

Inclusive Assessments Quick-Start Guide:

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What other new things are you doing this semester?

Is the course familiar to you or brand-new (or somewhere in between)?

What is the course about?

Are the learning outcomes pre-defined?

Are there required assignments, exams, or post-course assessments that you need to include in your planning?

What's the schedule for course meetings?

Where will the class meet?

Where do student activities take place?

Other considerations

Inclusive Assessments Quick-Start Guide:

What is Inclusive Assessment?

We define inclusive assessment as a set of techniques that defines the classroom as a space of learning, while recognizing the varied ways in which individuals learn and share that learning. Inclusive assessment is the mindset of intentional practices and thoughtfulness in the design of assessments to acknowledge student differences. Inclusive assessment typically therefore values transparency, centers the learner, aligns outcomes and criteria, promotes self-directed learning, and focuses on formative rather than high-stakes assignments.

To practice inclusive assessment also means reflecting on and interrogating the institutional function that grades serve and acknowledging the ways that grades themselves can and have historically reproduced bias and discrimination and in some cases, negatively impacted student motivation and learning.

Before incorporating inclusive assessment into your course, it can be helpful to think about your goals for doing so. The following questions are designed to help focus your goals for the course

and for incorporating inclusive assessments. While it is unlikely that responding to the questions below will produce a single model for you to adopt, thinking through them will probably help determine which model is most appropriate for you, for the course in question, for the resources you have, and your students at this time. Remember that there is no one right way to “do” inclusive assessment; there are many approaches, and even small changes can have significant results.

What Models did we consider?

TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching) assessments

Adaptable to almost any class, offering clarity to both students and faculty members about the requirements for a particular assignment. TILT can be integrated incrementally. TILT emphasizes the purpose of the assignment and its relationship to the course and to students' life experiences, and can be adapted for use with the other methods we reviewed.

What makes it inclusive? Transparency, clarity, equity, increasing awareness about learning processes, increasing capacity for self-directed learning.

Specifications and contract grading

Typically require more up-front investment than portfolio/ungrading, but less additional time at the end of the semester. Specifications grading is particularly well-suited to classes with very clear learning objectives, many discrete assignments, and clearly scaffolded assignments. Contract grading, like specifications grading, can give students the opportunity to choose a desired grade at the outset of the course and to work towards that by accomplishing a contracted amount of work; best suited for courses that have a lot of assignments or a variety of different kinds of assignments. More advanced students (and typically students who know themselves, their schedules, and priorities) have appreciated the flexibility of the contract and the agency that the system gave them to decide on their own goals.

What makes it inclusive? Student agency, clarity, emphasis on learning outcomes. De-emphasizing traditional grades.

Portfolio/ungrading.

Stresses the metacognitive aspect of learning, and is best implemented in a course which benefits from frequent revision, in which a particular skill or set of skills is developed over time (art, writing, etc.). Students at any level can benefit but lower-division or introductory students may require more guidance to accomplish meaningful reflection, which is a key element of ungrading. Note also that it's possible to “ungrade” a single assignment or group of assignments, de-emphasizing grades while still maintaining a traditionally graded course overall. This can be a way into inclusive assessment for faculty members who still need to provide traditional grades (because of multiple sections taught by different faculty, for example), or who want to test out the process before fully committing.

What makes it inclusive? Emphasis on individual growth, agency, de-emphasizing traditional grades.

Rubrics

Rubrics assist the instructor in making explicit, objective, and consistent the criteria for performance that otherwise would be implicit, subjective, and inconsistent if a letter grade were used as an indicator of performance. If designed well, a rubric serves as a communication tool between instructor and students about what they will be evaluated on and enables the instructor to clearly evaluate the work using those pre-established criteria, promoting transparency, clarity, accuracy, and precision. Like TILTed assessments, rubrics can be incorporated with all the other methods we reviewed.

What makes it inclusive? Rubrics promote equity and fairness in assessment of learning and assignments, because the instructor can explicitly state expectations and define levels of accomplishment.

What are some guiding questions for choosing a model?

Questions to consider when thinking about inclusive assessment (adapted from [“Grading for Growth”](#))

Who are the students in the class?

For example, are they new to the material, or likely to be familiar with it? Are they new to college, or returning students?

Many alternative assessment design methods may require some adjustment and a reorientation period for students, especially if you are not known to the students already. Trust in a new process is essential. Rubrics and TILTed assignments offer clarity that can be reassuring to introductory, mixed-level, and non-majors students (though they benefit all); specifications and contract grading offer flexibility that may be more appealing to students with greater awareness of their time commitments and priorities. Ungrading, which can be implemented on a single assignment or whole course basis, can be practiced at any level, reducing stress for all students but requiring a measure of self-regulation and reflection.

Is it a large or small class?

With large classes, TILT assignments and rubrics can save time in assessment; specifications & contracts require considerable record keeping but can save time in final grade calculations. Inclusive assessment methods with frequent revisions, such as portfolio/ungrading, can work especially well with smaller classes

Other related considerations:

- Who are the other stakeholders of your class?
- Is it required for the major?
- Is it a multi-section class with a shared syllabus?
- Do other faculty members teach the same class in other semesters?
- Is it a general education class?

Some departments/institutions may require mid-semester grade reports or other assessments that may be more complicated with ungrading and other alternative assessment models.

Who are YOU? Are you tenured or tenure-track?

Students are not always eager to embrace alternative assessment structures, particularly if they have been successful with more traditional ones. This may lead to student resistance and criticism that may reverberate in course/instructor evaluations. It is important for an instructor to consider how a department/school evaluates instructor experimentation with alternative modes of assessment and inclusive pedagogy.

What kind of time commitment can you make to assessment? And when?

At the design stage: Specifications, contract, TILT, and rubrics require an up-front investment that pays off later

During the semester: Specifications, contract, and ungrading often build in revisions, which can be time-consuming (depending on whether they are required for students to advance to the next unit). Rubrics and TILTed assignments tend to be easier to assess because the criteria are explicit.

At the end of the semester: Specifications & contract grading save time at the end because students simply complete the “bundle” or contract of their choice. Reading portfolios & reflections in ungrading/portfolio grading can be time-consuming, though with some ungrading models the instructor has already read most of the material and needs only to review and read the reflection.

What other new things are you doing this semester?

Be realistic about the time commitment of a new assessment model. It's ok not to change everything all at once.

Is the course familiar to you or brand-new (or somewhere in between)?

Some instructors prefer not to shift to an alternative assessment model before they have taught a course for the first time; others prefer to bake it into the design from the start. Depending on your level of comfort with the material and the other elements of the course, this may be a consideration.

What is the course about?

Is the content fixed or variable? Are you in control of the content?

With fixed content, consider specifications grading, which directly ties “bundles” of content/assessments to learning outcomes.

If the content is flexible or is subordinated to skills development, ungrading/portfolio grading, in which students work on developing skills over time, may be effective.

Are the learning outcomes pre-defined?

Specifications and TILTed assessments can be explicitly tied to learning outcomes.

Are there required assignments, exams, or post-course assessments that you need to include in your planning?

These may be incorporated into contracts and/or specifications; it may also be helpful to develop rubrics for them (if they don't already exist), and to create TILT descriptions of the assignments to clarify their place in the course.

What's the schedule for course meetings?

How much time do you have between course meetings to review student work? How often do you meet? Does most of the coursework take place in-class or between classes?

These considerations may affect your choice of assessment model, depending on the amount of feedback required, the availability of a rubric to simplify feedback, etc.

Where will the class meet?

Is it in person, online, or hybrid? In a large lecture hall, small discussion classroom, lab, active learning space, other?

While all models of alternative assessment have been effective in different settings, rubrics can facilitate equity across multiple raters in a large course, and specifications grading has been gaining popularity in lab-based courses. Again, however, consider your own context.

Where do student activities take place?

For example, will the course employ discussion boards, social annotation tools, or other online resources? Will most work take place in-class, in the lab, or outside of class? Are there community-based learning activities?

Some kinds of assignments, such as community-based learning activities, social annotation, etc., may especially lend themselves to the binary “complete/not complete” assessment

common in contract grading. These elements can easily be incorporated into any assessment model by including, for example, a reflection essay.

Other considerations

Other considerations for course development, which may affect your choice of assessment model are listed below. As with all course development planning, reflection is the key element here; the more information you have about the course, your students, and your own capacities/investments, the better decision you can make.

Why does the course exist?

What is its relationship to the rest of the curriculum?

What is its relationship to the discipline?

Why do students typically take the course?

Are they filling specific requirements that aren't related to their major?

(med school admission requirement, pre-service teacher requirements, etc.)

Are they looking for a challenge?

An easy A?

A review of familiar material?

An introduction to something new and different?

Why are you teaching the course?

Were you assigned to it?

Did you volunteer?

Did you design it yourself?

What are your goals for the course?

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