Assessing Your Learners: Evidence for Digital Credential

You're talking to Julia, a colleague who is extremely skeptical about online courses – especially when it comes to assessment. Julia says, "I don't see how you can assess learners in an online course. How do you keep them from cheating?" How would you respond to Julia?

> Your answer to the question: Cheating is definitely a valid concern in both online and in-person classes. For online educators there a wide variety of tools and approaches that can bet used to help identify and prevent cheating. Tools include SafeAssign in Blackboard, an assignment submission tool that checks student submissions for plagiarism; "lockdown browsers" that limit students' browsers to remain on the test page while completing an exam; in-person test proctoring services available at many institution; and various remote proctoring services that provide proctoring of online exams through your students' webcams. Faculty can supplement these with intentional approaches to lesson design. Design to reduce cheating can include varying assessment methods to give you a better sense of each particular student's writing style and abilities; creating assignments with multiple parts, such as drafts and peer reviews for papers; limiting time allowed in exams to make it harder search for answers or copy the exam; randomizing exam questions to make it harder to share responses or retake exams in bad faith; and showing only a single question at a time to avoid easy copying of questions.

After hearing your response, Julia wants to know more about the assessment integrity policy you use to communicate integrity expectations to learners in your online course. She asks, "What kinds of information do you put in your policy? How does this help maintain assessment integrity?"

> Your answer to the question: Including an integrity policy in the syllabus is a great way to signal immediately what academic integrity expectations I have in my course. I always begin with my university's code of conduct, with includes a section on academic integrity and details the processes and possible penalties when faculty identify a student as potentially cheating in a course. Because the activities in each course vary, though, I also include specific examples and explanations of how I expect the students to act with academic integrity in my courses. For example, I frequently require peer review. As such, incorporating peer suggestions into a paper is not only allowable; it is an important practice I encourage in the course. However, any ideas a student gets form an outside source, such as a website, must be fully cited in an appropriate format. Furthermore, because I frequently teach writing to underclassmen, I break down what plagiarism can look like at the sentence and paragraph level through activities. This make my expectation very clear and opens up space for questions early in the course, limiting unintentional plagiarism. Purdue OWL provides some great online resources (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_research/avoiding_plagiarism/plagiarism_exercise.html) that can be helpful in these efforts.

Julia seems to be more receptive to the idea of online courses now that she's heard your explanation of assessment integrity, and is now asking you about monitoring progress in an online course. "How do you

know what's going on in the course if you don't actually see the learners so many times a week? How do you keep track of their progress, and what do you do if someone is not doing well?"

> Your answer to the question: In some ways, I feel like I have even more of a handle on student participation and effort when I teach online classes, or incorporate online components in my in-person classes. We use Blackboard for our LMS at my institution. Blackboard provides "Grade Reports and Statistics" to clearly display each students' progress on assignments. It's also possible to see when each students has last logged on and which students have viewed content, often even detailing for what length of time. I've used these resources extensively and found them to be helpful not only with monitoring student progress but also in assessing my course design and resources. To hear from the students and give them ongoing feedback, I like to use minute writes, meta-cognition journals, peer review, and weekly written check-ins from me. These together allow us to share the role of progress review and give us opportunities to talk about growth and struggles. I try to design my courses so that I can catch students who are struggling and work with them early enough in the semester to still succeed. The weekly check-ins are my time to note any concerns and set up further support meetings for learners who are struggling, or learners who need more of a challenge. These come in the form of personalized letters sent to individual students that speak to their performance in both discussions and assignments, and anything else that might be relevant to them personally. These help me build strong connections to each individual student, connections that are not always built as quickly in my in-person courses. I create weekly summary/review videos to address global issues/successes/reminders for the class.

After hearing your response, Julia seems a little skeptical again. She says, "It sounds like you really have to be a babysitter if you're an online teacher. I don't have time to be a babysitter. Is there anything you can do to make the learners responsible for keeping track of how they're doing and whether or not they're learning?" How would you respond to Julia?

> Your answer to the question: Yes, absolutely, I expect my online learners to be in charge of their own education and success. As I noted above, my students are expected to give me feedback on the course as well as to practice meta-cognition all term. This means that my students must be critical, active co-creators of their academic experience. For example, I ask students at the end of each module to assess how they did and why. If I see a way I can restructure the next module to help students succeed I will, but most often students recognize that their own effort and investment are what lead to their relative success.

Julia likes what she heard in your last response. Now she wants to know if you know anything about rubrics. "I always hear other teachers talking about the 'rubrics' they use to grade their learners. How do I make one of these? And once I do, how do I use it to grade the learners?" What would you say to Julia to answer her questions about rubrics?

> Your answer to the question: Yes, I use rubrics whenever I believe that they could be the best tools to help me fairly assess student work, effectively communicate my expectations, and clearly deliver actionable feedback. To create a rubric, you need to first determine what are the key measurable outcomes students need to demonstrate in the assignment and how they should be demonstrating them. These are most often listed as categories on the far left column

of a chart. An online discussion rubric, for example, might include an initial post, a response post to a peer, timeliness of postings, and grammar/mechanics. Next, you need to determine what level of proficiency in each of these categories would earn what score. You may want to have A, B, C, D and F levels for major assignments, but less complex incomplete, partially complete, and well-done levels of minor assignments. For each of these levels, you'll need to create descriptions of what you would see as work characteristic of each level. This makes it clear to you and your students what expectation you have for each category, helping them see how to demonstrate they have achieved each of the learning outcomes set for the assignment. You can find help with developing a rubric in the online environment here: https://irc.uconn.edu/rubrics/.

Now Julia's interested in your thoughts on group work online. "Participation in group work is so hard to assess," she says. "How do you do it?" Give Julia at least three strategies for assessing learner participation in online group work.

Your answer to the question: I like to use rubrics for group work in part because of my experiences as a student. The biggest critique from my students of group work is the free-rider problem. To address this, I use group project rubrics to assess both the final project and the process. Together they can clarify expectations not only for the assignment, but also for how work should be fairly distributed for its creation. I supplement these with debriefing journals and/or discussions with the groups and the class about their process and outcome. I first started this when I was teaching leadership courses in which group collaboration and roles were explicitly elements of the courses. Because these skills and self-awareness of one's own leadership strengths and weaknesses are desirable to employers, I have continued the practice. Discussions are the open, group portion of this process. The journals I use tend to be private (just between me and the students) and focus on personal meta-cognition and process. I ask students interrogate why they believe what they believe at different points in the term, and how their behavior influences their educational experience and product. When students take this seriously, I get to hear some great insights. For example, I had a student admit that they started the term with narrow ideas about the Rwandan genocide based on watching *Hotel Rwanda* for fun. After working on a group research project in my class, though, he realized that he had assumed the film told him everything he needed to know. His peers pushed him to work harder than he usually does in classes, and he felt like that led him to learn more than he usually does. He even went so far as to admit that before the class he had no idea where Rwanda was, and the he thought Africa was a country. If these had been public from the start, I doubt that he would have been so candid.

"One last question," Julia says. "How do you know that what you're doing is working? In other words, how do you assess your *teaching*?" Give Julia at least three ways to assess the effectiveness of teaching in online courses.

Your answer to the question: I especially like formative assessments and peer observations as tools for assessing my teaching. Together these give me student and colleague feedback, two potentially divergent or complimentary perspectives. The most important element of formative feedback in my classes is making sure I ask questions that would help me shape the rest of the term to better serve my students. I find that this solicits more detailed, actionable feedback

because students know it can directly improve the rest of the course for them, not just future students. The most important element of peer observations is inviting someone I trust to be thoughtful and critical. This is because I want to have someone I trust to push me to grown and improve. These assessment practices are both transferable to the online environment. I conduct my formative assessments in my course LMS even with in-person courses. Furthermore, with an online course I could even ask for feedback from colleagues from across the world, broadening my pool of potential observers. At the end of the term, I use this combined feedback and the summative course assessments to sit down with a colleague to consider revisions for when I teach similar courses in the future. This helps me continually improve my courses and teaching approaches each term.