

## Shifting our focus: Moving from discouraging online student dishonesty to encouraging authentic assessment of student work

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The rapid and consistent rise in online delivery of university credit courses, and the corresponding requirement to assess student work in this mode has resulted in a proliferation of academic enquiry in the areas of contract cheating and online proctoring, including discussion and publication surrounding the verification of student identity when engaging in online formal examinations. The increasing availability of commercially-written academic essays (submitted by students as their own work), commonly referred to as “contract cheating,” has become another hot area of academic enquiry.

This symposium will provide a forum for an important discussion surrounding whether or not too much emphasis is being placed on discouraging a very small percentage of students from performing in dishonest ways, as compared to the amount of effort that should be placed on finding valid and reliable ways to assess student achievement that is aligned with stated learning outcomes. Presenters will contend that many of the concerns relating to online students’ academic dishonesty could be allayed if the two most common university assessment tools – the formal academic essay, and high-stakes formal examinations were not used to measure the achievement of online students. Several suggestions for authentic, workplace-related tasks will be discussed.

Keywords: authentic assessment, contract cheating, academic integrity, online assessment, online proctoring

### Panel Discussion

This issue of contract cheating has been the subject of a growing number of major research initiatives (Harper et al., 2018; Taylor, 2014) with a concentration on the percentage of students who would purchase academic papers for submission relating to formal essay assignments. Considerable concentration has been focussed on enumerating the percentage of students engaged in contract cheating, with reports from less than 1% to nearly 8% being published (Bretag, et al., 2018). We must acknowledge, however that this is still a relatively small percentage of our students being paid a high degree of attention.

As more and more examinations are being delivered online (for both online and on-campus students), many educational technology and software providers have begun development and distribution of “solutions” to the issue of verifying student identity and other potential online cheating practices (Amiguda et al., 2018). Online proctoring solutions include browser lockdowns, webcam technology recording student behaviour during exam completion, as well as other software and devices have been employed with varying success (Foster & Layman, 2013). Much research and development has been directed toward finding a solution to an issue that in reality relates to a small percentage of students completing assessment items that may be argued to be inauthentic in the real world.

While all of the discussion continues surrounding how we can identify and discourage those students who are inclined to engage in academic dishonesty, less effort is being targeted toward supporting those students honestly attempting to meet the learning outcomes of their courses, and providing evidence that they have done so. It must be acknowledged that research is revealing that this group is the overwhelming majority. It is heartening to see that research regarding the up to 98% who don’t cheat is beginning to be published as the reasons people don’t cheat are at least as important as the ways that people do cheat (Rundle and Clare, 2018). Removing the opportunity to cheat through modification of assessment tools would therefore seem to make infinite sense when trying to address this issue.

The drive to dissuade academic dishonesty has led to the presentation of assessments through a number of platforms to assure student identity and appropriate behaviour. The types of assessments that can be delivered in these modes substantially limits the types of authentic assessment that can be utilised, and makes an inherent



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assumption that all students completing the assessment must be discouraged from cheating (Beck, 2014). This results in a limited suite of assessment tools delivered to all students, even though research has shown that only a small percentage will attempt to cheat.

Considering the very low percentage of students who have been reported as engaging in academic dishonesty online (generally reported as approximately two percent, and no more than eight percent (Beck 2014), the focus on valid and reliable, authentic assessment tasks for the online environment should be paramount. This discourages both contract cheating and identity tampering for those few students who are inclined to cheat or plagiarise while presenting students with authentic ways to demonstrate their learning achievements.

As academic administrators continue to devise methods to discourage academic dishonesty in this small percentage of students, it takes priority over the development and delivery of valid and reliable authentic assessments. Over ninety percent of our online students may be being assessed with substandard methods merely because of this over-concern that all assessment tasks must be primarily designed to discourage academic dishonesty.

Rundle and Clare (2018) reported that students are more inclined to cheat if the opportunity exists, and that certain styles of assessment (such as academic essays) present clear opportunities. Levels of anxiety induced by assessment tasks that have not been scaffolded, and high stakes tasks such as online exams carrying a high percentage of the overall grade, will also induce normally academically honest students to consider cheating strategies that they would not normally attempt.

The contention of this symposium is not that researchers and educational administrators should turn their back on concerns about cheating, but rather that it should not be the primary focus of work in the field. This should be the assurance that the overwhelming majority of our students, who are academically honest, are able to reliably demonstrate their achievement of stated learning outcomes.

Given the range of assessment tools currently available, a disproportionate number of university assignments require a formally constructed and referenced academic essay (Brown, 2010). This is done in the belief that students need to learn to write academically whether or not it is a learning outcome of that course. The primary focus of marking these assignments is often the adherence to referencing formats and citation monitoring rather than whether or not the course outcomes have been achieved.

These traditional types of assessments are frequently required of online students, and represent the most common target of contract cheating providers. Rather than continue to struggle with the issue of combatting academic dishonesty for those few students who are inclined to cheat, we now have an opportunity to redesign assessment to not only discourage academic dishonesty, but to present our online students with valid, reliable, and most importantly, authentic and engaging ways to demonstrate their achievement of learning outcomes. Accomplishing this requires a substantial transformation in the ways that we measure student achievement.

By designing and delivering authentic assessment tasks to replace the traditional essay and formal online examinations, we will not only be acknowledging the learning needs of all students (not just focusing on those that relatively small number that may be academically dishonest), but will also provide online students with workforce-relevant assessment tasks constructively aligned with learning outcomes (a goal that all good assessments should include). Authentic, tasks aimed at student workplace performance are much more difficult to obtain from contract cheating agencies, who focus on the traditional academic essay.

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**Please cite as:** Miles, C. & Foggett, K. (2018). Shifting our focus: Moving from discouraging online student dishonesty to encouraging authentic assessment of student work. In M. Campbell, J. Willems, C. Adachi, D. Blake, I. Doherty, S. Krishnan, S. Macfarlane, L. Ngo, M. O'Donnell, S. Palmer, L. Riddell, I. Story, H. Suri & J. Tai (Eds.), *Open Oceans: Learning without borders. Proceedings ASCILITE 2018 Geelong* (pp. 562-564).

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