

Our teaching-and-learning experts give you insights on what works in the classroom. Delivered on Thursdays. Teaching is written by [Beth McMurtrie](https://www.chronicle.com/author/beth-mcmurtrie) and [Beckie Supiano](https://www.chronicle.com/author/beckie-supiano). We love hearing from readers, so please don’t hesitate to reach out to us directly. You can also read [more articles about teaching and learning](https://www.chronicle.com/tag/teaching-learning).

AUGUST 27, 2020

**From:**Beth McMurtrie

**Subject:**Teaching: Getting Creative With Course Assessments

This week:

* I share examples of innovative assessment strategies.
* I share an instructor's request to help students engage with digital textbooks.
* I point you to resources for effective online, equitable, and antiracist teaching.

**Ditch the Test**

High-stakes tests are stressful enough. Add a pandemic and online-proctoring challenges to the mix, and they become even less appealing. What can faculty members do instead?

A couple of weeks ago, I [asked](https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-08-13) faculty members to share creative assessment strategies, particularly ones that could translate to an online classroom. I received several great responses. Here are a few:

**Multimedia history projects**: Inspired by her department’s flipped-course approach to teaching, and by L. Dee Fink’s [*Creating Significant Learning Experiences*](https://www.amazon.com/Creating-Significant-Learning-Experiences-Integrated/dp/1118124251), Johanna Mellis, an assistant professor of world history at Ursinus College, has largely shifted to using creative, end-of-semester projects for her 100- and 200-level courses. In her class on global colonialism, for example, students did research on the history of colonialism, “which they then ‘remixed’ using a digital tool of their own choosing, to explain the history to a non-History audience,” she writes. (They were taught how to use digital tools like TimelineJS, StoryMaps, Fakebook, and Microsoft Sway.)

Students in Mellis’s world-history survey course did a Storyboard That project, working in groups “to create a graphic history of an individual who experienced the Arab Spring as detailed in the *NY Times* piece 'Fractured Lands*.'*”

This fall, Mellis is teaching a new survey course, online, on sports in world history. For students’ last assignment, she writes, “I am thinking of letting them do this final reflection in a format of their choosing (video, podcast, writing, a digital drawing tool, etc.),” though she is still working out the details.

**Advocacy through art**: Aimee Escalante, an adjunct lecturer in the College of Education at California State University-Monterey Bay, wrote in to describe an upper-division seminar that also fulfills a university writing requirement. Her students write a large research paper on an issue in education, along with recommendations on how to address it. A couple of years ago, she began asking them to create a piece of art to go along with it, designed to make their case. “I was very open-ended in how they could approach it,” she writes, “and students were graded on their reflection about the process rather than the art.”

The students loved the assignment, she reports, finding it “relaxing and a welcome break from the hectic schedule at the end of the semester. I also believe the assignment is more culturally responsive and enables students to utilize some of their skills that they may not have been able to show in their papers.

“I have loved reviewing their art, which has included songs, videos, paintings, editorial cartoons, comics, poems, sculptures, short stories, and photography. The students have asked to have a mini art show to share their pieces, and they enjoy discussing and reviewing their and their peers’ work. I believe this activity also helps build community. It is the highlight of my semester.”

**Creative classics:** Deborah Beck, an associate professor in the classics department at the University of Texas at Austin, completely redesigned the final exam for her spring "Intro to Classical Mythology" course after it moved online. She came up with a three-part, open-book test that students had two days to complete. First, they had to submit an academic analysis of around 300 words, in which they chose the subject. Second, they had to come up with a creative piece. Submissions included “makeup design for a performance of Euripides' *Medea*, movie posters, poetry, karaoke, collages, a spoof of an anthropology professor explaining why it doesn't make sense to evaluate ancient mythological stories using modern ethical standards, and a crossword puzzle, among other things,” she writes. The third part was either a 300-word essay or a short video “in which they explained how the other two things they submitted were the best ways to show what they had learned.

“This was a huge success,” she writes. “The students enjoyed it, and they came up with some absolutely astonishing work; my TA and I enjoyed our final exam grading, probably a first for me; and although we graded these submissions based almost entirely on completion, it would be easy to design a rubric so that submissions could be graded, even for the creative assignment, where ‘grading’ can feel awkward.”

Two other clever assignments also stood out:

**Monopoly**: For more than a decade, Kerry Calnan, an associate professor of accounting and finance at Nichols College, has taught a course on the principles of accounting entirely through Monopoly. Students represent real-estate companies, and through five hourlong rounds of the board game they focus on accounting issues. (She notes that this also works with a virtual Monopoly app or with videoconferencing and game boards.)

“We would need to show the bank if we were solvent and that we could meet basic ratios to prove we were a good loan,” Calnan writes. “After the round, we would close the books for the quarter. At the end of the four quarters, we closed out the books for the year and analyzed the business to report to an outside panel of bankers. Suddenly, all the students in my section understood how accounting works and the value it brings to a business. My colleagues thought I was a bit crazy, but my students loved it. They outperformed the traditional sections every year.”

**Buzzfeed-type quiz**: Jean A. Stuntz, a history professor at West Texas A&M University, taught an honors course called "Bada$$ Women in History." “For their end-of-semester class project, the students designed a Buzzfeed-type quiz where people could answer several questions and then be matched with a woman from history,” she writes. “They came up with the idea themselves, they did the research on the women, they divided their findings into personality bits they matched up with questions and answers, they created the quiz, they sent it out on various social-media platforms (we got several hundred responses), then they analyzed the results. It was extraordinary. They did all the work, from coming up with the idea to the final papers. I just sat back and watched the magic happen.”

**Helping Students Make the Most of Virtual Textbooks**

Todd Kushner, an assistant professor at National Intelligence University, wrote in with a question: What are the best strategies to help students engage with e-textbooks? “Reading passively does not help much with retaining or critically reading material,” he notes. But with a physical textbook, students can underline and make comments in the margins, or use sticky notes to mark important passages. Not so with digital books, which many professors will be using this fall.

“Now, I know that there is an electronic equivalent to these physical book strategies. But my impression is that students using electronic books tend to be more passive readers,” he writes. “Are there any strategies we can suggest to students to make them more effective — and more critical — readers?”

Have you devised useful ways for your students to use their virtual textbooks actively, and not passively? If so, write to me at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, and I may share your example in a future newsletter.

**Resources on Teaching**

* In this [webinar](https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/teaching-for-equity/index.html), “Teaching for Equity, With Empathy,” Jessica Calarco, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University at Bloomington, discusses what that looks like in practice. You can find more resources in her T[witter thread](https://twitter.com/jessicacalarco/status/1297238887752970241?s=21) on the topic.
* Carnegie Mellon University’s Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation offers "C[oncrete Strategies for Hybrid and Remote Teaching](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/online/designteach/strategies/)." The presentation focuses on five areas, including active learning, building community, and assessment.
* Looking for ways to foster meaningful conversations in an online forum? Flower Darby, an instructional designer and co-author of *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes,*offers several tips in this *Chronicle* [advice piece](https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-secret-weapon-of-good-online-teaching-discussion-forums).
* Packback released a guide this week on [how to build anti-racist pedagogy](https://www.packback.co/resources/anti-racist-discussion-pedagogy-guide/) in any discipline, by three academic experts: Selfa Chew, of the University of Texas at El Paso; Alisa Cooper. of Glendale Community College; and Akil Houston, of Ohio University.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us: beckie.supiano@chronicle.com or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

—Beth

*Learn more about our Teaching newsletter, including how to contact us, at the*[*Teaching newsletter archive page*](https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching)*.*