

Online Education and Authentic Assessment

A common question these days, writes Douglas Harrison, is "How do we keep students from cheating on online exams?"

By Douglas Harrison // April 29, 2020 15 COMMENTS

It's been more than a month since the coronavirus crisis drove higher education online, along with much of the rest of the U.S. workforce. As April turns into May, the focus in many college and university classrooms will necessarily shift from how to conduct class virtually to how to most effectively and authentically assess student learning online.

Like many who work at online universities, I've conducted dozens of webinars and consultations over the past few weeks with colleagues seeking advice, resources and support. By far the most common question is about assessment security: How do we keep students from cheating in online exams?

The question implies that online education lacks the quality and integrity of face-to-face instruction -- that it is just more cheatable. That isn't true, and the underlying assumption runs counter to research, risks stigmatizing all students as cheaters, shifts the pedagogical focus away from developmental teaching and learning and toward a fixation on punitive measures, and wastes an opportunity for a more reflective approach to online assignment and assessment design.

Let's be clear: no assessment is uncheatable, and there are indeed best practices and techniques for conducting assessments securely in an online environment. But beyond the purely tactical, the most pedagogically meaningful response to issues of academic integrity in online assessments begins with a few basic principles and concepts.

First, all online education is remote learning, but not all remote learning is online education. Online education is a distinctive educational architecture intentionally designed for virtual teaching, learning and assessment, with technology tools strategically deployed for engagement and outcomes, as well as wraparound services that provide support throughout the online student life cycle.

Second, it's simply not realistic to transition a face-to-face class to a fully optimized online learning environment in the space of a few weeks. It's also not fair or accurate to point to the improvised and unavoidably glitchy process currently underway as proof of online education's inferiority, as some skeptics will surely be inclined to do. The primary objective is to provide students meaningful engagement with faculty members and peers in the move to remote teaching.

What does all this have to do with secure and authentic assessment online? Pressure and stress are key drivers of cheating behaviors, and students today are experiencing a lot of both. So, students who feel connected, supported and encouraged are less likely to cheat.

Students are also less likely to cheat when they are invited to demonstrate learning in ways that are most authentic to them. Grant Wiggins seminally defined authentic assessment as "engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively. The tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field."

In short, whether online or face-to-face, authentic assessment -- such as case studies, scenario-based projects and word problems -- can often represent a superior way of measuring students' learning, engaging and empowering them to demonstrate knowledge rather than demanding that they prove their worth via high-stakes exams.

Here's a quick example: a faculty member seeking to replace a multiple-choice exam on nutrition, digestion and metabolism could introduce more authentic assessment by giving students the option of tracking their own dietary intake and metabolic indicators. They could then evaluate the results or analyze food service menus and create an integrative map of the outcomes and impacts on diet and health.

Even when traditional exams represent the most appropriate assessment tool, there are ways to enrich authenticity. Consider replacing six multiple-choice or true-and-false questions with two short-answer items. Or simply ask students to record a brief spoken-word explanation of their answers to two questions and return the recordings after the exam.

Of course, under the current circumstances, there will be realistic limits to how much anyone can use the move online to introduce more authentic assessment. That's OK. No matter the approach to online teaching and assessment, the most important thing we are teaching, learning and assessing right now may be the criticality of adaptability and resilience that come from a commitment to lifelong learning.

Bio

Douglas Harrison is vice president and dean of the School of Cybersecurity and Information Technology at the University of Maryland Global Campus and a member of the Board of Directors for the International Center for Academic Integrity.

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wokjr

a month ago

Douglas Harrison,

Ultimately, short of proctored exams, there is no way to guarantee it is the actual student who registered. I'm sure you realize that but, seeing your position with the largest online university, I can understand why you might minimize this fact.

8 ^ | v · Share

Stan Blue

a month ago

"Let's be clear: no assessment is uncheatable, and there are indeed best practices and techniques for conducting assessments securely in an online environment."

It has been my experience, others' experiences may vary, that adopting "best practices and techniques" means: "I do not want to make the effort to think what to do, I will do what others do and then nobody can blame me for the results." Better to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally.

6 ^ | v · Share

Anthony Pina

a month ago

I often say that people do not go into teaching because they really are excited to test students. Students can (and do) cheat online, in classrooms, and even in proctored campus testing centers. Our reliance on high-stakes multiple-choice tests (often just 1970's scantron testing with extra capabilities like randomizing questions) and textbook publisher test banks is an indicator that, on average, we are not that motivated or adept at assessing student learning outcomes. Scantrons and their virtual cousins are appealing because they require so little work from us--not because they are the best way to assess. Some forms of assessment--such as breaking large projects into component chunks, where students submit drafts, receive feedback from their instructor, and then include the revised version into the larger finished project--will tend to elicit more learning, interest and retention (and be less motivating to cheat) than paper or online scantron-type testing.

3 ^ | v · Share

David

Anthony Pina

a month ago

I went into teaching out of a desire to teach, and I found that scantrons were pretty good at showing who knew the material and who didn't. The exams were often a bit of work to create, but then they were fair, something that nobody can guarantee for subjective grading.

I guess now people use test banks, which are pretty mediocre and low-level from what I've seen. But nothing stops you from creating a good multiple choice exam that reflects your own approach, with easy and truly difficult questions.

^ | v · Share

Glen S. McGhee_FHEAP

a month ago · edited

Doug completely misses the point. Online cheating is not limited -- somehow -- to test taking, but extends to making certain that assignments are completed by the student and NOT someone else. Cheating on assignments is surprisingly easy to do, as I know from personal experience. You just email the completed assignment to the student, and they submit it as their own work.

You cannot monitor every assignment, but with the relaxation of online standards by DeVos/Jones, none of this matters. When I pointed this out in the NPRM, and the secretary's response was an obscure Israeli study showing that online students don't cheat! LOL!

3 ^ | v · Share

Steve Foerster

Glen S. McGhee_FHEAP

a month ago

Not that the nationality or publicity of a study matters, but there are also studies in the U.S. that suggest online students cheat less than classroom-based ones. I expect, though, that that's more because of motivational differences than the mode of instruction itself, and of course it's also pre-COVID.

1 ^ | v · Share

Glen S. McGhee_FHEAP

Steve Foerster

a month ago

Here's the study, which doesn't support the Secretary's position on cheating. Cheating is the elephant in the online-learning room!

researchgate.net/publicatio...

Many reports show that students admit that they are more likely to cheat in online courses. Chapman and colleagues (Chapman,Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004) found that 24% of 824 business students indicated that they had cheated on an electronic exam, and that 42% of them claimed that if given the opportunity, they would cheat in electronic exams. Yet the study finds that "contrary to the traditional views and the research literature, the surveyed students tend to engage less [academic dishonesty] in online courses than in face-to-face courses."

See pages 145-146

https://s3.amazonaws.com/pu...

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Glen S. McGhee_FHEAP

Steve Foerster

a month ago · edited

Yes -- motivational differences -- that's what the study looked at. No assessment of opportunity, no assessment of previous history, no assessment of ..., anything, really. Just like with China's Covid-19 statistics (does nationality matter?), we have no real data, one way or the other. Most of those I know "cheat," but are not even aware of it.

^ | v · Share

Steve Foerster

Glen S. McGhee_FHEAP

a month ago

does nationality matter?

What matters is how dodgy it is to gratuitously point out that researchers are Israeli as part of minimizing the importance of their work.

1 ^ | v · Share

Glen S. McGhee_FHEAP

Steve Foerster

a month ago · edited

In the response to my NPRM comments about cheating, DeVos/Jones were not able to cite US studies (not one) about US online students cheating in US schools -- that's the population their legislation relaxing online standards affects. I had to laugh. Here's the study.

researchgate.net/publicatio...

"Many reports show that students admit that they are more likely to cheat in online courses. Chapman and colleagues (Chapman,Davis, Toy, & Wright, 2004) found that 24% of 824 business students indicated that they had cheated on an electronic exam, and that 42% of them claimed that if given the opportunity, they would cheat in electronic exams." Yet, this study argues that face-to-face students cheat MORE than online students. Go figure!

^ | v · Share

Alan Wazny

a month ago

I believe fears of online cheating and similar "issues" are simply an excuse not to modernize. My university simply made online exams open book and the questions more thoughtful. I have also seen webcam exams where the students are supervised. There is always those that try to cheat but let's not pretend technology has any more unsolvable problems than paper exams.

Besides, running an exam that does not allow students to access google or other resources is really harking back to an environment that no longer exists. Everyone has access to the internet in the workplace. This is how modern work is done, so why should exams ban modern equipment? For example, I wrote an exam on City Planning Law where I was not allowed a computer but had pages and pages of bookmark and organized notes. Why? In the real world I could simply use a PDF search function to find the laws I needed to answer questions. Why should the exam room pretend it's 1950?

Education is really dragging its feet; it needs to be reformed for the modern world. For anyone interested I write extensively on this here: https://maplethink.ca/2020/...

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David

a month ago

Why not use the assessment centers that already exist, giving professional exams, GRE, etc.? Or more such could be built at low cost, in commercial space that will have many vacancies now. It's unnecessary (and adds work at a time we need to simplify and streamline) to change college assessment because of test proctoring, a problem we've already solved.

^ | v · Share

thinkmum

David

a month ago · edited

At the moment, those centers may not be open. Higher education centers in my state are not open for students to use computer labs or to get proctored, due to the general shut-down and prohibitions against gatherings of more than 5.

^ | v · Share

Picatso

David

a month ago

At present, most if not all of the centers are closed and may remain so for an unknown time.

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David

Picatso

a month ago

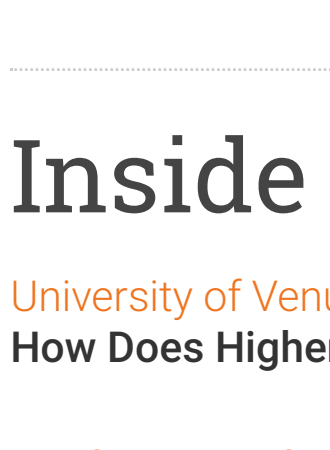
If they won't even open, with their controlled and predictable environments and the vital service they perform (3 hours in there and you could get a crucial certification), I think campuses should not open either.

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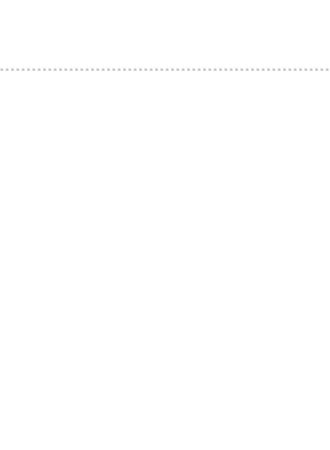
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