"Road Test" A Testing Approach to Ensure Student Competency

by Joe Sainz , TFS Author

After teaching business computer applications for many years, I developed dissatisfaction with testing students' proficiency using word processing and spreadsheet applications. Were students using mechanical or haphazard ways of preparing for these tests, just winging it on the day of the test, or were they truly competent? I needed a strategy to know for sure.

Winging it or truly competent? I needed to know for sure.

My "Road Test" approach

I decided to model my computer tests loosely after the road test part of a typical driving examination; you know the routine: one driver, one examiner together in a car, the driver receiving immediate feedback.

A handout gives the students specific concepts to practice a week in advance of the test. One part of this handout includes basic concepts and the other part includes intermediate-to-advanced. I then split the class in half; one half comes to take the test on one day and the other half comes the next class period. [Of course an alternate learning activity will be needed for the half of the class that is not testing.]

I use two computers in the back of the room to ensure privacy; one computer is for the student to perform the assigned tasks, and one is for me to grade the student using a spreadsheet as he or she does the test. This way, we both know the results of the test immediately.

Tasks Selected at Random

I grade each student on every concept from the basic concepts section, and the student randomly selects two numbered game pieces from a cloth bag, each corresponding to the intermediate-to-advanced concepts. Neither one of us knows which intermediate-to-advanced concept he or she will have to do. This ensures objectivity on my part and enforces having to practice every one of those concepts. It also makes it difficult for students to gain an upper hand by talking with students who have taken the test before.

Like the professional driving examiner after each test, I print my scoring spreadsheet, discuss it item by item, and record the grade on my spreadsheet grade book. All this takes about fifteen minutes, including greeting and small talk.

It's All about Results

Road-tested students have an advantage because:
▶ They are better prepared having coped with the additional pressure of having me observe each step, and it becomes quite evident who is unprepared and who isn't.
▶ They receive immediate results and feedback.
▶ I get to know each student on a one-to-one basis.
▶ I can give instant performance feedback and correct any wrong items on the spot—a very effective tool—something that I find preferable to delayed-feedback testing.
▶ I find any weak items on the test, if any exist.
▶ Grading is immediate and done at the time of the exam. Not only does this save me time outside of class, but it helps students better retain information.
▶ Students become used to thinking on their feet and expressing themselves in situations that may well simulate those they will find in their careers.

Cross-curriculum Applicability

Can this be done in subjects other than computer applications or other hands-on activities? Sure. For example, an English instructor, could question a student's term paper content orally using similar one-on-one methods. It's all too easy to buy a term paper from the many existing Internet sites, but it's tough to fake writing competency when the instructor is monitoring the process.

A math instructor, could evaluate one-on-one for no other reason than to follow a student's thought pattern in solving a problem. This would allow the instructor to find calculation mistakes and process inefficiencies.

I have always favored a one-on-one approach where I can evaluate the work of one person at a time.