“Reach for the Stars:” A Fun, Engaging Way to Support Student Learning
A Conversation with Professor John Immerwahr, Department of Philosophy

Philosophy Professor John Immerwahr sat down with Francesca Cocchi – a freshman honors student and VITAL intern – to discuss the Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique (IF-AT) as a tool for classroom instruction. IF-AT quiz sheets utilize lottery ticket technology to allow students to scratch off their answers to multiple choice questions, revealing a small star for a correct selection and a blank space for an incorrect one.

Francesca (F): Could you explain how this teaching tool works?

Dr. Immerwahr (I): …Our [the instructors’] challenge is to get the students to participate in class and to work [with the content]. That’s where IF-AT comes into play. It’s a very interesting, short-term engagement tool for a bunch of reasons … It only works for items that have a correct answer. One technique is, and this is how Gabriele uses it, each student completes a pencil and paper version of the multiple-choice test first. Then students come together in small groups and discuss what the right answer is and why, and then scratch off their choice. If there are disagreements, they have to resolve those disagreements. If they get the answer wrong, they have to discuss further and scratch off again … Another way, the one I prefer, is to have the group discuss the questions from the get go… It’s sort of like you’ve never actually had this happen in a class, where you’re trying to solve a problem together and you’re going to either get it right or get it wrong, and you’re going to know right away which one it was … So this gives you immediate reinforcement on whether you’re right so that’s very powerful. Like, “Wow, we really learned what kind of argument can make this right.” But when you get it wrong, you have to figure it out again. So how often do you get a chance to do that? And that’s even in some ways more useful than getting things right, is getting them wrong and figuring it out. And then you get a third change to figure it out. And it’s all fast, clean and high-stakes … So there’s a lot going on in this simple process of students discussing an issue, getting immediate feedback, adapting based on the feedback, re-discussing if necessary, negotiating – and everybody likes it. It’s fun, it’s different, it’s a changeup. So I think it’s just a great learning tool.

F: Also, as a student, I leave knowing what was the right answer. You see it right away, and you don’t have to sweat it out that night either, hoping you got it right.

I: Right; also, you know you can’t cheat on it. That’s even better … There’s another way of thinking about it which is this. If you think about how the mind works, it tends to go in a cycle … But in school we mostly observe and synthesize. We rarely predict and we almost never test our predictions. But in this process, you kind of do.

F: And it starts all over again with every question.

I: It’s a microcosm of everything that’s good in education in five minutes.

F: What might instructors need to consider if they were to adapt IF-AT in their courses? What other benefits do you think there are for using this and incorporating it in instruction?
I: Consider you subject area. For example, in my area, philosophy, it’s not always easy to find right and wrong answer multiple choice questions that involve thinking and interpretation. I did a pretty cool one on Plato’s *Apology*. It was like, “According to Socrates, the poets are wiser than the crafts people, the crafts people are wiser than the poets, they are both wiser than Socrates, neither of them is wise?” Well, you know, you could think, “Oh the poets might be wiser.” You know, you’d have to talk about it.

F: *And you also have to tailor the options …*

I: Right, so that they’re not easy to do ... So the science of it is you should have [options] that are right, ones that might seem right, ones that you really have to be silly to think they’re [right] ...To put it a different way, a person who knows nothing should be scratching them off at random. A person who knows a little bit should be able to exclude one.

F: *Do you think these quizzes are more effective when they’re not necessarily graded? Is it more about the discussion and what students learn and then talking about it, or can they be used as a graded quiz?*

I: Well they certainly can be used as a graded quiz. We tend to think that if you want students to do something creative, you should have a reward for it. And the bigger the reward the more creativity you will get. But in fact it doesn’t always work that way ... My own view is it’s enough fun that you’ll get more creativity out of it ... and there’s enough reinforcement in the little stars that it’s better ungraded.

VITAL makes IF-AT forms available to Villanova faculty at no cost for one semester. Further information: [http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/vital/resources/library.html#if-at](http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/vital/resources/library.html#if-at)

*If you’d like to share a teaching practice that you have found successful in enriching your students’ learning, please submit your practice online for presentation at the 2014 Teaching and Learning Strategies at Villanova by April 9: [http://www.villanova.edu/forms/vital/presenters.htm](http://www.villanova.edu/forms/vital/presenters.htm)*