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Special Edition Teaching Toolbox

Examining Final Exams

by **Andreas Broscheid and Emily O. Gravett**

One of the main concerns we've heard from colleagues about online teaching is connected to the integrity of grades. Online exams and other assignments give new opportunities for cheating: Students can use Google to look up answers without actually having learned the material; they can email and text each other during exams; they can take photos of test questions and distribute them widely; they can outsource their work to others who are more knowledgeable and more than happy to be paid. After all, [on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog](#).

Common responses to such concerns include timed tests that make it difficult for students to cheat, as cheating takes time, and various forms of online proctoring, for example, through video conferencing systems monitored by [professional services](#). Yet these approaches can be problematic. Timed tests are not only a barrier for some students with disabilities (who theoretically can get extended time through an ODS access plan, though not all students have the economic resources to get the required medical tests to receive such accommodations in the first place), but also for students who do not have the economic resources for fast or reliable internet connections. (Try taking a timed exam from a McDonalds parking lot!) And forced video proctoring violates student privacy, as we—or the proctoring services—spy into their living spaces that now double as work spaces, and data security, as their movements are tracked and sold to third parties. (For more about problems with video proctoring, see [this recent Washington Post article](#).)

Some disciplines and programs may nevertheless force instructors to use such “brute force” strategies against cheating, even if these strategies discriminate against otherwise already disadvantaged students and do not fully prevent the problem. We hope that the current crisis leads to a reconsideration of such policies, but faculty may have no choice but to follow suit in such circumstances. For those who have the academic freedom to avoid timed and proctored exams, we offer the following suggestions and considerations, in addition to [those from JMU Libraries](#):

- Consider to what extent the current situation warrants assignments that create fine-grained distinctions between student accomplishments. Graded assignments such as exams are meant to record the [extent to which students have acquired knowledge and skills taught in a class](#). In a traumatic situation such as this one, this may not be possible as student performance may reflect the extent of their traumatization more than their learning. Will final exam grades be meaningful expressions of student learning? If not, should final exams be replaced by activities that [help students reflect on their experience this semester](#) instead of probing them?
- If, for example after consulting with your students, you find that students are able to

meaningfully participate in exam activities, consider carefully what you wanted students to learn this semester (i.e., what were your course objectives?), and what types of knowledge or skills you still want them to be able to demonstrate now that we're near the end: Understanding of concepts, relationships between facts, and the like? Application of concepts to examples? Demonstration of how certain techniques can be used in different contexts? Creation of discipline-specific artifacts such as medical diagnoses or primary source analyses? Something else? Most likely, if you focus the exam (or other final assignment) on these kinds of learning outcomes, the result will not only provide students with meaningful feedback, but it will be fairly cheat-proof, as it is unlikely that answers can be looked up on the internet.

- If you teach a large class, be heartened by the fact that even multiple-choice exams (which Canvas can grade automatically for you) can target higher-order learning objectives such as [applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating](#). [Woodford and Bancroft \(2005\)](#) provide a number of suggestions on how to write multiple-choice questions that are “not considered harmful.” But plan ahead: These questions take time and care to create. And, afterwards, it is important to scrutinize the test statistics to identify questions that stumped the whole class and thus were probably badly written—or not about what the students actually learned.
- Most exams that we give are top-down affairs, questioning structures created by instructors to reveal the relative shortcomings of students: An 85% score, after all, is a 100 - 15% score. What about turning this around and letting students demonstrate what they learned and why it matters? The classic format for such exam prompts are essay questions, which leave students more agency as they construct their own approaches to select, connect, and present knowledge based on a prompt. But [more open-ended activities that engage students in reflection and demonstration of their learning are possible as well](#).
- Connect in-class learning to the “real” world. If we are concerned that students may cheat by using the internet, why not ask students to use the internet and evaluate what they find based on the knowledge that they learned in your class? Ask them to identify web sources that are confirmed by the course content, and those that contradict the class material—and have them explain how and why. Or consider asking students to apply theories and concepts from class to current events, such as recent developments in the course discipline, or [those related to COVID-19](#)?
- Take a moment to consider why students might cheat. Among other reasons, we know that certain conditions in a learning environment can incentivize cheating; one example is a [single, high-stakes assessment](#) for which students have been given little to no practice or preparation (e.g., one exam worth 50% of their final course grade). To the extent that we can give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge or mastery of a skill, to the extent that we can offer them practice and timely feedback, and to the extent that we

can help to reduce their anxiety at this anxiety-inducing time, we will go a long way in creating conditions where they will not choose to cheat.

- Be sure all students understand what “cheating” means in the context of your course. No, really. So much of what we assume is obvious or self-evident is not so for students. It’s one of the problems of achieving [expertise](#); we easily forget what it’s like to be novices. And cheating can vary from discipline to discipline, from course to course, even within the same department. Certain populations, like first-generation college students or international students, are particularly disadvantaged by this kind of tacit or [“hidden curriculum.”](#) The more that’s explicit or [“transparent”](#) for our students—on cheating or otherwise—the better.
- Finally, consider the trade-offs. Sure, if all students cheat, exams and grades become invalid measures of learning. But, if we create examination environments that express generalized distrust and deficit thinking, that treat all students as quasi-criminals, that violate their privacy and trigger the very inequalities that we are trying to overcome through education—in other words, if we employ a [pedagogy of punishment](#)—then our exams and grades will lose validity too, as they will reflect students’ tolerance for authoritarian structures and socio-economic privileges as much as or more than their learning—and those validity problems may outweigh those associated with cheating by a few students. [Building trust and a common focus on learning with students](#) throughout the semester will be more effective than the best anti-cheating enforcement.

These ideas and more are the focus of James Lang’s *Cheating Lessons*, one of the many books we’ve read and discussed in the [CFI’s higher ed reading groups](#) over the last few years. See Lang’s series in [The Chronicle](#) for an abbreviated version of the book’s main ideas.

We wanted to end on a somewhat unrelated note: Only one more week of classes and one week of exams! The end of this wild semester is near. Hang in there—you’ll make it.

About the authors: Andreas Broscheid as an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and a professor in the [Department of Political Science](#). He can be reached at broschax@jmu.edu. Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an assistant professor in the [Department of Philosophy & Religion](#). She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu.

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