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Fourteen Simple Strategies to Reduce Cheating on Online Examinations

May 11, 2020  Stephanie Smith Budhai, PhD



The end of the academic term often brings final examinations and cumulative assessments to test students' knowledge of course materials. With 30% of college students taking online courses (Allen & Segman, 2017), and that number expeditiously increasing, so will the need for administering exams within the online learning environment. Many instructors are hesitant to include exams within their

distance education infrastructure. Additionally, having students take exams under the eye of an online proctor may negatively impact student success on the exam (Lieberman, 2018). Even without expensive virtual proctoring tools, there are many ways that instructors can leverage the inherent features within their institution's Learning Management System (LMS) to decrease cheating during online examinations. Here are 14 ways to do so:

1. **Create questions that require higher order thinking.** Instead of having students respond to questions that can be answered by a simple web search or even by finding the answers in their textbooks, create questions that are on the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels (Bloom, 1956). It will be more challenging to ask a friend or “Google” the answer when the questions require students to explain, analyze, infer, create, compose, evaluate, and authentically demonstrate their mastery of course content.
2. **Use varied question types.** Refrain from having an exam with all multiple choice or true and false questions and include open-ended questions. It is more difficult for students to give the same response as their friends verbatim for open-ended questions, and students would be forced to explain their responses using specific details and supporting narratives that are unique to their own understanding of the course materials.
3. **Creatively remind students of academic integrity policies.** Create and post a video explaining the guidelines for the online exam and review the institution's academic integrity policy and consequences that are listed in the course syllabus. There may be some psychological impact on students after seeing and hearing their instructor discuss academic integrity right before an exam begins, which may deter students who were thinking about cheating.
4. **Require students to sign an academic integrity contract.** After reviewing the academic integrity reminder video, have students electronically sign a contract that lists what the university considers cheating. Include a link to the university website that houses the academic integrity policy and require a signed contract prior to beginning the exam. Use a free tool within the LMS, such as a polling or survey feature, to execute the contract, or you can have the students sign, scan, and upload the contract as an assignment prior to the exam.
5. **Restrict testing window.** Similar to how on-campus final exams have a designated testing slot for each course, create the same online. Have every student start the exam around the same time and limit how long each student will have to take the exam. If you

there is no one watching the students take the exam—it is important to provide just enough time that a student who knows the information would have the appropriate amount of time to be successful on the exam, and not too much time for students who have not prepared for the exam to search for the answers. Be sure to create individual, extended timing settings for students who are approved for testing accommodations.

6. **Set-up the exam to show one question at a time.** To avoid students quickly looking over all of the test questions and having multiple tabs open to research answers to questions, or even having family and friends responsible for a certain set of questions, choose the test setting that only allows one question to appear on the screen at a time.
7. **Prohibit backtracking.** Require students to focus solely on one question at a time, answer it with a final answer, and then move to the next question. Prohibiting backtracking can reduce students from using extra time at the end of the test to try to locate the correct answer and force them to answer the question to the best of their already learned knowledge.
8. **Change test question sequence.** In the test settings, have the order of test questions be different for each exam along with the order of answer choices for each test question. Students are tech savvy and may attempt to employ screen sharing technologies in an effort to take the exam at the same time as their classmates and share answers.
9. **Offer different versions of the same test.** This was mentioned above in using different sets of tests for students in different time zones, but in general, it is recommended to have many different versions of the same test so that in the event that students are taking the test in the same physical space, it will be less likely for them to have all of the same questions.
10. **Allow for only taking the test once.** There is typically not a chance to retake an on-campus final exam, and the same practice should be followed for exams that are taken online.
11. **Plan for “technical issues.”** Offer a practice exam with a few questions, not pertaining to the actual test, that would provide students with the chance to become familiar with the online testing features. This will also avoid future issues with students who are not familiar with the online exam technology. Also, engage the test settings to automatically end the exam when the student exits or if the time runs out. This way, if a student says their computer crashed, you can go into the exam and see the questions they already

12. **Delay score availability.** Set a later date after the testing window ends for students to see their score and feedback and do not make the score available for immediate view after test completion. This way, one student who finishes early cannot see their score and then advise students who have not completed the test yet. Depending on your LMS, you may have to hide a column in the grade center for students not to see their scores and test questions.
13. **Refrain from using publisher test banks verbatim.** It is convenient to have access to complementary test banks that come with course textbooks; however, students may be able to get access to those textbooks when they are housed online, including the answer keys. Think about using the questions as inspiration and changing them up enough that the students would not realize it was the same question asked in a different way. You can also change how the answer choices are worded.
14. **Protect test question answers.** If students request to review their exam, only show them the questions they answered incorrectly. This will limit students from being able to copy and download all of the exam questions for the next group of students who take your course.

The ways in which instructors have to go about designing online assessments may be different than they would be in the traditional bricks and mortar classroom (Fontanillas, Carbonell, & Catasús, 2016), regardless, instructors can use some of the ideas above to better safeguard their online exams and maintain academic integrity, while also being able to appropriately assess their students' overall course learning.

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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS **Christopher Heard** • 16 days ago

We educators would do so much better to pursue these strategies than to expend energy and resources on proctoring systems. I'm not sold on #10, though. Lowering the stakes and allowing, even encouraging retakes can be a powerful strategy if we stop looking at exams as hurdles for students to jump and shift to thinking about how they can serve as learning activities.

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Re:exams as learning activities (allow retakes)... depends if exam is formative or summative assessment. Formative, yes, low stakes, allow retakes to encourage learning. Summative (unit or final exam), no.

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Number 1 is key. Retaking exams is a great learning strategy if you're trying to teach them how to cheat on exams. Plus, as you vary your questions over time you will run out of ways to ask questions fairly, and that will punish students who take subsequent versions of the class. In over a decade of testing online I have seen just about every flavor of cheating, and most of them were defeated by changing exams and narrowing the window for the test. It's little different from how I had to test to be effective before teaching online, and my averages haven't really changed in all that time. It's easy enough to make deep databases of question types, and to create algorithmic exam questions, but it's still necessary to update these questions often to keep them from showing up in databases that students might keep or send to Chegg. I always make sure to change the flavor of number questions so that those who might be

you make the commitment to proctor exams, even a few exams, you're going to keep the doors open to rampant cheating. Active anti-cheating measures that students can see will help marginal students make the choice to study rather than trying to cheat (ineffectively) and it will assure honest students that they don't need to engage in defensive cheating. No matter what you end up using on exams, to be effective faculty must make penalties for cheating real and harsh and they must be consistently enforced. That helps a great deal. The reputations of programs and courses and professors are always important. Most of all it's important to let students know that they don't have to cheat or plagiarize to do well in a class or program. Some of them will inevitably try to cheat anyhow.

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To me, it is sad that many (not all) lecturers focus so much on preventing cheating, that they forget the purpose of assessment - learning. And that the purpose is also to allow the students to show

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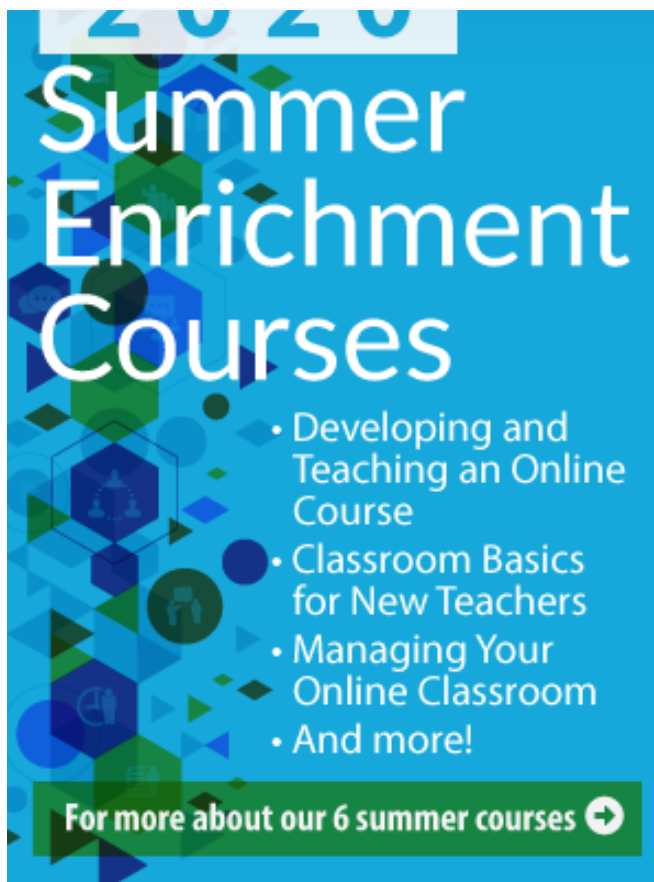
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