

**SMALL STEP, GIANT LEAP:**

# THE POWER OF PAY-IT-FORWARD ASSIGNMENTS

By Anastasia Stuart-Edwards

Department of Human Resources Management and Organization,  
University of Lethbridge

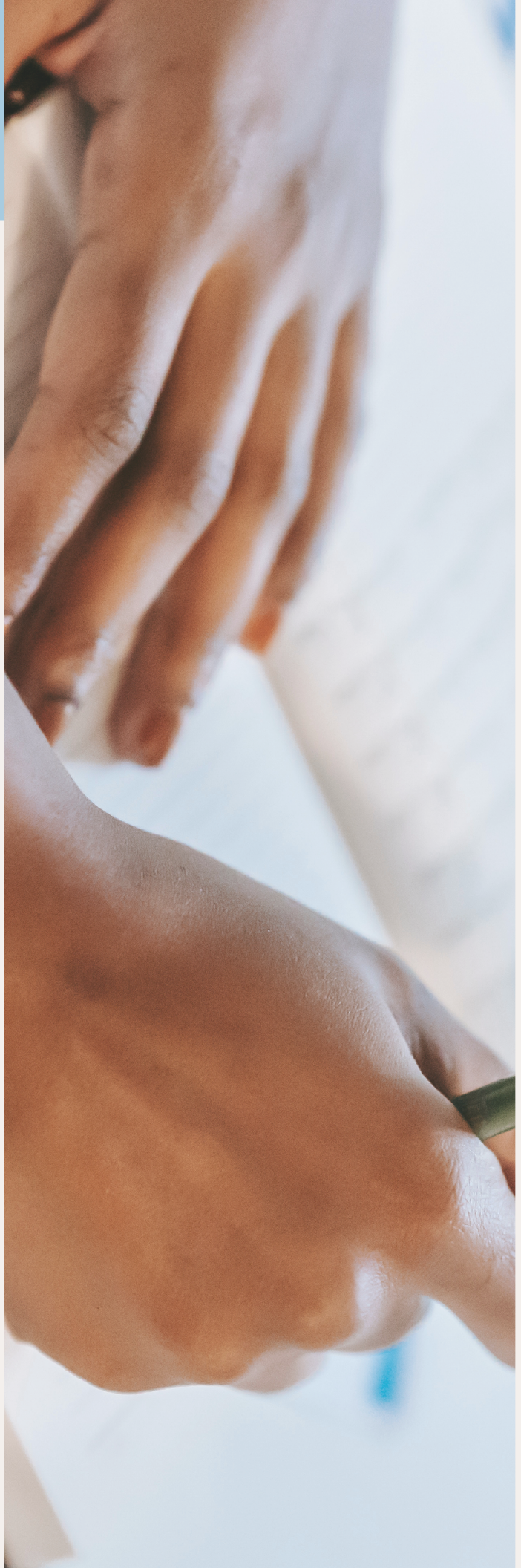


# What Is a Pay-It-Forward Assignment?

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A Pay-It-Forward Assignment (PIFA), also known as a non-disposable assignment, transcends the traditional student-teacher dyad as a distinctive learning activity (Berdahl, 2022; Seraphin et al., 2019). Despite the diversity of PIFAs, several key characteristics set them apart from disposable assignments:

- PIFAs **add value** to the world and transcend the student-teacher relationship, making an impact on learning beyond a single academic term by being utilized by future students and the broader community.
- They are **openly accessible** with the potential for global sharing, ranging from brief in-class discussions to the creation and dissemination of new Open Educational Resources.
- PIFAs are **authentic**, with each student crafting them in ways most meaningful and relevant to their experiences and goals.
- They have increased **real-world relevance** as they promote the development and practice of valuable skills.



## Ten Ideas for Pay-It-Forward Assignments

PIFAs can adopt various forms and can be adapted to a wide array of disciplines and contexts. A few examples include (Berdahl, 2022; Seraphin et al., 2019):



# 01

### Graphic novella

Students create a graphic short story that explains a key idea. It allows students to articulate complex concepts or ideas in a more accessible and engaging manner, fosters storytelling abilities, and encourages innovative ways of thinking.



# 02

### Mind-map

Students construct a mind-map for a specific topic or a core idea. This activity promotes critical thinking, improves memory retention, and allows students to synthesize complex information.



# 03

### Power-point slide deck

Students create a short series of lecture slides that teach a major point of a lesson. This activity helps to improve digital literacy and encourages students to convey information effectively, enhancing their public speaking and presentation skills.

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# 04

### Photo essay

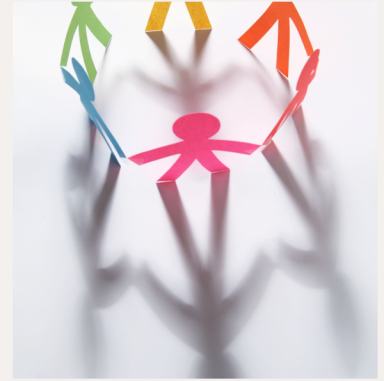
Students use a photo or series of photos to illustrate a key idea in a lesson, and then use short amounts of text to explain how the photos illustrate the idea. This task encourages students to think critically about how images can be used to communicate ideas or concepts and improves their observational and interpretative skills.



# 05

### Learning activity

Students develop a new learning activity for a lesson, such as a quiz or a game. This encourages a deeper understanding of the course material and fosters creativity.



# 06

### Mock peer-review

Students participate in a mock peer-review process, emulating the process of submitting a paper to a journal. This exercise helps students understand the academic review process and fosters a sense of scholarly community.

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# 07

### Podcast

Students create a podcast episode related to the course content. This assignment can enhance research, scriptwriting, recording, and editing skills.



# 08

### Infographic

Students design an infographic that visually represents a complex concept or data set from the course. This task can improve research, data analysis, and design skills.



# 09

### Wikipedia article

Students create or edit a Wikipedia article related to the course. This activity can enhance research, writing, and collaboration skills.



# 10

### Digital portfolio

Students create a digital portfolio that showcases their learning and growth throughout the course. This task can improve reflection, self-assessment, and digital literacy skills.

# Benefits of Pay-It-Forward Assignments

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PIFAs offer numerous benefits (Moss, 2022; Scott, 2022; Seraphin et al., 2019; Seraphin & Stock, 2020), including:

- **Critical skill learning:** PIFAs promote the development of information literacy, communication skills, and critical thinking.
- **Engagement:** PIFAs foster self-regulated learning and autonomy, engaging students in their learning process.
- **Career advancement:** The tangible products of PIFAs can be added to personal portfolios and showcased to future employers, demonstrating students' skills and accomplishments.
- **Academic integrity:** PIFAs encourage original work and discourage academic dishonesty by having students create unique, open-source materials.



# Challenges of Pay-It-Forward Assignments

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While PIFAs offer numerous benefits, they also present certain challenges (Bates, 2015; Seraphin et al., 2019):

- **Student resistance:** Some students may be uncomfortable with the exposure and vulnerability that comes from creating open content for wide use.
- **Need for metacognitive skills:** These assignments require substantial metacognitive skills - the ability to think about one's own learning process. This means that instructors must provide substantial support at multiple stages in the learning process to help students succeed.
- **Quality control:** The open nature of student-generated content presents a challenge in terms of maintaining and assessing quality. Instructors must anticipate this and provide multiple opportunities for revision and peer review as well as a clear grading rubric to ensure that the content is of high quality and the expectations are clear.



# Recommendations For Effective Implementation

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**1. Align with learning objectives:** The first step to effectively implementing PIFAs is to ensure that the assignments align with the learning objectives of the course or program. This alignment serves two main purposes. First, it helps maintain academic rigour by making sure the assignments are relevant to what students should be learning. Second, it helps students see the value in the assignments, as they can clearly see how the assignments connect to what they are supposed to be learning.

**2. Provide scaffolding and support:** PIFAs, by their nature, require a high level of metacognitive skills from students. To help students succeed, it is essential to provide them with extensive scaffolding and support throughout the creation and execution process. This could include step-by-step guides, resources, feedback sessions, and more. Providing this support can help students navigate the assignment successfully and ensure they have the resources and guidance they need to complete it.

**3. Incentivize quality production:** To ensure high-quality outputs, consider adopting grade-based incentives or other motivational strategies. When students know that their grades or other rewards depend on the quality of their work, they are more likely to put in the time and effort required to produce high-quality materials. Remember, the goal is not just to get students to complete the assignment but to create valuable learning objects that can benefit future students. See Berdahl's (2022) blog post for an example of a grading rubric.

**4. Be open to experiment and learn as an instructor:** Finally, it is important to approach PIFAs with an open mind. Be willing to experiment, learn, and adjust your approach as needed. Remember, PIFAs are a relatively new teaching approach and there is still much to learn about how to implement them most effectively. Be open to feedback from students, and do not be afraid to make changes based on what you learn.

# Personal Experience with Pay-It-Forward Assignment

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I adopted Pay-It-Forward Assignments (PIFAs) in a human resource management upper-level elective course in Spring 2023. Students were encouraged to choose a course-related topic that was challenging, intriguing, or personally relevant and create a lasting 'learning object' using a format they found engaging: a social media critique, a graphic essay, an infographic, or a mind-map. This initiative aimed to transcend disposable assignments by creating something future students could use.

Midway through the term, a consultation session was scheduled. This session was designed to keep students on track with their PIFAs, help them stick to deadlines, and provide a platform to address any issues or roadblocks early. These consultations opened communication channels, allowed me to provide constructive feedback and guidance early in the process, and helped to ensure that students were not left floundering at the last minute. In the final weeks, the class shared and explained their projects, fostering a deeper understanding of the topics and enhancing presentation skills. Additionally, the students submitted self-reflective pieces about their PIFA experiences, prompting critical thinking about their learning process.

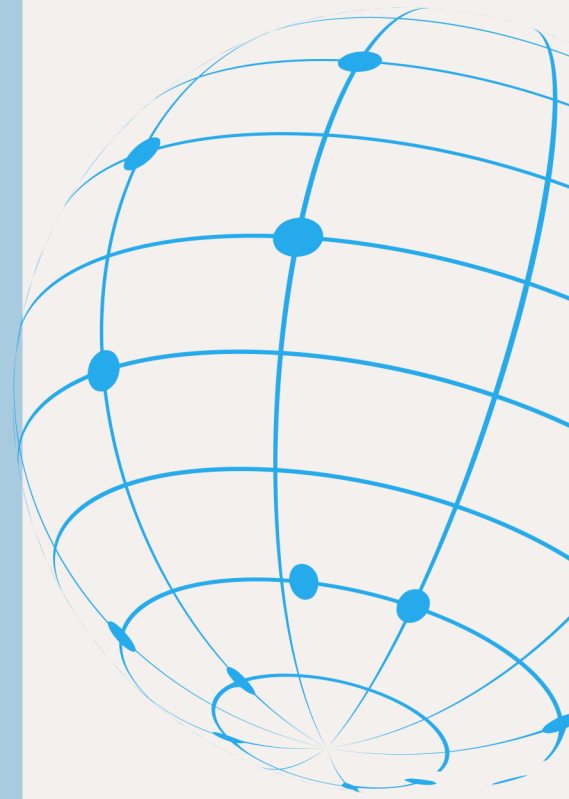
Students created a variety of learning objects, from comprehensive mind maps and infographics to narrative-driven graphic novellas. A particularly memorable project was a 'Family Feud' style game created by one of the students. It was based on the course content and provided a fun and interactive way to review just before the final exam. This demonstrated the innovative ways in which PIFAs can be used to enhance learning and engagement.

At the end of the term, students were asked for permission to share their work with future classes. This additional step reinforced the value of their work, underscoring that these were not mere 'disposable' assignments but valuable contributions to the learning community.

Looking back at this experience, it was one of the smallest yet one of the most rewarding changes I have made to my teaching approach. Not only did it enhance students' learning experiences and develop their skills, but it also enhanced student engagement, fostered a sense of community, and resulted in meaningful, reusable learning resources. It demonstrated how a minor shift in pedagogical methodology can yield significant benefits. I am eager to incorporate PIFAs into more courses in the future.

# Conclusion

The Pay-It-Forward Assignment, with its myriad forms and adaptations, is a powerful tool in contemporary education. Using such assignments transforms students from consumers of knowledge into content creators (Bates, 2015; Scott, 2022), as they promote learning outcomes, help develop valuable transferrable skills, and add meaning and value to student experiences. Despite challenges such as student resistance and the need for quality control, effective implementation strategies—including alignment with learning objectives and provision of extensive support—can optimize the benefits of PIFAs. Ultimately, PIFAs represent a promising avenue for advancing education in an increasingly interconnected and digital world.



## Publicly Available Examples of PIFAs

### Open Education Group:

<https://openedgroup.org/doer-fellows-renewable-assignments>

### University of Central Florida:

[https://topr.online.ucf.edu/r\\_1h7ucljsasbkbsd/](https://topr.online.ucf.edu/r_1h7ucljsasbkbsd/)

### University of British Columbia example + grading rubric:

<https://blogs.ubc.ca/phys101/files/2015/01/LO-Guide.pdf>



# References

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<https://flexible.learning.ubc.ca/case-studies/simon-bates/>

Berdahl, L. (2022). Putting non-disposable assignments to work. *University Affairs*.  
<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/the-skills-agenda/putting-non-disposable-assignments-to-work/>

Moss, J. (2022). Non-disposable assignments and why you should use them. *Open Education at UAF*.  
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## Disclosure

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