

5 Reasons to Stop Doing Timed Online Exams During COVID-19

Submitted by Joshua Kim on April 8, 2020 - 9:00pm

Blog: [Learning Innovation](#) [1]

Like many of you, my home is now an office *and* a school *and* a residence hall. Living with four remote learning college students (2 seniors, a junior, and a sophomore - none enrolled at my institution), provides me with an up-close view of the COVID-19 postsecondary learning experience.

More accurately, I am seeing the learning experience of the subset of more privileged students. The college kids living under my roof benefit from fast internet, modern laptops, and a full fridge. Their only jobs are to finish out the semester. And despite their many privileges, I still see these remote learning college students struggle at times.

Across higher ed, we have patted ourselves on our collective backs for making the rapid transition from residential-to-remote learning. I'm not immune from a bit of self-congratulation. But the real people that we should be giving props to is our students. They are the ones who have had to simultaneously move both house (for residential students) and learning mode.

Among the biggest struggles that I'm witnessing with the remote learning college students at my home is in their timed online exams.

Requiring our remote learners to take timed online tests seems like a higher ed self-inflicted wound.

There are at least five reasons why no remote learner exam during the time of pandemic should be timed.

Timed Online Exams:

#1 - Create Unnecessary Stress:

During a pandemic, among the absolute top priorities of every college and university should be to avoid contributing to any unnecessary stress for our students. I'd argue that this is true even in non-global pandemic times, but we save that debate for later.

Timed exams create stress. Not for every student and every exam. But enough students in enough exams.

Timed exams created stress, even if everything else in the test-taking environment is normal and supportive. Nothing in our students' test-taking environment is normal and supportive nowadays.

A stressed-out brain does not learn. Even with all the evidence from learning science, we in higher ed have not been able to let go of the myth that a little bit of stress is good for learning. It is not.

Stress and anxiety can push up short-term performance (as measured in test scores) but is horrible for long-term retention.

#2 - Are Vulnerable to Bandwidth Problems:

How is your home bandwidth? With six laptops competing for bandwidth in my house, not to mention every neighbor also on the internet all day, my bandwidth sometimes sucks. And we the top Comcast tier.

How are you surviving with remote work and schooling if you are on DSL, cellular, or satellite?

Combine iffy home bandwidth with the performance challenges that Canvas, Blackboard, D2L, and other learning management platforms have been

experiencing as a result of massively heightened usage. The LMS providers seem to be doing a decent job of scaling their services to meet demand, but reports [2] of platform sluggishness are widespread.

With timed online exams, particularly exams that only show a single question on a page, bandwidth and other performance issues are deadly for the test-taker. Can you imagine your exam time ticking down as you wait for the questions to load?

3 - Are Poorly Correlated with Understanding:

Timed exams measure a student's ability to answer questions quickly. A timed exam is assessing speed, not understanding.

There is no correlation between recall speed and understanding. Students who can come up with answers quickly are not smarter than those who need to think before answering.

The ability to finish an exam quickly is not a measure of preparation, diligence, or mastery.

#4 - Do Not Protect Against Cheating:

Sometimes you hear that instructors assigned timed exams to guard against cheating. The idea is that students will not have time to go and find the answers from other sources.

The idea that timed exams protect against cheating is another one of those myths that higher ed can't seem to let go. The reality is that if students want to cheat, then they will find a way to do so.

In our current universal remote learning reality, I suppose that we could institute an online proctoring system involving webcams, keystroke logging, and maybe drones. I'm dubious if this will work, and I'm sure that the benefits would not be worth the effort.

Much better to have an honor code that your entire community believes in. Put that honor code at the top of every exam. Talk about the reasons behind the honor code in your synchronous online sessions. Record a video about the honor code that your students can watch asynchronously. Require each student to agree to the honor code through a quiz.

But stop believing that a timed exam will do much to prevent cheating. It won't.

#5 - Place Undue Burden on Students Who Require Learning Accommodations:

I do not doubt that most schools are totally on top of the steps necessary to ensure that students with identified learning support requirements are receiving extra time on timed exams. If a student was approved for additional time during residential classes, that approval should carry forward to remote learning.

Even in the best of circumstances, however, requiring that our students navigate the systems in place to allow extra exam time places an additional requirement on these learners. The task of getting extra time for exams has to be more difficult in a remote learning environment.

We should also be willing to admit that there is a gap between those students who are allowed to take extra time on an exam, and those students who would benefit from additional time.

Students (and their parents) who are savvy navigators of the education system have jumped through the necessary hoops to secure extra exam time. Those with fewer resources may not be on anyone's list of students entitled to accommodations.

So no more online timed exams during COVID-19.

If you have set your exams with a time limit, please consider rethinking this decision.

Anyone care to make a case for sticking with online timed exams?

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