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## **LOWERING THE STAKES: TIPS TO ENCOURAGE STUDENT MASTERY AND DETER CHEATING**

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### **Abstract**

With the increase of online courses, many instructors utilize quizzes as a preferred method of assessment. This is especially true for large courses due to the flexibility and convenience that online quizzes can provide since they are often automatically graded by a learning management system. Consequently, it is important that online quizzes are effective in meeting learning goals and encouraging student mastery. This paper will explore how the use of low-stakes quizzes combined with meaningful feedback can help encourage student mastery and serve as a deterrent to cheating in online courses.

### **Introduction**

Instructors often rely on large midterm and final examinations as the culminating measure of student performance and mastery. However, research has shown that these large-scale assessments may be associated with higher anxiety and can have negative impacts on student performance, the very thing they were meant to assess (Stowell, 2010; Schult & McIntosh, 2004; Hembree, 1988). Consequently, it is important that new methods are employed that allow instructors to effectively encourage student mastery and assess student performance without providing increased anxiety in learners.

One of those methods is to provide the learner with multiple attempts at shorter low-stakes quizzes with meaningful feedback available for each question. This will help to reduce the anxiety often associated with high-stakes exams by allowing the learner to focus on their learning rather a grade. Meanwhile access to meaningful feedback allows the learner to self-regulate and fill any learning gaps that may exist (Cassady & Gridley, 2005).

### **Low-stakes Quizzes and Meaningful Feedback**

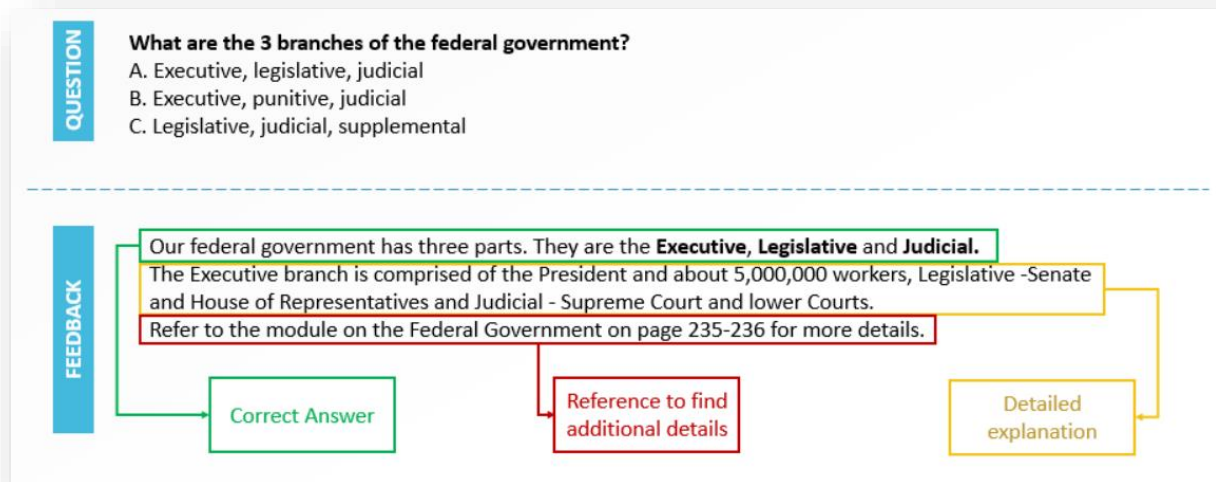
Low-stakes quizzes are an informal set of questions with little or no associated points. Low-stakes quizzes can also be called practice quizzes and are often used by instructors to assess learner knowledge of a given topic or concept. These types of assessments have been shown to improve information retention and transfer by providing the learner with multiple opportunities to recall new information, thus encouraging content mastery (Davis, 2009).

To further enhance the impact of low-stakes quizzes it is recommended that meaningful feedback be provided for each question. These combined strategies can create positive impacts for the learner by promoting reflective practice and enhanced critical thinking, while also developing the instructor-student relationship through the provided feedback (Rottman & Rabidoux, 2017; Warnock, 2013). Meaningful feedback can be easily implemented in online quizzes as it can be preset and automatically provided to the learner after each attempt when using a learning management system (LMS).

When crafting meaningful feedback, instructors should aim to go beyond a simple statement of correctness and provide an in-depth response that will allow learners to not only understand the correct answer, but also gain access to additional information about why the answer is correct and resources to learn more (Davis, 2013; Gipps, 2005; Miller, 2009; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Specifically, meaningful feedback should include three important elements (also see figure 1.1) (Trail-Constant, 2018):

1. Statement of the correct answer
2. Detailed explanation of the answer
3. Reference to find the answer and/or additional resources on the topic

Figure 1.1: Sample low-stakes quiz question with provided feedback



By following the provided formula for giving feedback, learners are given the opportunity to further interact with the learning content. In addition, since there is no penalty for errors, these combined strategies can help to create a pattern of continuous self-assessment and remediation, where the learner is able to identify potential learning gaps and is, furthermore, equipped with the tools to fill them on their own (Trail-Constant, 2018). Through this experience learners feel better prepared for higher-stakes, graded assessments and may then approach them with reduced levels of anxiety (Thelwall, 2000, Warnock, 2013).

## Low-stakes Quizzes as a Cheating Deterrent

Now what does all of this have to do with cheating? Before we explain how low-stakes quizzes can help to deter cheating in online courses, it's important to understand the current impact of cheating. According to past research the percentage of students that admitted to cheating ranges from 9 to 90% (McEwen, Wisely & Hoggatt, 2009) and with the increase in online instruction it is becoming more difficult to identify and discourage cheating. Consequently, institutions spend thousands of dollars on proctoring software to prevent and deter students from cheating.

On the other hand, low-stakes quizzes may be a viable alternative to expensive proctoring software and may help to discourage cheating. By reducing the pressure often associated with high-stakes quizzes/exams and allowing the learner multiple opportunities for self-correction, multiple attempts at low-stakes quizzes with meaningful feedback shifts the focus from achieving a good grade to striving for content mastery (Gillard-Cook & West, 2006). This provides a passive and simple way to deter students from cheating

## Conclusion

As with all instructional strategies, it is not guaranteed that the provided strategies will be relevant to all educational scenarios and result in unfailing success, as success is influenced by many different factors which are unique to each individual learning scenario. Instead, the provided strategies are meant to inspire instructional professionals towards a larger paradigm shift from a grade-centered focus to a more mastery-centered focus. It is through this change that effective learning processes can begin to take root and learners can be truly impacted.

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