

Editorial

Cheating

Looking at my online students' discussion on the bulletin board recently, I found the topic that engaged most interaction was one that I would not have thought worth instigating. The topic was what the students perceive as the problem of academic dishonesty. Apparently, according to research cited by the students, 70% of American high school seniors and 75% of college students reported having cheating at some time during their school careers. Some people think there is particular concern about dishonesty among distance learners who may

download an assessment, look up the answers before actually taking it, and share those answers with classmates. Instead of using crib notes or writing answers within the margins of the textbook or on the desktop, students simply use the “verboten” sources during the assessment. (Olt 2002)

According to Anderson (2001), students often download a manuscript from one of the many paper-mill Web sites, make a few edits on a word processor and submit the paper as their own work. Anderson goes on to explain how such plagiarism can be detected using Web-based search engines, such as Alta Vista, Google, or HotBot, while Rowe (2004) is cited to explain other ways of preventing cheating and plagiarism. These include the obvious and well-tested techniques of having examinations proctored and having instructors put effort into designing questions that defy reproduced responses.

I suppose the reason I do not warm to this topic is that I feel any system worth its salt should be able to devise procedures for deterring and detecting plagiarism and other forms of cheating, just as any instructor worth his or her salt should be able to spot such behavior with little difficulty. As an instructor, I believe I know my literature well enough to notice when a student uses unattributed material and I know my students well enough to recognize work that is not their own. Further, it has always seemed to me that any students who pay money to enroll in a course are foolishly wasting their time and money if they avoid the exercises designed as part of the course. However, it is possible I am being naïve, and I certainly recognize I am privileged in the kind of students that take my courses—most are practicing professional educators. They are in touch with different student pop-

ulations, and if they believe the problem of cheating and plagiarism to be a significant one, I have to accept it probably is so.

A very different topic came to my attention in the same week I was reading my students' thoughts about cheating. This was a newspaper report by journalist Nick Gordon (2004) about the conditions under which Major Berrington Mkoma is being held prisoner in Zambia. Apparently Mkoma, after performing heroically with the United Nations' forces in Rwanda, was imprisoned in Zambia on trumped-up charges of conspiracy against the government. Widely considered to be a scapegoat and innocent of wrongdoing, Mkoma not only suffers mistreatment as a prisoner, but also suffers from cancer. As has been the case with many political prisoners before him (Nelson Mandela being one of the most famous), some sense of purpose and direction to his life in prison is provided by distance education—in this case a complimentary enrollment offered by a private correspondence school in Britain. As reported by Gordon,

He shows me a certificate from the Cambridge International College. I see his name on it, a successful candidate in business administration. ... Pointing to the certificate he says, "... I have completed three courses now and I am waiting for my final examination papers before I go for the fourth course. After December I am eligible to enroll for the second-year study in a BBA. ... I try to put all of this," he says, looking around the cage, "to the back of my mind. I can console myself with study."

I found this story very touching. Not only does it illustrate the traditional core mission of distance education, which is to bring opportunity for learning to the otherwise deprived and underprivileged members of society, but also it surely puts into perspective the shameful need for discussion among our highly privileged students about cheating on assignments and exams.

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References

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