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BEST PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING AN ONLINE ASSESSMENT STRATEGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT:

ASSESSMENT IS A CRUCIAL PART OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AND THE VAST MAJORITY OF COURSES RELY ON IT TO DETERMINE WHETHER THEY HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL. OVER THE 2020/2021 ACADEMIC YEAR, ALL TEACHING, LEARNING AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES AT OUR UNIVERSITY WERE CONDUCTED ONLINE. WHILE THIS HAD ALSO BEEN THE CASE FOR THE MAJORITY OF THE SPRING SEMESTER OF THE PREVIOUS YEAR, THE SITUATION WAS ONLY SUPPOSED TO BE TEMPORARY AT THE TIME. THIS ARTICLE AIMS TO IDENTIFY AND PROVIDE PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICES WHICH CAN BE EMPLOYED IN THE CLASSROOM IN ORDER TO DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR ONLINE ASSESSMENT AS WE ENTER AN ERA OF WIDESPREAD DISTANCE LEARNING.

KEY WORDS: ONLINE ASSESSMENT, STRATEGY, HIGHER EDUCATION, BEST PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

Up until recently, only a small part of the educational process (assessment included) in Romania had been conducted online, and it usually involved long-distance learners only. Employers would disregard candidates in possession of an online diploma or degree, their main argument being the perceived lower quality of the educational process. Consequently, online teaching, learning and assessment have always struggled for recognition, as direct teacher-student interaction and paper-based testing have been the gold standard for educational institutions worldwide. Even though online-based activities were slowly being adopted on a small scale, nothing could have prepared us for the dramatic shift brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Basically, online learning and assessment have never been attempted on such a large scale and for such an extended period of time, which means that there is a great level of uncertainty and confusion, of trial and error and of unpredictable outcomes that remain to be dealt with in the future. Inevitably, this has led to a great number of challenges, first and foremost for teachers and educational institutions (due to the massive personal and financial investments necessary to make this new system work) but also for students, who have had to adapt to all this rather quickly. In terms of pedagogy, online

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assessment raises special concerns from both students and teachers. Developing assessment literacy is key for both categories, as is providing training for organising group meetings, remote communication via e-mail groups or apps and assessment through educational platforms.

As they look ahead, towards what will likely be another academic year of distance learning, teachers find themselves in need of a comprehensive online assessment strategy which will help them navigate what might be the most complicated issue in online education. While in the first few months of 2020 e-learning was only supposed to be a temporary solution to managing the pandemic, one and a half years later, teachers need this strategy in order to make online learning and assessment work in their classrooms. This article is based on the author's experience of teaching English at university level and aims to outline some key points to be considered before the start of the new academic year.

BEST PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING AN ONLINE ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Traditionally, all the courses at our faculty would involve formative and summative face-to-face assessment, usually combining oral with written evaluation. With the sudden switch to distance learning (during the spring semester of the 2020/2021 academic year), the emergency solution was to transfer the same evaluation pattern online. However, we must keep in mind that simply transitioning an assessment program from pen to paper to CBT, while keeping all the regular procedures and costs the same, is extremely unrealistic because it can impact what, how, when and where we assess, as well as how and when we communicate the evaluation results.² In other words, while this may work temporarily, the most important point to consider when devising a strategy for online assessment is designing the course with this end in mind. It is essential for both the teacher and the students to know from the beginning how the evaluation process will be conducted, so that the conditions for reliability, validity and authenticity are met. If the entire course is conducted online, then it is easier for everyone involved to get acquainted with the technology used in the learning process ahead of the evaluation period, which will likely reduce testing anxiety. If, however, the course is held face-to-face, while assessment is done online, practice is necessary in order to familiarise students with the process beforehand.

The real problem appears when there is constant back-and-forth between offline and online instruction, based on the fluctuating epidemiological situation we have recently been dealing with. In our country, there are several thresholds based on the number of COVID-19 infections, which require education institutions to go from on-site to on-line learning and back again when the situation permits. Thus, there is no guarantee that assessment will take place one way or the other, which translates into the teacher's inability to plan accordingly.

What can be done is including both possible scenarios in devising our strategy through blended learning. Even if we go back to face-to-face activities, by including some online components into the course, the teacher is able to prepare students for different scenarios and make the transition to online assessment smoother. Distance learning should not be viewed as inferior and even the medium itself "is not the critical point; it is how the medium is utilized that matters."³

² Sandra Greenberg and Leon Smith, "Feasibility Studies on Transitioning Assessment Programs from Paper and Pencil to CBT Delivery" In *Online Assessment and Measurement. Case Studies from Higher Education, K-12 and Corporate*, edited by Scott L. Howell and Mary Hricko, Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, 2006, p. 247.

³ Evan Frenedo, *How to Teach Business English*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2012, p. 95.

There may be, of course, skills which are more difficult to teach and assess online, and in my particular case as a Business English teacher, one of them would be intercultural communication. However, as Sorina Chiper shows, Moodle™, Blackboard™ and Youtube™ are invaluable resources for trainers looking to create opportunities for their learners to discover other cultures, interact with foreigners and become a global citizen. In terms of ICT tools for evaluation, she points out that Mahara™ is very useful in evaluating intercultural competences, since it is an electronic portfolio system which allows users to upload files of their work and also develop their own profile. Moreover, this system allows for peer evaluation.⁴ When the pandemic hit, these tools, which had limited uses before, became indispensable. The key point is being able to identify, acquire and utilise the necessary resources to be able to implement these tools in such a way that is accessible and relevant to students' needs, while also making sure that assessment based on them is authentic.

As a prerequisite of adopting an online assessment strategy, we need to acknowledge that the “substantial resources in terms of time, energy, and money are needed to establish any form of online authentic assessment strategy. Additionally, efficient and reliable technical support, along with appropriate networking capabilities, are essential for all students and instructors.”⁵ While some evaluation tools are accessible free of charge, when it comes to large numbers of students and extended use, it is up to the educational institution to provide the financial, technical and human resources necessary in order for online learning and assessment to be implemented successfully. Based on an article from 2006, few universities (in the United States) had “written policies, guidelines or technical support for faculty members or students.”⁶ If that was the case back then, we can imagine that with the abrupt start of the pandemic, the situation has been even more problematic, especially in other parts of the world, where access to technology and the number of programs offering online education is even more limited. In the case of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași, this translated into adapting the Moodle™ platform so it would enable students to take their multiple-choice tests online. In terms of lectures and seminars, videoconferencing through Microsoft Teams™ has been used for the past academic year, with a plan to continue using them moving forward, at least until the current situation improves.

One of the biggest issues with online assessment is cheating. This, of course, also happens in the case of traditional on-site exams, but taking a test from behind a computer screen brings a new set of challenges. Some solutions exist, from using software to verify IPs and video supervision to designing the test in such a way that there is little room for fraud. But the formerly mentioned software and equipment may not be available on a large scale, while the latter will still leave some room for cheating.

Thus, developing a strategy for online assessment not only requires planning ahead but also investing money and long-term effort, from the staff and learning institutions alike.

Investments are always more feasible when they are based on a well-executed plan. Obtaining positive results and a good return of investment take time, which is why

⁴ Sorina Chiper, “Teaching Intercultural Communication: ICT Resources and Best Practices.” *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 93 (2013), pp. 1643-1644.

⁵ Smita Mathur and Terry Murray, “Authentic Assessment Online: A Practical and Theoretical Challenge in Higher Education” In *Online Assessment, Measurement and Evaluation: Emerging Practices*, edited by David D. Williams, Scott L. Howell and Mary Hricko, Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, 2006, p. 249.

⁶ Mary K. Tallent-Runells et al. “Teaching Courses Online: An Overview of the Research” in *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), p. 93.

consistency is key when it comes to implementing any given strategy. Even more so, online assessment requires everyone involved to acquire certain skills (from learning how to use technology, in general, and specific software, in particular) and going through an entire mindset shift. It took some time for everyone involved to process these changes, so it makes sense, from an investment viewpoint at least, to continue with the implementation of certain aspects of online education in the future, even after the pandemic is officially over. Being consistent with our evaluation process ensures that everyone involved knows what to expect, there are reliable systems in place and everything goes smoothly. Thus, making at least one component of the online assessment process permanent would benefit students from an accessibility viewpoint and would pave the way for more online activities in the future.

At this point, there is still plenty to be learnt and improved when it comes to online assessment at our faculty and, to this end, feedback from everyone involved is extremely valuable. The 2020/2021 academic year was an experimental one, but for the most part distance learning worked, so now it is time for educators to incorporate that feedback in the strategy for this year, which will most likely roughly follow the same pattern as the previous one in terms of online instruction.

What we have learnt so far is that, provided with the necessary infrastructure and tools, both teachers and students are able to adapt to change fairly quickly. At the same time, online education requires considerably more effort, especially from a communication viewpoint, since it is now mediated through ICT. As a result, developing a quality assurance process based on the feedback we collect from all the involved parties, as part of the strategy for designing online courses and assessment, is paramount.⁷ This will ensure that their effort will not have been in vain and that we can use the past year as a solid base for the future integration of online assessment into the course description at our university.

CONCLUSION

As Fernando Rubio concludes his article on assessing oral proficiency in online language courses, “treating assessment in online courses the same way we regard it in F2F teaching would be trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Although the proficiency expectations should be the same regardless of the delivery format, how we achieve them and the way we measure them in each context do not necessarily need to be the same.”⁸ When devising a strategy for online assessment, as shown, teachers need to consider how the medium affects the process in the long run and be consistent with their choices, while also making sure that everyone has access to reliable infrastructure for equal opportunities. Implementing an online assessment strategy should be done with the support of the educational institution, as it impacts the activity at all levels and requires significant investment.

What would be advisable is to use this period as an opportunity to gather information about what works and what doesn’t in terms of online education in general and of online assessment, in particular, so that we can come out of the pandemic with a clear idea of how to move forward. Perhaps it will take some time to devise and implement a well-rounded

⁷ David Dayton and Mary McShane Vaughn discuss the importance of utilising QA checklists in their article titled “Developing a Quality Assurance Process to Guide the Design and Assessment of Online Courses” in *Technical Communication*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (November 2007).

⁸ Fernando Rubio, “Assessment of Oral Proficiency in Online Language Courses: Beyond Reinventing the Wheel” in *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 99, No. 2 (Summer 2015), p. 407.

strategy and it may prove to be less reliable than others, but the door to extensive use of technology in the educational field has been flung open and there is little chance of it being completely closed again. Consequently, even if at institutional level things are not yet clear in terms of making some of these changes permanent, teachers need to be aware of the fact that they are often the ones who can set the tone in this sense.

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