Online Proctoring Software
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Overview and Definition
Automatic proctoring services offer instructors the ability to monitor and control students’ behavior during test-taking situations. The program may “lock down” the student’s browser to limit their activities, track activity on their computer, or use microphones and cameras on the device to monitor and report student behavior. Analysis of student behavior may make use of artificial intelligence as well as facial recognition or eye tracking tools. Other programs make use of human proctoring, with proctors actively monitoring student behavior during the exam.

Use of automatic proctoring software has drawn significant attention since the massive and rapid shift towards online learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educause estimates that more than 60 percent of colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada mention a major proctoring software on their website in a way that indicates use of the tool. In addition to more schools using the software, Educause notes that the tools may now be used in a wider range of lower-stakes testing scenarios, such as weekly quizzes.

Why Do You Need to Know?
Proctoring software programs have received significant pushback from students who are required to use them, as well as from some instructors, researchers, and privacy advocates. They point to the significant privacy and equity concerns inherent in monitoring students on their own devices and collecting biometric data while they complete required coursework.

Facial recognition and other biometric data collection programs measure students against a presumed “normal” student who is white, able-bodied, and not engaged in care work, flagging those who deviate from this norm as potential cheaters. Of particular concern is facial recognition software based on racially biased algorithms that fail to recognize the faces of students of color, with students reporting that they are flagged repeatedly by the software. The University of Illinois cited equity concerns as well as accessibility limits of such software in their decision to end the use of Proctorio software after the Summer 2021 term, offering the example of text-to-speech programs being hindered by the use of lockdown browsers. Duke University has pointed to similar concerns in their statement on encouraging academic integrity, which emphasizes alternative approaches to assessment and communication of class and university expectations.

Current Applications in Libraries and Higher Education
Academic library staff may become involved in conversations around proctoring software through...
their roles as instructors and as providers of campus technology. Libraries may be asked to include proctoring programs on computers available for student use. Such a request requires libraries to navigate a difficult space between recognizing both the privacy, ethics, and equity concerns related to the software and the need to provide technology support for students who are required to use such tools for coursework. The resolution passed by the ALA Council in January 2021 against the use of facial recognition software describes their use as “inherently inconsistent with the Library Bill of Rights and other ALA policies that advocate for user privacy, oppose user surveillance, and promote anti-racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion.”

This tension may lead some libraries and their staff to push back against campus use of proctoring software. The Librarians Assembly at Wake Forest University issued a statement outlining the privacy and equity concerns linked to the use of proctoring software and stated that they will “not adopt or promote online proctoring services,” in favor of promoting alternative forms of assessment. In their guide to hybrid and online learning, the James Madison University Libraries advocate “prioritizing authentic forms of student assessment” in their page on proctoring services, and describe the ethical concerns related to the use of the Respondus LockDown browser.

Other units on campus are important partners in conversations about the use and non-use of online proctoring. A team of instructional designers from the University of Michigan-Dearborn has described their experiences supporting authentic assessments when their university discouraged the use of online proctoring software (Silverman et al. 2021). Using CARES Act funding, the university hired additional instructional designers who consulted with individual faculty on assessment strategies. The campus also engaged in broad conversations about using people-centered (rather than technology-centered) methods of assessment. Similarly, Duke points instructors to options for authentic assessments while also encouraging instructors to discuss the school’s honor code and expectations for citation and group work, in order to build a shared understanding of what constitutes acceptable behavior.

Potential Hurdles

Developing new methods of assessment no doubt places an additional burden on the time and resources of instructors who, like their students, are dealing with the trauma and stress of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Calls for additional labor must be made with the understanding that there have been racial disparities in the distribution of the effects of COVID-19 and that the pandemic’s effects in higher education may be felt particularly strongly among women.

Developing alternative assessments for courses where proctored tests have been the norm will likely require significant support from departments and campuses, and perhaps even cultural changes in terms of expectations for how student learning will be measured. Broad changes to student learning assessment will involve both campus-wide and disciplinary conversations about what students are expected to learn and how we can know that they have done so. Silverman and colleagues (2021) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn note that their approach to encouraging authentic assessments demonstrated the importance of a “comprehensive communication strategy” with both faculty and students in order to address the concerns of both groups.

Academic libraries will have to navigate the existing assessment infrastructure on their campuses in order to stake a position on the use of proctoring software, even within their own public computing spaces. Libraries have a wide range of roles in the development of instruction on their campuses, with some having a greater share in the conversation than others. And of course, encouraging the use of online proctoring alternatives requires additional resources from the libraries and its staff, who may already have been pressed into new roles as they developed library services in response to the pandemic. Pushing back against the use of online proctoring software may require the strategic practice of refusal, which brings with it costs and risks (Logan 2020).

Conclusion

In the April 2021 Environmental Scan, ACRL’s Research Planning and Review Committee lists “equity and privacy” concerns of both online...
learning systems and proctoring tools as considerations for libraries evaluating their roles in systems of assessment. While many colleges and universities plan to return to in-person learning in the upcoming semesters, instructors and institutions may decide to proceed with more online or flexible modes of instruction. While technology may make it possible for students to learn in a wider variety of environments, instruction and assessment must be developed in a way that is intentionally equitable and inclusive, and that protects the privacy of students and other patrons in the library. Among their many roles on campus, library staff are often involved in both instruction and the provision of hardware and software that students use for learning. Continuing in these roles will require important discussions about how our own professional commitments to privacy and equity intersect with developing tools for online teaching, learning, and assessment.

References


Further Readings

- The Algorithmic Justice League’s work on equitable and accountable AI