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Implementation of a low-stakes daily assessment in a large introductory LAC course

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The Benefits of Frequent Low-Stakes Assessments in Large LAC Courses

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Background: The What and Why of Low-Stakes Assessments

Objective

Assessment is often a dirty word in higher education. Exams, tests, quizzes, and evaluations are frequently portrayed and used as “pedagogical whips” (Peter Filene, *The Joy of Teaching*, 2005). They are often the final step in a course or in a course section, acting as a metric for *past, previous student learning*. **Frequent low-stakes assessments** are assessments which do not substantially impact a student’s final grade and are used formatively, not as capstones for what learning *did* occur in a course but rather as check-ins and guideposts for *how student learning is happening now*, actively and currently. Used mindfully, they are valuable tools for both students and instructors.

Benefits of frequent low-stakes assessments are numerous:

1. Provide students an indication and immediate feedback on how they are doing in the course, often on a short time scale (one week, one lecture, etc)
2. Build positive classroom culture
3. Provide instructors with an indication of student errors and misconceptions
4. Provide students with practice before taking high-stakes assessments
5. Increase student confidence
6. Increase student motivation (“gamification”)
7. Opens lines of dialogue and communication between instructors and students

This presentation offers a way to integrate low-stakes assessment into a daily routine in a medium-to-large LAC course, leverage Canvas for ease and organization. This setup accomplishes many things at once:

1. Allows for attendance to be a meaningful, substantial contribution to learning rather than just take up class time
2. Holds each student accountable for daily active participation without discriminating for personal circumstances or preferences
3. Allows the instructor to see in real-time the impact and effectiveness of their lecture or class activity, and address any gaps or misconceptions quickly
4. Creates the possibility for communication between the instructor and student in situations where student anonymity is easy to embrace

Step 1: Frame the daily objective clearly

Step 2: Write meaningful low stakes “wrap-up” Q’s

Step 3: Quickly assess success (0-1-2)

Step 4: Address gaps and errors

Post, read, and discuss the objective explicitly at the front of the class. You can also share a “soundbite” of the most relevant and essential information to be covered and unpacked in the course as an anchor point for student thinking.

Write a single, brief question for students to respond to that ties into the objective and soundbite, if provided. This can be done through Canvas Assignments, which students have access to on their phones and other devices. You can batch create these assignments at the start of the term. You do not need to post the questions, only an open text response assignment. This way, students must still attend class in order to answer the wrap-up question, allowing it to double as an attendance tool.

These frequent low-stakes assessments are only useful if they are quick to grade! A simple 0-1-2 scale make assessment easy:

0 = absent from class / no submission

1 = incorrect or mostly incorrect answer, but class was attended and attempted. “Points for trying” also helps boost student motivation and create dialogue, rather than penalty, around incorrect responses.

2 = correct or mostly correct response.

Start the next class with the question and a few anonymous quoted “stellar” responses. Follow up with individual students who scored very poorly individually. These tactics combined help motivate students to do well (by sharing their words as exemplars) and those struggling (by signaling your investment in their success and clarifying misconceptions).

For any common misconceptions or errors that came up frequently in responses, use a few minutes at the start of lecture to directly address them for the whole class.

Primate Diets

OBJECTIVE: Today, you will be able to: **define** the major dietary categories in modern primates, **apply** the Jarmon-Bell Principal to explain correlations between diet and body size, and **infer** activity levels, ranging behavior, and group size based on diet.

SOUNDBITE: We group primates into dietary categories (*frugivores, folivores, insectivores; generalists and specialists*). Some diets are *higher quality* (more energy per bite) than others. Smaller primates must eat a higher quality diet. Large primates can ‘afford’ to eat a lower quality diet. This is called the *Jarmon-Bell Principal*. Diets also (partially) determine ranging behavior, group size, body size, and many other behavioral traits.

Wrap-up question

You’ve fallen through a wormhole into another dimension! In this version of reality, you find a very small primate sitting in a tree. Being a good anthropologist, you follow it for a few days and realize that it is mostly relying on leaves and vegetation for its food. Based on the Jarmon-Bell Principal, are you surprised? Why or why not?

Friday 2/14
Due: Feb 14 at 12:30pm - ANT130-001


I am not surprised, since the monkey is smaller it relies on higher quality foods to keep them going ie the leaves.

Assessment

Grade out of 2

1

Assignment Comments

 It does need higher quality food, but X leaves are LOW quality (few calories per bite). Insects or fruits are high quality foods.

Marian Hamilton, Feb 16 at 11:42am

Last class's Wrap-up question

You’ve fallen through a wormhole into another dimension! In this version of reality, you find a very small primate sitting in a tree. Being a good anthropologist, you follow it for a few days and realize that it is mostly relying on leaves and vegetation for its food. Based on the Jarmon-Bell Principal, are you surprised? Why or why not?

I am surprised that the monkey is alone but eating folivore foods, which usually indicates that they are in a group living situation. Also small monkeys should be eating high quality foods! Not leaves, rather insects.

I am surprised because Jarmon-Bell principal states that smaller animals need to eat less food, but the food must be higher quality. So the small primate should be eating more calorie-dense foods, like insects, instead of meals such as leaves.

Final Thoughts and Tips

- Offer slips of scrap paper for students who prefer to submit hard copy responses
- Include comments and responses on Canvas replies that are particularly strong or interesting. A simple “Good job!” can go a long way, particularly in a large class.
- Use copy/paste of a clean, correct answer to provide students with almost-but-not-quite-there answers helpful feedback at low time cost to you.
- Provide grades and feedback quickly. I spend 10-15 minutes after class grading responses for a 60-person course. This benefits both the students and you, by facilitating a clearer indication of where the gaps in understanding are.
- Encourage students to use these daily submissions to ask questions, too! Use it as an opportunity to create dialogue.