



7 Steps to: Online summative assessment

Overview

It is important that summative assessment relates to learning outcomes and offers a reliable and valid measure of students' abilities and achievements. Online assessment facilitates some existing forms of assessment but also offers possibilities for new and different ways of assessing. It presents some existing and new challenges, particularly in relation to authorship and honesty. So, if you are moving your teaching online, it is likely that there will be aspects to your assessment that need rethinking.

When going online, assessment choices and how they are managed will be influenced by assessment beliefs related to previous experience, colleagues' practice, and the requirements of discipline and professional bodies (Conrad and Openo, 2018), such as favouring unseen timed examinations. In moving online it is important to critically reflect on assessment design choices and to question the relocating of traditional assessments to an online context. In shifting to teaching online, practice should be informed by the evidence of academics experienced in online teaching. Just as aspects of teaching delivery need to be re-designed for online learning, so does assessment.

Experts in online assessment advocate design that is authentic, appropriately automated, continuous, secure, accessible and supported by formative assessment (JISC, 2020). This 7 Steps resource briefly covers these themes, giving advice on online summative assessment. It offers suggestions for literature and resources to help inform design decisions and, paired with [7 Steps to: providing online formative feedback](#), helps develop an informed online assessment approach.

1. Automate your assessment

Automated assessment describes closed, short answer questions such as MCQs which provide immediate feedback (Stödtberg, 2012). Tools for these types of e-assessment are popular and well-catered for in digital learning environments. In very large classes they are used extensively as an efficient way of testing. However, this format has limitations in testing recall rather than more analytical, evaluative and creative expressions of knowledge and understanding. Academics experienced in online delivery advocate automated assessment in a continuous, low-stakes design, as part of the mix with other assessment. For example, students may be required to complete weekly e-assessment with the scores contributing a small component (typically 10-20%) to the overall module grade. Assigning a small value to automated tests drives regular online engagement, serves a formative purpose, and also improves overall academic performance (Holmes, 2018; Stödtberg, 2012). Consider moving beyond MCQs to use a greater diversity of e-assessment question formats that might be more challenging such as matching, assertion-reason questions and extended response questions.

2. Aim for authentic assessment

Authentic online assessment is routed in setting tasks whose form and/or process are based in real-life contexts and problems. Such assessment is more motivating for students; testing their ability to apply judgements relating to complex scenarios and case studies, and developing their digital literacy in ways that they will likely experience in the workplace. The forms that authentic assessment can take are many and varied but examples include video production, website creation, podcasts, digital storytelling, a social media strategy, as well as reports and digital presentations (JISC, 2020). For some assessments, marking rubrics written with flexible language can be used to allow students choice in what artefact they submit for assessment (Gikandi, 2013).

3. Integrate collaborative assessment

Collaboration, which is a form of authentic learning, has a central role online in nurturing a learning community (see [7 Steps to: Creating online learning communities](#)). Collaborative assessment engages learners socially, gives them multiple perspectives, develops negotiation and other professional skills, and allows students to tackle complex assessment tasks that they would not be able to address as individuals. Students also benefit from the critical reflection and self-assessment that they engage in through the act of working in a group (Altinay, 2017; see also [7 Steps to: peer and self assessment](#) & [7 Steps to: using group work in your teaching](#)). Collaborative learning needs to be supported by guidance and structure, such as through setting progress milestones, providing an assessment rubric, and making clear the expectations and consequences of free-loading. Online collaboration is facilitated by digital tools such as wikis, digital forums, and project management tools, that enable different forms of communication, content creation and management (Baleni, 2015). Consider using peer moderated marking of collaborative work, facilitated by the tools from your digital learning environment such as Moodle Workshop or those recommended by JISC (2020).

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4. Rethink examinations

Students prefer online examination to paper exams, finding that being able to work digitally enables editing, is faster and more comfortable for them to type than write, and more authentic (Butler-Henderson and Crawford, 2020). However, external accreditation bodies often require paper examinations and many academics favour them too. Whilst having potential for cheating, studies comparing online versus traditional exams seem to show no significant difference in assessment performance (ibid). Post-pandemic, greater evidence will emerge on this. Certainly, scope for cheating is higher online if not managed. Set authentic briefs, such as writing a professional report on the basis of provided resources. This can be as challenging as a traditional exam but harder to plagiarise. Consider if you would rather offer a more traditional timed closed book exam or an open book exam with a longer time window to complete (e.g. 24 hours), in which students are allowed to access resources. Defining the parameters of what students can access is advisable, such as closing off areas of the digital environment and permitting use of specific resources/journals only (Moore, 2018). This helpfully bounds the examination for the student and can make cheating harder. Online examinations need to have clear expectations around word counts and the criteria for referencing. Consult your institution's digital learning service on guidance and requirements about how to make the most of digital settings for controlling high-stakes online examinations.

5. Manage ethics and honesty

It is important to be able to verify both a learner's identity and their ownership of work submitted (JISC, 2020; Butler-Henderson and Crawford, 2020). Integrity has always been an issue for assessment and so in some respects existing good practice stands - set authentic and customised work; give clear expectations around ethics and honesty; state how plagiarism will be monitored; and explain the consequences of cheating. Partner this with good practice in formative feedback that supports students towards their summative work (Lederman, 2020). Continue to use digital tools to prevent plagiarism and collusion, including in online examinations. The Covid-19 pandemic has fast-tracked developments in the adoption of systems for learner verification (biometrics/face recognition) and remote invigilation also known as remote proctoring (educational data forensics, monitoring of user movements, etc). These surveillance tools are not without problems, raise many ethical issues, and are likely to be a contested area of practice in coming years (Okada et al, 2019; Swauger, 2020). Consult your institution's guidance for policy and practice at a local level.

6. Ensure online assessment is accessible and inclusive

The digital environment provides tools that enable rather than constrain what students can demonstrate and achieve (JISC, 2020). However, accessibility must not be taken for granted. Disability and neurodiversity issues remain, and not all students will have access to up-to-date technologies or reliable and fast connectivity. Furthermore, when working from home, students may not have quiet and uninterrupted spaces to work in. Authentic, flexible coursework and non-traditional approaches to exams can help to counter these issues. For example, a 24-hour open book test will give more latitude to those being assessed in disrupted spaces. Use universal design for learning (UDL) principles to underpin the assessment approach (Rogers-Shaw et al, 2018) and consult [7 Steps to: inclusive assessment](#) & [7 Steps to: considering neurodiversity in online learning](#) for further guidance.

7. Provide consistency in support and communication

Learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, processes and expectations should all be clearly communicated (Martin et al, 2019) and these should be designed and aligned with any modifications needed in taking a module online. Use the flexibility of the digital environment to offer different ways for students to find out about assessment such as digital checklists, synchronous class briefings, 'how to' videos, etc. Be considerate of the fact that students may be experiencing a variety of ways of presenting assessment information between modules. Work with colleagues to discuss and standardise practice as far as possible (Lonsdale, 2020). Traditionally feedback on summative assessment is given in written formats. Digital technology offers different possibilities (JISC, 2016). Audio and video feedback is not new but may better suit being part of the feedback mix of fully online modules.

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