

# Teaching Strategies for the Online College Classroom

A Collection of Articles for Faculty



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# How Can Course Design Help Prevent Online Cheating?

by Tom Tobin, *Northeastern Illinois University*

Think about how we usually try to detect and discourage cheating in face-to-face courses. Most of us have a sixth sense about work that doesn't seem right. Suddenly a freshman student starts using semicolons properly. Or there's a section in a paper spelled with British English—you know: *whilst* and color spelled with “o-u-r.”

When we think about online assignments and courses, we usually go right to the major student writing assignments and online exams. But academic integrity starts long before students ever engage with the high-points, high-stakes parts of our courses.

My model has three levels, or three paths, that we can give our students for academic honesty. The first, and most basic, relationship we can have with our students is one of trust. We don't have to, and we shouldn't, send every little thing that they do for us through a plagiarism checker.

## **Trust**

The strategy of trusting students tells them two important things: One, we expect honest behavior from them. And two, we're giving them some freedom in our courses.

The best trust mechanism is an honor code. At Georgia Tech, the honor code is emailed to every new student from the dean. Keep in mind that honor codes work best when they are everywhere. Students don't see them only at freshman orientation: faculty members put the honor code into their syllabi, on the front page of the online course shells, in the directions for every course assignment, and in the description of every test and quiz.

After we worked with faculty to implement this continual presence for the honor code, we've seen our academic dishonesty rates go down. The greatest decrease that we saw was in our online courses.

It's tempting to cheat due to factors like time pressure or having things not be clear and running out of time. The honor code helps students understand that the expectation is that they can talk to their professors if such factors arise, working out a better alternative to cheating that will support, instead of undermine, their learning.

It sets up a positive expectation of ethical behavior. And it gives students a behavior that they can use if they get in a bind and are tempted to cheat. Giving students an honor code that is both "here's what we expect you to do" and "here's what you can do if things go wrong" really moves the needle on academic integrity.

Now, more effective than honor code displays are sanction statements right at the point of need. Sanction statements are another form of trust. They tell students that honest conduct is expected and valued, what that honest conduct looks like, and what penalties exist for not following along (those are the sanctions themselves).

Sanction statements should be displayed wherever you want students to limit themselves in some way, like not using their books or notes. For example, a sanction statement in an online test might say "Question number one: By taking this online exam, I agree that I am the person who is supposed to be taking this exam. I don't have any outside help. I'm not using my textbook or my notes. I will honor the conditions of the exam. And I won't share the questions or the answers from this exam with anybody else."

Now, does this have any legal standing? Could you sue the student for sharing your exam with everybody else, say, in the fraternity or in the class? Probably not. At the same time, in your campus online integrity process, this statement has great weight. And it counts as evidence for students not doing what they're supposed to be doing, if it comes to that.

The better part of this, though, is that it shows students that you care that they're being academically honest. That will help reduce the number of students who are tempted to cheat in the first place. And from a faculty perspective, I hate doing the paperwork when students cheat. So I'd rather they don't cheat. Thus, this is a great strategy.

Now, skeptics might say, "Well, this doesn't prevent anyone from disobeying the sanction statement." But that's not the point. The point is to make students stop and think about the positive expectations for their own conduct. Research shows us that just reading and thinking about academic honesty significantly reduces the temptation to cheat.

A final strategy adds some teeth to the idea of trust; that's to use the honor code plus a typed response. As in this example, the first question of a quiz can be the honor code. In this case, the short answer field asks for the name of the student who agrees to abide by the honor code, who does so by keying his or her name.

Now, is that a legally binding agreement? Again, no. It does, though, require that students actually take an action to demonstrate their understanding of the trust we're giving them and makes them more likely to uphold it. The story here has to do with where else our students are being asked to key their name in. If you open a bank account; if you go to get a loan for a house; when you open all of the accounts that you have on Facebook, Instagram, or anywhere online and throughout life, you have to verify that you are who you are. Even when you install software on your computer, you have an End User License Agreement (the EULA) that most people just scroll to the bottom of and say "I accept."

What the sanction statement with the keyed-in name does is to get people to not just skip past the agreement but to actually focus on what they're signing, what they're saying they're going to do. That moves the needle on academic integrity quite a bit.

And that wraps up the idea of trust. Trust is the thing that we should do most often throughout every course that we teach online.

## **Verification**

Now, beyond trust is verification. This is what most of us think of as an academic integrity strategy: the "catching cheaters" part of the package. Verifying what students are doing goes beyond just sending their papers to a plagiarism-checker service. Let's look at some verification methods and where you should use them in your online course shell.

Of course, the big databases like Turnitin and SafeAssign do have a role to play in catching dishonest behavior. They are very good at catching copying, since their databases scan the Internet, library databases, known cheat paper sites, and millions of already uploaded student submissions.

Use the big databases particularly for draft work or prep work, so students can see their own database reports and learn how to correct poor practices. This example is an especially revealing one:

My colleagues in the history department often had great big high-stakes papers due at the end of the semester. The underlying assumption was, well, these students are adults. They should be able to handle their own time. We're going to give them suggested milestones at the one-third, two-thirds, and then all-the-way-done parts of the course.

At about one-third, you should have a resource list together. About two-thirds through, you should have drafted your final paper. By the end of the course, you should have your final paper ready to turn in. And by the way, that final paper is worth 50 percent of your grade.

It's no surprise that my colleagues came to us saying, "Hey, people are cheating on these things." The paper was worth an awful lot of points. And there weren't ways for students to see if they were doing okay, or if they were on track as the course went along.

What we suggested, and what the instructors eventually implemented, was asking students to create their resource list and submit that to the professor for a check mark that they had done it. The professor would then put the resource list, along with some annotations and the student's summary of what they planned to use from the resources, through Turnitin, the plagiarism-checking service that our university subscribes to.

The students and the professor got back those reports, and for those students whose report results were high on the index of "this is copied," the professor was able to reach out to dig deeper. Oftentimes, the students themselves said, "Oh, wait, I didn't know that I needed to do something different here" or "I guess I need to be a little bit more original."

This meant it was a *learning* conversation rather than a *cheating* conversation. And because it happened before the students earned any points, there weren't any consequences; moreover, the students could recover from poor performance. The incidents of cheating on the final item went down dramatically.

Now, what if you don't have access to one of the big databases? An alternative is the poor professor's plagiarism database: your favorite search engine. The term "Google fishing" is even part of our lexicon these days.

Take a suspect passage. Plug it into the search engine. And voila, there's the source.

Of course, in order to go fishing, you have to be suspicious in the first place. So this is a useful double-check, not a solid strategy for over-all detection.

You can see that in this case I've used Google. You can use any other search engine you like to come up with some pretty good hits on a suspect paper.

One of my challenges is deciding, "Should I be lenient with this student, or should I come down on him like a hammer?" Well, I think I should be lenient—because the suspect paper that got those strong hits I mentioned above was one of my own undergraduate papers. So academic

integrity is definitely a learned skill. It's not something that we can assume our students are coming to us with. If I can get it, your students can get it.

What we don't often think of as a verification practice involves using the analytic data that the learning management system (LMS) provides us in order to check for dishonest behavior. For example, if most students in your course spend 45 minutes completing an online quiz and one student roars through in 10 minutes, that's cause to start asking a few questions.

For example, in my own educational technology graduate courses, I have an assignment where I ask students to work through a sample website that is a simulation of what it's like to be a student with a visual disability looking at a web page. For those students who spend more than 30 minutes trying to find information on this purposely difficult-to-access website, I know that they're probably giving it a good try.

I've had students go through in five minutes and get all the answers right—which, even as somebody who's used a screen reader a thousand times, I could never do. Those students are either people with visual disabilities who are actually using screen readers—and I've had a few of those—or they're people who got the answers from someone else. And I've had a few of those, too.

Using the analytics in your LMS is an easy double-check for time on task. Most learning management systems today can tell professors: How long did a student stay on this page? How many times did the student come back and look at it again? How long did the student take to answer this particular question on this particular quiz?"

Another tactic for verification is unique to online tests and quizzes. We can set limits for students in terms of the dates and times when tests are available. Be careful not to be so restrictive that some students cannot find time to take the assessment, though.

There are also third-party tools that restrict test-takers to using a special browser that disallows common actions like opening new computer windows, copying, and pasting.

In both of these cases, time limitations and using special browsers, these are technological limitations. We have to make sure that human limitations are also taken into account. For example, with my online tests and quizzes, I'll always make sure that they're available during the day on a weekday, in the evening on a weekday, and on at least one weekend day.

That might be more than we would offer our face-to-face students. And we don't want to open it up a whole week or two weeks, if the minimum amount of time we need to have it open is only perhaps two or three days. At the same time, for academic integrity, we want to make sure that we give

students a good shot at taking the examination or quiz, and that we give them enough time to be able to do it.

My good rule of thumb is for you, the professor, to take your own test or quiz. Actually do it online. See how much time that takes you. Multiply that by one and a half. Then give your students that much time. If it took me 60 minutes to take my test or quiz, I'll give my students 90 minutes.

Again, the aim is not to prevent cheating—students can defeat restricted browsers by pulling out their mobile phones—but to underscore the importance of test security and the gravity of choosing to be dishonest. Use this kind of verification only for the big stuff that is worth the most course credit, usually the middle, term, and final examinations.

When we apply for credit cards, auto loans, or mortgages online, we usually have to prove that we are who we say we are. We answer questions about where we used to live, what car we used to drive, and how many teeth we had extracted after we got into a fight behind the high school when we were 17. No, I'm just kidding about that last one. I think.

This type of verification includes not only challenge questions like these, but also fingerprint scanning and other biometrics. You can probably also tell that this kind of verification is on the more expensive end of the spectrum from plagiarism databases and Google fishing. So use this only where the stakes are really high, like with online certification and licensing examinations.

## **Observation**

The gold standard of all academic integrity methods is observation. If we can directly see the student as he or she is demonstrating the skill, we are most confident in their performance.

There are three kinds of observation. Even though we're talking about online tests and quizzes, face-to-face observation is still the most reliable anti-cheating strategy. Bring your students into a classroom or computer lab and have them take your online test or quiz under observed conditions.

This doesn't work for fully distance education courses where students are spread out geographically. But if you can bring students together for at least the high-stakes pieces of your course, like the final exam, it's the best way to observe them.

The next best thing is to set up proctoring agreements with other institutions, such as public libraries, other colleges and universities, and even workplace supervisors. Define the conditions you need for testing. Get the proctor to sign off for the observation. And then either pay that person a small stipend or offer reciprocal proctoring on your own campus for others.

A final form of observation takes advantage of the computerized nature of tests and quizzes. Third-party software and some learning management systems allow you to take continuous video, snap random camera shots, or record the keystrokes of test-takers. These methods are the most intrusive and should be used only for high-stakes assessments. In fact, none of the observation approaches are appropriate for everyday academic integrity needs. Where students are working together, starting processes, and doing everyday things like taking quizzes, allow them a measure of trust. For assessments, draft work, lab results, or anything that shouldn't be faked, make sure to verify that the students are doing authentic work and that they are respecting the conditions you've set for their work, as well. And for the times when students are playing for big points or high stakes, use a strategy for observing them as they demonstrate their skills.

By adopting this three-tiered approach to academic integrity, your on-line interactions with your students can focus on building a culture of credibility and honesty for your course. And you can catch cheaters, too.

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