Exams and Testing in Academic Classes using Blackboard (and why we should rethink testing in this time)

Teaching online challenges how we write and administer exams. There is currently no perfect mechanism or technology for ensuring the academic integrity of a traditional “closed book exam” for students taking exams remotely. We do have access to Turnitin (available through Blackboard), which detects plagiarism from materials already available online. But we don’t have any means of policing students who might use the Internet or their textbook to look up facts (e.g., dates, composers’ names, etc.). Nor do we have the means to prohibit students from communicating with one another through email, texting, social media, etc. Faculty should therefore proceed with the understanding that, in our current COVID/online teaching environment, students will have access to internet resources, their own materials, as well as one another.

How, then, to write and administer exams? Here are some suggestions:

1) Clear communication with students about revised guidelines for exams is crucial. If your syllabus already contains descriptions of exams, you will need to alter that language to reflect the new guidelines, and then deliver those new guidelines to students well ahead of the test date. This can be done through the following mechanisms: an email message (sent through Blackboard) describing the change, an announcement (posted on the “Announcements” page for your class on Blackboard), and a revised syllabus which itself is sent out to students via email, and posted on Blackboard (on the “Syllabus” page). Do not assume that students will hear whatever you might say during a Zoom class meeting. Make sure that your revised guidelines are available in multiple channels.

2) Consider replacing exam questions that were fact-based with questions that require reflection and critical engagement. These could be questions that invite online research and consultation of course materials. Students could be asked to read and analyze an online concert review, or a particular interpretation of an assigned work.

3) Decide, and then communicate, how the students will submit their exams/quizzes. Consider having them complete their work as a Word document that they then attach to an email to you. Consistency and clarity are key here; make sure they know ahead of time how they will submit their work.

4) Administer the exam during normal class meeting times, with a fixed start and end time. If your original plan was to have your students take a midterm on Monday, March 30th during your regularly scheduled class period of 12pm to 2pm, you can email students an exam at 12:01pm on March 30th, and require them to email their responses to you by 2:00pm that day. (Be advised, however, that you may be asked to accommodate students who have traveled to distant time zones. For instance, we recommend against asking a student to take an exam at 2:00am local time.)

5) Essay questions and short-answer questions can be an effective means of assessing a student’s comprehension.

6) Be clear with students about your expectations for academic integrity. If you want to allow students to work together to complete an exam, say so. If they should work independently, say so, and also consider using time limits (see #4 above) that would make collaborative work difficult.

7) You may also choose to replace the exam altogether with an alternative assignment. For classes with smaller enrollments, you could substitute a live presentation over Zoom with the originally planned
exam. For classes with larger enrollments, you might consider substituting a written group project with the originally planned exam.

In all cases, be clear to your students about your expectations.

Unless there is some compelling, extenuating reason to do so, do not move up due dates. Students are already dealing with anxiety, so best not to add to it by telling them that their final exam will be given sooner than originally planned.

Interacting in a music class with Blackboard and Zoom

Zoom is our means of holding class, leading discussions, fielding questions in real time, and recreating a sense of classroom camaraderie. Blackboard is the equivalent of the Pee Chee Folder for your class. It can be used to post syllabi, lecture notes, readings, and grades. It also allows you to email students (as a group or individually) as well as to post announcements.

Libby Kim and CET have already made available information on the basics of Blackboard use. Here are some additional tips:

1) Know the difference between email and announcements, and use both appropriately.

When you need your students to receive a specific message or document in a timely fashion, send them an email. When you want them to have a less urgent bit of information, create an “Announcement”. Students receive a daily digest of Announcements from all of their classes. Think of this feature as the equivalent of posting a flyer on your office door.

2) For class discussions, consider using Zoom’s Chat function.

Students can communicate to you and one another by using the Chat function at the bottom of the Zoom screen. You can direct students to ask questions during a lecture to use Chat. While you might not want to, or be able to, answer their Chat questions while you are lecturing, you could schedule a class session with, say, 10 minutes of lecture, followed by 5 minutes when you read and respond to students’ Chat questions. You can also save your Zoom Chat, and respond to students outside of the class meeting via email.

Recording and Uploading

Information on how to record your Zoom sessions can be found here: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206277393-Finding-and-Viewing-Recordings

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