DESIGNING ENGAGING ONLINE ASSESSMENTS TO REDUCE CONTRACT CHEATING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Contract cheating is an emerging issue in higher education. Although not new, advances in technology are presenting new opportunities for cheating to take place in assessments, especially online. This paper presents an approach to authentic online assessment that encourages student engagement and has been pedagogically designed to make contract cheating difficult. The unit is a public relations unit at Central Queensland University in Australia. Using real clients which change every year, students work in virtual teams to develop a public relations plan. The assessment has three parts: first, the plan is divided into tasks and tasks are assigned to each team member negotiated within the team; secondly, students use augmented marking to grade their peers and provide individualised feedback; and thirdly, students reflect on the feedback and the completed task. The deep learning and engagement has been profound. Students must engage at each level of the assessment, and the skills learned include managing online teams. In the online unit where this assessment has been used, there has been high levels of student engagement and retention, and no identified cases of contract cheating. Retention in this unit has risen from 82% in 2014 to 100% in 2018, with student satisfaction rated higher than university benchmarks.

Keywords: online assessment, contract cheating, teamwork assessment, higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Contract cheating is an emerging issue in higher education. Although not new, advances in technology are presenting new opportunities for cheating to take place in assessments, especially online. Contract cheating is a form of academic misconduct where a student outsources the completion of assessment to a third party and the assessment is then submitted as the student’s own work. There are some preventative online tools, but most of the focus is on plagiarism detection. Contract cheating differs from plagiarism in that the work is original and is not detected as easily through online mechanisms. There are a number of commercial providers for contract cheating which target students, and the issue is difficult to detect. Services can include writing original essays and assignments, conducting research and impersonation in exams. Products can range from essays to lab reports, reflective journals, dissertations, computer programming, film editing and others. Based on a global systematic review, 15% of students reported paying someone to do their work. This figure is likely to be much larger since it was based on self-reporting and had a small sample size [1].

There is a lot of current literature explaining why students cheat. Although this is a complex area, and reasons are individual, generally it is agreed that students cheat because of:

- Efficiency: as a means of getting the grade they want for the least effort (time pressure, pressure to achieve, efficiency gain) [2,3].
- Opportunity: temptation, there is an opportunity to do so, perceived reward for risk [2,4-6].
- Malice: defiance, dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment [2,4].
- Error: mental health issues, genuine misunderstanding, conflicting cultural values [2,3,5].

In Australia, the regulation of the higher education system is overseen by the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). TEQSA have developed the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) [7] which sets out the responsibilities of higher education providers. The standards are used as a framework for ensuring and monitoring the quality of higher education activities. In conjunction, TEQSA have produced ‘Good Practice notes’ to provide practical advice in relation to specific issues. In October 2017, TEQSA produced a Good Practice note on academic integrity, which includes contract cheating [8]. The Guide breaks down the good practice examples into three broad areas: policies that promote academic integrity; policies and procedures to address academic integrity breaches; actions to mitigate risks to academic integrity.
It is recognised that it is impossible to completely ‘design out’ or ‘prevent’ contract cheating [8,9]. Instead, assessments can be developed to reduce the opportunity for contract cheating. Essentially (and somewhat simplistically), contract cheating occurs because there is an opportunity for it to occur. If the opportunity to cheat can be reduced or removed, so too does the ability to commit the offence. Clarke cited in Baird and Clare (2017) [6] listed five ideas which could be used to guide higher education strategies addressing contract cheating: by increasing effort, increasing the risk of detection, reducing rewards, reducing provocations and removing excuses. Specifically, this can be managed by an adjustment of assessment elements without disadvantaging students who are not contract cheating. Assessments difficult to contract cheat include reflections on practicum, oral presentations, individualized assessments, and those assessments completed in class [4].

This paper presents an example of a pedagogically sound online assessment that has effectively engaged students whilst being difficult to contract cheat. The significance of this assessment is that it was developed for an online cohort, and includes teamwork, which is notoriously difficult to perform well in an online environment [10].

2 METHODOLOGY

The assessment is contained in a public relations unit at Central Queensland University Australia (CQUniversity). CQUniversity is a regional Australian university with a significant online cohort. The unit is an advanced unit, and is taken by students online. There is no face-to-face teaching. Content is provided asynchronously via the university learning management tool of Moodle, and the unit is assessment driven. Assessment is linked to content so that weekly modules and activities inform various sections of the assessment. A student will access the unit online and form teams for the assessment by Week 3 of the twelve week term. The assessment has three parts. The first part of the assessment requires a discipline specific task. In this case, the task was to collate a series of elements for a public relations plan for a real client. The clients are selected by the unit coordinator, based on the appropriateness of the plan to be achievable in an online environment, and to meet the Learning Outcomes of the unit. That is to say, there must be the capacity for a public relations plan to be developed and to include the various elements that are required in the content of the unit. Usually, several clients are presented each term, each with a different public relations focus for the final product. Students select their preferred choice of client or topic, and those who choose the same client or topic form a team. Depending on the size of the student cohort and the availability of suitable projects, some topics may have multiple teams assigned. Students are also permitted to nominate their own client or project, provided it meets the unit criteria. If enough students select a student-nominated topic, a team will be formed. The selection of teams and topics is undertaken in this way as an engagement tool for students [11]. In early iterations of this unit, students had been placed into teams randomly, and students had no buy-in to the assessment or the topic. Some students resented the lack of choice and their team mates. By allowing students to nominate topics, or to select the topic, they became engaged with their team mates by virtue of a shared interest in the topic. There is a responsibility for the unit coordinator to ensure that topics are interesting and achievable in a virtual environment. It is also critical that the assessment requirements are written clearly [12]. Once in a team, and with a topic, elements of the plans are assigned to students so that students receive different elements from the plan. Team members meet virtually to negotiate who is to complete which task and to set their own submission dates depending on the project. A broad framework is provided to students about the expected tasks of individuals. Students submit part one online.

Part two of the assessment is augmented marking, where students provide written feedback on another student’s contribution, against the marking criteria. Since the students do not know whose assessment they are receiving, they have limited opportunity to outsource a response. Part three of the assessment requires students to complete their final assessment as a team, incorporating the feedback received from their peers. Their final submission includes their modified task, plus an explanation of how the assessment incorporated (or perhaps, rejected) the feedback provided to them as a diary/journal reflection. A complete public relations plan is submitted, with each student contributing an element. Students use a self and peer assessment tool to grade themselves and the quality and level of contribution from their team mates. This mark contributes to the overall grade of the assessment, so that students receive an individual grade, even though the assessment is team based. The grading system was developed following feedback from students who felt that a single grade was unfair when some students did not contribute equally. The use of the augmented and peer grading is promoted at the start of term, so that students know every step of the team assessment will influence their overall grade. If there is inconsistency between the student’s self mark and the mark from their peers, the unit
coordinator can moderate the mark and identify potential group conflict. There is also a component of the overall grade that is awarded to the group output, so that working as a team forms an aspect of the learning.

3 RESULTS

The deep learning required in this assessment is profound. The task must be real-world and authentic in order to engage students [13]. It must also be possible to complete the task online. Not only do students engage in a real world task, they must understand the task to the point where they can provide feedback to another student about it. In order to complete the full assessment task, students must be engaged at each point of the assessment process. From a marking perspective, the preliminary work of the marker is in a moderated role only. The marker only needs to grade the final submission, not the drafts, and not the student feedback provided. The moderation process commences at the selection of the teams, so the marker can follow the progress of the teams in a facilitated way, without the administrative burden of marking and assessment return, which can be onerous for large cohorts, and without compromising on assessment quality.

From a contract cheating perspective, it is difficult to outsource this assessment. As a real world task, there is no set essay-type format preferred by the larger contract cheating providers, the topics change with each cohort, and students do not know in advance what feedback to prepare for their peers. The assessment design is consistent with reducing opportunity to contract cheat in that the teams are encouraged to meet regularly and take recorded minutes. Contributions are individualized. In the four years where this assessment has been used, there have been no identified contract cheating cases, student feedback comments reveal high levels of support for the approach, and retention to the unit has risen from 82% in 2014 to 100% in 2018. Further, students have embraced the online teamwork concept. In 2012, criticisms of teamwork assessment made up 50% of negative student comments from this unit. In 2015, only 12.5% of negative comments were critical of teamwork, while 33% of positive comments related to a positive teamwork experience. In 2016, students explicitly nominated teamwork as the best part of the unit.

This approach was recognised as best practice teamwork assessment at the 2017 Australian Awards for University Teaching.

4 CONCLUSIONS

There are many benefits of engaging in a teamwork assessment in higher education. In an era of contract cheating, especially online, working in teams with a real client and incorporating individualized reflection is difficult to outsource. But there are other benefits. Virtual team management is a recognised desirable attribute in contemporary work places where more and more people are working online, and there is an obligation for universities to help graduates meet these needs. By introducing a well-managed teamwork assessment, the management and participation in the online team becomes an output of the task itself [11]. Teams ensure input from all students, and encourages engagement throughout term. However, team work assessment tends to be avoided in online tertiary settings, as it is difficult to do well [10]. The assessment from this unit has not always been successful, especially in early iterations. Whilst the assessment features a pedagogical sound design, which considers the risk factors of contract cheating, this assessment has not always been popular with students. The difference was in the academic facilitation and the choice of topic. Success has depended on the student buy-in to the assessment type; being able to identify conflict early and to address it before the team dynamic deteriorates; and recognising the benefits of learning online team management. Consistent with a technology and pedagogy integration framework [14], a competent marker/facilitator, who understands the assessment requirements can make or break this assessment. Clarity in the communication of the assessment requirements and an openness and willingness to respond to student inquiries has assisted with the success of this assessment. This is consistent with findings from first year online students, who underestimated the time university assessment tasks would take, unless guided by a facilitator [15].

This online teamwork approach has been successfully used in other disciplines beyond public relations, such as health science. There is potential for this type of assessment to be used in large cohorts, and is currently being investigated for cohorts upwards of 1000 students. Authenticity in assessment, reflective learning and engaged teaching can all contributed to reduce the opportunity for contract cheating, and to engage students with a relevant assessment that they see the benefit in completing themselves.
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