Strategy Training: Formative Evaluation

Imagine two students. One student took the practice test before taking the test that counts. The other student skipped the practice test. Which student do you think will do better on the final test? The answer is pretty obvious. The student who did the practice test will score higher. You should always do practice tests to maximize your scores.

Practice tests—also known as formative evaluations—are the most effective method that teachers can use to help students maximize their summative evaluation scores—the scores that count. Students who do formative evaluations outperform students who don't 76% of the time, and doing formative evaluations accelerates learning by 45% (Hattie, 2009). So, why don't teachers and students do more formative evaluations?

Double the work

There's a problem with having a formative evaluation before every summative evaluation. It can double a teacher's correction load. Instead of having one test or essay to correct, with formative evaluations, the teacher has two. Understandably, teachers tend to minimize the number of optional activities that add to their workload. However, with the advent of automated evaluation, teachers can provide students with an unlimited number of formative evaluations without having to give up their weekends. Problem solved? Not exactly.

Students don't want to double their workload unnecessarily either. They sometimes ask, "Does it count? Because if it doesn't count, I won't do it." That's their choice. But for students at risk of failing, doing a formative evaluation may mean the difference between passing and repeating the entire course the next semester.

Ironically, the students who would benefit the most from formative evaluations are often the most reluctant to do them. They think, "I don't want to do twice the work. One evaluation is already a lot of effort. I can reduce my workload by skipping the formative test and doing just the summative test." Later in the semester they exclaim, "Oops! I failed. I should have done the formative!" You see the problem. Inept students don't know what they don't know. Ineptitude makes them unable to accurately predict their scores.

What if we could let students decide if an evaluation is formative or summative? In that way, those students that need another chance can get it, and those that don't can avoid spending time on tests that don't count.

Mastery model scoring

The solution is to use a mastery model. Mastery model scoring involves dropping a student's lowest scores so only the best scores count. In effect, this model turns low scoring evaluations into formative evaluations. Successes are remembered, and failures are forgotten. The idea has been around since the 1970s, but it has been difficult to implement because of all of the extra corrections and record keeping it entails for the teacher.

Now with the advent of automated essay scoring using online evaluation websites, teachers can offer students the opportunity to write two essays scored automatically, of which only the best one counts. The benefits are threefold. The students who need a second chance can get it, the students who are satisfied with their first score can skip the second evaluation, and those who score lower on the second evaluation can use their first score instead.

Using the mastery model gives students more control over their scores while enjoying the benefits of the accelerated learning that formative evaluation provides. For students who want to excel, formative evaluation just may be their ticket to fame and fortune.

Reference

Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. London, UK: Routledge.

 Lesson 2