Transcript

How Can I Ensure Academic Honesty in My Online Assessments?

Presented by:

Thomas J. Tobin, PhD
Conference Programming Chair and Faculty Associate, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Thomas J. Tobin, PhD, MSLS, PMP, MOT, CPACC, is an internationally-recognized speaker and author on quality in technology-enhanced education. His books include *Evaluating Online Teaching: Implementing Best Practices* (2015) with Jean Mandernach and Ann H. Taylor, *The Copyright Ninja: Rise of the Ninja* (2017), and R*each Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (2018) with Kirsten Behling. He is also proud to have represented the United States on a Spring 2018 Fulbright Scholars core grant, under which he helped Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary develop its first faculty-development program.

_____

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hello, and welcome to this Magna 20-Minute Mentor. I'm Tom Tobin. I've been an online professor for more than 20 years now. And in that time, I've experienced just about every way there is for students to try to game the system. I'll bet you probably have some stories in mind, too. In this 20-Minute Mentor, I want to share some proven strategies for reducing dishonest behavior when learners demonstrate their skills in the assessments in your online course environment.

I want to promise you three things. First, academic integrity isn't about catching cheaters, no matter how much you've heard that message from your peers. It's about setting clear expectations and reducing the temptation to cheat in the first place. I'll show you academic integrity strategies that you can apply to your tests, quizzes, and assignments in as little as 20 minutes. And you can see for yourself how effective those techniques are.

Second, I'll help you to determine where you can focus your efforts and where you can safely stop paying attention to dishonest practices, and feel OK about it, too. And I'll also show you how to get your learners to help you to create a positive climate of expectations about what honest work looks like, regardless of the subject or level that you teach.

The first thing for us to do is reframe the conversation a bit. There are three myths that we need to counter right here at the start. It's about catching cheaters, it's an arms race, and the right mental model is, students are dishonest.

Let's start with the idea that we need to catch people cheating on our assignments. Here's a little quiz based on some recent research. In a frequently cited study of over 71,000 college students in the United States, what percentage of learners admitted to cheating on at least one written assignment or test in their college studies? Is it 8%, 28%, 48%, 68%, or 88%?

There have been many articles and even whole books written to bemoan the answer to this question, which is 68% of college students. Oh. So, if 2/3 of our students are cheaters, we'd better go out and get the latest spyware and tech tools to fight against the great hordes of dishonest students, right? And don't even get me started about the rise of mobile phones that has made cheating even easier.

And what about fully online courses? How can we verify that students are who they say they are? This mindset creates a sort of arms race where learners get better tools and then we get better tools to detect their better tools. And soon enough, the entire conversation has shifted from learning to policing. I'll show you how to stop the arms race and get back to actually teaching.

The other lesson that many people have taken away from this study is that the majority of our students are essentially rotten, ruthless, punks who are on the lookout for any advantage. Don't leave your purse unattended in the classroom. This fosters a mindset among designers and instructors that we have to be on our guard all the time, and that we need to keep tight control

over what our students do in order to demonstrate the skills we're teaching them so they can't sneak in some unethical advantage.

It's funny because none of us likes being the teaching police, do we? So how did we get here? I think we're in the spot we are because that 68% statistic is a great answer to the wrong question. Because when we unpack that statistic, we find a surprisingly different number, 2.5.

Remember that the question to which 68% is the answer is how many students have cheated ever? It turns out that the majority of students who cheat on tests and written work do so in response to pressuring stimuli. They mismanaged their time and ran into the deadline, or they had unexpected life events happen that ate into their time for pre-quiz studying. These things happen very rarely. We call it incidental cheating.

The better number to focus on is the number of people who will cheat on tests and written assignments in a single course. That number is only 2 and 1/2%. Out of a class of 40 students, that's one learner. The reason the stats build up to 68% over the course of years is that lots of different learners test the boundaries over time, and usually don't make a habit of dishonesty.

Why are we talking about these trends in such detail? Well, this is actually the foundation for how we can design our assessments to reduce even that 2 and 1/2% number closer to zero.

Let's do a little thought exercise to do some groundwork. Call to mind a time that you or one of your colleagues caught a student cheating. Think about the bureaucratic circumstances. How much of a formal response did you have to provide to the learner and to your institution? Was there a lot of paperwork involved, a conversation with the student, your department chair, an academic integrity office?

Chances are part of what makes cheating so onerous for us as instructors and designers is the process that has been constructed around responding to dishonesty. We spend a lot of time and energy showing that we are serious about deterring cheating.

Now, let's get to the practices that actually work. It is probably no surprise that in any series of interactions, the place to focus first is on assessments, quizzes, tests, and written assignments. However, the real effective practice is counterintuitive. We should be checking for academic honesty a lot less often. Here's why.

Incidental cheating is most often triggered by situational pressures. We can design our assessments to provide incentives for gradual practice that reduce the temptation to take shortcuts because of time crunches or a lack of preparation. In most courses, you don't even need to make any new assignments.

For instance, think about a chemistry professor who currently asks her students to take a weekly quiz on the readings in order to keep her learners current with the concepts in the course. Each weekly quiz is worth 50 points. This creates two problematic situations. First, the professor has

to look over and grade all of those weekly quizzes. If the quizzes are effective study tools, they're probably 15 to 20 items each. That's a lot of grading.

Second, by placing course points on each quiz, students feel the pressure to earn those points. Without changing anything in the quizzes, our chemistry colleague can reduce the temptation to cheat by making the quizzes required, but as part of a checklist portion of the overall grade, where one earns all of the available credit or none. If there are 12 quizzes, completing 10 or more of them would earn a student, say, 5% of the overall grade. Completing nine or fewer earns no credit.

Here's where letting people practice without specific points or without any points at all helps with academic honesty. Our chemistry colleague still looks over student work just to make sure students are attempting all of the quiz elements. But she also releases correct solutions to the class after the due date for each quiz, and asks students to check their own work, and then contact her when their solutions don't match the models.

Note that even an incorrect attempt counts toward earning the credit, and it opens up a channel for communication with the professor. So, lesson one is to grade a lot less, offer learners opportunities for practice, especially if they can fail, try again, and most importantly, figure out where their practice needs strengthening, and then have time to reach out and improve.

I once had a professor in graduate school whose assignments merely said, here is a big question. Respond in the way you feel is best for you. That was both empowering and frightening at the same time. As a graduate student, I enjoyed working on those assignments, but our undergraduates especially can freak out when we offer them the freedom to be innovative in their responses. I can write about anything in the subject? What should I actually do?

The second paradox is that freedom is best expressed within concrete boundaries. Let's unpack that a bit. Students often cite lack of clear guidance as a top five reason for cheating. So as designers and instructors, we can offer our students choices about what they include in their responses to our tests and written assignments while keeping the process within pretty tight boundaries.

One of the best ways to provide that process-related structure is to give our learners models of both good and poor practice. Remember our chemistry colleague? She released good responses to her weekly quizzes, signaling to her students that she was interested less in seeing whether they could do the specific problem sets, and more interested in helping them to identify areas for focusing their study.

This is another area of academic honesty where we instructors don't need to do a whole lot of work to reap a good result. Every time you teach your course, your students produce work that ranges from outstanding to almost there to needs help.

Ask two students for permission to share their responses to assignments with future classes and hang on to those permission files. Take their names off the work and explain briefly what went into the good response and how the poorer response could be strengthened. Share the models with your learners ahead of the assignment.

Some people have told me that this feels like handholding, or they're afraid that every response will look exactly like the model. My own experience echoes that rich study guide at Oregon State University, where they found that having models for written assignments reduced the number of student responses that were off the mark, and it also reduced the incidence of plagiarism by nearly a full percentage point.

Using two models, a well-composed one and one with common challenges in it, reduces the handholding concern. If we would send learners to our tutoring or writing centers on campus for exactly this kind of advice—that is, how to interpret assignments and structure their responses—it stands to reason that modeling directly will have a positive impact.

You know, ungrounded practice and providing models are great techniques, but they are not the most effective anti-cheating technique. The next two strategies we will examine account for the majority of the gains that study after study have identified in reducing dishonest assessment behavior.

One approach is, tell them how to do it right. Yep. The vast majority of students in your courses are there in order to learn the skills that you have to offer. And if you say, this is the way to work on this, most learners will follow that path. The secret to telling learners how to practice in an ethical way is also to answer the why question when you are telling them the what of the process you're asking them to follow.

Think of a business professor teaching an introductory macroeconomics course. He wants his students to learn core definitions, a rote memorization task, and one where a graded quiz about the definitions would be a temptation to have the book open or a cheat sheet handy.

The professor makes three changes to his quiz. First, he makes it an ungrounded but required knowledge check quiz. Students can take it over and over again until they earn a mastery score of 80% or greater. Earning the mastery score before the next unit begins earns progress toward a checkmark portion of the whole grade.

Second, the professor includes two sentences in the directions. This quiz is intended to be closed book and is a way to help you recall the definitions we are studying in this unit. By honoring the conditions of this quiz, you will be preparing yourself for success in the business plan assignment next week that is worth 200 points.

Third, in the description of the quiz, he put a sentence to say how many types of questions are in the quiz, what materials they cover, and—here is the real impact factor—he included an estimate of how much time the quiz should take. He followed an old prof hack to figure out the estimate,

too. He took his own quiz, and then he added 50% more time. So when it took him 10 minutes to complete the quiz, he told students to expect to take around 15 minutes.

Knowing the scope of the commitment on any assessment lowers the temptation to cheat because it offers a means of gauging whether one is over or underpreparing for the experience. Just having the reason for the method and then seeing how to practice the method in the right or expected way, that reduces the temptation to cheat immensely.

Notice, too, that our business professor friend hasn't gotten rid of graded practice altogether, either. But he's leading up to graded demonstrations of skill with opportunities for low-stakes or no-stakes practice. And by telling students explicitly what they should do in the assessment right at the point of need in the directions, he is setting an expectation that students will follow the script, not because the teacher says so, but because they can see how the practice requirements will benefit their own study and goals.

The other half of tell them how to do things right is explicitly to expect learners to do the right thing. Can you recall in your own formal studies a time when your instructors say that they felt confident that you had the skills and determination to tackle a hard problem? I wanted to move mountains for those professors myself.

Just telling students that you expect them to do ethical work is a powerful thing, as we heard in the example of our business professor colleague. It gets more powerful when we actually say or write the words, you are all bright and motivated students. The following task is challenging, and I know you are up to the task.

The counter-intuitive idea here is that rather than watering down the rigor of our assessments, we should keep them at a challenging level for most students, and then be purposeful about telling students about where previous learners got tripped up, or asked a million questions, or had to come back and think from different angles.

Saying, you've got this, is not a magic wand that will make all of your students capable learners. It does, however, signal to them that your attitude as an instructor is one of support. People cheat when they feel that they have few other viable options. Make yourself an option. Provide messages to your learners again at the point of need to help them set positive expectations about their behaviors in assessments. Put this text into the description of the test or quiz, not the directions that learners can read only after clicking Start, and into the directions of written assignments.

This is a good time to take a pause and do a little planning. Find a pen and paper or open a blank file on your electronic device. Think of an assessment that you provide to learners and brainstorm for a few minutes about what you will do in order to let them practice first, give them models, tell them how to do it right, and expect them to do it right. Pause the video here and unpause when you are ready to learn why these assessment techniques are so effective in reducing dishonest behavior.

Now that you know what to do with your assessments, let's talk for a moment about why these techniques are effective so that you can start to expand beyond the specifics and apply some good design principles to your assessments that reduce cheating. The first thing to know about is the concept of positive psychology. It is the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives to cultivate what is best within themselves and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play.

Our colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania are leading the charge in this area of psychology. As you think about the tests, quizzes, and written work that you ask your students to work on, think of how you can engage them to demonstrate behaviors in four key areas.

Flourishing humans put mental and physical energy into practices that help them to feel as though they are leading their best lives. Ask your learners to relate their ethical practices to their self-image as honest and good people. Relate right practice and study with satisfaction and pride in later professional practice.

Learned optimism. Many of you have heard of the concept of learned helplessness, and its opposite is also equally powerful. Like with our business professor setting challenging goals and then supporting learners in addressing the goals, it creates a mindset of overall progression and removes the stigma of get it right the first time or else.

Togetherness. Providing opportunities for students to share their experiences within a course provides them with social ties that act as supports as when students study together and as community standards as when students attempted to be dishonest are talked out of doing so by their peers register their disapproval about how their actions would reflect poorly on everyone.

And resilience. By removing grades from a significant portion of learner assessments, we send a powerful signal that it's OK not to be perfect at first, and that setbacks and gaps in our knowledge and practice are normal and to be expected. This gets students into a resilient mindset where they keep coming back to challenges.

In all of these areas of communication and practice, be sure to be explicit in sharing your ideas and expectations. Don't assume that students will feel the vibe unless you set it with them in a purposeful fashion. Positive psychology goes beyond just telling people that they're capable. It includes designing interactions based on assumptions of trust and skill. This is why the arms race mentality of catching cheaters is so detrimental to the climate of our course interactions.

So how do you get students to act like proud ethical learners? Tell them that you expect them to be proud ethical learners and reinforce that message where they are most likely to be tempted to act otherwise.

There is also neuroscience behind the assessment design techniques we are sharing. The framework of Universal Design for Learning or UDL, says that when we learn anything, we activate three brain networks. The affective networks, the why of learning, recognition networks in the frontal cortex, the what of learning, and strategic networks, the how of learning.

Without all three of these elements, we fail to see why we should bother with an assessment, we struggle figuring out what we need to study, or we get lost in trying to figure out the process to implement. All of these lead to greater temptation to take shortcuts.

Each of the examples we've thought about gives students the why context, the what scope of content, and the how process, directions, and models to make them feel that they are well prepared for the tasks we ask them to perform.

You can apply this framework to all of your course interactions, including assessments. Wherever students interact with materials, each other, the instructor, and the wider world, offer at least one more way to have those interactions. Just having choices about how to demonstrate their skills, such as an alternative method or format for doing a project, reduces dishonest conduct.

Now that you know what assessment strategies reduce dishonest responses and why they work, it's time to focus on how to get started. The best way to determine where to begin is to ask your learners directly. Phrase your question like this. I want the assessments in our course to be both challenging and supportive of your learning instead of being exercises just because I said so. The assignments in our courses should directly help you to practice and strengthen your knowledge.

Which tests, quizzes, and written exercises do you feel most motivate you right now? Which the least? Why do you say so? Or if you have data or anecdotal feedback from previous course offerings, look at the patterns. Where did a significant number of students do poorly? Those are spots where you can start applying the techniques of ungraded practice, modeling, process guidance, and setting positive expectations.

We can't end our 20-Minute Mentor session without addressing the idea that the techniques we're talking about are somehow naive, that I've given you a pair of rose-colored glasses to help you ignore a real problem. It would indeed be a disservice to tell you to let down your vigilance about academic honesty and then replace it with nothing. Ignoring a problem allows it to flourish and grow. But you won't be ignoring the issue of cheating.

In fact, by designing your assessments to encourage engagement, allow for learner choice, and model learner self-expectations for good practice, you are empowering learners to make good choices when temptation strikes. Of course, we will never get rid of dishonest conduct in our learning interactions. Fortunately for all of us, the real number to pay attention to is not 68%, but 2½, and that's a manageable problem.

So, don't throw out your reporting sheets, but design your assessments with positive psychology and neuroscience in mind, and you're setting yourself up to use far fewer of those reporting forms.

The strategies that we've discussed in this 20-Minute Mentor program are part of a larger overall approach that includes good course and program design as well. If you found this program was useful, check out the other programs in this series, _How Can Course Design Help Prevent Online Cheating?_ and _How Can I Design Academic Integrity into my Online Programs?_ Thank you for watching this 20-Minute Mentor program. Tell us what you think and how you plan to use what you've learned in your own assessments. I'm Tom Tobin for Magna Publications. Thank you.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/academic-honesty

[MUSIC PLAYING]