Ethics and Distance Education: Strategies for Minimizing Academic Dishonesty in Online Assessment

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Abstract

This paper discusses ethics and student assessment, as applicable to the growing field of distance education. In particular, this paper discusses strategies for minimizing academic dishonesty in online student assessment. Among the strategies discussed are acknowledging the disadvantages of online assessment and overcoming them, designing an effective, cheat-proof online assessment, keeping online courses current, and providing students with an academic dishonesty policy.

Overview of Ethics and Assessment

One of the more pervasive issues that an educator faces is the "age-old concerns about ethical practices in assessment (i.e., cheating)" (Abbott, Siskovic, Nogues, and Williams 2000). In fact, recent studies are indicative that academic dishonesty is on the rise (Niels). For example, McMurtry (2001) cites a 1998 survey from *Who's Who Among American High School Students* which reported that out of 3,123 students, 80 percent of them "admitted to cheating on an exam, a 10-point increase since the question was first asked 15 years ago" (Bushweller 1999). Furthermore, 50 percent of them "did not believe cheating was necessarily wrong," and 95 percent of those who had cheated "said they had never been caught" (Kleiner and Lord 1999).

Such statistics clearly indicate the pervasiveness of cheating in our schools.

In *Classroom Assessment: Concepts and Application*, Airasian presents a partial list (adapted from Cizek 1999) of ways in which students cheat. Below is Airasian's list:

1. Looking at another pupil's test paper during a test.
2. Dropping ones paper so that other pupils can cheat off it.
3. Dropping one's paper and having another pupil pick it up, cheat from it, and re-drop the paper so the original dropper can reclaim his or her paper.
4. Passing an eraser between two pupils who write test information on the eraser.
5. Developing codes such as tapping the floor three times to indicate that a multiple-choice item should be answered "C."
6. Looking at pupils' papers while walking up to the teacher to ask a question about the test.

7. Using crib notes or small pieces of paper to cheat. Crib notes can be hidden in many ingenious places.
8. Switching scratch paper-often allowed by teachers during tests-with one's own scratch paper that contains test answers.
9. Writing test information on the desktop and erasing it after the test; a variation is to write information in allowed reference or textbook pages prior to the test and use the information during the exam.
10. Wearing a tee-shirt with useful test information written on it.
11. Changing answers when teachers allow pupils to grade each other's papers.
12. Using resources forbidden by the teacher in take-home tests or work.

In looking more carefully at the list above, it becomes apparent that the methods of academic dishonesty given above can be divided into two, basic categories: those that require an accomplice and those that do not. Specifically, items 1 – 6 and 11 require an accomplice within close proximity while items 7 – 10 and 12 can be carried out independently.

In considering the issue of ethics and distance education, however, the "age-old concerns about ethical practices in assessment … take on new twists in the distance-learning environment" (Abbott, Siskivic, Nogues, and Williams 2000). Students are no longer in close proximity. In fact, they may be separated by thousands of miles. Distance, however, does not diminish the possibility of students cheating, with or without an accomplice, on online assessments; instead of developing codes or passing erasers, students pass private emails, which instructors have no means of intercepting. In some cases, students can also download an assessment, look up the answers before actually taking it, and share those answers with classmates. Instead of using crib notes or writing answers within the margins of the textbook or on the desktop, students simply use the "verboten" sources during the assessment. Instructors can no longer depend on different handwriting, a change in ink color, or the detection of eraser marks on an assessment as evidence that a student has changed answers after having taken the assessment. Under such circumstances, it would seem that ensuring the integrity of online assessment is almost an impossibility, or is it? Heberling (2002), points out that, "ironically, a strong case can be made that it is actually hard to cheat online and that it is also easier to detect."

According to Hinman (2000), there are three possible approaches to minimizing (online) cheating and plagiarism: first, there is the virtues approach. The virtues approach seeks to develop students who do not want to cheat. Second is the prevention approach, which seeks to eliminate or reduce opportunities for students to cheat and to reduce the pressure to cheat. Finally, there is the police approach, which seeks to catch and punish those who do cheat. According to Hinman (2000), policing, when employed consistently, can also serve as a preventative measure. Although each approach is essential in order to curtail academic dishonesty in online assessment, the scope of this paper focuses on prevention by discussing four key strategies for minimizing academic dishonesty in online student assessment.

Strategy #1

The first strategy for minimizing academic dishonesty in online student assessments is to acknowledge the disadvantages, and find ways to overcome them. The first and most serious disadvantage is the instructor's inability to ascertain who is actually taking an online assessment. Combating this problem will require a multi-faceted approach. The first line of defense is to utilize

a log-in system (Illinois Online Network). As an extra precaution, it is advisable to also have a log-in system for online assessments. The user name and password for the assessment should only be disseminated just prior to the assessment being made available, and change for each online assessment. Many of the packaged courseware products, such as Blackboard, have this capability. Of course, it is possible for the student to give out the user name and password, but changing them frequently will certainly make matters more difficult (Illinois Online Network). A second method is to utilize several, short assessments throughout the course. Abbott, Siskovic, Nogues, and Williams (2000 p. 5) concisely summarize, as follows, an approach to online assessment taken by Cox, author of the award winning, *Taming the Electric Frontier*:

> Cox's approach recommends using a series of small, sequential, individualized tasks and student-centered personal responses to provide multiple checkpoints during the online course and ensure that students, in order to complete the assignments, have to keep up with the class readings and respond to class assignments themselves. Multiple, individualized tasks are harder to counterfeit because of the necessary coordination and planning involved for the student to arrange for someone else to do the work in a timely and appropriately specific manner.

Illinois Online Network also concurs that, while a student may be able to solicit help for a particular assessment, it will be very difficult for him/her to solicit help throughout an entire course. A third method is to include assignments that require some degree of cooperation and coordination among students. According to Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2001), small group discussions should be required, focus on a task, and the task should always result in a product. Again, it will be very difficult for a student to find consistent help throughout a cooperative project of some duration and complexity. A final approach is to build into the course a high level of instructor/student interaction. According to Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy 2001), one principle of effective online teaching is to encourage student-faculty contact. Two possible ways to achieve this are frequent email contact and occasional synchronous chats that are substantive in nature. Frequent student-instructor contact will have two advantages: first, a student will, again, have difficulty finding consistent help in responding to instructor emails. Second, through ongoing dialogue, the instructor will get a better "feel" for a student's ability.

A second disadvantage to online assessment is an instructor's inability to control a student's unauthorized use of resources in completing an assessment. The simplest way to combat this difficulty is to make all assessments open-book. Of course, assessments should, therefore, be of a more substantive nature. The development of assessments suitable for online will be discussed later. For assignments in which plagiarism is a concern, McMurtry (2001) recommends a proactive approach. Among her most salient points, McMurtry recommends designing writing assignments with specific goals and instructions, knowing what is available online before assigning a paper, having students submit assignments electronically so that the instructor can archive them for future reference, and subscribing to a plagiarism search service.

A third disadvantage is the possibility of students collaborating with each other in taking an assessment. Fortunately, there are several ways to combat this problem. First, many of the packaged courseware products, such as Blackboard and WebCT, have the ability to set availability dates and times for all assessments. Time limits and the number of permissible accesses can also be set by the instructor. Many packaged courseware products have the capability of creating large questions pools for randomized assessments (Distance Education and Instructional Technology).

Randomized questions pools are an excellent tool since they ensure that no two students will take exactly the same assessment.

A final disadvantage to online assessment is the technological difficulties that instructors and students will undoubtedly face. Sometimes a student may try to use such difficulties to his/her advantage, complaining that the computer "crashed" while taking an assessment. One possible remedy to this problem is to use courseware, such as WebCT, that tracks the time, duration, and number of attempts that a student accesses an assessment. Multiple accesses for short durations are definitely suspect. If students are made aware that such data is available to the instructor, then they may be less likely to exploit the situation.

Strategy #2

A second strategy for minimizing academic dishonesty in online student assessment is to take the necessary time to design effective online assessments. The Illinois Online Network offers some sound advice for designing effective assessments, such as asking mastery-type questions which require the student to know the subject matter, requiring students to relate the subject matter to their own personal/professional/life experiences, and focusing on the process rather than a final product (Van Belle n.d.). An example of a process-oriented assessment would be to require students to submit thesis statements, outlines, and rough drafts so that they can see the project grow. Assessments should also be oriented toward higher ordered thinking skills, requiring application, evaluation, and synthesis rather than mere factual recall.

In "Writing Multiple Choice Items which Require Comprehension" (2000), Dewey maintains that "it is possible to construct multiple choice questions that are not readily guessed and which therefore require a student to comprehend basic factual material." The key, however, is for the instructor to understand the "rules of thumb" that students employ to take a multiple choice test, such as picking the longest answer, never selecting an answer which has the word "always" or "never" in it, or selecting an answer that includes a related word. In his paper, Dewey outlines a procedure for constructing an effective multiple choice test that will "out smart" such devious strategies. Dewey's paper is quite useful, considering that there seems to be a tendency toward objective testing in an online environment, since they are automatically graded, and provide immediate feedback to the students (Cooper 2000).

Strategy #3

According to Van Belle (n.d.), a third strategy to reduce academic dishonesty is to rotate the curriculum by assigning original assignments and readings, or even considering alternative, project-based assessments which require creativity. Obviously, the less frequently instructors modify assignments and assessments, the easier it becomes for students to share graded papers from previous semesters.

Strategy #4

A final strategy to minimize academic dishonesty is to provide students with an academic integrity/dishonesty policy. According to McMurtry (2001), instructors should take the necessary time to discuss their academic policy with their students. Unfortunately, a recent study reveals that few instructors take up the topic of academic integrity/dishonesty with their students. In Dirks (1998, p. 18), only "15 percent of the syllabi collected had academic policies in them."

In developing an academic integrity/dishonesty policy, McCabe and Pavela (1997), identified 10 principles of academic integrity, some of which have been addressed to some extent in this paper:

1. Affirm the importance of academic integrity.
2. Foster love of learning.
3. Treat students as ends in themselves.
4. Promote an environment of trust in the classroom.
5. Encourage student responsibility for academic integrity.
6. Clarify expectations for students.
7. Develop fair and relevant forms of assessment.
8. Reduce opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty.
9. Challenge academic dishonesty when it occurs.
10. Help define and support campus-wide academic integrity standards.

Taylor (n.d.), in his paper entitled "Academic Integrity: A Letter to My Students," addresses many of the above principles; Taylor concisely explains the mutual responsibilities of students and instructors regarding academic integrity. What is so attractive about Taylor's paper is that he defines integrity in lieu of defining what constitutes cheating, focusing on positives rather than negatives.

Conclusion

The "age-old" concern of academic dishonesty is a pervasive issue that all instructors must face (Abbott, Siskovic, Nogues, and Williams, 2000). However, the incidences of academic dishonesty can be significantly reduced if instructors are proactive, vigilant, and are willing to "welcome the challenge of creating 'cheat-proof' course materials" (Van Belle n.d.).

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