

4 Options for Creating Empathetic Online Midterms and Assessments



With a bit of creativity, you can meet your course's objectives while providing the flexibility students need

Many instructors are rethinking whether following the status quo for high-stakes exams makes sense given the challenges of learning online. The reality is, many students are feeling stressed and out of their element, heightening the need for empathy and flexibility.

Of course, conducting traditional assessments online using remote proctoring tools may be unavoidable for some. This is especially true for courses required for professional degrees and accreditation programs. Even so, this has become an area of some controversy given concerns around privacy as well as student access and equity. Many others question whether high-stakes exams, whatever form they take, are truly the best way to assess learning in the first place.

Perhaps the first question to ask is whether having students complete a high-stakes assessment is even necessary.

Have your students already met the learning outcomes for this section of the course? Would your students feel okay about their learning without an exam? If the answer to both questions is yes, consider reweighting other assessments or provide more frequent

opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery throughout the course.

However, if you still feel that students would benefit from a more formal assessment, that doesn't mean you're relegated to delivering an online exam. Here we provide a number of options that offer students the flexibility they need, while allowing them to apply their knowledge, think critically and reflect on their learning.

Open-book exams

Open book exams are a great starting point because they require less technical equipment and broadband internet access. This makes it simpler to provide an equitable assessment experience for all students. When giving students an open-book exam, try to provide them with a realistic time period to complete the work. Twenty-four to 72 hours should be a sufficient amount of time for students to complete the necessary work.

It's also important to be explicit with instructions and expectations to set students up for success. Specifying answer word counts, what types of questions will be featured and any technical equipment they may need (such as headphones for watching video clips) all help prepare students for what's to come. You could also consider giving

students a practice test beforehand as a quick preview of what the actual assessment will look like. Hosting virtual office hours a few days before the exam to answer any questions and providing an opportunity for informal connection can help students prepare.

Asynchronous assignments

For asynchronous assignments, consider providing students with a problem to solve. You could also have them write a paper or report that allows them to apply knowledge from the course by analyzing and evaluating previously learned concepts. This way, you have more options for creativity. Asynchronous assignments also allow learners to collaborate with their peers. A group project or case study can help deepen the learning process and alleviate feelings of isolation students may feel in remote learning environments.

Research projects

Students can use research projects as an opportunity to extrapolate their course learnings to apply the hard and soft skills they glean from the course to a topic of their choice. By sharing a poster presentation, video or pre-recorded speech with their peers and instructors, students can get both formal and informal feedback.

This also provides a way for students to connect with classroom communities on their own terms. More introverted students can complete posters and narrated powerpoints, while more outgoing students can prepare pre-recorded or even live videos to present their assignments.

More frequent, low-stakes assessments

Many online instructors have embraced more frequent assessments because of the feedback loops this creates between themselves and their students. Low-stakes assessments can be used for a grade, to assess comprehension or both. They provide students with more opportunities to iterate on their learning and improve over the course of the term. Plus, they help you get a finger on the pulse early on, instead of waiting until later in the semester when it may be too late to get a student back on track.

Frank Spors, Associate Professor of Optometry at Western Health Sciences University, has used frequent assessments to understand where his students were struggling. “The assessment identified content areas that required more clarification during class,” Spors

said. “I adjusted my planned lecture accordingly to focus on areas where students needed the most help.”

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