Academic Dishonesty in Postsecondary Education: A literature review

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1. Abstract:

Academic dishonesty is found at all levels of schooling from grade school to graduate school and is a growing problem at postsecondary institutions. Students acknowledge that many forms of cheating are wrong; for the most part, they say they know there are policies concerning academic dishonesty yet many choose to cheat anyway. As well, and more worrying is the finding that there is a high likelihood that cheating in school may be indicative of cheating in other settings. This article provides a review of literature concerning academic dishonesty in postsecondary institutions. It discusses peer influence, moral reasoning, motivation, neutralization and as well as western society and what some describe as its culture of cheating. As well, the role of the postsecondary institution and its impact on academic dishonesty is discussed. Reflections from the author are also included.

Key Words:

academic dishonesty, cheating, peer influence, moral reasoning, motivation, neutralization, technology

2. Introduction

Academic dishonesty within postsecondary institutions is a significant issue. Numerous studies report that students are cheating at increasing levels (e.g. McCabe & Trevino, 1996; Allen, Fuller & Luckett, 1998). Cheating calls into question the quality of an institution's academic program, the value of its degree and the capability of its graduates. As such, academic dishonesty has been the subject of more than 100 studies over the last 30 years. The reasons for who, how and how often students cheat are as numerous as the studies. Yet, the data provided by this research have done little to curb the dishonesty problem. It appears academia does not have a complete understanding of the issue.

Academic dishonesty is more than just a student problem. We are living in a world of technological access to almost unlimited informational resources. Students report crushing workloads and impracticable timelines (Parameswaran & Devi, 2006; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2004). They participate in a learning environment where individual scholarship is held as the model of true accomplishment, yet seeing the individual student is difficult in the crowded hallways and huge lecture halls. We are living in a culture that tolerates some forms of cheating while condemning others (Callahan, 2004). If students in postsecondary programs are cheating at ever increasing rates, there may be cultural influences enabling this behaviour.

The terms academic dishonesty, academic misconduct and cheating appear to be used interchangeably throughout the literature. The Centre for Academic Integrity defines academic dishonesty as dishonest behaviour related to academic achievement including cheating, plagiarism, lying, deception and any other form of advantage unfairly obtained by one student over others (1999). Academic misconduct continues beyond the classroom to include forging or altering university documents, writing a paper for a student, and damaging or hiding library resources (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006). Cheating is seen as a type of behaviour rather than a characterization of a particular student act. It involves a recognized ends and a restricted means (Rozycki , 2006). Many researchers see cheating as a cognitive process involving some form of planning (Grualva & Nowell, 2006).

The research pertaining to academic dishonesty is extensive, yet often contradictory. Part of the problem may lie in the way most of these data were collected – mainly through quantitative methods. According to Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne (1997), such studies make the assumption that the definition of cheating is universal and that students' understanding of the terms is universal. However, their qualitative study found that students often do not have a deep understanding of cheating and plagiarism (1997). Academic institutions and their faculty members often assume their policies and associated punishments are clear, but the research suggests this assumption is false (Paterson, Taylor & Usick, 2003). This review of the literature discusses the many components concerning the issue of academic dishonesty, including the contradictions found within the research findings.

3.   Who is Cheating

Although research pertaining to why students cheat differs greatly, the research about who does most of the cheating is fairly consistent. In a questionnaire-based study of 291 postsecondary students, Szabo and Underwood (2004) confirmed earlier studies when it was determined that more males cheat than females – 68% compared to 39%. Third year students were less likely to cheat than first or second year students (Szabo & Underwood, 2004; Brown, 2002). International students or students from different cultural backgrounds (i.e. not North American) have been identified as a group who demonstrate a high level of academic dishonesty (Park, 2003; Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). This has been attributed to differing cultural expectations around academic writing as well as a lack in language skills (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). Students who have an active social life are more likely to cheat (Straw, 2002). Younger students cheat more often than mature students (Straw, 2002). Some studies found that students with lower grades cheat more than those with higher grades (Cummings, et al., 2002), but other studies refute this through data that suggest no correlation between grades and cheating. In a 1994 survey of 191 nursing students in the southern USA, researchers found there was no correlation either between cheating and a student's maturity and ability level (Daniel, Adams & Smith, 1994).

4.   Why Students Cheat

The complexity of the issue of academic dishonesty is evident by the diversity of reasons provided for why students cheat. Researchers argue students cheat due to

ignorance (Jocoy, 2006; Pickard, 2006) poor professors and teaching environments (Hinman, 2002; Rabi, Patton, Fjortoft, & Zgarrick, 2006; Anderman, 2007), inadequate policies and penalties regarding academic dishonesty (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Martin, 2006), peer influence (Brown, 2002; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2003; Myrick, 2004; Petress, 2003; Rabi,, et al.,2006), to improve grades (Cummings, Maddux, Harlow, & Dyas, 2002; Underwood & Szabo, 2004), opportunity (McCabe & Trevino, 1993), the Internet (Baum, 2005; Bruster, 2004), procrastination (Roig & Caso, 2005) underdeveloped moral reasoning (Austin, Simpson & Reyen, 2005; Clark, 2003; Lindh, Severinsson & Berg, 2007; Szabo & Underwood, 2004), the need to get a good job (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001; Miller, Murdock, Anderman & Poindexter, 2007); and a cheating culture (Langlais, 2006; Callahan, 2004; Vojak, 2007). In many cases, these results were obtained through self-reported surveys of students and faculty, some of them involving thousands of students. For example, in 2002 to 2003, the Centre for Academic Integrity at Duke University conducted a study with data collected from 54 colleges and universities (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2006). Students have acknowledged cheating behaviours, they have checked the appropriate box for the reasons behind the cheating as defined by the researcher, yet the issue remains perplexing and unresolved. In a study of cheating among graduate business students, researchers were only able to determine 12% of the variance in cheating suggesting that the survey did not provide enough variables from which students could choose to explain their cheating behaviours (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2006).

In 1963, Friedenberg stated that the strongest influences on a student are family and school (as cited in Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004) – however, recent literature shows a shift toward a student's peer group being the most influential (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001). Not only is cheating increasing, but it is becoming more socially acceptable (Vojak, 2007). Johnston notes in her 1991 study that students will cheat if they feel it is unlikely they will be get caught and that being caught by their peers was not considered a problem (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). Drinen states that solving the problem of academic dishonesty is compromised when students feel a loyalty towards each other in that there is a reluctance to "rat" on each other (1999, p. 32). In their study, Rabi, et al. (2006) found that 65% of students would not report a fellow student who cheated. This is a concern for professors, particularly in medical fields like nursing and pharmacy, where under their codes of conduct, professionals are obligated to report dishonesty within the profession. Students demonstrated more allegiance to their peers rather than to their profession (Rabi, et al., 2006). This attitude was confirmed in a 2000 survey which found that students were unwilling to monitor the behaviour of other students – this was the role of the institution (Hendershott, Drinen & Cross, 2000). This loyalty to peers may be attributed to the growing distance between the professor and the learner. Postsecondary classes have become so large that students look to each other for assistance (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). This perception was confirmed in Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne's study where they found students failed to condemn cheating behaviours with the justification that "all have their reasons" (1997, p. 198). Thus the importance of peer influence and support appears to play a major role in student culture.

5.   Morality and Motivation

Many faculty members blame a breakdown in moral reasoning or low ethical standards as the reasons that students are cheating (Paterson et al, 2003). Faculty members and universities report that some students do not see cheating as a moral issue. Morality is often described as the beliefs of an individual that guide that person to make decisions that are good or bad, right or wrong (Myrick, 2004). Morality is developed through both the influences of society and one's personal understanding, hence there are variations in beliefs among individuals. Students appear not to see the connection between cheating in school and its impact, or its relationship to their proposed professional life (Clark, 2003).

A number of quantitative studies have been conducted on moral reasoning. For example, in 2004 researchers tested 220 postsecondary students to determine the level of moral reasoning students had in relation to their levels of cheating (Bernardi, et al., 2004). In a 2004 study, participants were asked to estimate on a scale what a person would do in response to particular scenarios. They found was that cheating behaviour was not associated with moral development (Bernardi, et al., 2004). This supports a 2002 study of 145 teacher education students at an American university where researchers found that more than 76% of students who had the highest level of moral reasoning engaged in some type of academic dishonesty with the same frequency as those students with lower levels of moral reasoning (Cummings, et al., 2002).

If moral reasoning is not obviously correlated to academic dishonesty at least by quantitative measures, some researchers also considered theories of motivation and goal attainment. Motivation is the inner state that drives a person to act in a way to accomplish a goal (Daniel, et al., 1994). Abraham Maslow's Need-Goal model (1970) states that humans have five categories of needs: 1) physiologic; 2) security; 3) social; 4) self-esteem; 5) self-actualization. Daniel et. al., argue that the role of education is to enable students to self-actualize. If something were to impede that goal, students may perceive cheating as the only way to reach it (1994).

6.   Neutralization

Albrecht, Wenz and Williams developed a theory concerning the elements that must be present for fraud, or in this case, cheating to occur: 1) pressure; 2) the possibility of not getting caught; and 3) the ability to rationalize the action as acceptable, to neutralize it (as cited in Bernardi, et al., 2004). In studying academic dishonesty, neutralization, the third step, becomes an important factor. Neutralization, or deflecting blame, is a process of explaining or legitimizing one's dishonest behaviour rendering it neutral or no longer dishonest. In a 1986 study of 380 students, a correlation was found between cheating and neutralization behaviours (Daniel, et al., 1997). Neutralization enables students to achieve the rewards of long-term gain with little or no consequences. A 2004 study of 220 postsecondary students found that students were able to rationalize their dishonesty (Bernardi, et al., 2004). Even when at the highest level of moral reasoning, students were cheating in response to a system they believed is subjective or unfair. In a 2006 survey of more than 500 postsecondary students in the U.K., students were cheating because everyone else was (Pickard). In the Paterson, et al., (2003) study, they found that dishonesty was framed positively by students.

Students lacked a sense of remorse or acknowledgement of the acts of cheating on the educational process. Cheating was something the "smart" student did to remain competitive (Paterson, et al., p. 189).

7.   Western Culture

Academic dishonesty in North America is a cultural construct of western society. In western society, intellectual work is seen as "property," therefore, it is a product that is owned. Ownership of ideas and words are the basis for research where knowledge is built on the shoulders of those before us. One must acknowledge those who have provided the theoretical platform on which researchers stand. Whereas scholarship was once a relatively limited profession, the advent of technology and the Internet has increased one's access to research and knowledge. There is vast amount of information available to students, most of it "owned" by someone else. The process of teaching students about academic dishonesty becomes a process of "enculturation" (Ashworth, Freewood & Macdonald, 2003, p. 261). The cultural complexity surrounding plagiarism increases the confusion for students and academics (Leask, 2006). This is a particularly difficult concept for international students in whose culture academic dishonesty is defined very differently (e.g. more communal cultures) or for those students for whom English is an additional language. In western culture, the original voice is valued and held up as the ultimate scholarship. For many newcomers, the ideology of the original voice is unfounded, with the belief that there is no original idea or voice. Hence, as Canadian and global classrooms become more diverse, the "dishonesty" problem appears to increase.

8.   Is there a cheating culture?

In a 1972 study, 93% of college students stated that cheating was a normal part of life (Smith, Ryan & Diggins). McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield (2001) found that one of the reasons students cheat is the need to succeed in postsecondary education in order to get a good job or get into graduate school. Willen (2004) suggests this need not be dismissed. "This need reflects an anxiety about the future, an anxiety reinforced by their experiencing higher education as professional preparation that is a highly competitive high stakes endeavour" (p. 56). Vojak states that "academic moral compasses" are moving as students equate their education to career and monetary success (2007, p. 178). It is of concern to academics that students who would not consider stealing money or other goods are cheating in school. There appears to be a split in student perceptions of cheating. Some students are less likely to perceive all types of cheating as having the same level of dishonesty, for example, some students do not consider that working with a friend to complete an academic paper is as serious as cheating on exams (Tanner, 2004; Austin, Simpson & Reynen, 2005; Del Carlo & Bodner, 2003). David Callahan, author of, The Cheating Culture, Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead, notes this duality is prevalent in American culture (2004). Stealing such as shop lifting is considered wrong by most Americans, but manipulating circumstances in an effort to evade taxes is encouraged (Callahan, 2004). In a recent example, as reported by the New York Times on February 19, 2008, U.S. Senator and Democratic candidate Barack Obama admitted to using unattributed parts of a speech previously delivered by his friend, the governor of Massachusetts. His challenger U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton

stated that his plagiarized campaign speech was an indication of Mr. Obama's character and appealed to the public based on those facts. In response, the constituents of Wisconsin chose to ignore the "error" and voted in the primary for Mr. Obama over Ms. Clinton.

Cheating is often overlooked when it comes to money and career (Callahan, 2004). Education has been described by students as an investment in one's future; a degree carries with it an economic pay off (Vojak, 2007; Myrick, 2005). "If money holds the solution to problems and the key to a successful life, then getting money becomes the primary goal, and education is viewed as the foremost strategy to achieve that goal" (Vojak, 2007, p. 186). The media refer to economic scandals like Enron, WorldCom, and more recently, Conrad Black. (Black is a Canadian businessman who was convicted in the U.S. of fraud and obstruction. As a student at Upper Canada College, Lord Black was expelled for academic misconduct – selling stolen exam papers.) Greed and the drive for material success have infiltrated all aspects of society (Callahan, 2004). Market-place values have become the basis for decisions made in an educational setting (Vojak, 2007). Furthermore, in education, dishonesty to achieve academic success is not limited to students. For example, in 2004, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that allegations of misconduct by scientific researchers had reached unprecedented levels (Langlais, 2007). It is becoming more difficult for universities to model standards of integrity when students perceive their own teachers acting dishonestly within a society that ignores many aspects of cheating.

9.　　The Role of Technology

Recent literature suggests that the Internet and technology play a role in the increased number of students cheating. Harper (2006) states there was a positive correlation between academic dishonesty and the increased use of technology in education. Computers and other high tech equipment have changed the way people communicate, work and study (Myrick, 2005). The prevalence of digital resources provides an environment where academic dishonesty such as cut and paste plagiarism can be extremely easy (Center for Academic Integrity, 2005). This is supported by a 2003 study which found that 94% of students were sufficiently experienced with the Internet to use it for cutting and pasting resources. Students were accepting of Internet dishonesty with 50% saying they would use it to cheat to avoid a failing grade (Underwood & Szabo, 2004). Szabo and Underwood found that the majority of students were sufficiently skilled to cheat using the Internet, with 32% admitting to plagiarizing using Internet resources and almost 8% cheating this way more than once per week.

10.　　Factors in Higher Education

Just as there is a variation in the data as to why students cheat, there are many inconsistencies concerning what roles the faculty member and institution should play. Faculty members are seen as those on the "front lines" policing student work on the "hunt" for any form of misconduct. For many faculty members, this is not a role they want to play (McCabe, 2005). Studies show that in many cases, faculty members know of cases of cheating, yet choose not to pursue them (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004; Hendershott, Drinen & Cross, 2000). Reasons for this include unclear definitions of what

exactly constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Challenging a student can be extremely time consuming. The procedures for confronting a student who has cheated may not be clear. Others feel that the institution does not provide the tools or training for properly conducting these challenges (Leask, 2006). In a 2004 survey, most faculty members handled incidences of cheating on an individual basis believing it to be a problem between the instructor and student (Ercegovac & Richardson, 2004). In their study of 82 postsecondary students, Schraw et al. found situations such as the lack of monitoring on high stakes exams increased cheating (2007). As such, some students are cheating because they can. They know that some faculty members are reluctant to pursue some forms of academic dishonesty or that the policies surrounding dishonesty are unclear and therefore, able to be successfully challenged (Austin & Brown, 1999).

Institutions may be encouraging plagiarism by putting students who have achieved high marks on a pedestal (Willen, 2004; Anderman, 2007). When students see that it is the level of achievement that is honoured rather than the steps taken to achieve those marks, it may actually encourage cheating within student ranks. Therefore, instructional practices where there is competition for grades are associated with cheating (Anderman, 2007).

Constructivist theory states that reality is constructed, a claim which would suggest the importance of examining the beliefs of teachers, students and the larger school as these beliefs may have an impact on the students' beliefs about and behaviour toward learning. For example, in traditional lecture halls, chairs are locked down with the focus on the podium – this reinforces a transmission method of teaching where the expert delivers information to passive novices. Often, postsecondary education emphasizes the individual over cooperative learning where there is competition for limited rewards (Toohey, 2002). It is the perception that power is in the hands of the teacher and institution. In the theory of internal/external locus of control, success or failure can be attributed to people's ability to control their environment. For example, a person with an internal locus of control feels responsible for his or her own success or failure (Cranton, 1989). A person with little external locus of control perceives the self is powerless and attributes success or failure to luck, fate, or other powerful individuals (Cranton, 1989). In Fassett's 2001 study, he interviewed postsecondary students to determine their beliefs around the role of education, educational success and failure. He found that students had both an internally and externally controlled beliefs about educational success, but that they dismissed their own internal beliefs in favour of those of their teachers and schools. According to Fassett, their understanding of success and non-success were psychological constructs (2001). Students believed they were working outside a system over which they had no influence or control, but that had power. This is supported by a 2004 study that found, some students were cheating in response to a system they found non-responsive (Bernardi, et al., 2004). These students perceive education as an individual endeavour rather than a social one where success means meeting the needs of the instructor (Fassett, 2001).

11.   Summary

The literature review exposes a western society where many forms of cheating are ignored or encouraged (Callahan, 2004). The role of postsecondary education has

changed where students now attend school to obtain a job that will provide for them a satisfactory economic future (Vojak, 2007; Willen, 2004). As such, being goal oriented was correlated to cheating (Miller, et al., 2007). Schools themselves have grown to be large institutions with classes of hundreds of students. The growing distance between faculty members and students may turn students towards their peers for support and understanding (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). The workload for students is extremely demanding where survival becomes the ultimate goal. The availability of technology makes access to resources a simple endeavour. Access to the Internet has been correlated to higher levels of cheating (Harper, 2006). Students themselves believed most of their fellow students were cheating (Brown, 2002). Faculty members themselves, the gatekeepers of academic integrity, are somewhat reluctant to challenge students as the institutional policies are vague (Paterson, et al., 2003). The result, students cheat because they are able to with little chance of getting caught. A student's level of moral reasoning does not appear to have an impact on the decision to cheat (Cummings, et al., 2002; Daniel, et al., 1994;) yet neutralization, or deflecting blame and responsibility, does appear to have a direct correlation (Bernardi, et al., 2004).

12.   Reflections on the Issue

How has this research impacted the way I teach? In a previous course I taught to first year students, I made certain that students understood the full definition of academic misconduct from assisting a student with a paper to hiding books in the library. It is an eye-opener for students who are shocked and often challenge the breadth of the infractions. It is obvious, and supported by the research, that students do not have a full understanding of academic dishonesty. I also require their first paper to be on the impact of academic dishonesty in their discipline. Again, this reinforces the severity and implications of such behaviours when they research real-life examples.

As is supported by the research, I see students struggling to cope with the volume of material they are expected to know. Students no longer have the time to sit on the lawns of their institutions and debate the concepts – those days appear to be long over. I remember discussing this issue with a colleague from Carleton University who had been teaching first year chemistry for more than two decades. Over that period of time, the textbook required by students had more than doubled in size. What was considered fundamental knowledge continues to increase. There is just so much to know. In contrast, we as educators love to learn it. As educators, we have the privilege of working in a field that is also our hobby. However, many of our students view it differently and are finding it difficult to cope.

Which brings me to the point that I find most troubling. It appears that learning is no longer valued. Going to school is valued as long as it leads to a career, but the process of learning itself has little value. I often hear faculty members lament that students are only focused on grades and not on the process to get the grade. Is it really puzzling when our society puts so much emphasis on the paper – the artifact that results when a student has completed the educational process? The artifact is what is important and it must have direct connections to the marketplace. How often have we heard, "why get a degree in English – what kind of job will that get you?" The learning required to obtain that degree in English or many other disciplines is not valued. The

former premier of Ontario, Mike Harris, stated that we have too many philosophers, insinuating that a degree in philosophy has little occupational value (Teitel, 2002). This from the politician with the jurisdiction over our educational system.

So, education is directly associated with economic life and death. Is it any wonder that students are fixated on summative success? Is it any wonder that when hundreds of students are sitting in a lecture hall with little chance that their instructor will ever know their names, that they can justify to themselves how, just this once, they will copy an assignment because they just don't have the time or skills to do a proper job that will get them an "A"? Is it any wonder that students aren't keen on learning when they sit in darkened lecture halls listening to an instructor read PowerPoint slides for three hours?

13.   What are we doing? What can we do?

As educators, we have responsibilities. We need to do more to involve our students in the learning process. This is hard work, I know, with little support from other elements of the profession - administratively, politically and socially. It is similar pushing a rock up the mountain. (If you are reading this journal, chances are high that you are keen to improve the learning taking place in your classrooms. However, I'm sure you have many colleagues not as keen to take a proactive approach to improve learning.) We must take on the responsibility to teach our students about what it means to have integrity – for some students, it may be too late, but for most, they will hear the message. Educators must do more than police for misconduct, but uphold and support integrity. In a society that is so focused on WIIFM (what's in it for me), the benefits of integrity may have to be reiterated over and over again. We want to create a culture of integrity in our educational institutions.

Donald McCabe has written extensively about the benefits of honour codes in assisting to reduce the frequency of academic dishonesty. What he found was that it wasn't just the honour code, per se, but the culture of integrity that supported it (2001). Honour codes won't solve the dishonesty problem, but creating a culture that supports and respects integrity may have an impact. This is not about policing students, but creating an environment university wide that exemplifies integrity at all its levels.

Academic dishonesty is an extremely complicated issue and as such, there are no easy answers. However, gaining a complete understanding of all its components while putting the emphasis on integrity may be the first steps in dealing with this escalating problem.

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