

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Assessments are a complicated topic, no matter how you slice it. The best way to assess students can vary by discipline, topic, and by your own pedagogical viewpoints. And this year, the complications of returning to campus after a long stretch of remote learning added new challenges and opportunities to the mix.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: This is what we are learning about learning. A podcast created and produced by the Center for New Designs and Learning and Scholarship, also known as CNDLS, at Georgetown University. I'm Meghan Modafferi, in for Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Though in some ways the fall semester was a welcome return from the previous semesters of remote learning, unfortunately faculty, staff, and students alike experienced higher levels of stress, distraction, turmoil, and anxiety than anticipated.

And of course, tests, papers, and other assessments always had the potential to add to that stress.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: So this is part two of our conversations with faculty from an event at Georgetown that we call digital learning days. In this episode, you'll hear from a group of faculty, from a range of disciplines, including the humanities, sciences, and foreign languages, about strategies they've used to reduce stress from assessments.

We hope some of these techniques can help you lighten students, and hopefully your own anxiety this spring. If you missed part one of this episode on leveraging technology to foster inclusivity and equity in your classroom, you can find it wherever you get your podcasts, and you can find the link in our show notes for this episode.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: First, Karen Shaup from the English department shared what she calls a grading agreement, her nontraditional grading method. Which, by the way, you can find in our show notes.

KAREN SHAP: Students starting this semester, everyone starts with a base grade. In my class, that's a B. So as the grading agreement outlines, if you meet all the qualifications for each major assignment, don't miss more than two homework assignments, don't miss X number of classes, then you're guaranteed a B in the course.

And then there are things that you can do to work your way up to an A. Writing a revision narrative for a major assignment, which I always tell students is pretty low hanging fruit to earn extra points. And because I build in-- my assignments are scaffolding, so students are doing revision anyway.

And so this is a way of just accounting, making an account of that revision. They can interview someone who writes to kind of learn writing in different professions, or in different fields, as well

as sort of develop a reference guide. And then I'm open to other ideas as well.

So this is how the grading works. All the assignments on campus are-- there's no points assigned or letter grades assigned. Everything is complete or incomplete.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Karen shared that, for her, it's important to take the time to explain the rationale behind the grading agreement. And students usually get on board pretty quickly. They find the mindset shift on grading to be liberating.

KAREN SHAP: We spend a lot of time in the first couple of weeks of the semester talking about the grading agreement and how it works and why we're using it. So I think students are generally enthusiastic about the grading agreement. They think it's completely liberating.

I think especially students feel a lot of stress around their writing in normal times. General anxiety around writing.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: In previous semesters, Karen hadn't given students much of a window to turn in incomplete assignments. But this semester it felt important to be much more flexible.

KAREN SHAP: You know, I think students were feeling-- just having a really difficult time getting their assignments completed. So I did end up kind of giving them kind of a universal policy of like, anything can come in at any time. And then the other thing that was a little bit of a struggle this semester was attendance.

Figuring out how to accommodate students who are missing class not only for physical health reasons, but also mental health reasons. And the grading agreement, I think, is definitely flexible enough to kind of accommodate this.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: While the grading agreement can help create flexibility in terms of attendance, we wondered how that affected peer based learning.

KAREN SHAP: There seemed to be always someone missing from at least one of those sections, you know, that I could pair up together and have them work together. But certainly if you have 12 or 15 students in a class and-- and they're kind of now working on slightly different timelines, I think asking students to go to the Writing Center can be a great step.

If they're really out of sync with other students in the course, at least they're sort of getting that interaction with a peer to talk about their writing.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Next we spoke with MC Chan who taught foundations of biology, a five credit course that can be stressful for students under the best of circumstances. Here he talks about how the biology department has taken steps to reduce the amount of writing and stress for students by honing in on what they really want to assess.

MC CHAN: We have really worked hard to reduce the amount of time this course has taken-- this course takes for the students. But also to really rethink what we actually want the students to learn in our courses. One very important portion of the course-- the portion of the lab that's the most important in terms of writing has always been that we want the students to learn how to write-- make-- do technical writing, but specifically to understand how to make a scientific argument with their writing.

What we really want to do is focus on this idea of scientific argument, and to provide a lot more guidance and provide a bigger, better scaffold in terms of scientific argument, and what part of scientific argument we wanted them to learn to make in any practical paper.

So we reduce the number of papers to four papers. We were very specific. We wanted a two page paper with about one page filled with figures and the second page is solely focused on scientific argument. Pretty much about 300 to 500 words of scientific argument, and then a couple words of metacognition were transparent. Not only in terms of what we wanted them to learn in terms of scientific argument for that particular writing assignment, but really showing the scaffolding as well as providing both positive and-- both good and bad examples of scientific writing.

The point being that what we have found this semester is that less is more. We have found that essentially by providing a more detailed rubrics and being very transparent about the scaffolding that we want-- and the direction we want the students to take, we found that the writing has improved.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Another element of this strategy is making room for feedback and rewrites, and integrating those elements as crucial parts of the process.

MC CHAN: We provide extensive remarks on every paper, both TAs and faculty. And now, because we provide an opportunity for them to therefore for engaging that discourse and that conversation back to us by actually changing their papers in very specific ways. And we try to not add too much to the-- we try and focus the revisions to under an hour.

That has really helped students engage. Really helps us see what they have done, what they can do to improve. And I think that's the successful method that we want to continue to use for future semesters.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Moving from the sciences to foreign languages, we spoke with Yoshiko Mori, who teaches Japanese, about how she handled assessments this term. She found that remote online testing had often inadvertently deprioritized the practice of physical writing, which is so important for learning languages that include learning new alphabets.

YOSHIKO MORI: My biggest question at the beginning of this semester is, should I go back to

the paper exams or keep using online, the Canvas quizzes? So I, at the beginning of the semester, I asked the students which they would prefer. For the paper quizzes, exams, or the Canvas quizzes.

The second issue was that, yeah, how to assess that writing-- character writing. Assess ability to write characters. And I felt that the Canvas quizzes were effective in terms of assessing recognition skills, character recognition skills. Did not really know how to use Canvas quizzes effectively to assess the character writing skills.

And then in the end, I tried a hybrid method for the Canvas quizzes. I used the Canvas quizzes for the recognition. There are questions. And then I used a piece of paper for writing characters. I had a student use different kinds of pens, pen, including sharpies, colored pens, pencils, calligraphy pens, brush pen to make students enjoy writing characters.

And then the students particularly loved the brush band or the calligraphy pens I ordered from Japan. They loved it.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Motoko Omori, another Japanese language professor, handled the same challenge by providing extra time for assessments, recognizing that students hadn't been practicing this skill of character writing over the last couple of years.

MOTOKO OMORI: It's a big change for students. I have never seen so many students struggling to write hiragana, which is one of the basic things. Hiragana kanji. Or that we have not seen that in years that I've taught at Georgetown. And I think remote learning, we were limited to giving the assessments in online tests.

What I've done is I divided into two days of midterm, which sounds more stressful. But I was trying to give the-- tell them why I did that, why I do that is because they have more time. So it's not design. They don't-- I didn't design the test to take the entire time.

So they will have plenty of time to write and finish and then move on to the second part, which is-- first part of it is grammar and then listening, and then the second part was reading and writing type of things. So that kind of I was trying to give them a little bit-- a less stressful, and a little bit more time to prepare that type of things.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Motoko also mixed things up by assigning homework related to a popular TV drama that students watched in Japanese.

MOTOKO OMORI: I picked out a really, really fun, very popular Japanese drama that they watch on their own. I don't have time during class to watch these dramas. So they watch it during-- on the weekend or whatever, when they have time. And I don't even discuss them in class. I have the discussion board, but that's their weekly assignments.

And then basically you engage in the discussion. You perfect point, and it's a 5% of grade. And all you have to do is talk about it. And this drama is actually a fun drama. And it actually was very, very interesting discussion board.

So a lot of them chose to write in English, and although some of them wanted to practice Japanese, so they did that. And they seemed to really enjoy that, and I think it's a little bit of a stress relief for the weekend. They're like, I want to keep watching it. So if you've got to wait once a week, you can binge watch.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Kumi Sato, who also teaches Japanese, tried a new twist on oral exams. To make language practice less stressful and more fulfilling, her students participated in an online exchange project.

KUMI SATO: I teach the first level Japanese. And in my first level Japanese, I had students participate in that online exchange project, where they communicated with the college students in Japan using Zoom. And that's something that I didn't do last year. So that's something new I did this semester.

So I divided the class into small groups, and each group had two Georgetown students paired up with one Japanese student. And they set up a Zoom meeting and had a chat in both English and Japanese separately for about 10 minutes for a language on a given topic.

To complete the assignment, the students wrote a few paragraphs to report their findings from the meeting. So they did this whole set three times throughout the project, meaning that they had three Zoom meetings in total. And I usually give oral interviews in this course to assess the accuracy and fluency of my students speech, and whether they use a variety of the expressions learned in class.

But this semester, I replaced that with this online exchange project. And unlike the oral interview, I focused on how much they are able to communicate in Japanese in this project, and wanted it to be a student centered activity. So to prepare for each meeting, students came up with their own questions they wanted to ask the Japanese students related to a given topic.

And I took-- I immediately took a supportive role to help them do so. And the topics were based on what students learn in class, but they're still broad enough for students to ask-- to ask various questions and expand the conversation freely. And in terms of assessment, I graded a recording of their Zoom meeting, only based on whether they spoke Japanese and contributed to the conversation.

And talking to native speakers is already nerve wracking for beginners, especially for beginners, so that was my effort to minimize student stress and anxiety. I thought that assessment scale would encourage them to speak Japanese without judging how accurately they spoke.

Student writing, on the other hand, was graded based on its clarity and accuracy. But that was something that they are able to spend time to complete and revise. And so I recently asked students to complete a survey about this project. I'm still in the middle of collecting the responses, but so far I see a lot of positive responses.

One student wrote, and this is a quote, "It was really fun to practice my Japanese skills through hands-on experience while also making a friend across the globe."

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: So to recap, some tips for reducing assessment anxiety. Consider a grading agreement, and be clear about why and how your grading system works.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: In some cases, it may be effective to reduce page count for essays or to break them up into smaller, scaffolded parts that hone in on particular skills. And revision can be a key part of the writing and evaluation process.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Notice and be aware of what students haven't had a chance to practice over the last two years, and allow extra time when possible for them to catch up in those areas.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: And finally, for language learning and other topics too, TV shows and virtual exchanges can be engaging and meaningful ways to connect. We hope this episode has given you some ideas for designing assessments that help reduce stress and anxiety for faculty and students in the coming semesters.

This has been what we're learning about learning. We're wishing you all the best for your new semester this spring.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS including Molly Chehak David Ebenbach Lee Skallerup Bessette, Mindy McWilliams, and Joe King.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Big Thanks to our guests Karen Shaup MC Chan, Motoko Omori, Kumi Sato, and Yoshiko Mori. I'm Meghan Modafferi, in for Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.