Chapter V

Factors to Consider in the Design of Inclusive Online Assessments*

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Abstract

This chapter presents factors to consider in the design of online assessments for all students, including students with disabilities and English-language learners. It presents a process and considerations for the initial transformation of paper-and-pencil assessments to inclusive online assessments, focusing on features of universal design, the use of assistive technology, and an examination of the use of individual accommodations in light of the content tested. The authors hope to convey the importance of implementing a process for addressing these considerations from the beginning of online assessment design. Retrofitting completed assessments can result in concerns about validity.

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Introduction

Learners today are a diverse group. In the context of laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for children in public preschools and K-12 schools, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for individuals who have left school, nearly 12% of the population of learners have been identified as having disabilities of various types. The United States also has many learners for whom English is not their first language. In the past decade there has been a 72% increase in the number of English-language learners in the K-12 public schools, up to nearly 4 million students. With this diversity in learners today, we can no longer afford to think of online learning and online assessment without making sure that these are inclusive of all individuals, including those with disabilities and those who are English-language learners.

For the full benefits of online assessments to be realized, a thoughtful and systematic process must occur to examine the transformation of existing paper-and-pencil assessments. It is not enough to simply transfer test items from paper to screen. Not only will poor design elements that exist on the paper version of the test transfer to the screen, but additional challenges may be introduced that reduce the validity of inferences from the assessment results and possibly exclude some groups of students from assessment participation.

This chapter presents factors to consider in the design of online assessments for all students, including students with disabilities and English-language learners. The focus of this chapter is on operational large-scale assessments with common items that measure grade-level content. We do not address the complex issues involved in computerized adaptive testing.

The chapter begins with opportunities and challenges presented by this approach to assessment and then explores research about effective, universally designed assessments and technology-based accommodations, relating this research to online assessment design features. Finally, we present a process and considerations for the initial transformation of paper-and-pencil assessments to inclusive online assessments.

Opportunities and Challenges of Online Assessments for Diverse Learners

Online technology has been touted as a tool that can be used to empower diverse learners, including students with disabilities and English-language learners (Goldberg & O’Neill, 2000). Specifically, online assessments have been viewed
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