Communicating with Students about Managing Technical Problems with Online Tests and Exams

Even though we are all becoming more accustomed to online exams, students may still not intuitively know what to do if they encounter technical problems while they are taking an exam in your course. It is important to provide explicit guidance to help students navigate any challenges that occur so that you can reduce their anxiety (and your own!) around the exam. This short article will help you consider why explicit guidance is important, what students need to know before taking an online exam, and how you can help students feel prepared to take your exam online. It also includes sample language that you can adapt to share with your students in advance of exams.

Why do students need explicit guidance?

Helping students develop a plan for responding to technical problems is important not only to ensure they can complete and submit their exam successfully, it also helps them maintain focus on the work of the exam itself. Uncertainty about technical problems can lead to extraneous cognitive load while they are taking the exam, which can have a negative impact on their performance. Reassuring students that there are ways to get help if they run into problems can also make them feel more in control of the outcome of the exam.

What do students need to know?

Before they take an online exam, it is important for students to know . . .
1. *when* **you will be available to respond to any problems that arise**. Encourage students to contact you right away if they encounter an issue, but given that final exams will be available for a 24-hour window, you likely won't be able to respond immediately to every concern that arises. To help allay students' anxiety, it is helpful to offer a rough idea of the hours when you will be available so they can know when to expect a response from you.
2. *how* **to contact you**. Make sure you indicate the best way for students to reach you in the case of a problem.
3. *what* **information they should capture**. Having documentation of the issue that occurs helps everyone involved: it ensures that students don't have to try to simply describe the issue they have encountered, it can reduce the likelihood that you may have to question students' integrity, and it can help ITS know what kind of problem has occurred so that they can address it appropriately. Students may not automatically think to do this, though, so it's important to let students know that documenting problems is crucial.
4. *who* **else they might contact for help**. Make sure that students know how to contact the ITS Help Desk during regular business hours (518-442-3700 or http://www.albany.edu/its/help) and the Blackboard Support Center (844-852-5696 or http://albany.edusupportcenter.com) for after-hours help. This may provide students with more immediate help and also gives them additional documentation of the problem.

What else can I do to help students prepare for online exams?

Providing students with multiple practice attempts in preparation for an exam is essential to ensuring their success and reducing instances of cheating. There is also technical value in having students practice with the tools they will use to take online exams. Before students take an exam

that is worth a significant percentage of their final grade, make sure they have had opportunities to take no- or low-stakes quizzes or tests using the same functionality and types of questions as the higher-stakes exams. This can help them feel more comfortable with the technology, learn how to manage problems, and potentially uncover issues (like using the wrong browser) before they are in a higher pressure situation.

<u>Sample language</u>
Note: This sample was adapted from language generously provided by Professor Susanna Fessler from the Department of East Asian Studies at UAlbany. Some of the guidance is specific to the context of her course, so it will need to be adapted for your context.

Most of the time, final exams are held without technical problems, but occasionally the unexpected happens. Below are some tips. Note that I monitor my e-mail closely during exams, but even professors need to sleep at some point so if you're taking the exam at night I might not reply until the next morning.

- If you experience a power-outage but can still send an e-mail (on your phone or some other battery powered device with internet service), please e-mail me *immediately* and let me know so that I am aware of the problem.
- If your internet connection goes down for reasons beyond your control, take a screen shot of your device to document the issue/error message. Whenever you take a screen shot, capture the entire screen with date and time AND the top of the screen (which tells me what browser you were using). If you have phone service, call {preferred phone number} and leave me a voicemail message, telling me what the problem is.
- If Blackboard freezes or you experience any technical glitch in Blackboard, take a screen shot (or screen shots) and send it to me. If you don't hear back from me immediately, log out of Blackboard and log back in to see if it fixes the problem. If it does not, take more screen shots to document the incident.
- You may also want to submit a ticket to ITS so that they also have documentation of the incident and can investigate the problem. If you are taking your exam during regular business hours, you can also call the ITS Help Desk at 518-442-3700.
- Please understand that once an exam is submitted in Blackboard, there is no way for the instructor to open it back up again. Instructors can clear an attempt, or ignore an attempt, but we can't re-open it. It's the nature of the platform. In cases of technical difficulty it is preferable that you DO NOT submit the exam in a panic. Rather, let me know of the problem and then, once I have solved it (assuming I can) I'm able to extend your time.

ITLAL would be glad to talk with you individually about preparing and giving online exams in your courses. Please visit our website to request a consultation or email us at teachingandlearning@albany.edu.