



Remote Teaching Updates & Resources

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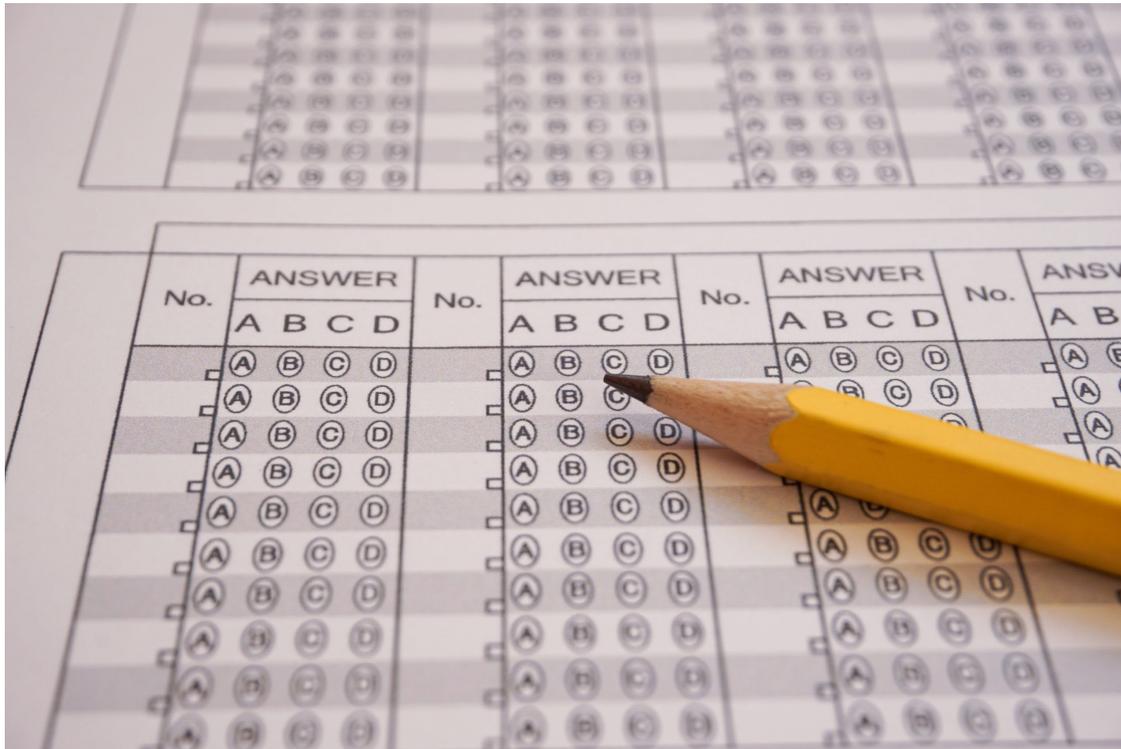
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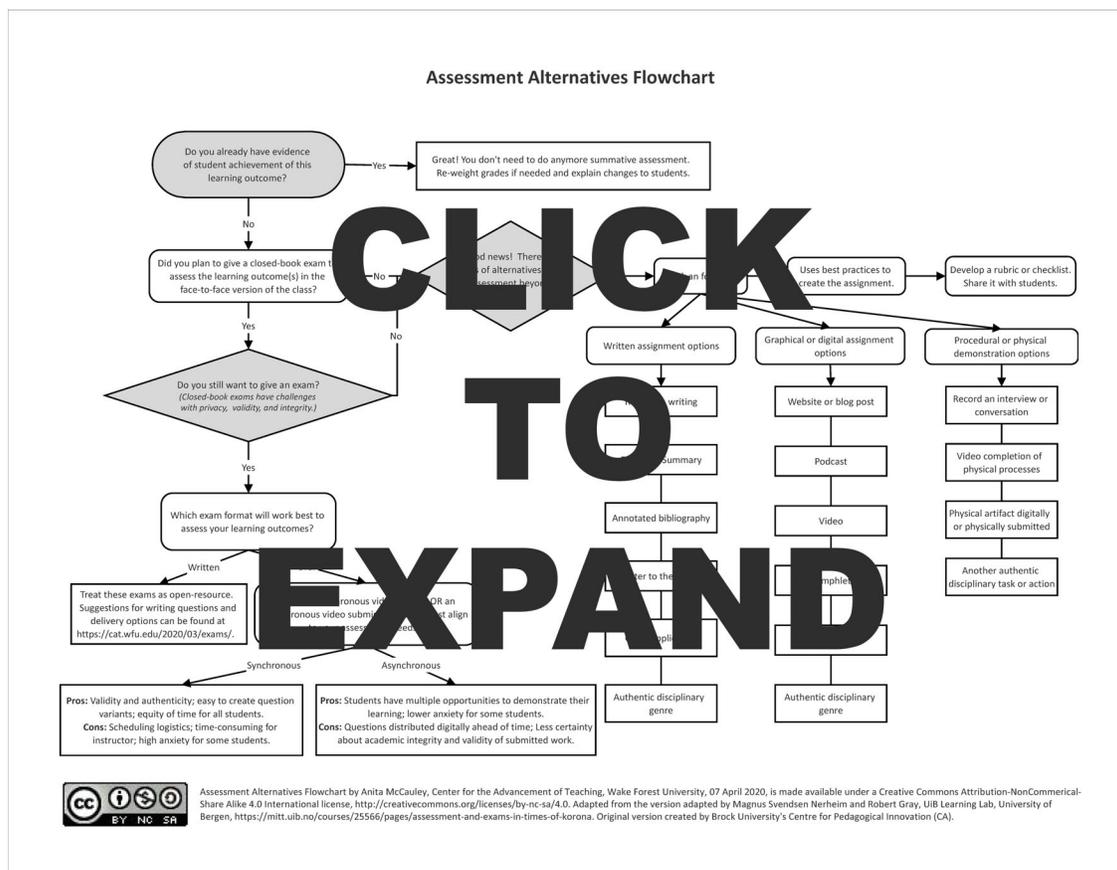


Assessing Student Learning: Alternatives to Closed-Book Exams

By Anita McCauley on Apr 09, 2020 09:24 am



What do you want your students to learn? How can you find out if they learned it? What evidence can you collect to document their learning that is authentic, valid, and reliable? These may seem like daunting questions to answer in remote teaching and learning circumstances. But, there is good news! Many best practices in assessment are relevant and applicable to remote assessment. This post, focused on remote assessment of student learning, uses an **Assessment Alternatives Flowchart** to help you think about exam options other than the closed-book written format, options for assessment using assignments, and provides steps and strategies for developing these assessment alternatives.



What do you still need to assess?

Start by reflecting on what students have already learned. Review your course learning outcomes. If you don't have explicitly articulated outcomes, pull out your syllabus and identify the major topics, questions, or goals of the course. Determine which of these are the most important things for students to learn. This will be a good starting point for considering your assessment plan for the remainder of the semester. Next, reflect on the assessments you have already done. You already have evidence of student learning from the previous eight weeks of face to face and three weeks of remote teaching and learning. What physical and digital artifacts of learning have you already collected that you can use for assessment? Determine where you already have enough evidence of student learning and consider those outcomes done. You don't need to do any

more assessment. Reweight your grades if needed and explain the changes to students.

Following this reflection and self-assessment, you now have a list of learning outcomes or major topics that have yet to be sufficiently assessed. Prioritize the list. As you do so, consider whether all are of equal importance and whether any can be cut or revised. Approximately three weeks remain until the last day of the semester, followed by a week for final exams. How can you use the next 3-4 weeks to meaningfully assess the highest priority student learning that remains in your course?

Did you plan to give a traditional, closed-book exam?

If you planned to give a closed-book, written exam as a midterm or final assessment of student learning, consider alternatives that could replace that assessment. While there are options for proctoring online exams, there are many [ethical, financial, and equity-based concerns](#) that make this solution problematic at best. If you want to stick with an exam-format style assessment, there are a number of options for written or oral exams.

For written exams, it's best to think of them as open-resource. You can find more about writing questions and delivery options for remote written exams [here](#). If you want to give a timed written exam within a learning management system, this [post](#) gives you step-by-step instructions. If you do an open-book, written, timed exam, here is an [example of instructions](#) you could give to students ahead of time. One option that bridges a written exam with a writing assignment is to have students write exam questions along with an answer key. First, using the course outcomes and feedback from you, students could iteratively develop exam questions. Once the questions are acceptable, then students work in an open-resource environment to develop comprehensive answer keys to those questions. For oral exams, there are both synchronous and asynchronous options. Each has pros and cons but could serve as authentic, valid ways for students to demonstrate learning.

Assessment Alternatives Beyond Exams

If you weren't planning to give an exam or you have decided to pivot away from the exam format entirely, assignments are a great alternative for students to demonstrate their learning. In particular, consider using authentic and engaging assignments as a way to motivate students to do more work and achieve deeper learning. These types of assignments are more motivating because they give students the opportunity to work on "real-life" tasks, to imagine being a professional in a field, to experience doing the work of the discipline. And, it turns out that the more demanding (and transparent) the assignment, the greater the quality of student work. In other words, if we ask students to do more, then they do.

As you start brainstorming potential new assignments or revisions of existing assignments, consider the following questions as guides:

- What is the most important purpose of this assignment?
- What do you want to see from students in this assignment?
- What is the difference between a strong and a weak performance on this assignment?
- How can you make this assignment relate to or build upon other assignments from this course?

Pick a format

In the [flowchart](#), assignments are organized as written, graphical/digital, and practical/procedural. What type of assignment should you give? Start by reflecting on your discipline. What are the authentic tasks by practitioners in the field? What types of scholarly products are created? How are ideas communicated to others? Answers to these questions can help you pick the format and specific task. You may also be able to find ideas for assignments, along with instructions and rubrics, in the [NILOA Assignment Library](#). In

addition to the ideas listed in the flow chart, here are some additional examples that might get your creative juices going.

For written assignments, task students with writing a(n)...

- Campaign speech or a public service announcement
- Realistic fictional diary
- Plan to interview an expert or stakeholder
- Dramatized event or scenario
- Instruction manual

For graphical and digital assignments, task students with creating a(n) :

- Graphic organizer
- Classification scheme
- Model of a process
- Charts, graphs, or diagrams
- Game including the board or playing surface and instructions

For digital and practical/procedural, task students with recording a(n):

- Advertisement or commercial
- Video or other digital format to critique a performance, exhibit, argument, of sample of work
- Realistic fictional news report
- Teach a lesson to a family member, stuffed animal, or empty chair
- Narrate a powerpoint presentation on a topic

Use Best Practices in Assignment Design

With the assignment format and specific task decided, now it's time to get into the design details. Consider these strategies for incorporating the [characteristics of effective assignments](#) into your assignment design.

- **Aligned:** Pick 1, no more than 2, learning outcomes and make sure the assignment is directly connected to them.
- **Transparent:** Clearly communicate to students detailed instructions and the evaluation criteria.
- **Developmentally Appropriate and Substantive:** Set performance levels at a high but realistic level given the time available to complete the assignment.
- **Authentic and Engaging:** Focus on real-world contexts and encourage integration and synthesis from across the semester.
- **Inclusive:** Make sure your expectations are unbiased in terms of student background and current circumstances.
- **Reflective and Iterative:** Include at least one opportunity for feedback and revision.

As part of your assignment, consider requiring a reflective writing journal in which students document their progress, reflect on their learning along the way, and demonstrate to you their growth through the process of completing the assignment. At the end of the assignment, this journal could include reflection on any of the following prompts:

- What was the one most useful or meaningful thing you learned while completing this assignment?
- What did you learn about writing/research/another skill from completing this assignment?
- What strategies did you use to learn the material in this assignment? Which were most effective?
- What risks did you take in completing this assignment?
- What problems did you encounter in this assignment; How did you solve them?
- List three ways you have grown or developed because of this assignment.
- What did you learn from this assignment that is not reflected in your submitted work?

Build the rubric or checklist

Create a rubric or a specifications-style checklist and give it to students when you give the assignment. Make sure that you write detailed instructions to explain the purpose, intended audience, process, and your expectations for the submitted work.

As you work to create the rubric or checklist, determine if you can use, modify, or combine parts or all of existing [AAC&U VALUE rubrics](#). If you need to create a rubric from scratch for this assignment, follow these steps:

- Convert the learning goals into traits. The list of traits make up the leftmost column of a rubric. You may find it useful to use the definitions of key concepts and skills to help you identify the traits. For example, AAC&U defines “problem-solving” as the process of designing, evaluating, and implementing a strategy to answer an open-ended question or achieve a desired goal. In the associated VALUE rubric, the traits of problem-solving to be assessed are 1) define the problem; 2) identify strategies; 3) propose solutions; 4) evaluate potential solutions; 5) implement a solution; and 6) evaluate the outcome.
- Identify and label performance levels for each trait. These are the other columns in the table.
- Create descriptions of each trait at each level. Here you are filling in the boxes in the table.
- Compare the assignment details and instructions with the rubric. Revise as needed.
- Share it with students and give them a chance to ask questions.

There are many ways to assess student learning beyond the traditional written closed-book exam. As you consider all these options, we are here to help.

Reach out to us directly or send an email to cat@nullwfu.edu and we'll be glad to brainstorm with you, answer questions, or point you in the right direction for all the pedagogical and technological support you may need.

Resources:

- Hutchings P, Jankowski NA, & Schultz KE. 2016. *Designing Effective Classroom Assignments: Intellectual Work Worth Sharing*. Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 48:1, 6-15.
- Sullivan D and McConnell KD. 2018. *It's the Assignments — A Ubiquitous and Inexpensive Strategy to Significantly Improve Higher-Order Learning*. Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, Vol. 50(5): 16-23.
- Suskie, L. 2018. *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. 3rd ed. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco CA.
- Winkelmes, Mary-Ann et al. 2016. *A Teaching Intervention That Increases Underserved College Students' Success*. Peer Review, Winter/Spring.

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