
Assessment Design and Cheating Risk in Online Instruction

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Abstract

Many consider online courses to be an inferior alternative to traditional face-to-face (f2f) courses because exam cheating is thought to occur more often in online courses. This study examines how the assessment design in online courses contributes to this perception. Following a literature review, the assessment design in a sample of online courses is analyzed and then the results of a survey of student opinion on assessment design issues are reported. We report the finding that in our sample the online courses a heavy reliance on unproctored multiple choice exams and likely have greater cheating risk than comparable f2f courses. For online courses with multiple choice exams we recommend instructors modify their assessment design to proctor some of the multiple choice exams, and aggressively use strategic question shuffling tactics.

Introduction

The delivery of course material either to off-campus venues or over the internet to on-campus venues is exploding. Between 2002 and 2007 the number of students enrolled in at least one online course increased by 46% in US degree granting post secondary institutions, whereas total enrollment increased by only 8.2%. Consequently online enrollment as a percent of total enrollment more than doubled from 9.6% in 2002 to 21.9% in 2007 (Allen and Seaman 2008).

The growth of online offerings at undergraduate colleges and universities is fed by both demand and supply factors. On the demand side there is a large and growing market of older, non-degree seeking students with full-time jobs (Coates and Humphreys 2003). Nontraditional students are a high proportion of enrollments in 2 year institutions (Coates and Humphreys 2003) and online enrollments in 2 year institutions are a high proportion (59%) of total undergraduate enrollments (National Center for Education Statistics 2006). On the supply side the cost of producing online courses is decreasing because of the emergence of course management software (CMS), and textbook publishers are developing digitized supplements, such as PowerPoint lecture notes, test banks compatible with the CMS software, and electronic homework supplements (Sosin 1997; Navarro and Shoemaker 1999). These innovations reduce costs of digital content preparation, administration, grading, and distribution of course material, and are a contributing factor to the explosive growth of online courses.

As online enrollments surge and online courses proliferate there is a justifiably rising concern for the integrity of the assessment procedures in online courses (Watson and Soittle 2010; King et al 2009). In f2f instruction it is the convention for a portion of the course grade to be determined by proctored assessment (multiple choice, short answer and essay format). In the proctored format the identity of the test taker is confirmed by personal acquaintance between the proctor and the student or by visual inspection of identification credentials. Whereas, for online courses there is a conventional belief that when the instructor and student are physically removed from the classroom the integrity of grades in online classes run a significantly higher risk of being compromised by cheating than do grades in f2f classes (Stuber-McEwen et. al. 2009; Howell and Sorenson 2009; and Krsak 2007). In this article we use the case study approach to evaluate this conventional belief.

Literature Review

It would be a mistake to minimize the problem of cheating in f2f classes. Four stylized facts emerge from a survey of the literature on cheating in f2f undergraduate courses. First, cheating by college students is considered widespread (McCabe and Drinan 1999). For example, estimates from five studies of college students reporting having cheated at least once during their college career range from 65% to 100% (Stearns 2001), and Whitley (1998) reports an average of 70% from a review of forty-six studies.

Second, cheating by college students is becoming more rather than less of a problem. Estimates from five studies of the percentage of college students cheating at least once in their college career have been steadily rising over the period 1940 to 2000 (Jensen, Arnett et al. 2002). A study administered in 1964 and replicated in 1994 focused on the incidence of serious cheating behaviors (McCabe, Trevion et al. 2001). This study reported that the incidence of serious cheating on written assignments was unchanged at 65-66%, but the incidence of serious cheating on exams increased from 39% to 64%.

Third, the format of assessment is correlated with cheating. Whitley (1998) reviewed 107 studies of cheating by students over the span of their college courses (published since 1970), and reported that from 10 studies a mean estimate of 47% for cheating by plagiarism, from 37 studies a mean estimate of 43% for cheating on exams, and from 13 studies a mean estimate of 41% for cheating on homework.

Fourth, student characteristics of age and GPA are negatively correlated with cheating. Whitley (1998) reviewed 107 studies on college cheating (published since 1970), and found 16 studies reporting a small negative correlation between GPA and cheating and 10 studies reporting a negative correlation between age and cheating.

In the growing literature about online instruction there are two opposing views on the integrity of assessments. One view is that cheating is as equally likely to occur in the f2f format as in the online format of instruction. In this view the cheating risk differential can be made negligible by appropriate adjustments to the administration of the online exam. Commonly mentioned adjustments are making exams open book (Kushner 1999), password protecting exams (Rovai 2001), limiting the for viewing for each question (Taylor 2002) and the number of times it can be viewed, weighing the exam less and putting more weight on essays and discussion assignments (Liefert 2000; Taylor 2002), restricting times and date of availability (Liefert 2000), and from a large pool of test questions randomly select a subset of questions (Shuey 2002). More exotic measures are randomly phone calling the student during the exam, or requiring a web cam perched on the student's computer during test taking time (Carnevale 1999), or voice and retinal scans (Rovai 2001). Plowman (2000) acknowledges (with stunning examples) how technology has enhanced opportunities to cheat, and exhorts instructors to use the technology to stimulate student motivation and interest in learning instead of in cheating. This view of the heuristic value of changing the culture of online cheating is an extension from the literature on cheating in face-to-face classes that promotes the view that honor codes and "ethical communities" can be effective in deterring cheating (McCabe, Trevion et al. 2001).

The alternative view is that proctored exams are the only way to protect the integrity of grades by guaranteeing both that a substitute is not taking the exam and that students are not working together on an exam. Because it's too easy to cheat, according to proponents, not proctoring raises many red flags that question the validity of the program. (Deal 2002), and (Edling 2000). Examples of online programs that proctor their exams are Carnegie Mellon University (Gannon 2005), and the University of Texas (Young 2001). For students with a long commute to campus there are an increasing number of organizations that offer proctor services for a fee. Examples are The National College Testing Association (Young 2001), which maintains a web site (<http://www.ncta-testing.org/cctc/find.php>) with a site locator for 296 participating proctoring sites, and Virtual University Enterprises (Shuey 2002).

Our literature searches uncovered six published empirical studies of cheating in online courses. Three studies examine the correlation of cheating with course format (online v f2f) and three studies examine the correlation of cheating with assessment format (unproctored online v proctored).

Table 1

Three Studies of Cheating and Course Format		
Study	Sample	Outcome
Stuber-McEwen et. al (2009)	225 students	cheating less frequent in online
Kennedy et. al (2000)	172 students	cheating more frequent in online
	69 faculty	cheating more frequent in online
Grijalava et. al (2006)	800 students	cheating as frequent in online and f2f

Stuber-McEwen et al (2009) surveyed student perceptions of the relative incidence of cheating in f2f compared to online courses. Their sample consisted of 225 students enrolled in f2f and online courses at a mid-sized Midwest university. They report that students' perceive the incidence of cheating is less in online as compared to f2f courses.

Kennedy et. al. (2000) compares student and faculty perception about the relative incidence of cheating between f2f and online courses. They conducted a survey of 172 students and 69 faculty members at a mid-sized Midwest university. They reported that 57% of the students and 64% of the faculty believed cheating would be easier in online classes than face-to-face classes. Grijalava, Nowell and Kerkvliet (2006) compare the incidence of self-reported cheating in a single semester in an online course compared to a f2f course. In a confidential survey of 800 undergraduate in an online course in spring semester 2002 they report that 3% of the respondents self-report having cheated in the online class taken that semester. The same percentage is reported for a similar confidential study of self-reported cheating in a specific f2f course in a single semester (Karlins, Michaels et al. 1988). (Empirical studies of cheating in specific courses uniformly report lower rates than studies of cheating over a college career because the former use narrow definitions of cheating behaviors and focus on cheating on particular assignments (Crown and Spiller, 1998). Considered as a group, the findings of these three studies comparing cheating risk in online v f2f instructional format are indeterminate.

Table 2

Three Studies of Cheating and unproctored Online v Proctored In-Class		
Study	Sample	Outcome
Watson & Sottile (2010)	635 students	cheating more frequent in unproctored online
Harmon and Lambrinos (2008)	60 students	cheating more frequent in unproctored online
Charlesworth et. al (2006)	175 students	40% say cheating more frequent in unproctored online , 40% say cheating as frequent in unproctored online and in proctored in-class

Watson and Sottile (2010) compare student perceptions of the incidence of cheating on proctored and unproctored assessments in online and f2f instructional formats. For a sample 635 undergraduate and graduate students at a medium sized university they report that students perceive online unproctored tests as more susceptible to cheating behaviors. Harmon and Lambrinos (2008) compare the incidence of cheating between proctored and unproctored exams in an online class. Their sample consists of 60 students in paired sections of a principles of economics course. The study posits that absent cheating a model predicting exam score should have the same explanatory power for both exam formats. They report the explanatory power is lower for the unproctored format and conclude that the incidence of cheating is less when exams are proctored. Charlesworth et al. (2006) compare students' perceptions of the incidence of cheating between online unproctored assessments and written in-class assessments. Their sample consisted of 175 students in a web-enhanced first year chemistry course where. The student responses were that 40% thought online assessments would encourage more cheating relative to in-class written assessments, while 40% thought there would be no difference. On balance, the results of these three studies imply that cheating risk is greater in unproctored than proctored assessments. The six studies, considered as a group, imply cheating risk is less correlated with instructional format (online v f2f), and more correlated with unproctored online assessments.

Assessment Design in Online Courses

Our sample for analysis of assessment design consists of the 20 online undergraduate courses offered in the summer term of a large public northeast university. Since 2000, the Center for Continuing Studies (CCS) has been developing these online courses with the goal of offering non-traditional student populations the opportunity to complete most of their course work for a 4 year degree online. For quality concerns enrollments in the classes were capped at 25 students. Our data are the course syllabi and a survey of the online course instructors (referred to as the Instructor Survey). Because only 9 of the 20 instructors responded to the survey, only the data from the written comments are used anecdotally.

To evaluate learning outcomes an instructor makes at least three choices: the relative grade weight for exam assessments and non-exam assessments, whether the exams are proctored, and whether the exam format is multiple choice (fixed response) only, short answer (constructive response) only, or a combination. Table 3 organizes the courses in our sample by three categories, based on whether the course has an exam or not, and whether the exam is proctored or not. The table reports the number of courses in each assessment category, and the grade weight of the assessment (in parentheses). Seventy percent of the courses (14/20) use unproctored online multiple choice exams for roughly 50% of the course grade. The preference for multiple choice exams is in part explained by the introductory courses out numbering the intermediate courses by a 2 to 1 margin. In this group 9 are at the intro level (a course catalog number in the 100s) and 5 are at the intermediate level (a course catalog number in the 200s).

Table 3 Assessment Design

	UNPROCTORED EXAMS	PROCTORED EXAMS	NO EXAMS
<i>NUMBER OF COURSES</i>	14	2	4
<i>EXAM ASSESSMENT:</i>			
Multiple Choice Only	6 (49%)	1 (45%)	
Multiple Choice and Short Answer	8 (48%)		
Short Answer Only		1 (65%)	
<i>NON-EXAM ASSESSMENTS (Not proctored):</i>			
Online Discussion	14 (22%)	1 (17%)	3 (57%)
Writing Assignment	10 (22%)	1 (15%)	2 (75%)
Periodic Quizzes	7 (23%)	2 (29%)	1 (40%)
Note: Each cell reports the number of courses in the assessment category, and in parentheses the average grade weight of the assessment.			

For these fourteen courses the remaining 50% of the course grade is determined by a mix of online discussion, written assignments and unproctored online multiple choice quizzes. Because the entire grade is determined by unproctored assessments these fourteen courses likely have a significant cheating risk differential as compared to similar f2f courses with proctored exam assessments.

Ten percent of the courses (2/20) use proctored exams for roughly 50% of the course grade. The assessment design may in part be explained because the subject material is introductory level courses, and in technical disciplines within the field of social science. These two courses likely have the same cheating risk as similar f2f courses with proctored exams. Twenty percent of the courses (4/20) do not use exam assessments. Instead, 100% of the course grade is determined a mix of written assignments (e.g. term papers), online discussion and unproctored online periodic quizzes. This assessment design may in part be explained because their subject matter is in the fields of art, literature and philosophy. Because the assessment design of these online courses is similar to comparable f2f courses it's likely have the same cheating risk as similar f2f courses.

Proctored Exams

Proctoring deters the cheating behaviors of taking the exam collaboratively with other students in the class, and/or having a substitute take the exam. Tactics that deter cheating during a proctored exam include: randomize the question order and the response order, allow only one question at a time to be displayed onscreen, prohibit revisiting of a question, select each question from a pool of similar but slightly different questions, rotate questions from semester to semester, and increase the ratio of questions to minutes allowed to impose a substantial opportunity cost for time engaged in cheating behaviors (Vachris 1999; Shuey 2002; Serwatka 2003). Despite these measures cheating behaviors such as access to forbidden crib sheets and receiving assistance during the exam, can and do occur during a proctored exam. Other confounding factors are whether the exam is high stakes (quiz v. final exam), proctor diligence, and not checking ID's, in the case of large sections (Leming 2001).

Against the potential benefit of proctoring multiple choice exam assessments online instructors need to weigh the costs of inconvenience to the online student, and the cost of administering a proctoring system. Conventionally, the target market for online courses is thought of as underserved populations such as working students who manage conflicting practice, work, family, and academic commitments (US Department of Education: Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006:6). For these students there is the possibility that an inflexible time constraint and/or an inconvenient location of the proctored exam will offset the advantages of enrolling in an online course. Finally, there is the cost of administering the proctored exam. The costs include the development of guidelines, setting dates and locations of the exams, reserving computer labs at each location, communicating with students regarding proctored exam requirements, approving out-of-state locations, collecting preferred sites from students, hiring and training additional proctors, and verifying that all students are accounted for. The administration costs are substantial when borne by the individual instructor and are a disincentive for using proctored exams.

Non-exam Assessments

A striking feature of the online syllabi in our sample is the extensive use of non-exam assessments. Especially for online courses, these assessments can provide opportunities for student-to-student and instructor-to-student interactions that otherwise might not occur. Non-exam assessments include weekly quizzes, online discussion posts, homework, term papers and other written assignments. Periodic assignments are a way of encouraging the learner to step through the material at a measured pace rather than crash study for the exam, and discussion boards can provide opportunities for mentoring, social interaction, and creating a sense of community. A principal reason many online and f2f courses use written response non-exam assessments is to measure Bloom's (1964) two highest levels of understanding, whereas these levels are less well measured (at best) by timed exams (especially multiple choice exams). The assessments have different strengths and weaknesses, and it is the instructor's role to decide which type most appropriately matches the course content. Multiple choice assessments can be graded quickly and objectively, and they can cover a wide range of course material, whereas written response assessments require more time to grade and they cover a more narrow range of material (Buckles, S. and J. J. Siegfried (2006). Indeed, reflecting the concern that exam assessments are not the best metric of measuring learning outcomes, there is a perceptible move in f2f instruction to greater experimentation with non-exam assessments. For example, several undergraduate programs at universities are introducing student learning outcomes assessment, cooperative learning, e-portfolios, and capstone projects into the curriculum. Other factors explaining the use of non-exam assessments are that the course material of the academic discipline, the level of the course (introductory v advanced), and scheduling flexibility.

On one hand, the take-home format of the non-exam assessment suffers from relatively higher cheating risk than exam assessment, because of plagiarism and the web term paper mill, and because many of these assignments are the same for every student (Walstad 2001). Ways students can cheat in online discussion include: making posts collaboratively with other students in the class, paraphrasing previous posts by discussion participants, and engaging the services of a substitute. But on the other hand, there are ways online instructors can use non-exam assessments to offset the cheating risk. A deterrent to cheating by plagiarism is the chance the instructor can detect similarities in themes, phrasing and sentence structure and the chance the instructor notices the unproctored submission differs significantly from expectations based on prior work-product. Also, periodic non-exam written assessments can be relatively more difficult to cheat on because cheating requires frequent collaboration with other individuals and in small classes instructors can form more accurate expectations of work product. The potential value of non-exam assessments is reflected in the following quote of an anonymous respondent to the Instructor Survey: "I rely more on discussion boards to assess students' engagement with the issues in the course and their critical thinking. They are much less likely to think about being academically dishonest on a discussion board."

Student Perceptions of Assessment Design

A survey of student perceptions of cheating and cheating deterrence tactics was conducted. Our sample consists of 5 sections of introductory level courses in economics, 3 sections taught in online format and 2 in f2f format. There were 100 respondents out of 123 enrolled. The responses to questions about student perceptions of the frequency of cheating are summarized in Table 4. The first column reports the results for the online sections, the second column for the f2f sections and the third column both sections.

For the first question of whether cheating risk differed by instructional format, 59% of the respondents (column 3) thought the frequency of cheating was about the same for the online and the f2f format. The proportion was significantly greater than 50% at a p-value of .0344. This result (of no perceived difference) is consistent with the findings of Grijalava, Nowell and Kerkvliet (2006), which was reported in Table 1. The responses were significantly different depending on whether the student was in the online or f2f subgroup, but only at a p-value of .1060. Only 18% in the online group thought cheating was more frequent in the online format, whereas, 33% in the f2f group thought cheating was more frequent in the online format, and these proportions were significantly different at a p-value of .0436. Similarly, 22% in the online group thought cheating was more frequent in the f2f format, whereas only 10% in the f2f group thought so, and these proportions were significantly different at a p-value of .0516. Thus students, who thought the frequency of cheating differed by format, perceived cheating to be less frequent in the instructional format they were in.

For the second question of cheating on essay exams 51% of the respondents thought that cheating occurred with same frequency regardless whether or not it was proctored, and 39% responded that cheating was more frequent in unproctored essay exams. However, this was dependent on what type of format the student was in at a p-value of .0724. For the f2f group the 60% proportion that thought the frequency of cheating was the same in the proctored and unproctored format was significantly greater than 50% at a p-value of .0606. For the third question of cheating on multiple choice exams 46% responded that cheating occurred with the same frequency regardless of proctoring and 48% responded that cheating was more likely in the unproctored format. The responses were not dependent on what format the student was in. For questions 2 and 3, on balance, roughly half the respondents believe proctoring reduces frequency of cheating and half believe the frequency is that same whether or not the exam is proctored.

Table 4 Student Perception of Cheating

	Online	F2F	Total
INSTRUCTIONAL FORMAT:			
In your opinion cheating			
occurs more frequently in online classes	18%	33%	25%
occurs more frequently in f2f classes	22%	10%	17%
occurs with the same frequency in online as in f2f classes	60%	57%	59%
Total	100%	100%	100%
ASSESSMENT FORMAT:			
In your opinion cheating			
occurs more frequently in proctored essay exams	15%	2%	10%
occurs more frequently in unproctored essay exams	40%	38%	39%
occurs with the same frequency in proctored and unproctored essay exams	45%	60%	51%
Total	100%	100%	100%
In your opinion cheating			
occurs more frequently in proctored m/c exams	9%	2%	6%
occurs more frequently in unproctored m/c exams	48%	48%	48%
occurs with the same frequency in proctored and unproctored m/c exams	43%	50%	46%
Total	100%	100%	100%

In a follow-up survey respondents were also asked to rank the effectiveness of ten specific tactics for deterring cheating on a scale of 1 to 3, where 3 = 'most effective'. The same classes were administered the second survey, however the number of respondents was less in each class resulting in 13 fewer respondents for a total sample size of 87. The results are reported in table 5. The four top rated tactics were: using multiple versions of an exam, not using identical exams from previous semesters, randomizing question and response order, and proctor vigilance. Their ratings were above 2.35 and were significantly greater than 2.0 at the .01 level of significance. Less effective tactics were: seating arrangements, and smaller room seating capacity. These results suggest that for proctored multiple choice exams tactics aimed at re-shuffling the deck of questions have relatively greater payoff than tactics aimed at re-shuffling exam seating.

Table 5 Tactics to Deter Cheating

TATICS TO DETER CHEATING	MEAN	SD
using multiple versions of an exam	2.63*	0.90
randomizing question order and response order	2.46*	0.68
not using identical exam questions from previous semesters	2.39*	0.69
proctor vigilance	2.36*	0.68
instructor led discussion of grade integrity and ethical conduct	2.09	0.64
computer screen recessed under desktop instead of on top of desktop	2.00	0.73
using a mix of short answer and multiple choice questions	1.90	0.77
seating arrangements	1.75	0.87
smaller room seating capacity	1.75	0.76
high ratio of questions to minutes allowed	1.63	0.78
n=87		
Note: * = significantly greater than 2.00 at the .01 level		

Summary and Conclusions

This study reports three principle findings. First, from a survey of student opinion it is reported that 59% believe that the frequency of cheating is the same in both the online and the f2f instructional format. The proportion is significantly greater than 50% at the .05 level. It is also reported that the responses to the question of cheating and instructional format are significantly different depending on whether the student came from an online class or a f2f class, but only at a p-value of .1060. Recalling the literature review in Table 1, which reported mixed findings by previous empirical studies, an interesting implication for future research is whether student experience with each instructional format influences student perceptions of differences in the frequency of cheating. Second, on proctoring and the frequency of cheating on essay exams and multiple choice exams, it is reported that roughly half of the respondents perceive unproctored assessments as having greater cheating risk than the same assessment in a proctored format, and half think

they have equal cheating risk. These findings are consistent with the conventional perception that in a side by side comparison of two courses with comparable content and predominately multiple choice exam assessments, the course with unproctored exams is viewed as having greater cheating risk. Third, in our analysis of assessment design in 20 online courses it is reported that 70% base roughly half the course grade on unproctored multiple choice exams.

These findings imply that online courses, which have unproctored multiple choice exams, can reduce perceived cheating risk by proctoring some of their multiple choice exams without significantly altering the original mix of assessment types. Gresham's Law suggests that online courses debased by assessment designs with high cheating risk will displace courses with relatively lower cheating risk. Institutions of higher education tone deaf to the issue of proctoring online multiple choice assessments may understandably find other institutions reluctant to accept these courses for transfer credit.

The benefit of proctoring is not without cost. A proctored exam limits the spatial and the asynchronous dimensions of online instruction, which may have been the core reason the student enrolled in the online. These costs can be mitigated to some extent by early announcement of the time and date of the exam, by allowing for some flexibility of time of exam, and by permitting use of alternate certified proctoring centers. The costs to individual instructors are formidable but there are potentially significant economies of scale to be realized by integration of online courses with an existing system that administers proctoring of exams for f2f classes.

Proctoring of some multiple choice exam assessments will reduce cheating risk. The elephant in the room, however, is the cheating risk on non-exam unproctored assessments (for example term papers, essays, discussion, and group projects). These are widely used in f2f instruction and, as online instruction evolves, will likely become equally widely used in online courses. These assessments are valuable because they encourage learning by student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions, and because they measure Bloom's higher levels of learning. These assessments have higher cheating risk than proctored multiple choice exams. These assessments, more so than multiple choice exams, challenge the ability of faculty and administration to inspire students to behave ethically and to refrain from academic misconduct.

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Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XIII, Number III, Fall 2010
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