Chapter XVI

User Authentication and Academic Integrity in Online Assessment

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the issues surrounding user authentication and academic integrity in online assessment and offers a number of academic and technological solutions for dealing with student identification and plagiarism. It argues that even though violations of academic integrity are seemingly ubiquitous across all forms of educational delivery, the relative recency of online education has led to growing concerns among faculty and administrators. Although technological solutions for addressing the issues of user authentication and academic integrity are increasing in number, the chapter emphasizes the need for effective instruction and authentic assessment as the strongest means of deterring and reducing the number of academic integrity violations.
Faculty and administrators alike—especially those new to online learning—often raise the issue of authentication of students or the process by which educators determine the identity of students. They raise this concern because of a series of related questions that most educators do not have answers to, including, How do we know that students taking a class (or earning a degree) are who they claim to be? Could it be that someone else—an imposter—is pretending to be that particular student? and Are institutions of higher education granting distance learning degrees to students who have hired others to do the work?

Less drastic than hiring others to do their work, online learners are often suspected of higher levels of plagiarism. Though often discussed anecdotally, we have no data to answer the concern that online students may be more prone to cheating than their face-to-face counterparts. Lacking good research, how do we know, without watching over them, that online students’ writing samples are indeed theirs and not merely downloaded from one of the Internet sites selling academic papers? To complicate matters even more, cultural issues can arise with international students, who may have differing views of what it means to plagiarize. Educators who have little knowledge of a particular culture may be unable to differentiate a student who intentionally plagiarizes from one who is following a cultural norm (e.g., Chinese students consider using an expert’s exact words as a sign of respect, not stealing; Xueqin, 2002).

These related problems of user authentication and academic integrity in online education are not unique to distance learners. Most institutions that offer face-to-face higher education do not ask their applicants to present a photo ID when applying; thus, they are unable to determine if the student who attends class is the same student who is officially registered for the course. Likewise, when graduate students submit papers in face-to-face classes, instructors rarely check to make sure that the student generated the work and not the student’s spouse, for example. Moreover, no matter the type of course modality (face-to-face or online), the proliferation of the Internet has made it easy for students to simply claim the works of others as their own.

The fact that the two teaching formats—face-to-face and online—generally lack viable user authentication or plagiarism-detecting mechanisms may not be a satisfactory answer to most educators, as concerns over academic integrity violations increase. Therefore, this chapter introduces a viable set of strategies that an instructor can employ to help minimize and deter violations of academic integrity in the online environment. Our intent is to offer best practices in dealing with violations of academic integrity in online assessment and to address the pedagogical and technological implications of these practices.
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