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Cheating in Online Courses: A Qualitative Study

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Editor's Note: This is an interesting yet disturbing paper. The effects of cheating have always been difficult to assess. This is a serious and uncomfortable academic concern in classroom teaching and learning and in online classes.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways students have cheated in online courses. Ten students who had either cheated in online courses or knew of others who had cheated in online courses were interviewed for the study. The participants' responses to the interview questions were analyzed using qualitative methods of data analysis. The results show that the majority of the participants had cheated or knew of someone who had cheated in online courses. Working together with other students, referring to class notes, textbooks, and other useful course materials while taking online tests and quizzes, and using Internet resources were some of the methods students used to cheat in online courses. One student reported that she was paid to complete an entire course for another student. This unique finding of the study can be labeled 'paid impersonation.'

Introduction

Distance education has evolved alongside technology over the past two centuries. From its humble origins in correspondence courses, to radio, television, teleconferencing, and now offered online, distance education has always been a convenient way for students to get an education. Distance education has been in demand for quite a few years at the university and college level in both the United States and other countries. In the United States distance education is also becoming popular in the K-12 level. Clark (2001) reports that virtual high schools, like The Florida Virtual School, are the latest paradigm shift in education. The trend has grown considerably in the first decade of this century with nearly 50,000 students taking online courses in over 40 virtual high schools across 14 states (Clark, 2001). This is a clear sign that distance education is popular in the United States.

Distance education has also seen a large growth over the past few decades. Daniel (1996) reported 11 mega-universities across Africa, Asia, and Europe. In 2009 it was reported that there are 24 mega-universities across the globe (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). These mega-universities deliver distance education methodically to the millions of students that they seek to educate. The growth of these mega-universities proves that distance education is an international phenomenon.

At its best, distance education has brought educational opportunities to uncharted regions where qualified teachers were not available to enrich the academic experience of the student body. Barbour (2007) illustrates that this was case in Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada during the late 1980's. This area in Canada was, at the time, a region where educators were hard to come by. The educational stakeholders were eager to provide high quality education to their student populations. After receiving funding from the Canadian government, the provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador expanded their course offerings through distance education. The first of these courses were offered in the disciplines of advanced mathematics and the hard sciences.

The Newfoundland and Labrador example illustrates how online classes can help provide equity to disadvantaged students. However, online classes, as well intentioned as they might be, are not immune to the Law of Unintended Consequences because, with use of the Internet came serious concern about plagiarism, cheating, and the validity of distance education. Students enroll in large numbers in distance education courses and programs, for several reasons including convenience and flexibility (Braun, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

A most pressing concern in the context of distance education is academic dishonesty. We live in an era where copying-and-pasting is the norm and cheating is not considered a serious offense by the student body. Therefore, such behavior often goes unnoticed and unpunished. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which cheating occurs in online courses, the different ways of cheating, and how such behavior can

be minimized or eliminated. The study will use the information gathered from published sources as well as data obtained from interviews to achieve its purpose.

Summary of the Relevant Literature

Students engage in academic dishonesty for numerous reasons. These include a wide range of academically unacceptable behaviors. This study focuses only on how students cheat on quizzes, tests, and exams while they were enrolled in online courses. Studies on why students take part in this type behavior have concluded that students do so because they can rationalize their behavior (Lindsay, 2008), their grade point average is important to them (Wotring, 2007), to remain academically competitive (McCabe, 2005), and reap the benefits of advancement (Willen, 2004). Other reasons for cheating include ineffective disciplinary actions taken by educational institutions (Etter, Cramer & Finn, 2006: Leonard, 2008; Leonard & LeBrasseur, 2008), and the differences in values placed on physical versus electronic property (Willen, 2004). As Fulkert and Kustron (2002) noted, most students now view Internet content as public domain and taking passages from various websites is not a vice.

Studies conducted in Romania (Teodorescu et al, 2007), United Kingdom (Lindsay, 2008), New Zealand (Lindsay, 2008), and various universities in the United States (McCabe, 2005; Price & Price, 2005; Kelley et al, 2005; Wotring, 2007) have concluded that around 47% to 88% of students have committed some type of academic dishonesty such as cheating and plagiarism, at least once, in a face-to-face course.

In a traditional face-to-face class academic dishonesty can take various forms: copying answers from another student, utilizing unauthorized materials, copying verbatim from textbook (Jacoy & DiBiase 2006; Teodorescu et al, 2007). However, with online classes there are more options for committing academic dishonesty while taking the class such as texting or instant messaging a friend for the answer, copying verbatim from an online source and coercing a friend to take the class for you or sit adjacent to you with the intention of aiding you throughout the course.

The research conducted by Kelley et. Al. (2005), Teodorescu et al (2007) and Wotring (2007) demonstrate that gender is insignificant when trying to determine who is more likely to commit academic dishonesty. However, the research shows that the likely of cheating is higher for student athletes and those who were enrolled in religious schools (Kelley et al, 2005). Hours of employment and extracurricular activities (Teodorescu et al, 2007) do have an effect on who is more likely to commit academic dishonesty. Furthermore, students with high grade point averages, a commitment to strong mastery goals, and a belief in the honor code were less likely to commit academic dishonesty (Wotring, 2007).

The integrity of the learning process is an integral part of receiving a formal education. Prospective employers rely on a student having learned the necessary skills to successfully and competently overcome the challenges in any given situation. With all institutes of learning having addressed this issue as part of their mission statement, why are so many of them failing? Research studies on academic dishonesty estimate that 45% to 88% of students have cheated at least once in face-to-face settings throughout their academic careers (Kelley et al, 2005; Lindsay, 2008; McCabe, 2005, Price & Price, 2005; Wotring 2007).

Selection of Study Participants

The researchers sought and received the required approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). An instructor within the College of Education at a large public university located in the southeastern part of the United States was contacted via e-mail and asked if he was willing to allow the researchers to come to his classes and recruit students for the research study about online classes. He replied to the e-mail stating that he was willing to participate. Soon thereafter, a time and a date that was convenient for the researchers and the instructor was set.

The researchers visited one of the classes taught by the cooperating instructor and informed the students that they were doing research about online or distance education. The researchers asked if any of the students have completed courses fully online either during their high school years or in a college or university to step outside. Then we asked the remaining students if they themselves have, or if they know of others, who have cheated in online courses. Then we asked those students who answer in the affirmative if they would like to participate in a research study and be interviewed anonymously. Several measures were taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants. If students and faculty know each other and/or have been enrolled in courses taught by the PI or Co-PI of this study, these students were not included in the study. We set up a date and times for the interviews. We then informed them that refreshments and snacks will be provided during the in-depth interview process. Five students from this class participated in the study. Five more students, who were enrolled in another course also taught by the cooperating instructor, were interviewed for the study. The course instructor asked students in the class who had completed courses online to volunteer for the study. The researchers had set up a room next door to the room where the class was taught, and the instructor sent

the five students one at a time to be interviewed by the researchers. One student could not be interviewed because she had previously enrolled in a course taught by one of the researchers. This was done to comply with the IRB guidelines under which permission was granted to conduct the study.

During the interview process refreshments and snacks were provided to participants. Before the interview began we ask the participants to not identify themselves so that we can guarantee them total anonymity. Also, the responses of the participants were not videotaped nor audio recorded. We felt it was necessary to ensure that neither the research nor the participant knew each and thus we asked once again have been enrolled in courses taught by the PI or Co-PI of this study . These measures were taken to guarantee the total anonymity of the participants. Some participants had more information to share than others therefore, the length of the interviews ranged from 6 minutes to 22 minutes. The average interview time was 12 minutes and 48 seconds.

Sex, Ethnic and College Major Distribution of the Sample of Participants

The breakdown of gender, race, and major of participants is shown in Table 1.

What courses have they or their close friends or relatives completed online?

The interviews revealed that students are taking a considerable amount of online courses and so are their friends. The participants took courses mainly in the social sciences and mathematics while most of their friends took courses involving mathematics. This is not surprising because most Early Childhood and Elementary Education majors struggle with mathematics early in their college career. Their strength lies in the social sciences and that they take these courses online because it is an easy way to advance and receive a boost to their grade point average at the same time.

Have they cheated in online courses, and if so, how?

Participants were asked if they had cheated in an online class and the following responses were given six of them said "yes," while four of them said "no." Participants were asked if they knew of someone who had cheated in an online course. These may include significant other, friends, or classmate to which the eight participants said that "yes" they knew someone who had cheated in an online course. Of those only two said that "no" they did not know of anyone who had cheated in an online course. This supports the findings in the literature review that a good portion of students have cheated and are not doing so in online classes. The methods students are using can be placed into three general categories: collaboration, course materials, and other resources.

Table 1

Gender, Race, and Major of Participants

Participant	Gender	Race	Major
1	Male	White (Non-Hispanic)	Criminal Justice
2	Female	White (Non-Hispanic)	Elementary Education
3	Female	Black (Non-Hispanic)	Elementary Education
4	Female	Hispanic	Elementary Education
5	Female	Hispanic	Elementary Education with Environmental Science minor
6	Female	Hispanic	Early Childhood Education
7	Female	Hispanic	Sports Fitness with Education minor
8	Female	Hispanic	Elementary Education
9	Male	Hispanic	Psychology with Education minor
10	Female	Hispanic	Special Education

Collaboration

During the interview process one of the most frequent responses can be summarized as collaboration. Classmates and their friends would get together and work on assignments. They also would take test and quizzes together. During the course of the interview one Participant #6 did not consider this cheating at all. She went on to rationalize her behavior saying that the instructor "[did] not specify about working groups." During test, this same participant admitted that she and two of her friends would work on test together. While one student was testing "the other two were helping."   Participant #1, #2, #5, and #10 tell a comparable story. Participant #10 recounts her "friends would help [her] do the assignments and test."

Using Course Materials

During the interviews it was discovered that, during test and quizzes, students used maps, notes, formula sheets, and their textbook. Participants #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, and #9 admitted to using these materials or knew of someone who had used them. Interestingly enough, Participant #5 considered using a map for a geography exam as "lightly cheating." Participant #9 admits that she used a "book during an exam." Similarly, Participant #7 recalls that her boyfriend often used his textbook during a test. She revealed that during his tests, he had unlimited time to take a test, but even with the help of his textbook, it would "take him 2 to 3 hours" to complete a test.

Internet and Other Resources

Since the classes are online, students are resorting to other forms of cheating. The first form of cheating that they use search engines such as Google to look for answers to the test. Participant #4 mentioned that she used "Ctrl + "F" to find the answers scattered throughout the notes in the module. Participant #3 mentioned that some her friends are using the Internet and search engines such as Google to find answers to the test. This is not always the case. Participant #3 pointed out that when she tried to open a browser window it "shuts down the quiz." Participant #5 shared a related story that when she was taking quizzes and tests "…all access to the Internet and the whole computer" were locked.

The participants revealed they were aware of the cheating because they had been part of the group of students who cheated in the class by working together on tests, quizzes, projects, and assignments. Also, during casual conversation among their friends and classmates, they had discussed the matter and had admitted to participating in such a behavior. Some of the participants had witnessed other students cheating.

Paid Impersonation

Shyles (2002) describes two very important types of academic dishonesty that are important to online classes in distance education: impersonation and misrepresentation. The unique finding of the study conducted was 'paid impersonation.' We define 'paid impersonation' as one student pretending to be another student for a fee, and enrolling in and completing the course for another student. It was revealed that in high school one of the study participants took Geometry and Liberal Arts Mathematics through a virtual school that offers courses at the K-12 level. In these courses the participant was paid to impersonate another student.

How can cheating in online course be either minimized or eliminated?

There might be ways to minimize cheating in online classes but one participant felt that it was not possible. In the discussions several types of responses emerged. They covered a broad range of topics that include rules, penalties, technology, and assessment.

Rules and Regulations

After speaking to the participants, it was obvious that cheating is a relative issue. Where one person might see cheating another one might see a technicality. It was mentioned that the instructor was not specific about what is considered individual work and what is considered group work. Participants felt that one way to eliminate cheating in online classes is to have clear expectations about the course. The instructor should create work that does not force them to cheat. Another suggestion that was mentioned was to make online classes worth fewer credits/units.

Penalties

To reduce the behavior students could be subject to harsher punishments by university officials. The students felt that harsher punishment would be a viable option in reducing the behavior.

Technology

It was mentioned by the participants that the instructors should find a way to block all access to other parts of the computers and block access to the Internet. To avoid the possibility of looking back at the lesson notes,

the questions should be written in a different format. If courses were offered in a hybrid manner, with a part of the class offered online and part of the class taught face-to-face, this might eliminate cheating. If this is not possible, have video chats with the students.

Assessment

If the test and quizzes are to remain online, the student should have just one attempt at the assessment. The questions within the test should be randomized. After the assessment is complete, withhold the answers until the deadline has expired. A consistent response among the participants was that test and quizzes should be in person to avoid cheating. The perception that tests and quizzes should be taken in a face-to-face manner was a very popular response among students. This is not a cure all because as one student points out "some professors don't care." Lastly, it was recommended that the instructor reveal the answers to a test or quiz after the deadline so that the answer do not get passed down to another student.

An extreme measure that the participants felt could eliminate cheating in online classes was to eliminate online classes completely but they concluded that was "unrealistic."   And three participants felt that eliminating cheating in online classes is impossible because cheating is "inevitable."

Is cheating easier online or in face-to-face courses and why?

During the discussion this was a question that participants were consistently asked as a follow up question. Overwhelmingly eight of the ten participants felt that cheating was easier in online courses. One of the participants felt that it was easy to cheat in both situations and one answered with "I don't know."

Other thoughts on the topic of cheating in online courses

When asked to give their final thoughts on the matter, students felt that the amount and the type of cheating that occurs in online classes are "not too bad" and "not a serious problem." Even though it happens, they felt that it was not worth removing online classes. Students cheat regardless of whether they are in a face-to-face class or an online class, therefore it was not worth eliminating the convenience of having classes online. Overall, students liked online classes and stated that they will continue taking them, especially those students who live off-campus and who travel back home during the summer months.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that students and their friends are cheating in online classes. They are collaborating with another on tests, quizzes, assignments, and projects. They are also using their notes, textbooks, and the Internet to look for answers. A unique finding to this study was paid impersonation. In this particular case a student was paid to take two high school mathematics classes offered by a virtual school for another student. It is worth investigating if this phenomenon of paid impersonation is happening on a large scale.

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