

Cheating In Online Courses: The Student Definition

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Abstract

One of the barriers to faculty acceptance of online teaching and learning is a concern about cheating and the quality of the learning experience. This paper reports the findings of a descriptive survey focused on the students' definition of cheating in the online learning environment.

Keywords: Cheating, online teaching, student perspective.

Cheating is a common phenomenon on American college campuses (Harmon & James, 2008). Among college educators there is a widespread belief that academic misconduct is on the rise (Hard, Conway, & Moran, 2006). However, the problem is not new. A 1952 study at eleven colleges found that nearly two-thirds of students admitted to cheating (Harp & Taietz, 1966). The major difference in today's academic environment is the proliferation of technologic devices for delivering and accessing course information. This issue is central to online course delivery because in the absence of the physical proctoring of course work and confirmation of the student's identification, the question of who is taking an examination or completing an assignment and how information is being accessed is problematic to some faculty and administrators. Educators are concerned about the impact of technology on various forms of academic dishonesty. Some sources have implicated the internet as a major culprit for the high incidence of academic dishonesty (Scott, 2001). However, other sources state that the internet and technology has simplified the act of cheating for those so inclined to do so (Boehm, Justice, & Weeks, 2009). Yet, Herberling (2002) asserts, "a strong case can be made that it is actually harder to cheat online and that it is also easier to detect" (para. 3). While there are numerous publications about the concerns and incidence of student cheating, the more recent discussion has turned to the online learning environment and how it may change the way students approach cheating (Charlesworth, Charlesworth & Vician, 2006).

The number of students participating in college level online courses has outpaced all other forms of distance learning. The growth in online learning opportunities has intensified the concerns about cheating in online courses. In a 2004 Sloan C study, "the majority of all schools agreed that online education is critical to their long-term strategy (Allan & Seaman, 2006). In the fall of 2008, colleges saw a 17% increase in online enrollment with more than 1 in 4 students taking at least one online course or a total of

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more than 4.6 million students overall (Allan & Seaman, 2008). This growth rate eclipses the 12 % increase and dwarfs the 1.2% overall growth rate in the higher education student population (Trenholm, 2007). With such a fast introduction and rapid rise in the popularity of this instructional innovation in higher education, major stakeholders including faculty and administrators continue to discuss and debate the nature and extent of the integrity and quality of the online educational experience. Therefore developing an understanding of what students define as cheating in online learning environments is important to faculty, administrators and students.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies that demonstrate the prevalence of cheating at four-year institutions. The rate of cheating has been found to vary from 30% to 96% (McCabe & Trevino 1977; Payne & Nantz, 1994; Nonis & Swift, 2001; Owings, 2002; Pino & Smith, 2003). Howe and Straus, (2003) identified that students of the millennial generation have no clear distinction between traditional notions of exam cheating and the modern notion of information “morphing” (p. 120) and have a difficulty recognizing traditional operational definitions of academic dishonesty. This is consistent with the findings of Burrus, McGoldrich & Schuhmann (2007) who found that students do not understand what constitutes cheating. Similarly, Higbee and Thomas (2002) found significant discrepancies between the operational definitions of cheating by students compared to those of faculty which may reflect a difference in values related to student and faculty roles or generational differences. Both author groups identify the socialization to a high degree of team orientation and the intense pressure that many feel for academic success among the millennial generation of college students.

A number of studies have examined factors associated with a higher frequency of cheating. However the findings are related to non-course specific factors such as: male gender, membership in Greek social organizations, individuals with low self-esteem, and major in that graduate business student cheated more than graduate students in non-business majors (Eastman, Iyer, & Reisenwitz, 2008; Mangan 2006; McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield 1999). Interestingly in a study by Black, Greaser, & Dawson (2008), it was found that factors known to contribute to academic dishonesty in the face to face class have little influence in online courses. However these factors were not described. Similarly, Spaulding (2009) found no significant differences in students’ perception of the academic integrity of their own behavior or other students’ behavior based on course type (face-to-face or online).

Grijalva, Nowell & Kerkvliet (2006) found that teachers and institution of higher education perceived that the frequency of cheating would be higher in online courses because students and faculty do not interact directly. However, in a follow-up survey of students, they discovered no difference in the reported incidence of cheating in online or tradition classroom settings (Grijalva, Nowell & Kerkvliet, 2006). Both students and faculty perceive that cheating occurs more frequently in virtual classrooms because online students are often believed to be more tech savvy than their ground-based classmates or are less

likely to be detected by faculty who are unfamiliar with online detection techniques (Grijalva, Nowell & Kerkvliet, 2006)

Overall, the literature on the extent and determinants of cheating on college campuses is quite extensive. The evidence supports that student cheating does exist and it is non-course related factors that influence the incidence of cheating. From the existing literature there is support that cheating is an action of the individual. However, most of the existing empiric work is focused on cheating in general and does not examine whether cheating behaviors are different or unique in online classes. Consequently there is a paucity of literature on what constitutes cheating in online courses. The purpose of our study was to begin to fill this gap in the empiric literature, by developing an understanding of the definition of cheating in an online course, from the perspective of the student.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to understand the meaning of cheating from the perspective of the student. As part of a larger cross-sectional, non-experimental survey, participants were asked to share their definition of cheating in the context of academic course activities in the online environment.

Using purposeful sampling, students enrolled in fall 2009 courses on one of the university supported online course platforms (Blackboard and e-College) were contacted. A message explaining the purpose of the research and inviting their participation was sent to all enrolled students. Students were directed to an online data collections site to anonymously respond. Submission of their response to the WEB-site's secured server was evidence of the student's consent to participate. The study was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the university's department of institutional assessment and evaluation.

Participants were asked to respond to a single open ended item, what is your definition of cheating and to complete demographic descriptors for the purpose of describing the composition of the respondents. There was no personal identifying information; such as the student's logon credentials, student ID or computer IP address linked to the response.

Responses were collected and analyzed for evidence of common words that give meaning to the definition of cheating. A qualitative approach to data analysis which includes an inductive phase to identify dimensions of cheating behaviors as perceived by these participants and a deductive phase to reduce the data to common themes was used. Evidence of common themes is exemplified by quotes that provide a rich description of a component of the behavior.

An audit trail was established through the field notes maintained by the lead researcher during the initial reading and re-reading of the data and by coding and tracking schemata used in the analysis and reduction of the data. These notes include bracketing to control for research bias and the researcher's impressions associated with exposure to the data during the encounter.

Results

A total of 1028 students responded. Because many students are registered for more than one course and may be enrolled in courses on both the university's course management systems, the percentage of the population responding to the survey is impossible to accurately calculate. However, the demographic characteristics of the sample are similar to the proportion of on line learning across the university with one exception. This sample has a higher than expected representation of freshman. The reason for the over-representation of freshman is related to the freshman reading program online community site being on the university's blackboard server. Respondents were sixty percent undergraduate students, mostly female, and represented all of the university's colleges. Fifty-four percent of respondents were 26 years of age or older. Demographic attributes of the respondents are provided in Table 1. Three themes, breaking the rules, dishonesty and not using your own brain were evident in over 60% of the responses. The process of completing course activities was the focus of these replies.

Table 1: Attributes of respondents (n=1028).

Student Attribute		Number	Percentage
Class level			
	Freshman	119	11.5
	Sophomore	77	7.5
	Junior	169	16.4
	Senior	245	23.9
	Graduate	418	40.7
College/Major			
	Arts and Letters	127	12.3
	Business	253	24.6
	Design and Social Issues	93	9.1
	Education	222	21.6
	Engineering and Computer Sciences	72	7.1
	Honors	29	3.2
	Nursing	100	9.7
	Sciences	56	5.3
	Undecided	76	7.1
Gender			
	Female	728	70.8
	Male	300	29.2
Age			
	Less than 18 years	7	0.6
	18-21 years	268	26.4
	22-25 years	206	20
	26-35 years	239	23.2
	36-45 years	133	12.9
	46-55 years	132	12.8
	Over 55 years	43	4.1

Six hundred and seventy-four respondents (66%) referenced doing something that is contrary to the university honor codes or policies, course expectations, professor's guidelines or the syllabus as the standard for identifying a behavior as evidence of cheating. Typical responses illustrative of the theme breaking the rules include:

- “Using resources expressly prohibited by the professor to complete an assignment.”
- “Breaking a rule on the syllabus.”
- “Doing an assignment or taking a test in any way that has not been defined by the professor.”
- “Gaining information using ways the professor has not authorized.”
- “Using sources other than those permitted.”
- “To obtain the answers by deceiving the professor.”
- “Breaking the rules of the exam (expressed or implied). The implied area can be tricky, as some people see cheating as being resourceful and will exploit anything not expressly outlawed.”

In their descriptions of cheating, students consistently mention behaviors that were outside the rules or authorized sources. However, a number of respondents noted that there are differences in the “rules” for online and classroom courses.

- “They are different for online and traditional courses. Online professors usually tell you if a test is open-book or proctored.”
- “Looking at material to help you during a test. But in online courses one can look at the book and class notes, but you can't look up the answers online. That is one advantage of taking online courses.”

When an individual's actions, behavior or conduct was not consistent with a set of policies or expectations from a specific source such as the university honor code, course syllabus or professor it contributed to the theme of dishonesty. This second theme of dishonesty is broader than simply breaking the rules. Dishonest behaviors involve those norms of wrong behavior that go beyond a specific situation or course activity. Dishonesty is determined by the accepted norms of society's behavioral expectations and includes misrepresentation, lying, stealing and buying goods. Student's responses indicating dishonesty included:

- “Misrepresenting assignments as your own work, when they are not.”
- “Presenting work that is not yours as your own.”
- “Lying, getting answers in advance, for example, storing answers on the memory of a calculator.”
- “Buying papers, stealing answers and copying others work. All the things your mother taught you were dishonest to do.”
- “Doing something that you could not tell your parents or professor.”

The final theme evident in a majority of the responses was “not using your own brain”. This theme focused on the authentic nature of the work as a representation of the individual’s learning and knowledge.

- “not using one’s own brains to do the work”
- “Intentionally using an answer that you did not come up with on your own and that you would be unable to explain how to arrive at that solution on your own.”
- “not using your own thoughts or ideas.”
- “submitting work that does not originate from yourself.”
- “Not using your own mind.”
- “Submitting answers that are not of your own creation.”
- “Getting information for a test from a source other than your own mind.”
- “Turning in what is not yours, information that you did not discover by your own means.”
- “Not using your god given equipment (Brain) to succeed.”

A second group defined attributes of cheating by focusing on the tangible outcomes of cheating. Approximately 39% of respondents included a reference to using unfair advantage to gain benefit in their response. In all cases, the benefit or gain mentioned by the student was a passing or higher grade.

- “Using someone else’s work or brain power for your benefit.”
- “Obtaining information by non-ethical means to pass a course, test or assignment.”
- “Using someone else’s work to get a better grade.”
- “Taking advantage of information or resources, known only by the cheater, to improve their grade.”
- “Using unconventional means like stealing exams or information and buying answers or assignment in order to excel.”
- Any advantage used to improve your grade that is not available to everyone.”

Finally a small percentage (3%) of students were unable or unwilling to define cheating or indicated that cheating only occurred if the person was caught.

- “Cheating is hard to define. I see nothing wrong with students helping each other when it comes to school work and testing. It’s all about learning together and passing the course.”
- “I don’t know.”
- “I don’t want to think about it.”
- “I don’t think it is a problem.”
- “Its not cheating unless you get caught.”
- “To test online and not expect people to cheat would be unrealistic. People are opportunistic and will take advantage of situations when given the chance.”

- “As long as the student is willing to put their name on the work, it is not cheating.”

While this final theme represents a small minority of the respondents it is important to note that a portion of the student hold these beliefs.

Discussion

The major finding of this study was that the majority of students in the online environment were able to define cheating. Across all the definitions was recognition of the unique characteristics of online learning and that there are differences between the expectations in an online and classroom based course. A clear majority of these students identified breaking the rules, dishonesty and not doing the work as behaviors emblematic of cheating. While these behaviors are internally motivated, the students noted they are influenced by the boundaries of the learning behaviors established in each course by the faculty. These students did not view cheating as a means of succeeding. However, slightly more than one-third of respondents did perceive cheating as a way of achieving success. These participants defined cheating in terms of external motivators or the tangible outcome, most frequently better grades. These findings shed considerable light on the students' perspective of cheating in online courses and have implications for faculty teaching in the online environment.

The results of this study indicate that students look to faculty to set the boundaries of acceptable learning behaviors. Faculty need to establish and communicate the boundaries of acceptable learning behaviors in online courses. Faculty and students need to acknowledge that these boundaries in an online and electronic-based environment will vary from the boundaries in a classroom and paper-bound course. Instantaneous information access is an advantage of the online learning experience: students are not confined to the resources the faculty brings to the class setting. But faculty while nurturing skills in seeking knowledge and connecting in the online world need to establish the boundaries on the role of accessing information as related to student learning assessment activities. Also, in online courses, teamwork and collaborative activities are often intertwined with individual assignments. It is incumbent on the faculty to make a clear distinction between which aspects are individual work and which aspects are collaborative work. Online course platforms have many ways to support a learning environment that rewards effort, perseverance and positive learning behaviors. Faculty need to be knowledgeable of these mechanisms and use them to facilitate positive student learning and to establish the boundaries of acceptable learning behaviors.

From a sociologic perspective cheating is conceptualized as a form of deviance and involves a consideration of the norms to which the members of a system are oriented and subsequent deviation from the expectations (Bowers 1964). The majority of students in this study cited behaviors consistent with a sociologic perspective of deviance as their definition of cheating. Understanding students' perceptions of cheating in online courses is important for faculty and course developers. Perceptions are influenced by past experience, memories, expectations and the context in which any given experience occurs.

Perception is the result of a process through which the brain organizes and interprets what happens in one's environment. One reason it is important to understand perceptions is because perceptions provide a valuable reflection of the belief that individuals hold, in this case, a reflection of the students' beliefs about academic dishonesty. Beliefs are the foundation of actions. If a student does not believe that an act is cheating, they are likely to do it. Therefore it is incumbent on faculty and course designers to provide students with clear guidelines and boundaries about the acceptable and non-acceptable behaviors and actions. In designing online courses, faculty need to consciously design learning activities and assessments that are multifaceted and collect data about the unique learning experiences of each student and to minimize the opportunities and the temptation to cheat.

In conclusion, this study provides faculty and administrators knowledge about student's perception of the definition of cheating in online courses. The word of one student's reflection illustrate the meaning and implications of cheating to the overall learning experience and what it means to 'earn' one's degree.

I define cheating as being dishonest and disloyal to yourself [sic]. What would you really get out of a course if you cheated half way or the whole way through just to pass exams, get assignments turned in on time and pass the course? What would you learn from that? How would that make you feel if you were walking up to the stage to receive your diploma and shake the hand of the President of the university, knowing that you cheated 25%, 50%, 75% or the whole 100% of your college career just to graduate? I know what I would think: "I cheated for all this!"

Knowledge about the unique aspects of online learning environments is critical to faculty and administrators in maintaining the quality and integrity of the higher education experience.

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