

Promoting Academic Integrity in Assessment in Online Distance Learning

*Denise Vincent, Instructional Designer, Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support (DELTS)
Memorial University of Newfoundland, deevin@mun.ca*

Universities face challenges to ensure academic integrity in online distance learning (DL) (Kitahara & Westfall, 2007). Kennedy et al. (2000) surveyed approximately 300 faculty and students at a mid-sized university in the American northwest and found the general perception was that academic dishonesty is more prevalent in online DL versus in a traditional face-to-face classroom. A 2002 study by Scanlon and Neumann (as cited in Roberts, 2006) found that, in a survey of 700 undergraduate students in nine U.S. colleges, 25% of respondents had engaged in acts of plagiarism such as copying of online material without citing sources. Another study by McCabe (2003) reported that 36% of respondents voluntarily reported one or more instances of “cut-and-paste” plagiarism from Internet sources. Baron and Crooks (2005) concluded that the increase in plagiarism may be attributable to recent advances in technology which allow for greater access to information, as well as the proliferation of digital “paper mills”. However, as Baron and Crooks (2005) asserted, without any real quantitative evidence, such perceptions are harmful to an institution’s reputation, and diminish the value of credits and/or degrees earned through online DL.

A study by Rogers (2006) found that many faculty using online testing are concerned about cheating, but are not proactively implementing security measures provided in the courseware tools. Olt (2002) and Rowe (2004) argued that another issue with assessments in DL is that it is hard to ensure that all students take them simultaneously, thus making it easier to share answers. Most courseware products have the ability to randomize large question pools to ensure that no two students take exactly the same assessment (Olt, 2002). If exam collaboration is suspected, IP addresses can be traced to see how physically close the machines are to each other and time logs can be viewed to see when each student was logged in (Eplion, 2005).

Barron and Crooks (2004) suggested that the curriculum be modified each term and include randomized application-based questions. These questions take longer to process and are more difficult to find in a textbook because the answers require a synthesis of information as opposed to a simple recitation of a fact (Eplion, 2005). Biometrics is also now available to detect academic dishonesty in online assessment. To utilize some of these technologies, institutions should update their software standards policy to inform the students of technological requirements (Waterhouse and Rogers, 2004). Furthermore, as Olt (2002) explained, if students are made aware that such data are available to the instructor, they may be less likely to cheat.

Heberling (2002) posited that a strong case can be made that it is actually harder to cheat online and it is easier to detect than in a traditional classroom setting. Since papers are submitted electronically in an online class, this method of submission makes it easier to detect plagiarism than in a traditional classroom because these papers can easily be analyzed for plagiarism using tools readily available on the Internet. Olt (2002) suggested that instructors require submission of a first draft of assignments, to discourage the use of “paper mills”, which typically only offer final drafts.

As Eplion and Keefe (2005) argued, totally eliminating cheating is not likely on any assessment, in-class or online. Harmon and Lambrinos (2007) compared two online courses, one with proctored exams and one unproctored. They concluded that cheating was taking place in the unproctored exams. Another study by Lanier (2006) also found that “The rate of cheating for online courses surpassed that of traditional lecture courses” (p. 258). However, Waschull (2001) found no significant differences in exam performance, whether students freely elected or were assigned to take an online course, when comparing online versus on-campus sections of the same course. Kinney (2001), quoting a study that compared exam performance in online versus concurrently run on-site sections of the same introductory psychology course, found students “enjoyed no significant advantage or disadvantage by taking their exams online versus those in the face-to-face class” (p. 20). As Howlett and Hewett (2005) pointed out, it is critical to recognize that traditional paper-based testing and oral exams are also highly susceptible to cheating.

As Carnevale (1999) argued, “the key to catching cheaters is to know the students in the class” (p. A47, ¶12). This knowledge can be gained through chats, discussions and email exchanges that can also reveal a student’s writing style (Barron and Crooks, 2004). Informal discussion with students after unexpectedly good performance on an assessment can often reveal the student's level of knowledge (Rowe, 2004). Higher levels of interaction can provide a deterrent for cheating, but also, as Barron and Crooks (2004) noted, they have the added benefit of “bridging the gap between academia and the real world”.

McLoughlin and Luca (2001) asserted that students need to take more responsibility for their own learning, but most are not prepared to do so. According to Heberling (2002), the administration must make the school’s position on plagiarism very clear through the catalog, student handbook, and during student orientations. Kithara and Westfall (2007) concluded that the long-term solution to curtailing academic cheating “must include well-defined standards, a strong sense of accountability and properly focused community attitudes, above and beyond complex high-technology attempts to establish a secure testing environment” (Extent section, ¶4). As Lathrop and Foss (2006) concluded, promoting integrity is more effective than policing it.

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