Ways to Prevent Cheating

At first glance, online testing seems problematic. How can cheating be prevented? How do you stop students from using books and other materials to answer questions? Here are eleven ideas to make online assessment work:

1. **Bring a new mindset to online assessment.**
   Traditional approaches to testing don't work well online. A new mindset is needed. That's not bad; most education experts agree that rote memory testing is not the best measure of learning in any environment.

   In online courses, treat every test as if it were "open book." Use questions that challenge students even if they use resources when forming their answers. This practice is more like our real life tests anyway.

   Treat online testing as a means, not an end. Assessments should not only measure learning, but serve as part of the learning process.

2. **Publicize content, format, rules, and honor codes to students in advance.**
   Students are less prone to cheating if they understand what to expect on tests. Ensure that they are appropriately prepared.

   Post the question formats, test length, and time limitations well in advance. Post study guides that students can use to prepare. In addition, announce rules for the test, especially limitations on the resources students can use. Finally, post your college's honor code so that students are aware of the implications of cheating.

3. **Ask questions that require application of knowledge.**
   The most important way to overcome online cheating (and realistically assess student understanding) is to use application level questions. Essays, case studies, and other complex question types can be challenging to answer even if you are looking at the book.

4. **Only use memory-testing questions to facilitate student progress.**
   There is room for some rote memory questions in online courses. These questions confirm student understanding and establish common context for learning. Instructors can use memory questions to gauge the pace of the course and identify students who are lost.

5. **Use software with test administration features.**
   There are many kinds of online testing software. These packages produce consistent test formatting and grade most questions. Use administration features in these programs to enhance the practice of online testing.

   For instance, Blackboard has mechanisms to not only grade tests, but also provide feedback so students can learn from the questions they miss. For this to work, test writers must include quality feedback and turn on the appropriate options. Other common options include timers, the choice to allow one try or multiple tries at the test, and password protection.
6. **Design alternate forms of the test. In Blackboard, use question pools.**
   One simple but important rule for test security is to make different forms of the test available. Alter question order or write tests with slightly different questions. Once a test is online, it only takes a minute to create alternate forms with cut and paste features.

   In Blackboard, build question pools. When constructing tests from pools, you can randomize sequence or pull a different set of questions (but the same number of questions) from the pool for each student. Once a question is in a pool, it can also be pulled onto other tests in the course.

7. **Learn the writing style of students before testing.**
   A great deal of written communication passes between online students and the instructor. Pay attention to the writing style of students and save samples. Online instructors report that with a little awareness, it is easy to recognize work that is not the student's own.

8. **Use questions that require personal input from students.**
   Require some personal opinions from students in answers. Ask students to provide examples from their own lives. These kinds of personal details are difficult to fake.

9. **Set a reasonable time limit for completion.**
   Limiting the amount of time for which students can access a test makes any form of cheating difficult to implement. Don't be too restrictive, but don't give students forever either. In Blackboard, do not make the test available until the day you want students to begin taking it.

10. **If security is critical, consider local proctoring.**
    Some colleges use local proctoring. When a test is given, students must either visit the college or find a local proctor to monitor their test. For instance, the fire prevention program at Coastal Carolina CC uses firehouses around the state to monitor the tests of online students.

    This approach works if you have willing proctors and time to mail tests to them, but can also create problems. Many students take online classes because they cannot physically attend a course at specified times. Requiring them to test at a particular location precludes the very reason they signed up for the course. So please, use this approach with care.

11. **Don’t worry too much.**
    Finally, online educators emphasize that online testing is more problematic in theory than in practice. They report that the range of scores is similar for online students and classroom students. Test achievement by individual students is consistent with performance in other course assignments. Incidence of cheating is no more frequent than in face-to-face courses.

    Design online tests with care, prepare students fairly, and take a few reasonable anti-cheating precautions. Success is likely to follow!