

User-Centered Design: Fewer Words the Better

Written by Bill Pellowe
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When you reach the "Create a quiz" page in the Teacher Area, the quiz is already filled-in with a very simple question ("Answer the teacher's question") and five options (A, B, C, D, E). Why is it already filled-in with such a simple format? There's a short answer, and there's a long answer. Short answer: The more of the total that students can see in a single screen, the better. Instead of a long answer, this article gives you a medium-length answer.

Back in 2001, I did some research over the course of a semester with a focus group of Japanese students. They would do a variety of activities on their mobile phones, and we'd discuss the various usability issues. Long story short, the biggest issue was when the activities took up so much space that the students had to scroll up and down a lot just to answer the question.

The screen real estate we have in 2010 is much larger than the 16-character wide, 10-line tall screens that those students had, but the general principle is the same: The more of an activity that is visible to students in a single screen, the better it is for students. Ideally, students should see an entire quiz question and all of the options on a single screen.

So the types of activities I started doing with that focus group began to require external content. For example, I gave them a quiz-type activity on a piece of paper, and the screens in their mobile phone browsers had nothing but the question number and five option letters. The students found this activity much better than an earlier activity with very similar content, but which required a lot of scrolling to read the content off the mobile screen.

The quizzes I do with my students now are all done in the classroom. Many of these questions rely on an external source for the content. In other words,

- the question and options are in the textbook, or
- the question and options are on a handout that I've given them, or
- the question and options are being projected onto a screen, or
- the students are listening to me ask the question and options aloud.

Other teachers using MOARS have told me that they use it so that students can "pass in" homework in the form of quizzes that are based on pages in the students' textbooks. The

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teacher tells the students the exact day and time that he will "Add To Gradebook", so if they're not done by then, they receive no credit.

Can we always fit it all onto one screen? No, we can't. The point is, we try to. While crafting our exercises, we should keep the screen limitation in mind, and that should help us. After all, I don't mind if students answer incorrectly when it's their own mistake, but I certainly don't want the format or medium of my question to be part of their difficulty.