

Welcome to this podcast called Assessment in the Online Classroom! I am Scott Vigallon, the instructional technology/open learning coordinator at Las Positas College, and this podcast will focus on those things that you need to consider when assessing students in an online course.

Like in the face-to-face classroom, you have choices when it comes to assessment. You can assess in the traditional manner with quizzes, exams, etc., or you can use an alternate, performance-based format. Or you can do both. Either way, it is critical that you match your assessments to your student learning outcomes and objectives. This way, you will know whether or not your students learned what they were supposed to learn. Either way, it is also critical that you inform students of the rules, procedures, and grading criteria regarding assessments, and be sure afterwards to give students proper, and prompt, feedback.

Traditional formats for online testing match those in face-to-face courses, namely multiple choice, true-false, short answer, matching, essay questions, etc. Blackboard offers a variety of question types for exams and even offers practice tests with feedback that act as stress-free ways to prepare for exams.

Alternatively, you can have students complete performance-based assignments, such as designing web sites, designing PowerPoint presentations, completing research and group assignments, and completing case studies. You can even have students save their work in portfolios that you can assess. Just make sure that these types of assessments are consistent with other course activities and available resources. Moreover, these alternative formats tend to minimize cheating, if this is something that you are concerned about.

Speaking of cheating, many instructors are leery of teaching online because they fear that cheating might become rampant in their classes. If you have those concerns, here are other ways that you can minimize cheating:

- Collect a writing sample(s). Do this early in the course so you have a pretty good idea of students' writing skills and styles. You should also have students post to the class discussion board often, which is another way you will have access to their writing. Discussion board postings and chats are automatically saved in Blackboard, so you can view them at any time. If a student's assignment submissions and postings reveal sub par writing skills, then all of a sudden, he turns in a term paper that seems like it was written by a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, you'll know something is fishy.
- Write creative essay questions. In your questions, ask students to apply what they have learned; try to stay away from questions that can be answered by anybody. Also, require students to apply other higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, along with supporting factual knowledge.
- Call students to discuss a point further after an exam or after a major assignment is turned in. If you are suspicious that the student cheated, call her at home and ask some clarification or follow-up questions. If the student can't satisfactorily answer your questions, that might be an indication that she didn't do the work.
- Use an anti-plagiarism service. All LPC instructors have access to Turnitin, an online anti-plagiarism service that compares student submissions against everything on the public Internet, archived (or old) web pages, research databases, and student papers that were previously submitted to Turnitin.
- Use the Blackboard tools available to you when giving exams. These tools include setting time limits, prohibiting backtracking during tests, and forcing students to complete an exam once they access it. You can also randomize the order of questions, or better yet, randomize questions so different students get different questions.
- If you are really concerned about possible cheating, you can always force your students to come to campus to take exams. To do this, though, you'll need to put the time, date, and room number in the college's schedule of classes.

After your assessment, you'll want to compile data on the results and analyze that data for several purposes. First, you'll want to determine how valid and reliable your assessment was. In other words, did you assess what you told the students you would assess on? Next, you'll want to determine if your students met the student learning outcome and/or objective of the module, chapter, unit or assignment. Finally, you'll want to use the above information to improve the assessment for the future. If you are assessing via exams, Blackboard has statistical tools that help with data collection.

Granted, designing quality assessments takes time. However, the time you spend writing your assessments, grading them, following up with data collection and analysis, and improving them will prove its worth to your course in general and to your students in particular.