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Integrating Inclusive and Sustainable Assessments in your Online Teaching from Beginning to End

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In remote teaching we all wrestle with how to effectively translate our typical assessments of student learning, and possibly, how to create new assessments. This requires (re)determining what we most want our students to achieve and thinking creatively about how they can best demonstrate their learning in an online environment. While there are tips to discourage cheating online, many instructors are concerned about academic integrity in online high-stakes, closed-book exams. Because students are more likely to learn from (and less likely to cheat on) assessments that provide authentic experiences or reflection on learning, it is valuable to think broadly about how best to assess our students learning in creative ways online.

The principles of inclusivity and sustainability can guide our development of online assessments from the beginning to the end of the course.

Sustainable assessments are those that help students develop skills necessary to direct and monitor their future learning. Shifting students' expectations from all feedback originating from the instructor to using self and peer assessment will help them reflect on their learning processes, and identify gaps in their skills and understanding. Making this shift will allow students to begin to assess and monitor their own learning, making it sustainable a skill that

students can use after leaving your course.

Inclusive assessments are those designed to measure students equitably, and in ways that are sensitive to cultural, economic and social differences. Transparency and clear communication regarding expectations for successful completion of work is key so that students understand its purpose, the necessary tasks to successfully complete the work, and upon what specific criteria they will be evaluated. This approach levels the playing field for diverse students while facilitating learning for all students.

To apply these principles in your online course:

Begin by seeking input from your students

At the beginning of a course, surveys can be used to discover students' incoming knowledge and skills as well as something about them as a person. Rather than focusing on knowledge 'deficits' that the curriculum must fill, this kind of preassessment will allow you to discover students' interests, lived experiences and motivations. Equitable assessments should be accessible and responsive to students whose abilities, access to computational tools and reliable high-speed internet, access to quiet work spaces, and extent of flexibility in setting their study schedules may vary. Therefore, it will be important for you to know about your students for your course planning.

1. Ask students to share what they are most excited about in the class, unique skills they are proud of, past educational experiences, and their own perceptions of their current knowledge and skills.
2. Use students' input to help them build connections between the course content and their interests.
3. To help them take ownership in creating spaces that welcome all members of the class, invite students to contribute to ground rules for class interactions.
4. Where possible, provide opportunities for students to make choices about an assessment topic or format that leverages their skills and interests to help them feel more empowered and engaged in the course.

Use frequent low-stakes assessment to guide students' learning throughout the course

As your course progresses, assessments are a learning tool that can develop the students' sense of belonging in the course community, as well as a shared responsibility for and awareness of their learning. There are many ways to accomplish this. Here are a few:

1. Include a variety of low-stakes activities and assignments early and frequently such as short quizzes, reflective writing prompts, group projects, and synchronous or asynchronous discussions. This allows students to calibrate your expectations, get feedback they can incorporate, and understand their individual progress.

2. Use online discussions to build opportunities for interaction that develop students' sense of belonging, and motivate them to learn from each other in their responses and question of each other.
3. In both asynchronous discussions and synchronous sessions, guide opportunities for effective peer feedback by modeling it yourself, highlighting examples of productive exchanges, prompting them to ask each other guiding questions and asking them to use rubrics / clear criteria to guide and assess their responses.
4. Before students hand in work, ask them to self-evaluate according to the grading criteria and to identify areas where they would most benefit from your feedback.

Culminate the course with authentic applications of course knowledge and skills with integrative assessments

Students can demonstrate their achievement of the course goals by applying disciplinary tools to real-world situations, analyzing authentic data or exploring solutions to so called “wicked problems.” These are problems that have changing parameters, are resistant to solutions, involve incomplete data, or are difficult to recognize (Hanstedt 2018). Creative projects with formative feedback will support students in developing the sustainable assessment skills necessary for lifelong learning. Consider

1. To synthesize key ideas or reflect on what they've taken away, have students write research reports or papers. These can provide opportunities to practice disciplinary language and styles of communication.
2. To creatively demonstrate learning, have students create artifacts such as maps, figures, photo essays, journals, videos, blogs, podcasts, or portfolios. Structure checkpoints and opportunities for formative feedback to support students in successfully completing these projects.
3. To learn to self-assess the quality of their work, have students use use rubrics, peer-feedback, and/or compare it to exemplary examples.

Whatever forms of assessment you choose, clear communication is critical to their success. Consider starting each unit with a brief overview of how all the course components fit together and alerting them to upcoming deadlines. Make sure to inform students how each assessment will be useful for their learning, make expectations as transparent as possible, and be clear about where students can find answers to questions as they arise.

Learn More

- The Art & Science of Successful Online Discussions (Faculty Focus)
- Five Discussion Ground Rules for the Online Classroom (Colorado State University Online Blog)
- Professors Share Ideas for Building Online Community (Inside Higher Ed)
- Alternative to Exams for Remote Teaching (Teaching@Tufts)
- Creating Epic Finales or Limping Across the Finish Line (Teaching@Tufts)

- Curricula for Wicked Problems (Wicked Problems Project)
- Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT Higher Ed)
- Inclusive Assessment: Equal or Equitable? (Teaching@Tufts)

Selected References

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