

Assessment, Academic Integrity, and Community Online

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult tasks the online instructor has is to assess student performance. Magennis and Farrell (2005) define teaching as a set of activities that makes learning possible. Assessment strategies should not only measure the degree to which learning has occurred, but should be learning activities in and of themselves (Gaytan, 2002). Tests and quizzes are most often used to assess learning, but are not necessarily the best way to assess discussion-based courses or even skill-based courses as they generally measure the amount of information retained rather than the degree to which learning has occurred. Angelo and Cross (1993) note that the outcomes of assessments are often a disappointment to the instructor as they do not provide feedback on how well teaching activities promoted learning. This may be especially true in the online environment, where instructors are separated from students by time and space, increasing concern about academic integrity along with concern about assessment outcomes. How, then, does the instructor who wants to move away from the use of tests and quizzes develop assessment techniques that measure student learning? How can the use of varied assessment techniques and the development of a supportive online learning community increase the academic integrity of online courses? The following is a discussion of assessment techniques that work well online, and concerns about academic integrity that are often expressed by instructors regarding online learning. Finally, the development of an online learning community is explored as a means by which to reduce these concerns and increase the level of academic integrity online.

BACKGROUND

Assessing the Online Learner

Early efforts at online teaching often touted moving content directly from the traditional face-to-face classroom into the online classroom and often resulted in unsatisfying and even unsuccessful learning experiences (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Traditional means of conducting student assessment often accompanied attempts at delivering instruction through the use of lecture and other faculty-focused activities. However, as instructors have entered the online environment to teach, many have noted the difficulty of using traditional assessments, such as tests and quizzes, as effective assessment measures of student learning. Although the use of tests and quizzes can be seen as a time-saver for faculty, they are not necessarily the best measure of student learning online. Replicating assessments that are used in the face-to-face classroom without modification for online use is likely to cause frustration for learners and instructors alike (Milam, Voorhees, & Bedard-Voorhees, 2004). Regardless of the setting, however, good assessment is seen as an important element of teaching that can reduce the gap between what was taught and what was learned (Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999).

As online learning develops increasing sophistication both in terms of the technology in use as well as pedagogical technique, instructors are exploring other means by which the task of assessment can be conducted. Dunn, Morgan, O'Reilly, and Parry (2004) note that alternative and authentic assessments, such as projects, papers, and artifacts that integrate course concepts are more effective means by which to assess student learning online. The use of self-reflections, peer

assessments, and clearly designed rubrics designating good projects and papers may align more closely with the objectives of an online course and will flow more easily into course content (Palloff & Pratt, 2008).

Angelo and Cross (1993) support the notion that in order for assessment to be effective, it must be embedded in and aligned with the design of the course. They note a number of characteristics of effective classroom assessment: It is learner-centered, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice. Although they are discussing assessment techniques for the face-to-face classroom, these same principles can be effectively applied to the online classroom. Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) believe that if an online course is designed with clear guidelines and objectives, tasks and assignments that are relevant not only to the subject matter, but to students lives as well, and students understand what is expected of them, assessment will be in alignment with the course as a whole and will not be seen as a separate and cumbersome task.

Academic Integrity Online

Regardless of how assessment is carried out, the topic of assessing online learners often brings with it concerns about plagiarism and cheating. Dick et al (2003) report on the results of 12 studies of college student cheating, in which an average of 75% of students reported cheating at some point in their college career. Cizek (1999) also reports that cheating increased significantly in the second half of the twentieth century and that cheating increases with the age of the student up through age 25. This research notes that cheating is not limited to those considered to be "poorer" students, but is a practice that is widespread and not necessarily detected or confronted by instructors. The website for the Initiative to End Grade Inflation (n.d.) notes that although instructors may suspect cheating, they rarely confront students about it, leading to grade inflation. Consequently, students who cheat are likely to shrug it off, as it does not negatively impact the grades they receive.

Plagiarism occurs in both face-to-face and online classes alike. Some believe that this is because cheating is now considered to be socially acceptable behavior (Rowe, 2004; Varvel, 2005). McNett (2002) suggests that "deadline-driven desperation" is a common and significant reason for plagiarism and cheating. Surveys

conducted at numerous universities around the country indicate that plagiarism occurs regularly in both face-to-face and online classes and the majority of students know another student who has plagiarized an assignment (McCabe, et al, 2001). The majority of students who have plagiarized or know another student who has believe that the plagiarism was accidental and due to the lack of knowledge about how to properly cite reference material (Harris, 2002; Varvel, 2005).

Although many believe that the incidence of plagiarism and cheating increase when students take online courses, some anecdotal evidence (Kaczmarczyk, 2001) suggests students today cheat less in distance learning than with traditional instruction, while other studies indicate that the incidence is about equal (Kellogg, 2002). This may be, according to Rowe (2004), because new technologies typically first attract smarter and more motivated users with less reason to cheat. Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) note that concerns about plagiarism and cheating emerge from a mindset that students are "born cheats." They believe that this is not so and that many online learners, who are predominantly older, non-traditional learners, are not interested in taking the work of another.

The Online Learning Community and Assessment

Recent research has shown that the construction of a learning community, with the instructor participating as an equal member, is the key to successful online course outcomes and is the vehicle through which online education is best delivered (Garrison, n.d.; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Shea, Swan, & Pickett, 2004; and Wenger, 1999). Rovai (2002) summarized the essential elements of community to be mutual interdependence among members, a sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members. In online learning communities, members share a specific purpose, which is to gain knowledge, understanding, enrichment, and course completion. Promoting mutual support to do so is an important component of online teaching which can be utilized in the development of collaborative course activities, including collaborative assessment activities (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

The ability to develop and sustain a learning community, then, becomes an important competency for

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