

What happens to assessment and feedback?

Ideally, assessment and feedback can motivate students and help them to focus their learning, but when 'getting good marks' becomes the focus, it diverts students' attention from the essentials. Because of this, re-thinking assessment and feedback as teaching shifts online can potentially benefit our students.

Traditionally, essays and exams have been central to assessment in History. Most students now submit their essays online and e-resources are ubiquitous. Exams can be conducted online, and open-book, time-constrained online assignments offer a viable alternative. On one level, then, shifting assessments online is straightforward. Yet the digital pivot offers an opportunity that should not be wasted, to bring assessment and feedback into a more productive relationship with the learning process.

It has long been acknowledged that exams often encourage a surface approach to learning ([Gibbs and Simpson, 2004](#)) and can privilege certain kinds of learners (and demographic groups) over others ([Furnham et al., 2008](#)). Such inequities may well be perpetuated or even intensified when moved online. But shifting assessment online opens up opportunities to engage different kinds of learners in new and varied ways, while continuing to develop key disciplinary capacities and career-relevant skills.

Online assessments that are designed to encourage students to engage actively with the digital world may be particularly apt for focusing students' energies on core areas of historical practice. For example, assessing online research in a structured manner strengthens students' capabilities in searching for, evaluating and making use of information online. Writing and presentation skills can be built into tasks such as blogging, developing websites and/or making videos or podcasts. Opportunities to practice writing in different registers and for audiences beyond the tutor and immediate peer group can be both exciting and valuable.

Online assessment opens up many possibilities for innovation, including:

- **Equity through continuous assessment.** E-learning tools enable tutors to evaluate students' ongoing engagement with a module or topic rather than just their performance in assignments or in face-to-face classes, both of which tend to favour certain demographics over others.
- **New skills.** Online tasks can be designed to develop valuable skills that are not normally foregrounded in learning outcomes in History courses, such as creativity.
- **Alternative assessments.** Digital environments may create opportunities to introduce alternative forms of assessment, such as reflective writing in online learning journals.

Given that our professional lives are increasingly digital, setting students predominantly analogue forms of assessment (even if done online) is a mistake. However, whether deployed to support traditional or innovative approaches, it is clear that the shift to online assessment can prepare students very effectively for academic and for the world of work.

Things to think about

- **Assessment *for* learning, not assessment *of* learning.** Setting assessment tasks, conducting assessment and giving feedback (whether formally or informally) offers one of our best chances to help our students prioritise their learning, so think about assessment as a prognostic rather than a diagnostic process. Consider how the overall assessment regime of your course is contributing to the message you are sending to students about what is

important. If any element is simply allowing you to measure what they have attained, then remove or reconfigure it. (S. Brown [2005], [Assessment for learning](#), *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* 1, and D. William [2011], [What is assessment for learning?](#), *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 37.1, are useful here.)

- **Constructive alignment is key.** Assessment is most useful to students when it is aligned with the other elements of your course, especially your learning objectives and the activities students are expected to undertake. (See J. Biggs [2003], [Aligning teaching for constructing learning](#) [Advance HE], and Jamie Wood [Lincoln]'s [Pandemic Pedagogy – Redesigning for online teaching, or Why learning objectives aren't a waste of time](#), which explores the connection between what you want students to learn and how assessment strategies encourage them to direct their energies.)
- **Formative assessment makes the process come alive.** Build in opportunities for students to get feedback from you and their peers, and to reflect on their own performance, across the module. This doesn't have to be a 'draft essay'; it can simply be informal 'checking-in' points. (See Z. Baleni [2015], [Online formative assessment in higher education: Its pros and cons](#), *Electronic Journal of e-Learning* 13.4.)

Things to watch out for:

- **Inertia.** It may take a long time for formal changes to assessment to be approved by your institution; factor this into your planning, but also think about trying things out informally and talking to your students about your plans - they can be valuable allies.
- **Accessibility.** Students may experience issues accessing and engaging with online assessments, especially if they are time-constrained and dependent on a reliable internet connection. Staff face some of the same issues: remember that marking on screen can be challenging for some; see Sandra Rankin and James Demetre, [The Experience of Online Marking and the Future Development of Online Marking Practice](#).
- **Conservatism.** There is a strongly-held view in parts of the academy that essays and exams are the 'gold standards' of assessment. Here, rather than engaging in arguments with colleagues about the merits or otherwise of essays/ exams, it is useful to show how innovative forms of online assessment enable students to meet learning outcomes. 'Traditional' and innovative, digital forms of assessment can coexist.

Further Reading

1. [Getting your teaching online](#) - Advice from QAA Scotland including a number of helpful links in the 'assessment' section.
2. [New Ways of Giving Feedback](#) - Overview of innovative feedback strategies from the University of Edinburgh, with links to a wide range of case studies and publications.
3. [Ungrading](#) - a call for a radical overhaul of approaches to assessment, from [Jesse Stommel](#) (including how-to advice).
4. [Assessment Strategies](#) - Fantastically useful module on strategies for assessment from Queens University, Canada; work through it at your own pace.
5. [How COVID-19 has changed student assessment for good](#) - A story about the 'future of assessment' from [JISC](#), drawing on a report released in 2020 and studies of approaches taken during lockdown.
6. [Beyond essays and exams: changing the rules of the assessment game](#) - This blog post from [Jamie Wood](#) (University of Lincoln) considers how online assessment can support deeper student learning, with a number of links to case studies.