

Summative Assessment in Distance Learning

Whether schools are using regular grades or not, teachers need to accurately assess learning while their students are at home. These are some helpful ideas to consider.

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All of us are challenged with trying to implement effective teaching in this distance learning environment, and assessment is certainly part of that. Many schools are wrestling with grading practices, with some choosing pass/fail structures and others are sticking with traditional grading practices. And of course, there are others who are somewhere in between. But all of us will need summative assessments of student learning, whether we report them as a grade or pass/fail.

It's important that we not rely solely on tried-and-true summative assessment practices and strategies during this time—we should reflect on those practices and strategies and approach assessment differently. Some of our practices may shift. Here are some points to consider as you reflect on the shifts needed to arrive at effective summative assessments of your students' learning.

IMPLEMENTING SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Stop assessing everything: By *everything*, I mean every single content standard. In order to make a “[guaranteed and viable curriculum](#),” we need to make strategic decisions about what is “need to know” and what is “nice to know.”

This is an idea we should apply in both in-person and distance learning. However, with distance learning, this is a further call to distil our curriculum to essential learning and target specific standards and outcomes. All of us in the distance

learning world know it will take much longer to move through our curriculum, so there is not enough time to cover what we intended when we had being in the classroom in mind.

Take this time to work with teams to further clarify [which standards are priorities](#) to ensure that you're assessing the essentials. Consider using the [R.E.A.L. criteria](#)—Readiness, Endurance, Assessed, and Leverage—to help you make those decisions. These criteria were developed by Larry Ainsworth, an expert in curriculum design and power standards.

Assigning performance tasks and performance items: This isn't a new practice for assessment, but in these times of distance learning, it's important that the assessments we design for students demand that they apply their knowledge to new and novel situations. [Performance tasks](#) do that, and they [create engaging multistep opportunities](#) for students to show what they know. Performance items are similar, appearing in many traditional exams. Both require students to perform by applying their thinking; performance items are more limited in scope and often assess a single standard or skill.

When teachers express concerns around cheating or academic honesty, I recommend that they change their assessments to be more performance-based. Teachers can also consider [long-term PBL projects](#) that also leverage performance tasks.

Moving from one big event to a series of smaller events: Performance tasks are a research-based practice to assess student learning. However, the tasks we give students may be too much for them during this time of uncertainty and anxiety. If students are required to complete multiple performance tasks, across multiple disciplines or classes, that can create stress that is detrimental to student wellness.

Depending on what is being assessed, teachers may be able to take these tasks and split them into shorter tasks or performance items to be completed over a longer term rather than in one sitting. As a performance task often assesses

multiple standards, it can be broken apart into discrete mini-tasks that each assess an individual standard or learning target.

Using conversations and oral defense: Anthony Poullard, an associate principal at Korea International School, said that “students must always be prepared to explain their thinking or learning with their teacher, and they know that a teacher may ask for an explanation of assessment answers one on one.” In an article on [formative assessment in distance learning](#), I discussed conversations as one of the best ways to check for understanding, and this holds true for summative tasks as well. Students can do presentations or engage in an oral explanation or defense of their final product. This provides further evidence of student learning.

Leveraging technology tools: I want to first acknowledge the inequities here. We know that many students do not have access to technology, so these strategies may not apply. However, there are ways to use technology to support summative assessment practices. You can have students take the assessment at the same time, during a synchronous virtual session. This is similar to timed in-class writing. Schoology, for example, allows you to time quizzes and tests. Tools like [Draft Back](#), a Google Chrome extension, can show patterns in work submitted and play back the process. And student-created videos are great tools for students to share what they know.

Teaching academic honesty and trust students: We need to acknowledge there is no foolproof way to ensure academic honesty, and that is OK. Education consultant Ken O'Connor explained [in a recent webinar](#) that we need to educate students about academic honesty, adding that if there is a problem in this area, we may not have intentionally educated students on it.

Instead of a deficit-based approach to assessment—expecting that students will cheat—we need to have an asset-based approach where we trust them to do the right thing and engage them in teachable moments around academic honesty. Teacher expectations matter.

Using professional judgement: Ultimately, teachers need to use their professional judgement when summatively assessing students and determining scores.

Teachers can decide that a summative assessment should instead be formative and then reteach and support students in learning before attempting another summative assessment. And if a teacher wonders about a student's academic honesty on a summative, they can meet with that student to make an informed judgement. We need to trust not only students but also our teachers.

I want to emphasize that these are strategies, not necessarily solutions.

As [O'Connor says](#), the “order of operations” in teaching should be: first, student relationships and wellness; second, learning; and third, assessment. When we approach assessment practices, we should not lose sight of our priorities.