



STATE COUNCIL OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR VIRGINIA

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TAKING ASSIGNMENT DESIGN ONLINE

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Virginia—like many states and institutions—has devoted increasing attention over the last few years to assessing the quality of student learning in more meaningful ways. Part of that effort has involved analyzing student work products and, by extension, the assignments that generate them. After all, we can't criticize students for not demonstrating particular skills if the assignments we ask them to complete are unclear or do not actually require any demonstration of those skills.

Most readers of the NILOA newsletter will be familiar with assignment design workshops, or "charrettes," which NILOA has led and supported on campuses across the country for several years. In a charrette, faculty work in small groups, offering feedback on each other's assignments with the goals of (1) enhancing clarity for students about what they are expected to do; (2) making sure assignments indeed require students to exhibit the knowledge and skills the instructor is looking for; and (3) making sure assignments are well aligned with the student learning outcomes established by the instructor, program, or institution.

When Virginia joined the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning (MSC) in 2016, some of our institutions were particularly excited to learn that NILOA would help provide faculty development at no cost in the form of an assignment design workshop. We quickly realized, however, that we couldn't possibly get a critical mass of faculty from all of our participating institutions in one place at one time, given the geographical distances between them. Even if we had organized two workshops in different parts of the state, we would have struggled to meet the needs of those institutions' faculty directly.

We decided the best option would be to increase our capacity to offer charrettes ourselves. We worked with NILOA to offer a train-the-trainer workshop, which drew 75 faculty and staff from across the state. We soon discovered, however, that even with an expanded number of potential facilitators, travel would continue to be a barrier for some faculty, particularly in rural parts of the state. We were also aware that the benefit of getting feedback from colleagues at other institutions (which, in some cases, greatly increased participants' comfort level) was lost when the charrette was conducted for a single institution or department.

The idea of an online charrette evolved naturally out of the desire to conduct a workshop that involved faculty from different campuses and did not require investing a day (or two) to travel and participate. We conducted a pilot online charrette in November 2017 and used what we learned to offer several online charrettes over a three-week period in February/March 2018. The concept has proven to be popular and relatively easy to implement at very little cost.

What We Did

I chose Google Hangouts as the platform for the pilot online charrette. I wanted something that would allow participants to see one another and to interact much as they would if they were sitting together around a table. Google Hangouts offered several advantages over other services I looked at: it is free; it has no time limit for a group call; it can accommodate up to ten people at a time; and it can be accessed via a mobile app or a web link. The only technical requirements for a video call on Hangouts are a Google account, an internet connection, web cam, microphone and speakers. For the charrettes conducted in February/March I gave facilitators the option of using whatever meeting platform they were comfortable with; most used Hangouts. One facilitator whose institution had a license for Zoom used that platform instead and reported that it also worked very well.

The charrettes were scheduled to last a total of 1 hour 50 minutes—long enough to feel substantial but not overwhelming. Because the entire content of the workshop needed to fit in that time, I kept the groups to only four participants, plus the facilitator(s).

Just as we do for in-person charrettes, we asked each of the online participants to submit an assignment in advance along with a reflective memo explaining the context and purpose of the assignment, describing what had and hadn't worked about the assignment in the past, and describing the feedback they hoped to receive from fellow participants. I saved the assignments, memos, and a feedback form for each participant in a Google Docs folder for each charrette group. Although in-person charrettes sometimes allow participants to bring assignments with them to the workshop, we expected the online charrette would proceed much more efficiently if everyone read the assignments ahead of time.

After everyone connected to the Hangout, the facilitator welcomed the group and had the participants introduce themselves. Then the group got right down to the business of discussing assignments. We allotted 25 minutes for each participant's assignment, which included five minutes for the author to introduce their assignment, 15 minutes for the group to discuss the assignment, and five minutes for participants to write feedback to the author using the feedback form in the Google Docs folder.

What We Learned

Judging from post-workshop survey responses from participants and facilitators, the online charrettes went very well and yielded comparable results to the in-person workshops we've conducted. We will continue to offer online charrettes, keeping the following lessons and considerations in mind:

- **Anticipate technical difficulties and try to address them in advance.** We discovered that Hangouts doesn't work equally well with all browsers. (Chrome works reliably, Firefox less so.) Facilitators should encourage participants to test their connection, camera and microphone in advance. Facilitators should also have participants' contact information handy in case they need to communicate about any problems at the last minute. In some cases where connectivity problems could not be solved quickly, participants joined the group by speaker phone instead. Although the participants still said they got a lot out of those sessions, it was more difficult for the facilitator to manage the discussion without being able to see participants' non-verbal cues.
- **Consider having a back-up facilitator, at least for the beginning of the charrette.** Most of our charrettes involved only one facilitator. It generally worked well, but in cases where some participants had trouble connecting, the facilitator had to try to manage the technical issues while also doing the usual facilitation work of welcoming group members, reviewing the charrette process, etc. Having a second facilitator, at least for the first few minutes, would allow one facilitator to focus on the group members already on the call and the other to deal with other concerns. Having two facilitators also ensures that the session can proceed even if the primary facilitator has unexpected connectivity problems themselves. (Network outages can happen to anyone!)
- **Provide a link to conceptual information about charrettes.** We did not explain the conceptual foundations of the charrette at the beginning of the online workshop. While participants who have experienced charrettes before might be fine just diving in, we assumed people who were new to the concept (as most of our participants were) might feel more comfortable and get more out of the experience if they had a better idea of what this "charrette thing" was all about ahead of time. I included a link to NILOA's video, "[Unfacilitated Assignment Design on Your Campus](#)" (available on YouTube), in the pre-workshop email to give participants access to that foundational information without taking time to cover it during the online session.
- **The reflective memo is an important part of the process.** The pilot online charrette participants agreed that it was very useful ("imperative," in one person's view) to have everyone submit the reflective memo along with their assignment. We made sure to keep that expectation when we invited participants for the February/March charrettes. The memos help other participants understand the context of the assignment in advance; it helps the owner of the assignment to think through their own concerns and questions about the assignment; and it helps focus the feedback discussions quickly, which is especially beneficial in the more time-constrained environment of the online charrette.
- **Avoid asking people to multitask.** During the pilot charrette in November we tried to maximize efficiency by asking participants to write feedback during the discussion rather than allocating time separately for that at the end of each round. The participants found this to be distracting and recommended that we preserve the dedicated time for written

feedback in future online charrettes. All of the February/March charrettes included five minutes for participants to write comments using the feedback form in Google Docs.

- **Facilitators should be thoughtful about their own level of participation and be prepared to adapt.** Facilitating an online process demands a particular kind of attention. Google Hangouts allows participants to see one another, but the images of participants who are not speaking are reduced in size. This means the facilitator needs to watch carefully in order to pick up non-verbal cues and ensure that those who want to speak have the opportunity. The facilitator also needs to manage the time and keep the group on track. The facilitator may not be able to manage all of that while also participating in the discussion. However, if the group turns out to be smaller than expected (because of no-shows) or if the participants are shy about speaking up initially, the facilitator may need to play a more active, participatory role, at least until the group gets warmed up. Facilitators need to use their judgment about how the group is going and adjust their involvement accordingly.

Experimenting with the idea of an online charrette has opened a new avenue for Virginia's faculty development and assignment design efforts. We can offer as many online charrettes as we have willing facilitators, and they can be run at any time that is convenient for the participants. While I do not expect online charrettes to replace regional or institutional in-person workshops, they may help us fill a gap and reach a population of faculty who might not participate otherwise. As we continue to offer online charrettes, we will no doubt learn more about the challenges and benefits they offer, and refine our processes to make the workshops even more successful. I welcome questions and comments, as well as conversation with others who have tried using technology to expand the reach of assignment design work. Email me at JodiFisler@schev.edu.