

Leveraging Module Conditional Release to Enable Personalized Student Engagement

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Abstract: Large-enrollment, asynchronous, online courses present significant teaching and learning challenges, particularly in implementing evidence-based practices such as building connections with students and offering personalized support. This Quick Hit explores the use of module conditional release, a feature in learning management systems, which can provide instructors with information about learners that enables important evidence-based teaching practices in large-enrollment online courses. This article walks through the steps of applying module conditional release to a course and describes how instructors can leverage module conditional release information to better connect and engage with students and provide personalized support at scale.

Keywords: module conditional release, large enrollment courses, asynchronous learning, online education

For the past 5 years, I have taught at least two sections of an introductory health care course each semester—one in-person and one online asynchronous. Over the years, I have seen the enrollment in my online section grow from 30 to over 120. This increase in the number of students choosing the online section over the in-person section reflects a national trend (Anthology, 2022).

As my class size increased, I grappled with the challenge of applying evidence-based practices, at scale, in the online asynchronous environment. I had to adapt my teaching methods to build better connections with my students and provide personalized support. To enact these evidence-based practices, I turned to a learning management system tool to assist.

Introduction to Module Conditional Release

Most learning management systems offer a feature that allows instructors to control when course content is released to students. The conditions that trigger this content release could be time based, releasing on a given date, or performance based, requiring the learner to take some type of action to release content. The name of this tool varies. In Canvas, the learning management system I use, it is called “module prerequisites and requirements.” For ease of understanding across all learning management systems, I will refer to this tool as *module conditional release*.

Module conditional release is recommended to support learner self-regulation in online courses, particularly those where content builds on itself, as it provides structure and organization (Darby & Lang, 2019). Research has also shown that performance-based module conditional release can increase student engagement with online content, especially lecture videos (S. M. Johnson & Menachemi, 2023), and is associated with a self-reported tendency for students to complete homework and quizzes more regularly (Fisher et al., 2014).

After implementing module conditional release in my course, I quickly realized that its benefits extend even further. It not only regulates content access but also provides insights into students' progress through the course, enabling personalized engagement with students that allowed me to build stronger connections and provide more individualized support to students in an online environment.

Setting Up Module Conditional Release

To implement module conditional release, you first need to choose the condition that will trigger the content to release. For synchronized progress through the course, use time-based release by setting modules to unlock weekly. This can be set up in your learning management system's module locking settings. However, this may limit flexibility, a key reason students choose to enroll in online courses (Bailey et al., 2015; R. Johnson et al., 2015; Vanslambrouck et al., 2018).

Alternatively, opt for a performance-based conditional release, where students must complete an action to unlock content. As the instructor, you can determine what action would best aid student learning, such as reflecting on previous content or completing a formative assessment.

In my course, I set up the performance-based conditional release to take the form of a review, a strategy I often use in my in-person courses. In the online course, I created these reviews using another Canvas tool called Quick Checks. Each module includes a Quick Check, a nongraded, formative assessment for students to test their understanding, allowing unlimited attempts until they answer correctly and unlock the next module. Quick Checks allow you to build in automatic feedback, offering personalized guidance based on correct or incorrect responses and directing students to relevant lesson content when needed. This feature became especially helpful as enrollment grew. By embedding these Quick Checks as nongraded assignments and setting a required score to be earned to unlock the next module, I enabled module conditional release in my course (Figure 1).

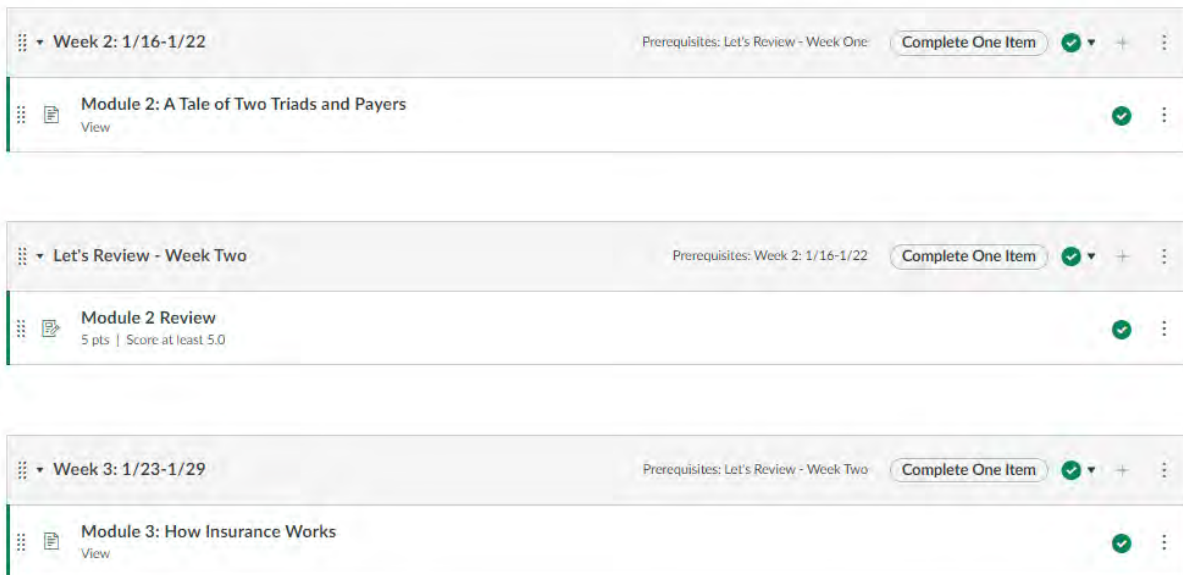


Figure 1. Canvas module layout with prerequisites and requirements enabled to create a module conditional release.

Using Module Conditional Release Data to Personalize Student Engagement

Frequent and supportive instructor engagement is crucial for building connections and a learning community (Darby & Lang, 2019). With module conditional release enabled, I could see where each student was in the course (Figures 2 and 3). This information, paired with insights from the Quick Check tool, helped me transform my online engagement with students. I was able to go beyond general video announcements and generic check-in emails to something far more individualized.



Figure 2. Clicking on “View Progress” allows the instructor to see how each individual student is moving through the course.



Figure 3. An individual student progress view in Canvas.

Building Connections Through Batch Canvas Messaging

To build student connections and support learners, instructors must demonstrate care and presence in an asynchronous online environment (Deacon, 2012). Before using module conditional release, I would send a general check-in email to all students in the 2nd week and post regular video announcements throughout the term. With conditional release enabled, I gained access to more detailed information about each student's progress, allowing me to send personalized messages that demonstrated care and built connections.

Although this approach sounds highly individualized and time consuming, it can be scaled efficiently in large enrollment courses. To do this, I created message templates for key points in the course, tailored to different student progress rates. For example, there was a message for students staying on track, another for those slightly behind, and a third for those with concerning engagement levels. These batch messages were sent before the first exam, ahead of a major assignment, right before break, and before the final exam. I also sent more frequent messages to students who needed additional support, as indicated by their progress.

By using Canvas to batch-send messages that appeared personalized, I was able to efficiently manage communications in a large course (Figure 4). I allocated students to message lists by reviewing their progress in the course. Although it did take some time to allocate students to their appropriate message batch, the time investment paid off in terms of engagement. To students, it felt as if I was personally emailing them about their progress, showing that I cared and wanted to help them succeed. These messages often led to valuable student responses and follow-up virtual meetings to discuss challenges and course content.

Compose Message ×

Course
 Select Course ▼

Send an individual message to each recipient

To
 🔍 Select Multiple Students Here 👤

Subject
 How are you feeling?

Good morning!

Spring break is right around the corner! How are you feeling about the content we've covered since the last exam? Any questions? I noticed that you are a bit behind in our modules. I know life happens and this is a busy time in the term. Is there anything I can do to support you? With spring break approaching, I always like to encourage students to stay on track to avoid feeling overwhelmed trying to catch up after the break. Ideally, it would be fantastic if you could catch up and finish Module 8 by the end of this week. If that isn't possible, let me know and we can come up with a catch-up plan.

📎 📧 Cancel Send

Figure 4. An example of a templated email sent to any students who had fallen behind the week before spring break.

Providing Tailored Student Support

Student progress data, provided by the module conditional release, combined with insights from the Quick Check tool, helped me identify students needing extra support. Once identified, I could provide tailored outreach and assistance. I regularly reviewed Quick Check data to spot students who required multiple attempts to pass Quick Check reviews, indicating a potential lack of understanding. When I noticed this, I reached out to offer help. Although not all students accepted, several shared that they would not have sought help on their own had I not initiated contact.

It was also evident that some students were simply guessing on Quick Check reviews until they passed, as shown by their progress in the course through module conditional release. When these students later struggled with an exam or assignment and asked for help, I could point out this pattern and discuss strategies for improving their approach and achieving success in the course.

Quick Check data were also valuable during virtual consultations with students. Before meetings, I reviewed the student's progress and identified areas where they struggled with Quick Checks. This preparation made consultations more effective and personalized. Instead of asking students to pinpoint their difficulties, I could start by addressing the areas I observed, immediately showing I cared about their learning journey. Without module conditional release, I would not have had the information needed for such individualized support.

The Impact

In my own course, I noticed a critical difference after enabling module conditional release and using the data it provided to enhance my student engagement. The level of interaction increased, and my ability to craft more individualized messages seemed to help students feel acknowledged in a large online class. This led to a rise in email conversations and virtual consultations. Students expressed a stronger sense of connection and support, as reflected in course evaluations where they commented on my consistent interactions. One student noted, “She was constantly giving feedback, sending out motivations, and reminders. She is one of those professors who truly enjoys what she does and values every single one of her students.” If you are looking for ways to scale evidence-based practices such as providing personalized support, increasing student engagement, and building meaningful connections in your large enrollment, online, asynchronous course, consider using the module conditional release tool in your learning management system.

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