7 Ways to Assess Students Online and Minimize Cheating

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By *Flower Darby*

How can you make sure your online students take tests without cheating? It's one of the most-frequent questions asked by new online instructors and even some experienced ones. The short answer: You can't.

You might be tempted to join the "arms race" in cheating-prevention tools, or to adopt punitive approaches such as proctored online exams and time limits for online tests. But the reality is, students will always find new and creative ways to get around your policing efforts. So what to do?

I'm not in favor of punitive approaches (though I recognize that proctored tests may be required in some STEM disciplines). Another school of thought is ungrading. Many passionate, committed, and caring educators advocate *not* grading student work and instead rely on self-assessments and peer assessments. While I respect their approach, I am not in that camp, either.

As a veteran online instructor writing this series on effective online teaching, I've found it's nigh impossible to create a cheat-proof online test. Instead, I recommend something both simpler and more effective: Assume that every online quiz or test you give is open-book

and open-note (or, for the tech-savvy, open-Chegg and open-Discord). Students tend to cheat when the stakes of a course are high and they feel pressured to do well — for example, when their grade is based solely on a midterm and a final exam. What follows are seven of my tried-and-true ways to both meaningfully assess student learning *and* foster academic integrity.

Break up a big high-stakes exam into small weekly tests. Students are under a lot of pressure to do well on an exam that accounts for a third or a half of their grade. Instead, lessen that pressure — and thus the urge to cheat — by giving them a series of weekly tests that equal the weight of the high-stakes exam. The weekly tests should be just as rigorous, but if students bomb on one or two of them, all is not lost. It is possible to recover from a low score on one of 14 short tests.

Pair that strategy with a deliberate system to reach out to students who performed poorly on a weekly test. Offer extra help via tutoring services or office hours. Students who feel supported in their learning are less likely to cheat.

Skeptics might object that students may still be tempted to cheat by, for example, paying someone else to take their weekly tests. But arranging that actually takes a lot of work, not to mention money. Lower the pressure, and students are far more likely to take the tests without cheating.

Start and end each test with an honor statement. As the first step of an online test, and again as the last, ask students to affirm that they are practicing academic integrity. Start each test with explicit instructions: "You may use your book and your notes while you take this test. Do not share your answers with anyone during or after the test. By clicking 'Begin,' you agree to the following statement: 'I affirm that I am the assigned student taking the test, and this is entirely my own work.'"

As they finish, ask students to reaffirm that they completed it on their own. Bookending the test in that way can help nudge students toward integrity, especially when you've reduced the pressure to cheat in the first place with shorter, more frequent tests.

Ask students to explain their problem-solving process. If you give students a set of problems to solve, some may search online for answers to similar problems. However, it's harder to find student-generated explanations of the steps they took to solve those problems.

Adding a short narrative question to an online test requires students to do more than just provide the correct answer. This can be a short, open-ended test question that takes seconds to grade.

Get to know each student's writing style in low- or no-stakes tasks. To prevent or detect plagiarism without relying on imperfect software solutions, ask students to complete

brief weekly writing assignments. In the English courses I teach, I get to know my students' narrative voices in their online discussion posts and journal entries. When I grade a paper that is weighted more heavily, I can quickly detect plagiarized text because it doesn't "sound" like that student's usual style.

Admittedly, this approach works best in classes with limited enrollment (say, 35 students or fewer). But if you're teaching a writing-intensive course, consider adding lots of informal tasks to get to know your students' style (and provide them with valuable writing practice, too).

Concerned about the time needed to grade those written reflections? Assess them on a complete/incomplete scale. With practice, you'll develop the ability to tell at a glance whether students have made a good-faith effort to reflect on your writing prompt. Use a simple rubric in your institution's learning-management system, or LMS, to speed up your grading even more.

Assess learning in online discussion forums. Don't overlook the potential of online discussion forums as a valuable yet low-stakes source of feedback on whether students are learning the material.

Structure your discussion questions in ways that unearth what students know about a topic. Use the "post-first" setting to require students to submit their responses before they can read what others have posted. (But be aware: The post-first setting can increase student anxiety, so you may prefer not to use it.) Ask students to cite additional sources for their comments. In STEM courses, ask students to talk about where they see scientific and mathematical principles at work in the world around them.

If you give points for discussion comments, be sure to provide clear criteria for what you consider to be a substantive post. Once again the rubric tool of your campus LMS can help you communicate your expectations and streamline your grading, too.

Don't base grades solely on tests. Some students know course material inside and out, but struggle with test anxiety. Others don't perform well on tests for reasons related to their cultural backgrounds, home environments, access to reliable internet service and computers, and many other factors.

So mix it up. Give students a variety of ways to show their learning, and not just the usual papers, projects, and homework. Get creative. Ask students to: (a) submit a weekly reflection on the reading, (b) create a brief video or audio about their stance on some current event, or (c) interview professionals in their desired career. Adding other forms of assessment — when weighted intentionally in your grading scheme — allows students who struggle with test anxiety to show their learning in other ways.

Offer students choice in how they demonstrate their knowledge. In line with the

principles of <u>Universal</u> <u>Design for Learning and culturally responsive pedagogy</u>, let students decide (when possible) how they can best show their learning. Options allow students from all backgrounds, dealing with all kinds of unique circumstances and preferences, to shine. For example:

- Will either a paper or a polished video presentation work equally well to share research and analysis on a particular topic?
- Can students choose to either write a paragraph or present a bulleted list to summarize a reading or video?
- Can they video-record themselves performing a new dance step, musical challenge, or theatrical skill, or can they write about their process of practicing that new skill?
- How about giving them a choice between a two-paragraph written journal entry or a 90-second recorded reflection?

As we all work to improve our online teaching, we have the opportunity to rethink practices we've relied on for years in our physical classrooms. If monitoring in-person tests has been a mainstay of your approach, never fear. The silver lining of the pandemic is the chance to think in new ways about how you teach, how students learn, and how they show it.

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