

Dilemma in Online Testing

A Case in Teaching Ethics

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Doing tests and homework assignments online has become so prevalent at all level of education (from elementary schools to universities) and in all disciplines (even including formula-based subjects like physics and mathematics) that it is difficult to imagine that all was done exclusively on paper only a few years ago. But with many in-class tests now also conducted on faceless computers, there is a new breed of ethical issues, and instructors have taken the extra role of safeguarding the integrity of the process by ensuring that students filling the tests are indeed the actual individuals who claim to be who they are, and the ones effectively taking the tests, and not some other individuals filling remotely for them. Ideally, proctors should check Photo IDs, access logs, restrict IP addresses to authorized computers only, etc. But doing all these checks can be overwhelming, especially in large classes, and so not all are always done consistently, leaving the door open for mischiefs to creep in.

An instructor has reported a case of academic misconduct, saying that a student gave his login credentials to somebody else who did the test. But the student vehemently denies the accusation. Who to believe and what to do? You are asked to hear both sides of the story and make a ruling on the case.

Here is how things unfolded according to the instructor. Students where given an hour to complete a computer-based and password-protected test online. At the beginning of the testing period, students were told the password and required to only open the testing website. Communication devices such as smartphones are not allowed. All this aims at deterring students from communicating with anybody while taking the test. As students complete questions, the software updates their scores to reflect their progress. Since students do not necessarily have to complete questions sequentially – they can jump from question to question as they see fit, it is not always possible to deduce the progress of all students by tracking one student.

After a while, students start leaving the class, some doing well, others not so much. They must all write their final score on a scratch paper with their name on it. The instructor claims that the score that the student reported on exit is different (and much less) than the score currently recorded by the testing software. And so the student has certainly communicated his login credentials to somebody else who added to what the student originally did. As far as the instructor is concerned, this is a clear case of academic misconduct that deserves the full force of university regulations against cheating, including possibly the exclusion from the university and with such a record in his transcript, the student will have a hard time getting admitted anywhere else. The academic career of the student is pretty much over.

According to the student, it is true that the score is different, but just because he logged into the test and continued working on it after getting out of the classroom.

The student claims that it was him who added to the test, not somebody else. And that he continued working on the test for practicing purposes, and not with the intention of deceiving the instructor by lifting his score, and counting on the fact that the instructor would use the computer score without checking what students reported on the scratch paper.

So you have to decide who to believe and what to do. If you find the student guilty, you are pretty much bringing his academic career to a dead end and curtailing his future job prospects in a dramatic way. On the other hand, if you find him guiltless, are you sending the message that all those checks are futile because cheaters that are caught can go free? At the same time, can the university win this case if it is sued for wrongful exclusion?