Assessing Student Learning In Distance Learning Environments

## Key Take-aways:

### Let your course learning goals guide the changes you make to the course.

### Use the online environment to your advantage -- for both assessing student learning and encouraging student learning.

### Assess student learning frequently and with low stakes assessments to help gauge how well students are learning and to allow for adjustments along the way.

### Assess the new course structure for ways you can support student learning and help students stay connected.

### Be kind to yourself and your students. Students will appreciate that you are taking the time to think about these changes in thoughtful ways and that you are making every effort to support them during these challenging times.

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**Thinking carefully about how we can support our students in achieving the learning goals we set for them is what assessment is all about.** A good assessment strategy can both inform your teaching and support your students in the new distance-learning environment. The information below is intended to help Queens College instructors assess the courses they recently transitioned to distance learning format by answering the following questions:

* What do I want students to learn (be able to know and do) from this course, regardless of delivery mode? What are my most important learning goals given the constraints of this semester?
* What kinds of assessments can help me as the teacher -- and my students as the learners -- better gauge how well students are meeting these learning goals?
* What improvements can I make to the new course design to support my students during this difficult semester?

## What are my learning goals for this course given the constraints of this semester?

Good assessment, regardless of how instruction is delivered, starts with articulating the learning goals for a course so that your students have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. If your course syllabus does not state your goals for student learning, that is the place to start. If you already have clear learning goals, now is the time to review them. Given the challenges of teaching in an unfamiliar environment and the challenges of learning in an unfamiliar environment and in uncertain times, you may need to adjust the goals for this semester:

1. Review your course learning goals and make any needed adjustments for this semester.
2. If adjustments are made, share these changes with your students by including a copy of your syllabus on your course site (Blackboard, Google Classroom, Google Site), or if you are not using any of these platforms, send a copy of the new syllabus to your students.

## What kinds of assessments can help me as the teacher -- and my students as the learners -- better gauge how well students are meeting these learning goals?

As you continue to redesign or develop your course to be delivered online, and to adjust to the changes in the academic calendar, you may need to adjust the work you assign to students - both the amount and the type. Assessing student learning in a distance education course -- whether instruction is delivered through Blackboard, Google Classroom, Video Chat, email or with other tools -- is not very different from assessment of student learning when instruction is delivered in more traditional ways (i.e., in person). While the frequency and methods of assessing student learning may need to vary from those you previously used to assess student learning when teaching in-person, you can still rely on similar tools -- problem sets, discussion, writing assignments, quizzes, tests, rubrics, surveys and polls to judge how well students are meeting course learning goals.

### **To better gauge students’ learning:**

* Use the online environment to your advantage, not only to assess student learning but also to encourage student learning. Consider asking students which learning activities they are enjoying, what material is most challenging, and provide self-assessment opportunities that can point students to the areas they most need to focus on.
* Consider building in more frequent assessments. Frequent, low-stakes assessments provide an on-going indicator on how well students are learning the material and can point to adjustments you can make to improve student learning.
* Consider incorporating collaborative and explorative assignments in your course. Assessing student learning in ways that provide an opportunity for students to apply what they learn in the course will help keep students engaged and give them the opportunity to demonstrate how well they understand the material.

### **Avoid these common assessment mistakes:**

* ***Using the wrong type of assessment for the learning goal***

The optimal assessment tool depends on whether a learning objective is declarative (facts) or procedural (tasks). This is a difference between knowing about and knowing how.

* + To assess procedural learning objectives, consider having your students give or record a presentation or demonstration. For example, in BlackBoard Collaborate Ultra, students can record themselves [using the whiteboard](https://tips.uark.edu/blackboard-collaborate-ultra-whiteboard/) to teach a concept.
  + To assess declarative learning objectives, consider assigning reports/essays or tests where students have to explain their answer.
* ***Using an invalid assessment***

If an assessment instrument doesn’t measure what you intend to measure, it has no validity. On the contrary, a valid assessment tool measures what it claims to measure. The best way to establish validity is to carefully match your learning objectives to learning activities and assessments.

* ***Assessing too late to be able to make changes to better support student learning***

## What improvements can I make to the new course design to support my students during this difficult semester?

Since you needed to bring your course(s) online quickly, you might be interested to learn whether your new course design could be improved in ways that will help your students succeed.Toassess your new course design, consider the following questions:

### **Does every student have access to the materials and resources you’re asking them to utilize?**

### **Are you giving students sufficient time and flexibility to learn the material?**

### **Are students assessed in ways that ask them to demonstrate what they’re learning?**

**If your course structure or schedule has changed, take some time to review the alignment between your learning goals, learning activities, and assessments.** If learning goals, learning activities and assessments are not in alignment, students may spend time on activities that have little to do with the ways in which they are asked to demonstrate what they’ve learned, which can undermine both student motivation and learning.

### **Are students given opportunities to develop personal connections to you and to their peers?**

This is a challenging time for everyone, and the loss of face-to-face interaction can be especially hard. Keeping students engaged with the course material is important, but it is also important that students feel connected to you and to their classmates. Boost student morale by including opportunities for positive interaction:

* Add, tweak or revise exercises, assignments, projects, and quizzes to enable students to work with a partner or in a group (which they can do via Zoom, Google Meet, Webex, Skype or any other online meeting platform, even simply email or chat).
* Make extra credit assignments available to groups of students
* Incorporate a short interactive exercise during synchronous class meetings.
* Have students evaluate each other’s work, giving constructive criticism on writing assignments or other work (a rubric for students is especially helpful for this type of interaction).
* Include activities that celebrate students’ growth and successes in the course.

## For more information on assessing your course design, see the Resources below:

* This [rubric from Quality Matters](https://www.qualitymatters.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/StandardsfromtheQMHigherEducationRubric.pdf) has eight standards by which you may evaluate your course:

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Learning Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability

* This [rubric from Open SUNY Course Quality Review](https://oscqr.suny.edu/) has 50 standards by which you may evaluate your course:

1. [Overview and Information](https://oscqr.suny.edu/evidence-examples/overview-and-information/)
2. [Content and Activities](https://oscqr.suny.edu/content-activities/)
3. [Technology and Tools](https://oscqr.suny.edu/technology-and-tools/)
4. [Interaction](https://oscqr.suny.edu/interaction/)
5. [Design and Layout](https://oscqr.suny.edu/design-layout/)
6. [Assessment and Feedback](https://oscqr.suny.edu/assessment-feedback/)

* From AAC&U: [https://www.aacu.org/events/teaching-learning-and-assessing-remote-learning-environments](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.aacu.org_events_teaching-2Dlearning-2Dand-2Dassessing-2Dremote-2Dlearning-2Denvironments&d=DwMF-g&c=mRWFL96tuqj9V0Jjj4h40ddo0XsmttALwKjAEOCyUjY&r=1X0JqzzRbChFPQAkzheDMrtQT4AUMsMOKo83NEhw-VI&m=t0Lv6oIbOxl5EmIvYxRghjtt5pVXQ_pHyTnCOWjOuY0&s=71dknn1Dhm7CcZCKf1vy_0rbyPWTadgqD5VkGsgF8VI&e=)