



Using Proctoring Services for Exams in Online Courses

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Among the new services spawned by the rise of distance education are a number of commercial online proctoring services. A growing number of OSU instructors have begun to utilize these, especially ProctorU and Examity. Online proctoring services dovetail with the institution's LMS and use the student's computer to proctor online exams. Since faculty have a monopoly on the testing methods in their courses, these firms market services to instructors. Their business model is based on offshoring the role of traditional testing centers to low-wage, English-speaking workers at call centers in South Asia, and having American students pay for it at rates comparable to bricks-and-mortar testing centers. The value to students of online proctoring involves the flexibility of location and scheduling. Students take exams whenever and wherever they please at a competitive price, especially when time and transit are considered.



Regardless of the firm, the procedure is basically the same: the service verifies each student's identity, records webcam and screen video during exam sessions, evaluates recorded sessions for evidence of cheating behavior (i.e., eye movement), and reports it all to the instructor. It's a necessarily elaborate system of collecting a lot of evidence and handing it to the instructor. In my opinion, this makes online proctoring fundamentally suboptimal to on-location proctoring. In the real world, proctors can stop a student in the act and perhaps save them from themselves; not so in the virtual world, where judgment comes after-the-fact in the form of recorded evidence.

A year ago, I participated in an OSU pilot of Examity. I required all my online students, other than those with SDS accommodations, to use Examity, at no charge, for their exams. Examity saved me a lot of time dealing with remote testing centers. From an instructor's point of view, I found the service easy to learn and easier to use. I was especially impressed by the speed of the technical support (but of course, this was a pilot). Examity offers several levels of proctoring, from simple identity verification (cheapest) to live proctoring. The service also allows students the luxury of testing anywhere, any time, and they can pay additional fees for short term scheduling.

Students must first register with Examity by uploading a photo of their photo ID, downloading and installing the Examity desktop software, reserving an exam time, and paying for the session. When it's time for the exam, the student logs in and initiates what looks much like a chat on Skype. The proctor introduces himself or herself and conducts an identity check through the webcam before initiating a pre-test security check of the student's testing area by having the

student pick up the laptop or webcam and slowly pan around the walls, floor, and ceiling to check for notes, books, or electronics that the student could access during the exam.

Once the session ends and the student signs off from Examity, the two videos are compiled and Examity runs a diagnostic on the webcam footage to track the student's recorded eye movement, identify any ambient light sources from cell phones and other screens, and identify unusual auditory patterns. Each of these are identified and time-stamped for inclusion in a webpage sent to the instructor containing the entire compiled video recording. Two or three Examity auditors review each video and classify it with a color-coded flag according to their interpretation of any anomalies during the session. If they find evidence consistent with cheating behavior, such as patterned eye movement, reflected light from scrolling screens, sounds of paper, etc., they issue a red flag. The vast majority of sessions receive green flags (no issues) and blue flags (minor issues like background noises). Moreover, in my experience, red flags typically involve accidental interruptions, by roommates, siblings, and pets . . . but not always. Examity is very good at alerting instructors quickly by email and phone in cases of red flag violations. But in the end, it is up to the instructor to initiate disciplinary action.

Although I was initially enthusiastic about Examity, my online students were not as impressed. And after using it for more than a year and experiencing two academic integrity actions based on Examity evidence, I consider online proctoring services to have numerous downsides. I only employ them as options for my students who lack better alternatives. Any instructor or administrator pondering whether to utilize online proctoring services should carefully weigh their advantages and disadvantages.

Chief among their disadvantages are increased levels of test anxiety for students. Exams already raise anxiety levels, especially for online students, who are more prone to procrastination and cramming. Add to this an elaborate protocol of the third-party virtual proctoring service, in which well-meaning, honest students (the vast majority) may fear that any wrong move may invoke accusations of cheating, and anxiety, depending on the student, is likely to interfere with cognitive performance.

Having anticipated this to some degree in the pilot, I settled on using Examity's medium level of security. This involved a real time check-in process in which the proctor first verified the student's identity, had the student perform a webcam room pan to check for contraband, explained rules and instructions, then wished the student well before signing off to allow the student to complete the exam, all of which was recorded, including the student's computer screen, webcam view, and sounds. During the security check, proctors frequently required students to remove items from walls or from within reach of their immediate testing areas. Another contributor to the student's degree of anxiety were communication barriers due to unfamiliar South Asian dialects and the speed of the proctor's spoken instructions, which often left students visibly puzzled and enough to ask proctors to repeat themselves. Finally, even though the medium level of security did not involve a live person watching the student in real

time, and despite my efforts to communicate this to students ahead of time, evidence from my SSI indicated that some of my 127 students assumed they were being watched.

In summary, online proctoring services provide flexibility to online learners, but they are also one more expense for cash-strapped students. Importantly, students should have legitimate concerns about privacy and the potential for identity theft when using them. The instructor who requires students to use online proctoring services should realize that they raise levels of test anxiety while not really serving the same service as bricks-and-mortar testing centers. While they are efficient at collecting evidence of cheating, they cannot prevent every desperate student from cheating. In the end, I find online proctoring services about as useful as tourniquets and fire extinguishers; they're good to have around, but I really don't want to have to use them.

