

# ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING IN MECHANICS THROUGH RAPID-FEEDBACK

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## ABSTRACT

In this project our goal is to improve student learning in engineering mechanics courses. The aim to improve learning was accomplished by providing rapid feedback to students of their understanding of key concepts and skills being taught. The feedback system acts as a catalyst to encourage students, working in pairs, to assist each other in correcting misconceptions or deepening each other's understanding of the concept or skill at hand. Furthermore, the system allows the professor to assess the students' level of comprehension or misconception in a just-in-time fashion, and thus guide the pace of covering the material. The feedback is enabled through wireless-networked handheld computers or color-coded flashcards. In the first two years of the study, the feedback system was implemented in two sections of a lower-level, core-engineering course, statics, as well as in follow-on courses of dynamics and solid mechanics.

## KEY WORDS

Computers and education, Concepts learning, Mechanics, Rapid feedback, Handheld computers

## 1. Introduction

Core engineering courses, such as Statics, are comprised of key concepts and skills that students need to master in order to succeed in follow-on courses. Students must *comprehend* these concepts at sufficient depth (as opposed to rote memorization of procedure) and *transfer* this understanding to other courses and contexts. In this multiyear project, our hypothesis is that such learning is facilitated in an active, peer-assisted environment in which the students are provided frequent and rapid feedback of their state of learning.

Providing feedback to students of their current level of understanding of concepts is critical for effective learning. It is also important for the professor. This feedback is typically realized through homework sets, quizzes and tests. All of these techniques, however, suffer the faults of being too slow, too late, and too tedious to apply frequently. Freeman and McKenzie [1] discuss several issues that inhibit better student learning in higher education. For students, there is a lack of individual feedback on learning; few opportunities for dialogue to improve learning; and a feeling that the subject is

impersonal. From the faculty members' perspective, the difficulties lie in knowing what students are really learning, providing individualized feedback, addressing students' specific misconceptions, attending to diverse learning styles, and engaging students in learning.

Bransford et al. [2] state: "Learners are most successful if they are mindful of themselves as learners and thinkers. In order for learners to gain insight into their learning and their understanding, frequent feedback is critical: Students need to monitor their learning and actively evaluate their strategies and their current levels of understanding." Freeman and McKenzie<sup>1</sup> support this idea, noting that "Feedback is fundamental to learning... Students may receive grades on tests and essays, but these are summative assessments... What are needed are formative assessments, which provide students with opportunities to revise and improve the quality of their thinking and understanding. If the goal is to enhance understanding and applicability of knowledge, it is not sufficient to provide assessments that focus primarily on memory for facts and formulas."

Our project addresses these issues by providing students with timely feedback and opportunities to improve learning. Our goal is to combine rapid feedback with conceptual learning and skills development and to evaluate our methods through rigorous experimental design and data analysis.

## 2. Project Design and Implementation

At Rowan University, Statics is a required course for sophomores in three of the four engineering disciplines (Civil & Environmental, Electrical & Computer, and Mechanical Engineering). The course content is similar to that of most engineering programs in the US, although the pace and length of the course is unusual. Rowan students take Statics in a compressed, half-semester (7.5 weeks) format, with classes meeting for three 75-minute periods each week. Students receive two semester-hour credits upon passing the course. The format dictates a faster-than-usual pace of coverage of the material with little time spent in reviewing course material from previous lectures. Statics is delivered in the first half of the Fall semester, followed in the second half-semester by Dynamics. In the first half of the Spring semester, Civil & Environmental and Mechanical Engineering students

continue in the engineering mechanics sequence by taking Solid Mechanics (also known as Mechanics of Materials). In Fall 2003, we began this study with one of the authors teaching two sections of this course. In that year, we collected some data to practice for what we might expect in the following year and focused on the details of implementing this project. Essentially, we treated the year as a ‘trial run.’ For example, we acquired all the personal digital assistants (PDAs) that were to be used for this study, set up, tested and practiced with the software used to collect data, and developed most of the quizzes for which rapid feedback would be provided to students. In the most recent offering of the course in Fall 2004, we repeated what was implemented in the previous year except that data was taken for subsequent analysis. All of the reported results in this paper are from Fall 2004.

As mentioned previously, one of the authors taught two sections of Statics in Fall 2004. This was done in order to minimize any differences in teaching style or content between the two sections. Having a single professor also ensured that the two sections maintained the same pace through the course from day to day. At the start of any class, the students in each section are provided with one of two means of receiving rapid feedback: a PDA or a flashcard. With the PDAs, students are paired up and share a single PDA, whereas with the flashcards, each student in the section is provided one. Details about the feedback methods are described later.

The in-class portion of this study is conducted in a similar manner to that described by Mazur [3]. The professor presents a new topic or concept for no more than 10-15 minutes, using traditional lecture, demonstration, or sample problem solution. Thereafter, he poses a ‘concept question’ or a ‘skill quiz’ to gauge the students’ understanding. If the student responses from the feedback system (PDAs or flashcards) show that a high percentage of students do not understand the concept or have not mastered the skill, the professor elaborates on or further explains the topic. If the responses show that a reasonable fraction of students understands (a distribution of answers, but a plurality with the correct answer), the professor directs the students to take time and explain the concept or skill to each other. Thereafter, the students are asked to either respond again to the same question, or a different question on the same topic may be posed. The final scenario occurs when the student response shows a high percentage of correct answer, indicating that students understand the topic. In this case, the professor simply continues to the next topic.

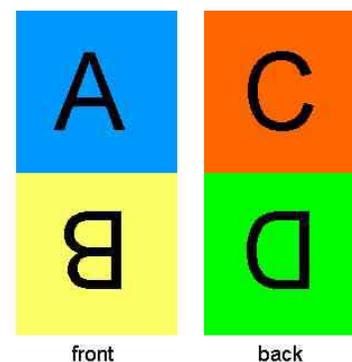
In addition to assigned homework sets, which were completed by students in two-person teams, quizzes and tests were used for student evaluation and data analyses for this study. In the 7.5-week period of the course, nine homework sets were assigned, and eight quizzes and two non-cumulative examinations were given. Identical homework sets were assigned to the two sections. Whenever a homework set was submitted by the students, a brief quiz was given which covered some concept covered in the homework. Quizzes were designed to be

similar, but not identical, between the two sections. The scores on the quizzes and examination questions were analyzed, as described later, to assess for differences between the two feedback methods.

### Rapid feedback Methods

The flashcard method for providing feedback to students was developed by Mehta [4]. In short, double-sided and color-coded cards are used by students to display their answer to a question posed by the professor. Each card as shown in Figure 1 can display one of six possible responses. The student can display the letter corresponding to their answer for questions with up to four possible answers. Holding up the card horizontally on the A-B side or on the C-D side allows for responding to a fifth or sixth possibility. The cards provide a quick means for the professor to scan the class’s response and qualitatively determine the distribution of answers.

Figure 1 – Colored Flashcard



A fleet of 18 PDAs is used for the PDA-enabled feedback method. Half of the PDAs are Palm-OS-based and half are PocketPC-based. All of the PDAs have wireless networking capabilities (802.11b or WiFi) and communicate with the professor’s Windows XP Tablet PC using a peer-to-peer networking mode. The software that is used to manage the intercomputer communications and to record and display student responses from the PDAs is a pre-beta version of OptionFinder VP, which is being developed by Option Technologies Interactive ([www.optiontechnologies.com](http://www.optiontechnologies.com)). This software was used as is, but the professor and programmer at Option Technologies corresponded throughout the year so that errors in the code could be fixed or features could be added or simplified.

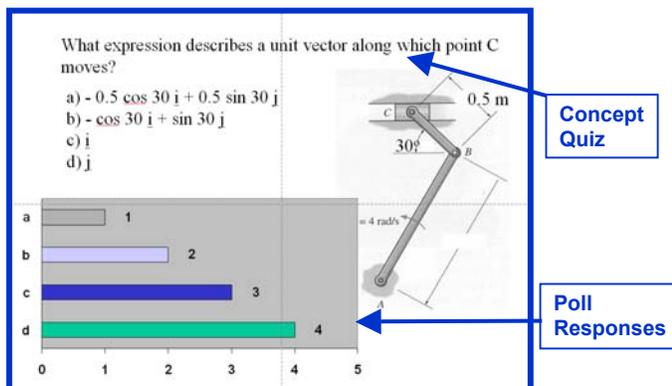
Regardless of the feedback method used each time, the concept question or skill quiz is posed by the professor through his Tablet PC and is projected to the front of the class, along with the possible solutions. The correct solution is embedded with incorrect answers, which are derived from common student mistakes or misunderstanding. Students are given time to reflect on the question posed, discuss it with their peers, and then must select from the possible solutions. Thus, the feedback methods allow all students to reflect on the topic just learned, actively participate, and evaluate his/her own

ability or understanding. The major differences between the two feedback methods are that the PDA/software-based method allows for 1) quantitative and permanent recording of the student responses for future review and 2) a display of the tallied student responses in a histogram, which is projected up on the screen nearly instantaneously after the students respond. An example of a concept quiz and histogram of responses is shown in Figure 3 and a second example is shown in Appendix A at the end of this paper.

Figure 2 – PC-based PDA with students' OptionFinder interface



FIGURE 3 – Concept question and responses



### Data Analysis

This project is comprised of three major components: the development of a suite of concept questions and skills quizzes for the course, the use of rapid feedback and peer-assisted learning in the classroom, and, for the current year of study, a comparison between the two methods of providing rapid feedback to students. The third component required the bulk of the statistical analysis. The goal of this analysis was to see if the method of implementing the rapid-feedback, using PDAs (the 'treatment') vs. flashcards (the 'control'), had an effect on the students' learning. The response variable tested is the score on a quiz or an examination question for the corresponding period of instruction where one section had the treatment and the other the control (or vice versa).

This would be done while controlling for factors (or variables) other than the treatment factor which might affect the scores.

A crossover design of experiment is used in this study [5]. The method is intended to eliminate potential confounding factors that cannot be controlled for using a standard analysis of variance model. For example, students may not be randomly assigned to each of the two Statics sections (for example, one section may have mostly electrical engineering students, who have a different motivation level than the other section, which might be populated mainly with mechanical engineering students), or the time at which each section is held may affect student performance. Without the crossover a potential treatment effect would have been indistinguishable from a section effect.

In a crossover design, one of two study groups (course sections in this case) will be randomly chosen to receive instruction with the PDA-enabled system (the 'treatment' group) while the other group will use the flashcard system (the 'control') for a fixed period of time. For the next 'treatment period,' the two sections simply swap the feedback method, and this continues for the duration of the course. In this manner, each student acts as his or her own control to eliminate the non-correctible confounders. This design has the additional advantages of eliminating any bias that may be introduced by the professor in course delivery in the two sections, and minimizing any attitude bias that may be displayed by students of either section due to receiving a single method of feedback for the entire course if swapping did not occur. The treatment periods generally lasted from two to five class meetings, as was determined to be logical based on the skills or concepts being covered during the period.

To analyze the treatment factor (PDA vs. flashcard) while controlling for the other 'nuisance' factors that could affect scores but are not attributable to the treatment, we employed the following general linear model using the DataDesk statistical package:

$$y_{mijkl} = \mu + \beta_1 x_{1,m} + \beta_2 x_{2,m} + \beta_3 x_{3,m} + \beta_4 x_{4,m} + \alpha_i + \gamma(\alpha)_{j(i)} + \delta_k + \tau_l + \varepsilon_m$$

where

$y$  = a transformed score on the quiz question,

$\mu$  = the grand mean (average score with no factors taken in to account),

$x_1$  = the student's Freshman-year GPA (0.00 to 4.00, which includes  $x_2$ ,  $x_3$  and  $x_4$ .)

$x_2$  = the student's Calculus I grade (0 to 40),

$x_3$  = the student's Calculus II grade (0 to 40),

$x_4$  = the student's Physics I grade (0 to 40),

$\alpha$  = the Section (Section 1 (8 am meeting) or Section 2 (10:50 am meeting)),

$\gamma$  = the student nested in section, or Student-in-section,

$\delta$  = the Period (or quiz or topic),

$\tau$  = the Treatment (PDA = 'treatment' and flashcard = 'control'),

$\varepsilon$  = random error.

The quiz scores were transformed because they were skewed ( $y$  = the 'score' squared). The Freshman-year

GPA and the Calculus I, Calculus II and Physics I grades were treated as continuous covariates. The Section factor was discrete, and the Student factor was discrete, and nested in section (student 1 in Section 01 is not the same as student 1 Section 02). The Period (or quiz) factor was discrete and included because some quiz topics may be intrinsically more difficult than others. The Treatment factor was discrete as well. For various reasons, only five of the eight quizzes were judged to be valid and were included in the analysis.

### 3. Results

When the model above was analyzed, Calculus II, Physics I and Student-in-section factors were significant at  $\alpha = .05$ . We will address the terms in their order in the model. Recall that factors other than the Treatment are in the model to account for likely sources of variability in the quiz scores. That way, any variability due to the Treatment is not masked by the other factors and we can detect the Treatment effect.

Because Freshman GPA is based on the grades for Calculus I, Calculus II and Physics I, it is not surprising that with these included in the model, and the latter two significant, Freshman GPA is not significant. That Calculus I was not significant might be because the most important calculus techniques used in Statics come from Calculus II, though we cannot be certain of this reasoning. It was not surprising that Calculus II and Physics I were significant ( $p = .0275$  and  $.0018$ , respectively), because each course contains skills and concepts important to Statics. Although Section was not significant ( $p = .0752$ ), which reinforced preliminary results from Fall 2003, that it was only marginally not significant justifies our having it in the model. Student-in-section was significant ( $p = .0009$ ), which should be expected, as scores should always depend on the individual student. That Period (quiz) was not significant may or may not be surprising. The fact that the scores for different quizzes were essentially the same indicates that the quizzes inherently adjusted for the difficulty of the material, or that the periods of instruction were constructed so that no period or topic was inherently more difficult (the authors wish we could claim responsibility for this). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Treatment (PDA or flashcard use) was not significant ( $p = .0947$ ). This result suggests that using PDAs or the flashcards to provide feedback to the students had little effect on their score. In other words, it does not matter *how* one provides rapid feedback, so long as it is provided. Although we had thought that the ‘coolness’ of the PDA might affect a student’s learning, it really would only affect their interest during the physical activity in class of reporting their answers. In the end their scores would be affected by outside work (such as studying!) and inherent interest or motivation in the material, neither of which would be greatly influenced by the fact that a PDA was used in class.

Although we had a large number of observations the nature of the crossover design and the fact that the

students were nested in the sections meant that there were only four two-way interactions that could be added to the model, and these generally one-at-a-time. When the Section-by-Period interaction was added, it was not significant, but the Treatment was significant at  $\alpha = .05$  ( $p = .0394$ ). All of the other factors were significant or not as before. It is not obvious to us why this is the case, except that the three factors – Section, Period and Treatment – are involved in the crossover, and adding this interaction somehow made the effect of the treatment stand out. Because the Treatment factor was not significant in the first model or in any subsequent models with one or two interactions, we feel that our discussion in the previous paragraph still applies.

When we added the Student-in-section-by-Period interaction, no factors in the model were significant. Essentially the ‘team’ of factors shared the work of explaining the quiz scores, with no factor standing out. When we added the Student-in-section-by-Treatment or the Period-by-Treatment interactions (one at a time), they were not significant, and only the Calculus II, Physics I and Student-in-section factors were significant at  $\alpha = .05$ , which is the same result as described earlier. When we added the pair of two-way interactions, Section-by-Period and Student-in-Section-by-Treatment, Calculus II, Physics I, Section, and Student-in-section factors were significant at  $\alpha = .05$ . That Section became significant ( $p = .0498$ ) for the first time was intriguing but not considered important.

A second set of results we obtained was from two surveys administered to the cohort, one approximately halfway through the course, and the other on the final day of the course. Each survey (midcourse and final), along with the combined responses from both sections, is shown in Tables I and II, respectively. The responses for both surveys were originally broken down into the two sections, but chi-square tests of the questions (with some necessary combining of categories) showed no differences between the classes.

In general, the survey results show that students have relatively little familiarity with PDAs (based on the mid-course survey), but still an overwhelming majority in either survey found that the PDAs (and the associated rapid feedback method) enhanced their learning experience (74% and 93%, respectively). In both surveys, a majority of students found that rapid feedback with either the flashcards or the PDAs was at least ‘somewhat helpful’ to their learning (59% and 80%, respectively, for flashcards), with a preference in both surveys for the PDAs. In fact, when questions two and three in the second survey were compared with a chi-square test of independence (grouping the no difference and the two ‘hindered’ categories), the PDAs were considered more helpful than the flashcards ( $p = .0089$ ). We attribute this finding to the immediate availability of the tallied responses that was provided to the students using the computer and software. Finally, in comparing the results between the two surveys, it is obvious that as the course progressed, the students’ acceptance of rapid feedback

using either method increased as seen by the results showing that the percentage of students who found either method to be at least ‘somewhat useful’ increased from 59% to 80% for the flashcards and from 74% to 93% for the PDAs. These results are similar to Mehta’s work [5], who found that 100% of his 31 respondents rated the flashcard feedback method in improving his/her learning in the classroom as effective or very effective.

**TABLE I - Results from midcourse survey administered to the Fall 2004 Sections of Statics**

| Question  | Response                       | Response Count | Percentage |
|---|--------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| Prior to this class, have you used a PDA?         | Yes, I have one.               | 3              | 8.8        |
|   | Yes, but it was someone else’s | 10             | 29.4       |
|   | No.                            | 21             | 61.8       |
| Rate your familiarity with PDA’s                  | No experience                  | 17             | 8.8        |
|   | Beginner                       | 10             |            |
|   | Somewhat familiar              | 5              | 29.4       |
|   | Expert                         | 2              | 61.8       |
| How useful were the flashcards for your learning? | Very helpful                   | 5              | 14.7       |
|   | Somewhat helpful               | 15             | 44.1       |
|   | No difference                  | 9              | 26.5       |
|   | Somewhat hindered              | 4              | 11.8       |
|   | Very hindered                  | 1              | 2.9        |
| How useful were the PDAs for your learning?       | Very helpful                   | 11             | 32.4       |
|   | Somewhat helpful               | 14             | 41.2       |
|   | No difference                  | 5              | 14.7       |
|   | Somewhat hindered              | 3              | 8.8        |
|   | Very hindered                  | 1              | 2.9        |

**TABLE II - Results from the Final survey administered to the Fall 2004 Sections of Statics**

| Question  | Response          | Response Count | Percentage |
|---|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| How useful was rapid feedback (either method) to your learning?   | Very helpful      | 16             | 45.7       |
|   | Somewhat helpful  | 19             | 54.3       |
|   | No difference     | 0              | 0          |
|   | Somewhat hindered | 0              | 0          |
|   | Very hindered     | 0              | 0          |
| How useful was using FLASHCARDS to your learning?   | Very helpful      | 5              | 14.3       |
|   | Somewhat helpful  | 23             | 65.7       |
|   | No difference     | 5              | 14.3       |
|   | Somewhat hindered | 2              | 5.7        |
|   | Very hindered     | 0              | 0          |
| How useful was using the PDAs to your learning?   | Very helpful      | 16             | 45.7       |
|   | Somewhat helpful  | 17             | 46.8       |
|   | No difference     | 1              | 2.9        |
|   | Somewhat hindered | 1              | 2.9        |
|   | Very hindered     | 0              | 0          |
| How do you think you would have done if this course was taught by the same professor, but in a more traditional method of teaching? | Much better       | 0              | 0          |
|   | A little better   | 0              | 0          |
|   | No difference     | 12             | 35.3       |
|   | A little worse    | 21             | 61.8       |
|   | Much worse        | 1              | 2.9        |

As mentioned previously, based on statistical analysis of the quiz scores, the Treatment was not significant ( $p$ -value = .0947). At first this was disappointing, as this was the factor of interest for this part of the project. On reflection, however, this finding, along with our survey results, suggest that rapid feedback is useful and well accepted by students, and that it does not matter which of the two forms of feedback is used, so long as it is used. What is interesting is that, though not borne out by the

statistical analysis, students *believe* the PDAs were more helpful to their learning than the flashcards.

The fact that rapid feedback is helpful to students compares well with other works. Roselli and Brophy similarly use personal response systems (PRS) for rapid feedback with results suggesting “a strong correlation between class participation and class performance.”[6] They also state that further research needs to be conducted on how PRS systems increase student learning, which our study and next years work attempts to do. Doolen [7] examined the relationship between PDA usage and student performance in an introductory course. He suggests that PDA use may be related to student achievement and survey results showed that students “felt confident about their ability to use PDAs, were enthusiastic, and enjoyed using the PDA’s.” While assessment of student learning was not evaluated by Falconer [8] and Dempster [9], the comments by their students regarding the use of rapid feedback are favorable.

Finally, as a comparison between subjects, we measured the students’ “gain” in statics through the application of a Statics Concept Inventory.[10] The reader is referred to the referenced work for details on the Concept Inventory and its use as a measure of student learning. In summary, the students from the Rowan Fall 2004 cohort scored an average gain of 35.9%. We have not yet made comparisons with other data or drawn conclusions from this finding.

## FINDINGS IN FOLLOW-ON COURSES

In order to assess the durability and transferability of the statics concepts and skills, the rapid feedback methods, both flashcards and PDA’s, were used in the subsequent mechanics courses of dynamics and solid mechanics (mechanics of materials). In the second year of the study, one author taught both courses. Dynamics was taught the second half of the fall semester, which was the 7.5 weeks immediately following statics and solid mechanics was taught during the first 7.5 weeks of the spring semester, using the feedback methods. Since one of the authors teaches only one section each of dynamics and solid mechanics, a crossover experimental design was not conducted. Instead the rapid feedback methods were used in one of two ways, 1) as a precursor to a topic in a follow-on course that was previously learned in statics to detect retention and transferability or 2) during the lecture as new concepts or skills were being taught, similar to the procedure that was used in statics. When a topic such as determining the moment about a point due to an external force was needed to solve a problem in dynamics, a question was posed to the students along with possible solutions before this concept was reviewed. The feedback results were tabulated to determine student retention of this concept learned in statics. If a majority of students answered incorrectly, then they were asked to discuss and answer again before the instructor provided review. If a majority answered correctly, then no review was necessary. Further questions were posed to the students

to provide rapid feedback to the instructor when teaching new concepts in dynamics and solid mechanics. In both cases the correct solution is embedded with ‘confounders’ derived from common student mistakes or misconceptions as previously discussed.

Table III lists the follow-on courses, concepts that were taught in statics and tested without review in the follow-on courses, and the percent of students who answered correctly. While these results are ‘tainted’ with data by students who did not learn statics in one of the two experimental sections in the fall semester (there were a total of three statics sections), they still are interesting preliminary findings showing reasonable retention.

**TABLE III - Concepts in Follow-on Courses in 2004-2005**

| Course          | Statics skill or concept  | Percentage correct |
|-----------------|---|--------------------|
| Dynamics        | Determine the vector position from one point to another (used in the kinematic equations for rigid bodies)                | 70.6               |
| Dynamics        | Determine the vector cross product (used in the kinematic equations for rigid bodies)                                     | 82.4               |
| Dynamics        | Determine the unit vector that describes the direction of motion of a pin in a slot                                       | 70.6               |
| Dynamics        | Compute the moment of a force about a point   | 85.7               |
| Solid Mechanics | Draw the correct FBD of a pin joint of a truss  | 50.0               |
| Solid Mechanics | Given the correct FBD of a pin joint, decompose the vector forces into x-y components and write the equilibrium equations | 92.6               |
| Solid Mechanics | Draw the correct FBD of an axially loaded bar   | 80.0               |
| Solid Mechanics | Draw the correct FBD of a simply-supported beam   | 58.3               |

### 3. Conclusion

Based on our results from the second year of our study, we can conclude that student scores in a Statics course were significantly associated with their prior performance in Calculus II and Physics I (both from the second semester of the freshman year). Most importantly, we found no difference between the scores when the students were provided with rapid feedback facilitated by the use of flashcards versus PDAs and software, something we found mildly surprising. In other words, it does not matter *how* one provides rapid feedback, so long as it is provided. Although we had thought that the ‘coolness’ of the PDA might affect a student’s learning, it really would only affect their interest during the physical activity in class of reporting their answers. In the end their scores were not influenced by whichever of the two feedback methods used. Next year, our project will continue with a crossover design between two sections in which the treatment (using the PDAs) will be contrasted with the control (using no feedback method).

The final survey results indicate that students overwhelmingly felt that having rapid feedback of their state of learning was somewhat or very helpful to them. Furthermore, a great majority of students felt that either method of feedback was at least ‘somewhat helpful’ to their learning, with a significant preference for the PDAs

over the flashcards. Hence, although the use of PDAs versus flashcards did not affect the actual learning (measured by the analyses of the quiz scores), the use of PDAs was *perceived* by students to be more helpful to their learning than the flashcards. Finally, 65% of the students believed that they would have performed worse in a course in which rapid feedback was not provided, while the remainder believed they would have performed at the same level.

We also believe that rapid feedback use improves knowledge retention (durability) and knowledge application in a different environment (transferability) as shown by preliminary results in dynamics and solid mechanics. The next year of this study will include comparison of students who did or did not use the rapid feedback method of instruction in statics in order to prove or disprove this hypothesis.

### 4. Acknowledgements

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