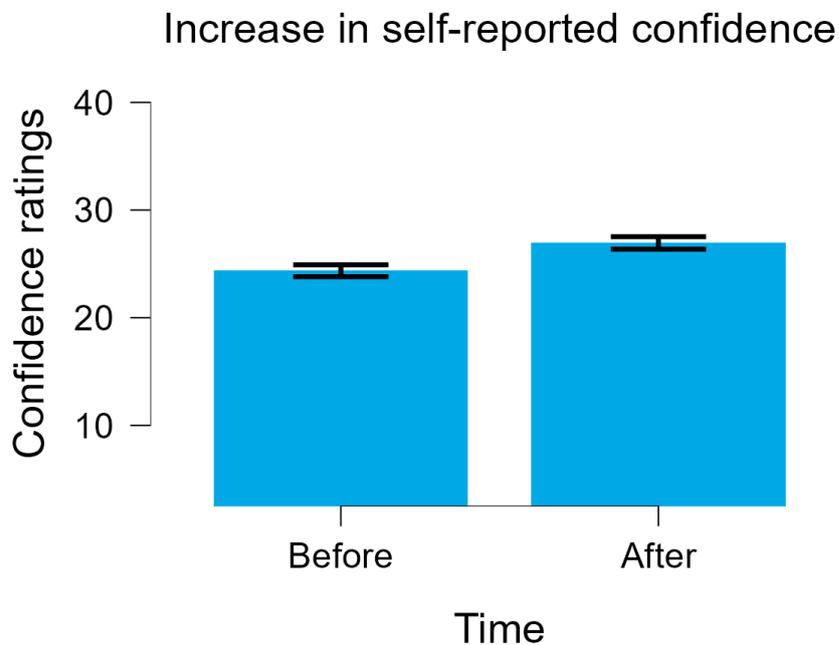


Figure 1: Coursework confidence ratings provided before and after using the Time and Effort on Task student planning template

When students were asked to score the template for usefulness on a scale from 1-5, the scores tended to cluster around the middle to upper range. Of 117 responses, the largest percentage selected a rating of 4 out of 5 (44.4%), 35.9% selected 3, 9.4% selected 5 (invaluable), 6.0% selected 2, and 4.3% selected 1 (not useful at all). The question on whether they could apply the template on future tasks was answered by 118 participants, with 89% answering yes.

Qualitative Data

Textual responses from 101 students were subjected to a descriptive thematic analysis. Students identified many benefits and applications of the toolkit, with the following being mentioned repeatedly:

- 1) The ability to break down tasks
- 2) The space to think about what is needed and make a written plan
- 3) The skills and tools needed in one space
- 4) The ability to apply to any coursework as needed

Students said they had more confidence as a result of being able to visualise and identify what they already knew. Many students said that they felt less overwhelmed because they could break down the coursework into more manageable tasks.

“as a visual learner I am able to look at each step and deadline very clearly and it makes completion easier and less stressful”

“Support confidence and understanding of being able to do your assessments... allowing yourself enough time to complete these tasks”

There were several suggestions for development and improvement of the toolkit:

- 1) Step 1 was too complicated
- 2) Less repetition between questions
- 3) Include worked examples
- 4) A list of tools available to students
- 5) Space for reflection
- 6) Add ‘any further actions’ box

A few students commented on the repetition and complicated nature of the first question.

“I think it hard to come up with your own answer in step 1. Potentially have an example of one filled out already or a better understanding of how skills etc can be transferred”

Several students requested more worked examples to show how it *should* be filled out.

“add more examples for the questions”

“Be more detailed, have an example of what one looks like”

Students were asked what resources they would like to see available with the toolkit. Most of the responses were about adding course materials such as PowerPoint presentations, readings, and links to the virtual learning environment. Some also mentioned examples of coursework and a daily planner. The TET user guide was available to students in the class through a [link](#), but also some students made requests for a user guide, so it is likely that some students did not follow the link to look it up. These first-year students, without prior experience of university assessment, said it would be useful to have completed examples to show them what is expected.

Discussion and Reflection

The aim of this pilot study was to assess how successfully the TET student planning template could be used by first year students during an active workshop session on independent learning and time management. In this case, students were free to choose which of their assessments they wished to plan and it was not tied to a specific

coursework task. Both quantitative and qualitative data converged on the conclusion that the planning template could be successfully implemented, and that students found value in it. Self-reported confidence for coursework tasks improved after using the template, and 89% of students thought they could use it for future assessment tasks. Indeed, the ability to apply the tool flexibly to different tasks was one of the benefits identified from the free text responses.

The finding of a large effect size for the increase in confidence must be interpreted with caution, given that there was no control group to indicate what the increase in confidence would have been after a similar workshop without the template. Also, the demand characteristics were high in this situation, potentially leading students to agree that their confidence had increased in order to please their tutor. It was notable from the questions asked in the workshops that occasionally students became confused about the purpose of the template, and interpreted Step 2 as an essay plan instead of a workload management plan. They tried to fill it in as if the rows in the table were sections of an essay, and it was necessary for the tutor to work to dispel this misconception. An example of this can be seen in [Appendix 2](#), but what can also be seen here, is that Step 3 prompts the student to realise that they have not included the preparatory reading stage, but only the task of drafting the different sections of the essay. A very small minority of the qualitative responses reflected confusion about the task, and it was not a dominant theme in these data, but rather an occasional occurrence that practitioners using the toolkit should be aware of.

A more common theme in the qualitative comments was that students felt Step 1 was too long. Students are known to struggle with articulating their transferrable skills from prior learning (e.g., Hill et al., 2022) and it was also noted by the tutors that some students spent a long time on Step 1 within the workshop, and that few completed the whole thing within the 30-40 minutes allocated for the task. For practitioners working with the template in a class in future, it may be advisable to give first-year students explicit 'permission' to leave questions blank, move on and come back rather than spend a long time stuck at Step 1. They should be encouraged to think of it as a document they can come back to, amend and update throughout the term rather than a solely a class exercise. This adaptability is aligned with Davies and Taras (2018) who argue that assessment needs to be inclusive, with a shared understanding between all involved, and that should happen with each new group.

Another piece of feedback from the participants was that they felt a sense of repetition in the toolkit, in that 'where can I find help and support' is present in both Step 1 and Step 2. The emphasis of these two sections is intended to be different, with the 'where can I find help' part of Step 1 relating to gaps in prior knowledge and skills, and the 'where can I find help' section of Step 2 relating to extra support for the new knowledge

and skills being developed as part of the module. It may be useful for the tutor to elaborate on this difference when they introduce the toolkit to students, and again provide reassurance that not every box has to be filled in during the workshop.

Despite these caveats, the template worked successfully as a class activity. The students engaged well with it across all the workshop groups, stayed on task, and with a small number of exceptions, their evaluations were positive. Guidance on using the TET template was provided verbally by the tutors both through an introduction session, and by circulating amongst the class while they worked and answering questions. Some students needed assistance to find the assessment briefing documents on the virtual learning environment pages of other modules. However, it is likely that some students were reticent to ask the tutor directly for help with this sort of task. The feedback suggested that some students did not navigate to the online TET guidance and might have preferred hard copies of a user guide to be provided alongside the planning template. They were also especially interested in guidance in the form of worked examples. These types of resources, including a detailed student guidance document, are available to tutors running similar sessions via the project's website (Quality Assurance Agency, 2026).

Conclusions

The findings of this pilot study are relevant to other colleagues working with first year undergraduate students to support their assessment literacy. Students were able to use the TET toolkit successfully within a workshop setting and engaged with it well. Their self-reported confidence for assessment tasks was higher by the end of the session, and they provided positive evaluations of the template.

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Appendix 1: Survey items

Self-reflection questions

- Given your previous experience with completing coursework at school or college, how confident do you feel about managing your time to meet deadlines? (Rating scale 1-10)
- How confident do you feel about breaking down coursework tasks into all the necessary sub-steps? (Rating scale 1-10)
- How confident do you feel about being able to find information and seek help during coursework tasks? (Rating scale 1-10)
- Please rate your overall level of confidence about being able to complete university coursework tasks successfully (i.e., achieving a mark you would be happy with): (Rating scale 1-10)?

Demographics (questions that allow a basic description of the class profile, or that relate to university experience or how time is spent)

- Age range:
 - Prefer not to say
 - 18 - 21
 - 22 – 30
 - 31 – 40
 - 41 – 50
 - 51 – 60
 - 60 +
- Do you commute for your course?
 - Yes (new follow-up question)
 - No (move to question after)
- How long is the commute for?
 - Less than 30 minutes
 - 30-60 minutes
 - 1 – 2 hours
 - More than 2 hours
- Please select any additional responsibilities in addition to being a student that apply to you:
 - Full-time employment
 - Part-time employment
 - Caring responsibilities
 - Other (please specify if you wish):
- Gender:

- Prefer not to say
- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer to self-identify: _____ (Specify if you wish)

After using the toolkit (end of session)

Please enter the codeword you used in the first questionnaire, to allow us to match up your data

Repeat of initial self-reflection questions

For the coursework task you chose for the template, please rate your level of confidence about being able to complete it successfully (i.e., achieving a mark you would be happy with): (Rating scale 1-10)?

Direct evaluation of template

- Having used the Time and Effort on Task template, how useful do you think the tool is?
 - Scale 1 (not useful at all) – 5 (invaluable)
- What do you see as the key benefit of this tool? (*free text*)
- Could you apply this tool for your future coursework tasks?
 - Yes (please explain how)
 - No (please explain why not)
- How could this tool be further developed? (*free text*)
- What types of resources or materials related to the assessment tool would be especially useful for students? (*free text*)

Appendix 2: Example of a student-completed template for an essay coursework task

In the template below, the student does a good job of considering prior skills, knowledge and experience in Step 1. They make some sensible suggestions of places where they could find help and support, even if some of them are general (e.g., ‘referencing websites’) rather than specific. In Step 2 we can see that the student has focused narrowly on the time to draft the sections of the essay, rather than on the whole process including research. However, we also see that Step 3 then prompts them to reconsider this and realise that they would also need to consider the time involved in finding and reading sources. Tutor feedback would concur with the student’s own realisation, that Step 2 should be adapted to include the whole project timeline, including the researching, reading, and note-making stages that would come before drafting the essay. This would result in a significant increase in the time estimation with the result that work would need to be spread over multiple dates and started sooner. With the tutor’s feedback, the completion of the template becomes an exercise in co-creation and facilitates open communication between staff and students about expectations.

Step 1: Establishing your relevant knowledge and skills		
Knowledge and skills	List all relevant items	Where can I find help with this? – <i>consider options from previous modules, or university-wide services.</i>
Have I completed similar assessments before? <i>(Consider format e.g., essay/presentation and topic at any course/level)</i>	I have completed essays before and have made vague plans and outlines in preparation but have not been assessed on an essay plan.	Looking at planning I have done for previous essays could help.
What knowledge from the course might help me complete this task? <i>(Consider links with other modules too)</i>	The course materials from the topic area. Additional reading and seminars	Suggested reading on [Virtual Learning Environment]

<p>What knowledge from outside the course might help me complete this task? <i>(Consider any real-world relevance or applications of the topic)</i></p>	<p>Knowledge from other classes and essays could prepare me for this listening to different lecturer’s suggestions for planning and preparing for different essays could be applied to this task. With scheduling and weekly planning, I can incorporate time for my essay plan also.</p>	<p>Keeping this assessment in mind and finding relevant information on [Virtual Learning Environment] possibly from other classes</p>
<p>What academic skills do I already have that can help me? <i>(e.g., literature searching, data analysis, or referencing)</i></p>	<p>Mind mapping and referencing are skills I have developed on previously and will both be relevant in this task.</p>	<p>TET task. Referencing guides</p>
<p>What academic skills do I need to develop that can help me? <i>(e.g., literature searching, data analysis, or referencing)</i></p>	<p>Academic writing could be improved as well as keeping the written components and references relevant to the question and the aim of the essay plan.</p>	<p>Assessment outlines and marking guides</p>
<p>Have I gained skills outside university that are relevant? <i>(e.g., work/hobbies can build skills in teamwork & time management)</i></p>	<p>Teamwork and time management are skills I have developed working and will be relevant.</p>	
<p>Is there specific software, equipment or tools/resources I need to complete this task, and do I know how to use them?</p>	<p>There are referencing websites that could be useful here.</p>	<p>Asking lecturers for their recommendations of websites or their advice.</p>

Step 2: Breaking down of task into sub steps

(Feel free to add or remove as many steps as necessary)

Step	Description	Estimate your likely Time-on-Task using a flexible range <i>(e.g., 4-6 hours)</i>	Estimate how much mental effort is needed <i>(e.g., high, moderate, low)</i>	Target date for completion <i>(consider workload on other modules)</i>	Where can I find help with this step? <i>(consider options from previous modules, or university-wide services)</i>
1	Introduction: roughly 250 words as a draft for an essay that will be developed from this plan	1 hour	High	20 th October	Topic lecture materials
2	Main body: this is broken up into bullet points, and each bullet point will be expected to be developed into full paragraphs for the final essay. Point explanation example and referencing are all included here.	2hours	High	20 th October	Further suggested reading. Online sources
3	Conclusion: roughly 250 words as a draft for the later essay.	1 hour	High	20 th October	Topic lecture materials and referring to the assessment question and introduction.
4	Indicative bibliography: Referencing should be done well and relevant to what is being references in the essay.	1 hour	Moderate	20 th October	Referencing guides.
Total		4.5/5 hours			

Step 3: Final checks for maximising success		
Item	Yes/No	Further comments
Review the assessment brief. Are the steps above covering the whole task? <i>(Have I missed anything?)</i>	Yes	Maybe not considered time for further reading and research as heavily as time to complete the task
Review the marking criteria. Will the steps above help me to meet all of them? <i>(Could I do more to maximise my grade?)</i>	Yes	
Is the total estimated amount of time realistic? <i>(Consider how much of the module this assessment is worth – e.g., 100%, 50%, 30%? Consider coursework demands on other modules)</i>	Yes	Assessment is worth 40% roughly spending 4 or more hours on completing the task
Do I understand what skills and knowledge will be developed by this assessment task, to support future success on the course? <i>(Make a list)</i>	Yes	The skills and knowledge developed in this assessment will be required in most all of my other assessments.

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