

Restructuring an Assessment Leadership Institute During the 2020 Pandemic

By Yao Zhang Hill, Monica Stitt-Bergh, Adrian Alarilla

Abstract: The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Assessment and Curriculum Support Center successfully transformed a four-day, in-person Assessment Leadership Institute (ALI) into an online, four-day program designed to cultivate leaders who facilitate collaborative program learning assessment. We share eight successful strategies, including using the flipped classroom model, role-plays in facilitation simulations, facilitation role-play training prior to the Institute, clear online file structure, dedicated support person, assessment coaches, shared planning scripts, and regular communications. Our observations, participants' self-reflections, and the ALI evaluation provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of the eight strategies, as well as the success of the inaugural online ALI at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Introduction

Walls were covered with large sheets of paper filled with group notes, curriculum maps, data visualizations; all the collaborative work of faculty members whose diversity of backgrounds and specializations were mirrored by the different colored markers and sticky notes. Friendships and strong bonds were formed during the highly interactive activities, shared meals, and off-topic conversations. This was what the annual Assessment Leadership Institute (ALI) had looked like since the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Assessment and Curriculum Support Center began offering it in 2012.

The ALI trains participants on both assessment and group facilitation skills so they can lead collaborative program assessment projects (Hill, 2017). However, when the pandemic removed the possibility of an in-person event, we, the ALI organizers, wondered how we can retain the engaging, energizing spirit and the interactive activities in a four-day online event. Our incoming cohort had similar concerns, with one participant commenting, "When I heard four days on Zoom, I thought, 'Oh, no! It's going to be miserable.'"

Despite the challenges, at the end of our first online ALI in August, with 17 participants, two facilitators, and one student worker, we received overwhelmingly positive evaluation results. One hundred percent reported the online ALI worthwhile and would recommend it to colleagues. One respondent wrote, "This was one of the most productive four days of my recent career," and another responded, "The institute was 'action packed' and provided a good amount of information, practice and application to your institution. This brought the learning to life." In addition, 100% of the participants developed and presented feasible assessment project plans that demonstrated their knowledge of assessment concepts and a recognition of assessment as a collaborative, faculty-driven process aimed at improvement of student learning.

We take pride in participants' reflections because they demonstrate our successful transition to an online environment. One participant stated that his memories of the activities were not about Zoom but about the interactions with his fellow participants, and he attributed that to our prowess in effectively using software and cloud technologies to design an interactive, online ALI. Other participants expressed gratitude toward fellow participants and recognized the respect, brilliance, and kindness in the (Zoom) room. They expressed that "we are each other's allies" and "we can reach out and support each other." The participants' reflections suggest that they did form strong bonds in the online setting, despite our initial fears that an online environment would make the experience less engaging.

Strategies that Worked

Reflecting on the participants' survey responses, in-session reflections, and our observations during the ALI, we summarize eight strategies that were key to the 2020 ALI's success.

1. We fully implemented the flipped classroom model. We made 19 pre-recorded presentations and tutorials on content topics (e.g., collecting learning evidence). Participants viewed the videos and read materials, which took 60-90 minutes, before the daily live meeting started. To decrease online fatigue, we limited the synchronous portion of each day to two and a half hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, using this time only for participant interaction, work on projects, feedback, and reflections. We had to make certain topics from previous years, such as setting standards and data visualization, optional due to time constraints. Participants responded positively to the flipped model, with one stating that "it was particularly superb and worked well with hands-on activities."
2. Role playing continued to be our primary pedagogical strategy (e.g., lead a department meeting on curriculum mapping). Instead of in-person groups and large sheets of paper, participants used Zoom breakout rooms and shared Google Docs. They engaged in role-playing simulations, including the following objectives: develop student learning outcomes, create and analyze a curriculum map, scaffold a signature assignment, adapt a rubric, use results, and develop vision statements. Participants rotated roles—meeting facilitator, the group's notetaker, department faculty members—which gave them practice performing and observing others performing each role.
3. To prepare the participants to role play, we provided and recorded half-hour training sessions prior to ALI and made the recordings available to all participants. In these training sessions, we gave participants information on meeting facilitation techniques, tips for taking publicly-visible group notes on Google Docs, and specific instructions for the role-play scenarios. In the open-ended survey responses, eight out of ten respondents who commented on the training sessions provided positive feedback, including comments that they were "extremely useful" and "super helpful," and that they "worked out very well."
4. We established a clear structure for the shared files. To help participants navigate dozens of activity files, readings, and recordings, we established a shared Google folder with all primary files linked in one document, the participant agenda (see Appendix).
5. We invited four accomplished assessment leaders on campus, Assessment Leadership Fellows (ALFs), as peer coaches. These ALFs provided peer feedback during the individual project work time, small group work time, and project presentation time. The ALFs' coaching made the project work time highly productive and fruitful. In some sessions, participants could move freely among breakout rooms to get feedback from peers, ALFs, or the ALI facilitators. Many participants expressed deep appreciation for ALF and peer feedback in their end-of-day reflections.
6. We had a designated support person: Adrian, our center's student assistant. Many activities required certain groupings of participants in Zoom breakout rooms, which Adrian handled. He always remained in the main Zoom room, helping participants navigate as needed and sending messages to the breakout rooms. Working in small groups was necessary for participants to build a sense of community—a new network for them to call upon for assessment-related support. Adrian's assistance was essential.
7. We had a detailed script down to the minute with assigned tasks for ourselves. We debriefed daily and made prompt changes as needed. For example, we discovered that moving from one virtual room to another was jarring. To re-orient participants after each breakout room activity, we displayed an image of a welcome mat in the main room and gave people a moment for small talk and several breaths before we continued onto the next activity.

8. We communicated regularly. We sent two daily homework reminders with links to clearly labeled materials. We sent daily instructions to the ALFs on our expectations and their responsibilities. All participants appeared prepared each day and participated in the role-play simulations—as facilitator, group notetaker, or department members—with aplomb.

In conclusion, our strategies, supported by intensive planning and preparation, made the transition to an online four-day institute a great success. We, as organizers, plan to offer next year’s ALI online either in whole or in part. To continue to improve the ALI, we plan to make the required recordings and readings available to participants at least two weeks in advance. This can allow participants more flexibility in when they read or watch the material before coming to the live sessions.

Reference

Hill, Y. Z. (2017). Building grassroots leaders for a sustainable assessment culture. *Proceedings of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education*, pp. 130-144.

About the Authors

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Tuesday, August 11, 2020

Start	End	Topic	Location
8:30	10:00	<p>Required readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. WASC Rubric for Assessing the Quality of Academic Program Student Learning Outcomes [adapted] (1 page) 2. Assessment and Curriculum Support Center's Best Practices for Program-level Assessment of Student Learning (1 page) 3. Develop outcomes (website, 2 pages) 4. Create a curriculum map (website, 2 pages) <p>Required videos:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction to the ALL: Recording (10 minutes) and slides (PDF) 2. Introduction to program assessment: Recording (14 minutes) and slides (PDF) 3. Meeting facilitation skit (how to redirect after validation) Recording (9 minutes) 4. Student Learning Outcomes: An Introduction Part I: Recording (11 minutes) and slides (PDF) 5. Curriculum mapping introduction: Recording (21 minutes) and slides (PDF) <p>FYI: Panopto viewer help (e.g., how to search, change view, jump ahead, etc.)</p> <p>Optional Videos</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Student Learning Outcomes: An Introduction Part II Recording (9 minutes) and PPT 2. Recording of the prep session for the curriculum mapping activity facilitators and note taking: Recording (33 minutes) 	On your own
10:00	11:00	<p>Welcome and introductions</p> <p>Self-Introduction Google Slides</p> <p>Group reflection notes</p>	Zoom Meeting Room
11:00	11:20	<p>Self-assess your current context using the WASC Student Learning Outcomes Rubric and the ACSC Best Practices for Program-level Assessment of Student Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group reflection notes • Individual reflection 	passcode: 617445
11:20	11:30	Break	
11:30	12:30	<p>Student Learning Outcomes: Facilitation Activity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Movement Exercise 2. Brief overview of program learning outcomes assessment 3. Student Learning Outcomes facilitation activity (Yao facilitate and Monica take notes) 	