

A Workshop on Online Exams as a Supportive Response to Faculty's Needs During a Pandemic

By Suzanne R. Horwitz and Mary English

Along with many other institutions of higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted Northeastern University to move courses online for the second half of the spring semester and beyond. As this crisis unfolded, faculty turned to the Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research (CATLR) for support on how to conduct their courses online—including effectively lecturing, facilitating discussions, and assessing student learning online. On the topic of learning assessment, CATLR developed, delivered, and iterated upon a workshop called, “Strategies for Effective Online Exams.” The workshop focused on strategies for balancing multiple needs, including rapid development, rigor, prevention of cheating, and equitable exam experiences for all students. While the shift to remote education was the impetus for educators to re-think exam administration, we hope some of these strategies will remain a part of educators’ practice, whether online or on ground.

This online synchronous workshop has been offered multiple times throughout the spring and early summer, with slight modifications and improvements each time. To date, I have co-delivered the workshop 9 times, with several other CATLR staff members, reaching a total of 118 participants. The workshop content was informed by the literature on online exams and questions raised by faculty in consultations with CATLR. In line with CATLR’s guiding principles, we 1) aimed to “meet faculty where they are,” recognizing that some faculty would want to make the minimum adaptations to their pre-planned assessments while others would want to make more innovative adaptations to the remote course; 2) positioned ourselves as “thought partners” who were there to think through the “pros” and “cons” of different design choices and technologies; 3) practiced responsive facilitation, creating space for those in attendance to share their expertise on assessment in their disciplines.

With these principles in mind, we selected several key topics to cover in the workshop while also leaving room to adapt to participants’ unique needs. As an example of how this was accomplished, we began our sessions by asking participants to share their questions about online exams. This “just-in-time needs assessment” not only allowed participants to feel connected to others who had similar concerns, but also allowed us to tune our facilitation to the needs of those in attendance. An informal look at comments shared in the sessions’ “chat box” show that common questions focused on preventing cheating and tools to monitor student behavior during online exams, utilization of technology tools for administering exams, and expectations around flexible timing for assessments.

The interests expressed by participants in the chat were well aligned with the topics we had pre-selected for the workshop. Anticipating that ensuring academic integrity would be a pressing concern for faculty, we tackled this topic first. We opened the discussion by asking participants to consider reasons why students might show lapses in integrity. With these possible motivations as the foundation, we shared strategies for addressing integrity concerns explicitly with students through discussions, and implicitly through exam design. Additionally, we mentioned some of the pros/cons associated with using proctoring software and asked educators to reflect on how this software might affect learners’ test-taking experience (e.g., increased stress for students with poor internet connections, sensitivity around making their home environment visible, complications of using shared computers).

Explicit strategies included prompting students to think about how their behavior during exams aligned with their personal and professional goals. When discussing exam item design, we urged educators to consider using application-based exam items that foster higher-order thinking skills, probe the breadth and depth of students’ knowledge, and require original thought (in turn limiting opportunities to copy answers). We offered ideas on how to implement technology-enabled opportunities for students to “show their work” (e.g., allowing a voice-recorded explanation for how one solved a problem to reduce the burden on students’ who face challenges writing in English) and we urged educators to consider when time limits for exams served an authentic purpose.

We also discussed the importance of transparency and clear communication when giving exams, with an ultimate goal of reducing the extraneous cognitive load placed on test-takers. During this time our university was also onboarding faculty into a new learning management system, so our workshop was also an opportunity to help participants gain confidence in using the exam-administration tools built into that system.

Overall, we hope that our workshop spurred educators to think in new ways about how students experience exams, how to foster exam integrity, and how incorporating elements of authentic assessments may motivate all students to do their best work while reducing test-related stressors. We know that during the workshop participants actively brainstormed about what assessment would look like in their specific contexts and asked questions that allowed us to bring in new content (e.g., student-generated exam questions, two-stage exams), but at this point in time we do not have systematic data about what educators actually did in their courses. Anecdotally, participants reported that they found something valuable in our workshop and shared workshop content with colleagues who did not attend.

Most immediately, as Northeastern prepares for a “hybrid flexible” fall, face-to-face time will be a precious commodity, and we hope one outcome of this workshop is that educators do not feel that they need to use limited face-to-face time for proctored exams. In the longer-term, we hope this workshop helped educators break free from the mold of traditional exams and feel more confident designing assessments for a wide range of educational contexts. There will be much innovation on campus in the coming semesters including, we hope, in the area of learner-centered equity-minded assessment.

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