

Teaching in a Pandemic: Low-stakes assessment and student accountability



Whatever your new learning pattern is, you may find that you have more difficulty maintaining student engagement and timely participation. After all, the learning situation will be unfamiliar to most participants, and there will be additional stress factors that students are facing outside of the classroom. While your major assessments (projects, exams, essays, presentations) may stay the same as in previous semesters, you may find it helpful to reconsider how you use smaller, low-stakes assessments.

The sections below provide key information about low-stakes assessment:

1. Defining low-stakes assessment
 2. Additional benefits of low-stakes assessment: Accountability and time management
 3. Steps for including low-stakes assessments
 4. Differentiating low-stakes assessment from “busywork” or “spoonfeeding”
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1. Defining low-stakes assessment

You and your students will benefit if your pattern every week includes one or more low-stakes assessments. An **assessment** is any task (quiz, exam, assignment, project, presentation, demonstration) that requires students to show how well they can meet one or more of your main learning outcomes/goals for your course, and provides them with feedback on their performance.

A short weekly assessment can be **low-stakes** in two ways:

- It measures only *part of a learning goal*: students show that they can complete one or two kinds of calculation, identify consequences of one law or performance, compose one section of a presentation or program, and/or analyze one text or case study.
- It has *limited effect on students' final grades*, which encourages students to see the task as an opportunity for practice, exploration, and learning, and lessens faculty grading workload:
 - Sometimes low-stakes assessments are completion-graded: the goal is for students to check (and thus reveal to faculty) their understanding so far, without penalty for mistakes.
 - Sometimes low-stakes assessments are evaluated using limited levels instead of using the full range of plus/minus letter grades: a popular option is some version of a 5-4-0 or 5-4-3-0 grading system that acknowledges Excellent, Satisfactory [Partial], or Incomplete products.
 - Often several low-stakes assignments add up to a 15% or 20% grade for homework, participation, quizzes, etc. Sometimes there is an option for students to drop the lowest grade in such a category.

When you use low-stakes assessments regularly in your course, both you and students benefit:

- You see quickly which students understand and can apply the week’s key concepts, and adapt your teaching if many students seem lost.
- *Students* see quickly what concepts they understand and can apply, and can adapt their learning to catch up early rather than getting stuck when a major assignment or exam comes due.
- Students *retain* learning better: research shows that a weekly effort to recall and apply key concepts promotes better comprehension, memory, and performance than “cramming” for an exam or “cranking out” a major project the night before a due date.

Selecting low-stakes assessment activities that align to your course’s goals or outcomes is a powerful way to help your students address any gaps in their understanding, demonstrate learning outcomes, and assure course completion. If you keep in mind the fundamental questions “What do I want my students learn to do?” and “How will they demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and/or abilities?” it will be much easier to develop low-stakes assessments that support students on the path to your major exams or assignments.

2. Additional benefits of low-stakes assessment: Accountability and time management

Many of us have come to have increased appreciation for the conversations we have in real time—and especially those we have in the same space—with students and colleagues. We may have even more need for students to arrive at a synchronous meeting already prepared to take advantage of the interactive opportunities that we have designed.

- **Accountability:** Low-stakes assessments can motivate students to keep up with weekly readings and lectures. While a few students don’t need this external motivation and a few others may not respond to it, a wide middle group of students will find these assessments—and the implication or statement that you value these tasks highly enough to create space in the curriculum for students to complete them—to be motivating and helpful in coming “to class” prepared.
- **Professionalism:** In fields and professions where “putting in the time” is as valued as creating a final product, low-stakes assessments help students learn professional behaviors that will increase their success.
- **Time management:** In a semester that is likely to unsettle everyone’s sense of normalcy, we all benefit from encouragement to do a little work regularly rather than putting off tasks and letting them pile up.

3. Steps for including low-stakes assessments

1. **Decide how they fit into your pattern:** Students will gain more from these assessments, and have less confusion about them, if you use a regular pattern: will there always be a quiz on readings or on a lecture on Wednesdays?

2. **Identify a learning goal** for the week that is either crucial for students' progress or can serve to "take the temperature" of students' comprehension: This might be a sub-goal of an overall class goal.
 3. **Design a short task** that will measure students' knowledge, skills, and/or abilities. This can be a quiz, a problem-set, a short-answer assignment, or a part of a larger assignment (such as the argument statement or outline of a persuasive essay).
 1. Your task may ask students to demonstrate lower-level learning outcomes such as recalling definitions, events, or examples from readings or lectures, but you can also create tasks--even with an automated multiple-choice quiz--that ask students to demonstrate higher-order learning, such as evaluating, analyzing, or applying complex concepts (e.g., "select the answer that shows the most efficient order of operations")
 2. You don't have to create new and fun tasks every week; a repeated quiz can function well and help students focus on the content rather than the format or structure.
 3. You could, however, create some new tasks: At Stearns Center, we like this "[53 Ways to Check for Student Understanding](#)" list for the ways it helps us stretch our thinking.
 4. **Provide clear directions**, including information about what students gain from completing the assignment, what steps they need to take to complete it, and how they will be evaluated.
 5. **Decide how to provide feedback.** In order for students to know if they comprehend or are correctly applying key ideas, they need quick feedback. You could
 1. Build correct answers into a Blackboard quiz, for automatic feedback
 2. Provide a "correct/best answer overview" after the assignment due date, so students can check their own work
 3. Respond in an announcement or discussion to identify key achievements or common errors in students' work
 4. Use a rubric or other option to grade assignments individually, if your class is small, the assignment is critical, and/or you have sufficient time
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4. Differentiating low-stakes assessment from "busywork" or "spoonfeeding"

Assessment is one space where experts can overestimate students' readiness to move forward on their own.

Moreover, students also overestimate their readiness. Novices and even advanced beginners not only don't know all the features or steps of an unfamiliar field, but they are much less able to predict their own competency accurately. When they have opportunities to practice on short assessments, they improve on their self-awareness as well as learning the concept more thoroughly. That's not to say students will immediately see the value of these tasks; you may need to take time early in the term to explain what you are doing and why.

Regular feedback on progress has been shown to improve both the immediate learning and the long-term persistence of students, with the greatest gains often showing up in students from first-generation backgrounds, students from lower socio-economic class backgrounds, and students from under-represented or minoritized backgrounds.

“Busywork” and “spoonfeeding” identify tasks that have no value to learners or even set the learners back, by asking them to invest time with a poor return or to avoid responsibilities. When you believe and communicate values like the ones listed here, you and students can move forward into low-stakes assessment with more confidence:

- This assessment provides crucial feedback to students about how their learning is going, so students can correct problems early or seek additional resources—both of which are signs of independent, long-term learning strategies
- This assessment provides crucial feedback to faculty about student learning, so that faculty can improve their support for student learning around particularly difficult tasks
- This assessment helps students to solidify their understanding of basic concepts and applications so that they will be more prepared for complex individual performances (exams, projects) later in the course

Becoming an expert is hard work, and meeting your course outcomes will still be challenging for your students even if you provide in-progress assessments and feedback. Low-stakes assessments help you support students *and* hold high standards at the same time.