**Assignment Charrettes in a Time of COVID-19**

Assignment charrettes, or structured peer review of assignment design, provide an opportunity for faculty members to come together and discuss, through a structured peer review process, the design of their assignments in relation to learning outcomes, evaluative criteria, and the means by which students are prepared to complete the assignment (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elements of an Assignment Design Conversation

In the current global pandemic of coronavirus, faculty have taken courses online for the remainder of the Spring semester or term, and are planning now to continue online for the summer and possibly fall. Thus, conversations on modifying assignments are now timelier than ever. Assignment discussions provide a means to:

1. Focus attention on the key learning outcomes of interest within a course and the assignments that allow students to practice or demonstrate their learning – what is it that we really want students to do;
2. Bring faculty together remotely to help with physical distance, but also to problem solve collectively ideas on how to focus and refine assignments for the near term; and
3. Provide professional development and support through community in a time of crisis.

While the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) conducted a [virtual assignment design charrette](https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Taking_Assignment_Design_Online.pdf) for several institutions of higher education within Virginia, and made their materials available for others to learn from, such an approach may not work given current faculty and staff constraints including home schooling, access to internet and time, and other situations related to the coronavirus circumstances. As such, we offer a few considerations for modifying an assignment design conversation for the near term.

**Virtual Considerations**

In order to fully support various faculty and staff constraints to participation in a virtual charrette, whether full- or part-time in faculty status, there are several circumstances to consider.

**Should the event be conducted synchronously or asynchronously?** **What technology should be used?** Given the differences in the lived experience of faculty and staff as well as differences in current ability to offer chunks of undistributed time to a task, virtual models of charrettes may need to be flexible in different ways. For instance, one model may be that faculty come together in a Zoom meeting and share their assignments in break out rooms (using the timed carousel process) and give feedback in the chat during a synchronous session. However, synchronous sessions may limit faculty involvement due to timing, internet requirements, and ability to focus. As such, a different model might entail writing up an assignment introduction that is shared in a Google doc along with the assignment, made available to select faculty over the course of a week or other set amount of time. Faculty are then able to comment on the assignment as they have time, guided by review questions. Faculty could record a video introduction to their assignment—which can also serve as practice for lecture recording tools—that is then shared with other faculty to comment upon via email using a shared feedback form. Technology might then include meeting software, LMS, Google docs, Zoom, or even things such as <https://screencast-o-matic.com/>. A modified charrette process may then entail:

**Introduce Assignment**

Faculty introduce their assignment through a recorded 5-minute video, or take 5 minutes to introduce their assignment remotely to their peers, or provide a write-up addressing the following information about their assignment:

* *Background Information*: In what course is the assignment used? At what point in the course? Is there any pertinent information about the students in the course (majors vs. non-majors) to share? Does it build on earlier work in the course or prior courses? Does it prepare students for more advanced work in later courses or success beyond graduation?
* *Current Experiences*: What is most challenging about the assignment for students? What has been your experience of using the assignment to date? What kinds of feedback and suggestions are you specifically looking for? What sort of feedback have you gotten from students (if applicable)?
* *Assignment Information*: What are you asking students to do in assignment? What is the purpose of the assignment? What learning outcomes is the assignment designed to elicit from students? How are students evaluated?

**Discussion/Feedback**

Listeners will respond to what they have heard, taking turns asking questions, sharing thoughts, feedback, etc. for 15 minutes. If using chat to offer feedback and hold lively discussions, then be sure to save the chat log. The purpose of the discussion is to help your colleague strengthen their assignment so please be constructive and collegial. Discussion should address the questions on the feedback sheet. If using a Google doc form, then faculty can enter their feedback as comments on the assignment along with suggested edits as they have time over the course of a week or other agreed upon set amount of time. Sample questions to guide discussion include:

1. What learning outcomes will students demonstrate with this assignment? How does it need to be modified to better align with the learning outcomes of interest?
2. How does the assignment align with the evaluative criteria? Are there mixed signals sent to students?
3. Thinking about the assignment from the point of view of students, what questions or suggestions do you have regarding clarity in instructions, prompt, or purpose?
4. How does this assignment allow for flexible options, alternative demonstrations, and/or culturally responsive demonstrations of learning?
5. How does this assignment need to be modified or adjusted to reflect current faculty and student circumstances and situations in light of COVID-19?
6. What unnecessary constraints, if any, may need to be removed to accommodate learning during a global pandemic crisis?

**Written Feedback**

Regardless if this is done collectively during synchronous sessions or individually as faculty have time, written feedback answering the guiding questions from the prior section should be emailed to the faculty member whose assignment is under review. This allows the faculty member to look across the different feedback and comments as they have time prior to modifying the assignment for students.

**How do the Assignments Need to be Modified?**

During this time, assignments may look different, entail more elements of reflection, and be more formative in nature. This is not the time to focus on revising an assignment in order to block cheating or create additional hurdles of online proctoring—this is the time to consider how to modify approaches to learning demonstrations to enable students to share what they know and can do during a time of a global pandemic.

It is useful to return to the basics of examining the learning outcomes for a course and involving students in determining how they might be assessed. One means to check for this in the assignment review process is to ask students if they have access to the necessary materials and technology in order to complete an assignment. Additional questions to consider in review of assignments are:

1. How does this assignment allow for flexible options, alternative demonstrations, and/or culturally responsive demonstrations of learning?
2. How does this assignment need to be modified or adjusted to reflect current faculty and student circumstances and situations in light of COVID-19?
3. What unnecessary constraints, if any, may need to be removed to accommodate learning during a global pandemic crisis?

For additional assignment considerations and ideas, you can access the NILOA Assignment Charrette [webinar recording](https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/) which is part of the [NILOA webinar series](https://emails.illinois.edu/newsletter/5031235.html) in response to COVID-19 (coronavirus) situations.

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