

# Scratch and Pass

By Brian Hanson-Harding  
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Answering those mundane multiple-choice test questions can now have all the tactile thrill of an instant lottery ticket.

Dr. Michael Epstein, a psychology professor at Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J., has been awarded a patent for his new scratch-off format as well as a \$65,000 grant from the New Jersey Commission on Science and Technology to adapt a scanning device to score it.

With IF AT (short for Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique; also, “If at first you don’t succeed”), the test-taker scratches a waxy coating off a small rectangle on the answer sheet with a pen cap, a dime, a fingernail, whatever’s handy. A star indicates the correct answer. If wrong, the student can scratch off a second and even a third choice, earning partial credit and, says Dr. Epstein, learning in the process.

“It’s not fair that people who can narrow it down to two choices are just as wrong as people who have no idea,” he says.

Dr. Epstein, whose specialty is learning and memory, never felt quite right about using multiple-choice tests in his classes. “I knew I was breaking every rule about learning,” he says. “Learning is best when feedback is instantaneous.” His research showed a 75 to 85 percent chance that a student gets the same question wrong when faced with it a second time. With the IF AT, students “never exit a question without getting it right,” which he considers a motivating factor: students never give up.

The format gives a small advantage for wild guesses – a 31 percent chance of earning points by making them, compared with 25 percent on traditional four-choice tests – although teachers can adjust this by changing the way they assign partial credit.

More than 100 instructors, college to first grade, have tested the test with positive reports. “It’s more fun,” Dr. Epstein says. “It’s more involving. There’s an ‘Aha!’”