

Replacing Surveillance Pedagogies with Meaningful Assessments

As more teaching has moved online in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic across higher education, educators are increasingly adopting surveillance techniques and tools to monitor student behavior, especially around tests. These techniques are especially tempting when there are so many other demands being placed on instructors; however, these tools come with ethical concerns and are not typically aligned with effective instructional methods.

Why Resist Surveillance Pedagogies?

Ethical Concerns *

- Giving third parties access to student data (and now, via video, student homes).
- Use of scarce resources and/or charging all students to police the behavior of a few.
- Surveillance affects student behavior, teaching practice, and administrative processes. Reinforcing compliance and submission to authority in an environment that should be emphasizing individual motivation, critical thinking, and internalized ethics.
- Algorithmic surveillance is often based on flawed assumptions about “normal” that disproportionately affect groups that do not fit the developers’ assumptions about ability, culture, race, or gender expression.

Efficacy Concerns *

- Setting up adversarial relationships between students and instructors degrades the community of inquiry - especially for first generation and marginalized groups*
- The stress caused by surveillance degrades student cognitive performance as they focus on compliance with rules, worry about making mistakes, and become hyper aware of being watched.
- The focus on alphanumeric “grades” rather than authentic feedback focuses student attention and effort on scoring rather than learning, which increases the likelihood that they will turn to shortcuts, short-term memorization techniques, and yes, cheating.
- Assessments that require proctoring and that are vulnerable to “cheating” do not typically measure actual learning, or mastery of a topic, only test-taking skills.
- Surveillance technology is vulnerable to the creativity and intelligence of students who see it as a challenge to overcome (better to redirect this creativity to real learning.)
- Assessments that reinforce standard approaches to a topic ensure that only students who align with these approaches will succeed, while weeding out students with atypical, but potentially innovative, approaches to the topic.

Consider Meaningful Assessments*

If you test, make sure it is well designed and meaningful*

- Design tests to be open book (& open Google).
- Design multiple choice questions to test higher-order thinking.
- Test application of knowledge, not just knowledge.
- Replace one high-stakes test with multiple, low stakes tests throughout the semester.
- Associate test questions with case studies and real-world problems.
- Use short answer and essay questions (if practical for grading - consider using local humans to evaluate written tests - including self- and peer-graded).
- Give students an opportunity to offer their thinking behind the answers that they give. This shifts the focus from correct|incorrect to their cognitive process. *

Use Formative and Performative Assessments*

- Make learning goals and standards visible to students.
- Provide multiple ways for students to offer proof of progress toward goals.
- Align assessments with real-world applications of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes represented in the learning goals for a course.
- Provide students with regular access to data on their progress toward specific learning goals through access to rubrics, test results, comparative data, reflection prompts.
- Provide regular feedback to students via instructor, peer, or self-assessments.
- Focus on gradual mastery, rather than high-stakes testing. Allow for low-stakes failure along the way so that students can use these “failures” to inform next steps.
- Review ongoing data from assessments and make adjustments to the focus of the class.

Apply Universal Design of Learning Principles to Assessments*

- Be clear about instructional goals & how quality of work will be measured.
- Scaffold progress toward goals, offer models for managing the learning process.
- Break larger goals into short-term measurable goals for easier tracking.
- Be transparent about the amount of effort and difficulty students can expect from a topic.
- Provide templates for self-assessment (e.g. checklists for quality and completion).
- Provide students with access to data on their progress toward goals (e.g. checklists, comparisons, charts, collections of work, portfolios.)
- Provide (multiple) ways for students to self-assess progress and/or receive feedback (e.g. access to rubrics, peer reviews, models, templates, examples of quality work).
- Prompt self-reflection on progress (e.g. surveys, status checks, learning journals)

Design assessments to be transparent *

- Describe the purpose of an assessment, what skills, knowledge, and attitudes are most important for the students to focus on while doing the assignment.
- Describe the task(s) that need to be performed and the kind of work you expect (e.g. time spent, resources allowed, difficulty level)
- Describe the criteria for success: does accuracy matter most? Or creative approaches to a problem? Link criteria to the objectives of the course and future (professional) applications.

Alternative Tools and Techniques*

Use survey tools to check on progress. Assign a simple reflection survey each week that asks about core concepts, progress on work, and confidence toward the goals of the class. Google, Moodle and Blackboard all have simple survey and questionnaire tools.

Use audience response polls during class to check comprehension & engagement. Ask simple questions between segments of a live class to confirm that students are comprehending key points. Survey tools can do this, as well as “live” polling tools such as Zoom polling, Poll Everywhere, and iClicker. There are also tools with added game mechanics.

Use simple polls or chat responses to assess comprehension in a class. Ask students to rank their confidence level using a number, word, or image. This can be entered in a poll, or simply posted in a chat. Using emojis or weather icons can add a lighter element to the activity.

Give points for completion instead of accuracy. If students are heavily motivated by extrinsic scoring, score based on the completion of an assessment rather than accuracy of the responses (feedback on accuracy can be separated from the recorded points).

Provide checklists for instructional goals and milestones. Create a set of testable goals that students can use to track their own progress (e.g. “I can describe the difference between X and Y” or “I have completed X of the Y self-tests due this month.”) This can be done in a variety of ways; e.g. a survey tool, an interactive PDF form, or an editable Google Doc.

Allow students to explain their answers on tests. Adding an open text question alongside autograded multiple choice questions can help identify if students chose the wrong answer but understood the concept or chose the right answer without knowing that it was right.

Allow students to retake assessments. Practicing and trying again is a key element of developing mastery. If there is a single test that matters most, design for, and allow for, the test to be taken multiple times.

References and Resources

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