

STUDENT ETHICS IN ONLINE COURSES: SOME CASE HISTORIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Organizational Leadership and Supervision (OLS) program at Purdue University Calumet (PUC) has offered online instruction since 1998. PUC is a regional campus located in northwest Indiana and serves approximately 9100 students, of which about half are traditional students and about half are non-traditional returning adult students. The OLS Program is a part of the Manufacturing Engineering Technologies and Supervision (METS) Department, and the program offers many service courses for other majors, in addition to the engineering technologies majors. The OLS has a wide range of offerings including certificates, associate, and bachelor degrees.

As the online course offerings have increased since 1998, the instructors in the program have experienced instances of suspected and confirmed cheating by students in different courses in the program, involving various types of written assignments and most forms of testing. This paper will discuss the University policy on student ethics, specific instances of student cheating, and how instructors have addressed the issues of cheating in online courses. Measures to counteract cheating and penalties will also be discussed.

2. UNIVERSITY POLICY ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Instructors on campus are strongly encouraged if not required to include a statement of the University's academic honesty policy in their class syllabus. (Student Handbook [1])

Ethics are an integral part of being a student and a professional. Academic integrity is the hallmark of this University. PUC does not tolerate academic dishonesty in any form. If a student breaches the integrity policy, the student risks sanctions for both academic and conduct violations. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the unauthorized use of another's intellectual property (plagiarism), and lying to an instructor or other University employee. Such actions will result in a failing grade on the assignment with the strong

possibility of course failure. There is also the strong possibility of referral to the Office of the Dean of Students for a conduct sanction.

This statement has been included in online courses as a statement made in the online course syllabus or included in course information. The University's policy also appears in the Student Handbook. Both of the authors of this paper test their online students on the syllabus, so that students are required to become familiar with all aspects of the course structure and policies, including the academic honesty policy.

The University is currently reviewing its policies on academic honesty, and has proposed an honor code along the following lines: (Faculty Senate Resolution [2])

I understand that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated at Purdue University Calumet. I am here to learn. Through learning, I will strive to become a better person and a more valuable contributor to society. I understand that dishonesty in the classroom, through cheating, plagiarism, or other dishonest acts, defeats this purpose and disgraces the mission and quality of a Purdue University Calumet education. Therefore, I make the following pledge: in accordance with the Honor Code, I will not engage in dishonesty in my academic activities, and I will not tolerate such dishonesty by other students.

Despite the existence of an academic honesty policy which is widely distributed on both the departmental and University level, many instances of confirmed and suspected cheating in online classes have occurred.

3. SPECIFIC CASES OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

3.1 Student or family "teams".

In one instance, both husband and wife took an online course. The husband took the online quizzes first, and then the wife took the quizzes second. The wife got As nearly 100% of the time, and her answers to quizzes were identical to husband's (down to typographical errors, etc.). While the spouse situation is less common, it is suspected that pairs of students frequently benefit from each other's work by passing along quiz content, or by helping one another take the online quizzes. Two heads are always better than one, at least for taking tests. In this same vein, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the "pairs" concept sometimes expands into a "committee" or a "team" effort with several students taking the same test. The fact that most online tests are administered over a three or four-day testing window for student convenience very likely increases the likelihood of this type of self-help cheating.

3.2 Plagiarized research papers

In one instance, a student turned in a paper, which clearly did not appear to be student work. Although this type of thing happens more frequently than instructors like to admit, wrong-doing is seldom easy to show, and often nearly impossible to prove. In this instance, the paper was found online after a brief "Google" search by the instructor. Even though the paper was peer

reviewed by a group of students, not one student reviewer raised the issue of possible plagiarism in spite of the unusually well-groomed appearance of the paper. When the cheating student was confronted with the source of the paper, he acted extremely surprised. This led the instructor to conclude that the paper was obtained from another source, and the student didn't know that this was "double plagiarism". The student attempted to redeem the situation by saying that he agreed with everything in the paper, so it really expressed his views. Obviously, a flimsy copout on the student's part, but it was complete justification in his mind.

3.3 Obtaining copies of the quizzes/tests

Since the procedures for online testing have not yet been perfected, students can easily print copies after they finish taking the test. Our course management system even gives students the correct answers. To do otherwise causes most students to become extremely stressed at not knowing how they did on the test. Consequently, most instructors try to test with as few questions as possible to keep the outflow of test questions low. Although the test printouts are not immediately helpful to the student taking the test, these printed test copies can eventually find their way into the hands of other students. Although most online courses utilize a large bank of questions, from which random drawings are made, resourceful unethical students can often find several friends to supply questions for each test.

However, rather than hunt down copies of a given test, unethical students will feign computer problems after signing on to take the test just so they can print out the test questions. The range of excuses includes the old standard about the power going off to the new innovative excuse of a cat jumping on the keyboard. Once they print out the questions, they know there will be at least a few of these questions in the next randomized set they get when the test is re-taken. Those few questions may make the difference between one letter grade and another on the test. Of course, the one caveat here is that this strategy falls apart if they cannot convince the instructor that they really had computer problems and that they deserve another chance to complete the test. As a result, unethical online students sometimes become skilful con artists before they finish a course.

3.4 Obtaining outside help during quizzes/testing

It certainly is not unusual for students to suddenly get smart after doing poorly on the first online tests. In those cases, one must assume that the students are either studying more or they are receiving unauthorized outside help. A review of their previous grades will usually give the instructor insight as to whether the students are making an honest effort or just getting someone else to do their work. In blatantly obvious cases where outside help is being used, the instructor will notice that the test scores do not correlate with the other forms of assessment. For instance, one foreign student could not write a coherent sentence in his case analysis assignments due to language problems, but he got straight A's on the online tests. The incongruence could not be ignored. It was also difficult to ignore the obvious, which was that this particular student was a very attractive young man who, the instructor observed, just happened to have several English-speaking girl friends who had previously taken the course.

3.5 Use of books/notes during “closed book” tests/quizzes

Although most online tests are designed to be “closed book,” it is nearly impossible to prevent students from using unauthorized resources. Regardless of the time limit put on tests, students are known to organize their notes and papers in such an efficient manner that they have immediate access to most of the pertinent details. This is especially true if students participate in a team effort. When instructors attempt to counter these actions by reducing the testing times, the students are extremely vocal in demanding longer testing periods. Even good students complain if the testing time is reduced because they want time to review their answers. No amount of reason will change students’ minds on this topic. Consequently, there is a fine line between what amount of time is fair to get a true assessment of a student’s knowledge without leaving the door open for cheating. The time constraints are a hotly debated issue in every class.

4. HOW INSTRUCTORS HAVE ADDRESSED CHEATING ISSUES

Instructors in online classes have adopted a number of methods to deal with cheating or the possibility of cheating in online courses.

4.1 Honor Codes

One method is to include a course contract or honor code pledge in the course, which the student electronically signs by entering his/her name and submitting the document to the instructor. A sample course contract is included at the end of this paper. It is much easier to uphold decisions or penalties imposed on a student as a result of dishonesty if the requirements are prominent in the information given to or made available to the students.

4.2 Randomized testing or Randomized Answers

Another method of reducing or eliminating cheating is randomized testing. One author of this paper uses random tests drawn from a large pool of questions. It is unlikely that any two students will get identical questions on a quiz. There may be some overlap, but it is likely to be so minimal as to be unhelpful to the student even if they have test questions from another student. It is also possible in some testing programs to randomize the answers, so that even though the questions are the same, the answers appear in a different order on each student’s test. This is often enough to discourage or prohibit cheating through the use of another student’s answers. For example, in the case of the spousal team, a randomized pool of questions would keep the second spouse from benefiting from the first spouse’s answers/information.

4.3 Timed Testing

Timed testing can also be of help in preventing or minimizing cheating. If the test is timed appropriately, students will not have time to look up the answers to test questions. Guidelines on how long to give on a timed test vary, but for a true/false, multiple choice type of test, one minute per question should be more than adequate. This minimizes the use of books or notes during a test which is intended to be a closed book test. The authors also recommend a narrow

testing window (a week or less) to minimize the possibility of answer sharing among students or coordinating their efforts to take tests as a team.

4.4 Testing Centers and Proctors

If possible, an online instructor can arrange for on campus testing, or testing in an agreed upon site with proctors available to monitor student activities. If a student has excessive problems with being “dropped” from quizzes and asking that the test or quiz be reset for later access, our policy is usually to allow the student one such instance. If the instance is repeated, we request that the student come to campus to take the test on site. This helps prevent instances of students accessing the test, printing out the questions, and then asking for later permission to re-access the test with answers in hand. Randomized testing also helps address this kind of problem.

4.5 Unusual email addresses or test statistics

Reviewing the test results for abnormal statistics or other anomalies in the course can also be useful for the instructor. In most cases, the grades follow a normal curve that is similar to the traditional classes. It is seldom that the suspicious scores start showing up. However, it does happen, and instructors have to be mindful of the possibility.

If two students have similar email addresses, it may indicate a family relationship which may present the opportunity for unauthorized collaboration. If two or more students start getting identical scores, an investigation should be conducted because this is unusual. Moreover, having a student achieve very high scores in the face of prior poor work may also indicate a situation which bears investigation. In the case of plagiarized papers, instructors are often made suspicious by a sudden drastic change in the quality of student work, or an extremely advanced level of writing which does not usually characterize student work.

5. PENALTIES IMPOSED BY INSTRUCTORS

In the instances mentioned above, the penalty imposed by the instructor was failure of the assignment in which cheating was confirmed. As is often explained to the student, one cannot be given a grade for work one did not do. Although instructors have the option of failing the student in the course, few instructors in the program have yet to take that step. Also, there is a general reluctance to report the student to Academic Affairs for further action. For most instructors, the thought of students being expelled from the University for cheating seems excessive. However, that attitude is quickly changing with the new ethical standards now being implemented at Purdue University Calumet. There has been much discussion among the faculty for the need for enforcement, and uniformity of enforcement, for academic dishonesty. At faculty meetings and convocations the consensus seems to be that all cases of dishonesty must be turned in to the office of Academic Affairs. While there seems to be a generalized feeling that all the departments on campus experience this problem to some degree, the lack of uniformity in enforcement and centralized reporting make it difficult for the University to track just how large or severe the problem is. The move in the faculty senate to develop an honor code with an

enforcement body which includes student members has been the result of the faculty interest in this issue. The move to an honor code is still being made, so that there is no instructor experience with the new procedures and policies.

5. CONCLUSION

Issues of academic honesty are important in today's educational environment, and student ethics have been discussed frequently. See for example references [3]-[8]. While plagiarism is commonly discussed (especially the ease which the Internet affords students) [3], [4], issues of using technology such as wireless devices to cheat in traditional courses have also been on the rise. [5] In online courses, cheating on exams is often discussed in the literature. [6], [8] Online instructors have been using some techniques which also work with traditional courses, such as multiple test versions, and also some new techniques made possible by the technology, such as randomized tests from question pools, and monitored access to tests. [7]

Issues of honesty are especially important in online courses since distance learning programs have grown tremendously in the last few years. More importantly, it is disturbing to most university faculty to find that students are generally not the least bit remorseful about finding ways to beat the system. Therefore, there is a significant challenge to find ways to balance the convenience of online classes with the need for better ethical standards and behaviors among our university students.

REFERENCES

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- [4] Sterngold, Arthur, *Confronting Plagiarism*, Change, May/June 2004, Vol. 36 Issue 3, p. 16.
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- [6] Harding, T.S, Carpenter, D.D., Finelli, C.J., and Passow, H.J., The Influence of Academic Dishonesty on Ethical Decision-Making in the Workplace: A study of engineering students, *Proceedings of the 2004 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference*
- [7] Steuver, JoDell K. and Harter, Nathan W., *Cyber Cheating Challenges in Web-based Courses*, Proceedings of the 2004 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference
- [8] Lo, Jenny, Gregg, Michael, Waldron, Sally and Robinson, Rose *Blackboard Collaboration: Consolidation of On-Line Course Materials and Assessment for Multiple Sections Using Blackboard*, Proceedings of the 2004 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference

APPENDIX

SAMPLE COURSE CONTRACT

1. Course Contract

By signing the contract below, I acknowledge that I:

- Have read the syllabus and understand that my course grade is based on readings, assignments, and online discussions.
- Will access the course site at least twice a week.
- Have access to a computer that I can use to complete my course work.
- Understand that if my primary computer is unavailable or is unable to function properly with Vista, I will need to come to campus to use a computer.
- Am responsible for understanding how to use the technology required in this course, including sending email with attachments, creating documents in Microsoft Word, taking assessments online, and submitting assignments online.
- Understand that late assignments will not be accepted.
- Understand that the instructor will send personal messages to me through the mail system within Vista and that I will check my Vista mail regularly.
- Acknowledge that I have read and agree to abide by the University's academic honesty policy.
- Can expect regular and timely feedback from the instructor (typically within 36 hours) and that I can contact my instructor via email through the course mail system or at instructor@calumet.purdue.edu, telephone at 219-989-xxxx, or in person in Anderson xxx.
- Will receive a grade on each assignment that represents the quality of work submitted and follows the grading rubric supplied with the assignment.

Sign this contract by typing in your name.

1.

Course contract originally written by Dr. Elizabeth Osika, Purdue University Calumet