



The Lowly Quiz: You'll Love What It Can Do

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Because I was never trained in the formalities of instruction, I've been forced to assemble my own personal arsenal of teaching strategies: respect, humor, personal experiences, glossaries, case studies, student presentations, academic contests and quizzes.



But the one I really rely on is the lowly quiz. I love quizzes as an instructor and as a student. When I was earning a bachelors degree, I had to pass a killer course in electrical engineering. This course had so many concepts and names and equations that it sounded like roll call at an alumni meeting of Nobel Laureates. The course instructor actually introduced me to the quiz process and it worked wonderfully: I passed the course, I believe, because of the quizzes given at each class meeting.

First class

I announce at the first class meeting that we will start every session with a quiz. When the groaning dies down, I relate some of my personal experiences with quizzes and I try to convince students how effective they can be. I characterize the quiz as a learning tool, rather than a test. That doesn't mean I don't grade them and count the grade. I do. I feel that most people try a little harder when there's something at stake. But my

grading is very liberal, and I always drop the lowest quiz score from the semester average. Each quiz generally covers the material presented in the last lecture. The quiz average becomes 15 percent of the final course grade.

It's a Terrific Teaching Tool

I also find that the quizzes are extremely useful as a teaching tool. Since the quiz forces the students to review last sessions's lecture material, it brings about an automatic review process. In addition, I always discuss the answers right after the quiz is over.

So, I've actually expanded my teaching opportunities from one shot to three shots: once in the initial lecture, second when the students review their notes before the quiz, and third when I go over the answers following the quiz. There's a lot of valuable short-term feedback happening here.

What about the Content?

The topics I cover in the quizzes are the ones I want to emphasize; generally the most prominent subject matter in the course, the outcomes the students absolutely need to grasp and take away with them.

I will sometimes give the same quiz questions again, just to underscore the gravity of a certain concept, especially if the class has struggled with a particular topic (like statistics theory in a management course). Handing back the quizzes also helps me learn the names of the students faster and better.

Keep Them Short

Another compelling advantage to the quiz is that it tends to break down a large mass of material into bite-sized chunks. The quizzes are short: three to five short answer questions that require a brief insight into the topic and take ten minutes or less to complete.

Ten Minutes Is All it Takes

This lets the students know what I want them to learn and it lets me know how well my message is

getting through. And I find I can learn quite a lot in ten minutes from carefully worded questions, like these:

- ▶ Define _____, and briefly describe its use.
- ▶ List three things you know about _____.
- ▶ Why is the concept of _____ so widely accepted and applied?

There Are Some Side Benefits, Too:

- ▶ There is a distinct disincentive to skip the lectures.
- ▶ The total class time devoted to the quizzes is less than the time consumed by a midterm exam.
- ▶ Since the quizzes highlight the important concepts in the course, it helps students focus their preparation for the final exam.

The Quiz Process:

- ▶ Quiz at the start of each class.
- ▶ The quiz covers the last lecture material.
- ▶ The quiz average counts toward the course grade, but...
- ▶ The grading is liberal.
- ▶ The lowest quiz score will be dropped, and,
- ▶ The total effect of the quizzes is only 15 percent.

Top 10 Reasons to Quiz Often

Quiz often because quizzes:

- ▶ Encourage class attendance.
- ▶ Force a review of the last lecture notes.
- ▶ Create a third exposure to the quiz material (lecture, pre-quiz review, post-quiz review).
- ▶ Break up complex material into smaller pieces.
- ▶ Highlight important material for students.
- ▶ Give students short-term feedback.
- ▶ Tell you how well the class is following the lecture material.
- ▶ Consume little time.
- ▶ Focus preparation for the final exam.
- ▶ Help you get to know the students and their needs.