

# ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES FOR BLENDED AND ONLINE COURSES

Brenda C. Litchfield and John V. Dempsey  
*University of South Alabama, UCOM 3800  
Mobile, AL 36688 USA*

## ABSTRACT

Alternative assessment techniques are essential for increasing student learning in blended and online courses. Rather than simply answer multiple-choice questions, students can choose activities in an academic contract. By using a contract, students will be active participants in their own learning. Contracts add a dimension of authenticity to blended and online course and students can learn, retain, and transfer more of course content. Guidelines and an example of a contract are given.

## KEYWORDS

Alternative assessment, authentic assessment, e-assessment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Developing effective assessment for online courses can present unique challenges for both graduate and undergraduate level courses. Because many graduate course assignments are project-based rather than objective-based, authentic assessment is becoming a motivating method of evaluation in many situations. In undergraduate courses where there is often a lot of information that needs to be transmitted, the use of authentic assessment combined with objective-based testing can provide a more meaningful and satisfying experience for students ( Hamilton & Carlson, 2010).

There are many names for online assessment that use real situations and involve students in active ways. Authentic, alternative, and performance-based are regularly used interchangeably. The term alternative assessment seems to be most appropriate because it is an alternative to the usual objective-based testing that is so prevalent in online and blended education today. This paper will use the term, alternative assessment.

## 2. ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

### 2.1 What is Alternative Assessment?

Alternative assessment is a type of assessment where students perform a task rather than select answers from a test (Maclellan, 2004). Students are involved in completing the assignments that relate directly to course content. These can take the form of group or individual projects, presentations, studying the community, interviews on specific topics, and a wide range of other activities.

The quality of student work is judged on pre-set criteria given to the students ahead of time. These criteria can take the form of rubrics or specific guidelines to follow. These detailed criteria provide guidance for students and increase their confidence because they know what is expected of them.

Research on alternative assessment has shown that learning for students is moved into the active category rather than passively absorbing information. Because students are part of their learning experience, they tend to spend more time-on-task and, therefore, learn, retain, and transfer more course content.

Students have a greater interest in the material because they are involved in creating their own products. Rather than simply reading online text as lectures and watching PowerPoint slides, they are constructing their

own knowledge and exhibiting their learning in creative and unique ways. Because online and blended students are more involved, more learning occurs.

There is a great depth of understanding and cognitive processing when students are creating artifacts that demonstrate what they have learned. With alternative assessment they are not just reading material online, but instead, creating and choosing from a variety of activities that can be judged by the professor as an indication of their mastery of the subject (Reeves, 2009).

To be effective, alternative assessment needs to address the major concepts and objectives of a curriculum. In all subjects there is a great deal of information. It is imperative that professors determine the critical objectives and then design alternative assessment measures to match those objectives.

As with all good instruction, alternative assessment requires more planning time at the beginning. It is essential to start with sound instructional objectives in a variety of cognitive levels. From those objectives, the activities and assessment can be constructed. Each activity must be created so as to allow students to demonstrate mastery of the content and/or skills of the course.

## **2.2 Benefits of Using Alternative Assessment**

Alternative assessment is a more valid indicator of students' knowledge and skills. It encourages students to be active participants in their own learning and moves them from a passive to an active mode. Rather than being on the other end of the computer receiving information, they are interacting with course content and developing meaningful modes of inquiry.

When students are actively involved with their learning, they are more likely to develop critical thinking and effective problem solving skills. They are not passively waiting for the weekly online multiple-choice test but are thinking of ways to complete the alternative assessment assignments that provide them with practice and active learning opportunities.

Another benefit of alternative assessment for blended and online courses is that it provides variety for professors and students. Students can choose among many interesting, course-relevant activities to complete. This ability to be able to choose from among activities they are interested in builds confidence and satisfaction with the subject (Keller, 2010).

This type of assessment requires practice in self-monitoring and self-evaluation. Students are responsible for their own learning and this is a very different type of learning for many students. They often feel empowered to be part of their own learning and being able to make a selection from among alternative assignments.

The ultimate benefit is that students learn and retain more. Because they are active participants in their own learning they feel a connection to what they are doing. Taking multiple-choice tests and getting back a number grade can be somewhat satisfying but when students know they have accomplished a project or activity, they tend to remember that much longer and are able to transfer the new learning to future situations.

## **2.3 Practical Application of Alternative Assessment**

One alternative assessment technique that works well and in online and blended university graduate and undergraduate classes is Academic Contracts. Academic contracts, an alternative assessment technique, are applicable for all ages and grade levels. They allow variability in teaching and learning. They build students' confidence by providing them with varied activities at which they can excel. They also address learning styles by letting students choose areas they prefer and can do while enjoying the learning experience. So they give everyone a change from the usual multiple choice or essay/term paper assignments.

For many online and blended classes, testing is not a good option because there is no security. Who knows who is taking the test? Or if they are looking things up in the book? Academic contracts are a viable alternative to objective-based testing. Some people have asked, "If you use academic contracts, how do you know the student is actually the one who is doing the project?" With on campus courses professors do not know that, either. But it is more difficult to get someone to do a huge project for you than it is to take a test.

Students learn a lot more about a subject doing projects, papers, and production-type work. Quizzes can be used as a self-check, though. You can also use quizzes as self-checks that are not graded. This can help build confidence because students find out how they are doing as they go along. They can gauge their progress and see how much they have learned.

A major objective with academic contracts is to provide students with real-world applications of skills and knowledge gained in a course. When they can apply what they have learned to a meaningful assignment they tend to feel much more satisfied with their learning experience. By applying what is learned to relevant, meaningful activities, students do learn and retain more and are able to successfully transfer this to other situations (Lee, 2006).

The main components of a good academic contract are listed below.

1. Cover a wide range of areas and processes – music, reading, writing, drama, interviews, observations, video, analysis, etc. Many professors make the mistake of having, for example, seven assignments and four or five of them are writing assignments. There needs to be MORE variety than that. Not all students learn the same way or like to exhibit what they have learned in the same way. They should be provided with different ways to show what they have learned.

2. Provide explicit criteria for each option. This is essential. If specific criteria are not included, students will not know exactly what to do. Very specific criteria for each of your assignment in your contract must be included.

3. Make sure you have enough optional assignments for them to be optional. For an A, if you require the required activities plus four optional activities and only have five or six from which to choose, that is not much option. A good guide is to have twice as many activities to choose from as you require. If they have to do four assignments/activities then there should be at least eight to choose from.

4. Include a space for other activities. Students may think of some excellent projects they can do and sometimes ones that professors will never think of. Always have Other as an option but specify they need to get it approved by the professor first.

5. Stagger the due dates throughout the semester by indicating due dates on the course schedule. Do not make the mistake of having everything due at the end. There will be too much to grade at the end of the semester.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Academic contracts are an effective method for applying alternative assessments methods in online and blended courses. Contracts allow students to be actively involved in their own learning and address their learning styles. Although creating academic contracts does take additional time and planning, the results are worth it in terms of student learning and satisfaction. The main consideration is to be creative and provide students with a variety of learning activities. Below is an example of a contract used in a graduate educational psychology course along with criteria examples.

---

EPY 502 - Principles of Human Learning Contract  
Signed contract due second week of class

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Completion date See syllabus for dates

#### Required Activities – 500 points

- Create a one-page vita with a photo and upload to course site (10 points)
- Five concept maps and associated anecdotes (50 points)
- Webliography - four annotated sites on relevant course topics (40 points)
- Complete an ARCS motivational chart for a unit of study (50 points)
- Design, implement, and evaluate a behavior modification plan (100 points)
- Design, implement, and evaluate a self-regulation plan (100 points)
- Online discussion participation (150, 10 points per week)

#### Optional Activities - Group I - 100 points each

- Design a board game that teaches concepts and principles of a course you teach (may work w/partner)
- Analyze articles using specified format (six articles)
- Produce an instructional video on a topic covered in the text – must be approved
- Create an academic contract and criteria to use with your students

Group II - 50 points each

- Interview a K-12 teacher about instructional strategies used in the classroom
- Observe a K-12 teacher and evaluate use of behavioral and cognitive approaches (two diff teachers)
- Create a photo illustration of a topic or concept covered in the text
- Design and implement a three-day/three hour cooperative learning activity

Indicate choice of grade and circle optional activities you plan to complete

\_\_\_ A = required + 200 optional points

\_\_\_ B = required + 150 optional points

\_\_\_ C = required + 100 optional points

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Instructor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**CRITERIA EXAMPLES**

**Video**

\_\_\_ 5 - 8 minutes

\_\_\_ detailed storyboard **MUST** be approved

\_\_\_ title screen

\_\_\_ credit screen

\_\_\_ narration

\_\_\_ introduction

\_\_\_ body (3-5 scenes)

\_\_\_ summary/ending

\_\_\_ content accurate

\_\_\_ lighting - not burned out, too dark

\_\_\_ camera work - not jumpy

\_\_\_ transitions - smooth

**Interview**

\_\_\_ 15 -20 questions

\_\_\_ intro statement for interviewee giving purpose for interview and how much time it will take

\_\_\_ summary statement

\_\_\_ most interesting finding

\_\_\_ what is related/not related to course

\_\_\_ improvements for next interview

\_\_\_ start time and end time

\_\_\_ personal evaluation of session (1 low, 5 high) with two paragraph narrative.

\_\_\_ two-page session narrative describing what you found out and how teacher could improve

\_\_\_ your notes taken during the interview

**REFERENCES**

Keller, J. M. 2010. *Motivational Design for Learning and Performance: The ARCS Model Approach*. Springer, New York, USA.

Lee, Eddy Y. C. 2006. Students Assessing Their Own Collaborative Knowledge Building. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, Vol., No. 1, pp. 75-82.

McClellan, E. 2004. *How Convincing Is Alternative Assessment For Use In Higher Education? Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 311-321.

Hamilton, M. and Carlson, B. 2010. *Think Outside the Test: Alternate Methods of Assessment. Teaching with Technology Today*. Retrieved from <http://faculty.net.matc.edu/tltnewsletter/nov10/page1.htm>

Reeves, T., June, 2009. *Little Learning, Big Learning: In Defense of Authentic Tasks*, World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications, Honolulu, HI.