

How to deal with academic dishonesty

Cheating and plagiarism are important issues in the University and must be kept to a minimum. A survey of 6000 students at 31 small to medium sized universities in the United States in 1990-91 found that two out of three students admitted that they had engaged in one of the many forms of cheating! And a longitudinal study on the issue of cheating by McCabe & Trevino (1996) showed that in the past 30 years, the number of students who cheated has increased from 63% to 70%. The study found that students are engaging in a wider variety of test cheating behaviours and are also cheating more often! Students believe few cheaters are caught and that punishments for cheating are generally lenient.

No similar study has been conducted in Hong Kong, but the issue is definitely one which warrants much concern. Cheating and plagiarism are not easy to identify or to deal with. As Alan Wright Director of the Office of Instructional Development, Dalhousie University mentioned in their publication *University Teaching and Learning*, academic dishonesty only occurs if there is an intention to be dishonest. What appears to be dishonesty may simply be caused by misunderstanding or inexperience. For example, it may appear that a first year student is guilty of plagiarism, when in fact, she is simply too inexperienced and inflexible with her second language. Or she may not understand what plagiarism is and why it must be avoided since she has been positively reinforced for a long time for her exact recitation of others' words, including her teacher's notes. Therefore, it is most important that we educate our students before we discipline them!

The discussion here will focus on strategies to prevent cheating. For University's guidelines on handling cases of academic dishonesty, please refer to HKUST 1995 Faculty Handbook, Chapter 5 Section 8.

Suggestion #1

Have a discussion with your students at the start of the semester and ensure that they understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. Spell out the punishment for violation.

Jacobson (1993) at the University of Georgia designed a Plagiarism Test with 15 true-false questions to find out how much her students understood about the subject. She administered the test to her class at the start of the semester and after the compilation of the results, discussed the findings with her students with examples showing ways to avoid plagiarism. Jacobson also mentioned that during the process, she became more aware of the difficulties of avoiding plagiarism in disciplines like science and recognized that some of her students did have difficulties in expressing themselves effectively with their limited language skills. She shared Wright's remarks that "A student who puts all ideas into his own words is likely to get a lower mark than one who copies but is not caught." and thus advocated feedback and coaching to students in their writing, in particular. Sometimes, a solid lesson on how to acknowledge and quote from others has to be given.

With permission, the test is reprinted here:

Plagiarism test

Directions: Circle T if the statement accurately completes the sentence or circle F if the statement does not accurately complete the sentence. Circle T or F for each of the fifteen sentences.

Plagiarism is:

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 1. The act of passing off someone else's work as your own. | T
F |
| 2. Using a phrase that someone has previously developed without recognizing the originator of the phrase. | T
F |
| 3. Copying word for word from a book without placing the statement in quotes and identifying where the quote was taken from. | T
F |
| 4. Extensive assistance from other people on a paper. | T
F |
| 5. Using sections of someone else's homework assignment. | T
F |
| 6. Looking at another student's examination during a testing situation. | T
F |
| 7. Conferring with fellow students during an examination period. | T
F |
| 8. Allowing another student to copy from your examination. | T
F |
| 9. Copying portions of sentences from a text and only referencing the author at the end of the paragraph or paper. | T
F |
| 10. Having someone else write your paper. | T
F |
| 11. Using another person's ideas without acknowledging that person. | T
F |
| 12. Allowing another student to copy sections of your paper. | T
F |
| 13. Signing another student's name on an attendance sheet. | T
F |
| 14. Permitting another student to sign your name on an attendance sheet. | T
F |
| 15. An act that can result in expulsion from the university. | T
F |

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Source: page 29 of the *University of Georgia, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies Graduate Student Manual (1993)*.

Key: All statements are true

Cockriel from University of Missouri developed another way to help his students understand what plagiarism is. At the start of the semester, he sent an email to all his students, asking them to define plagiarism with some of their class mates and send him their definitions of plagiarism by a certain date through email. He assured his students that their effort to turn in the definitions would be counted for credit and all comments from students would be compiled and sent to all class members. He did receive some very insightful definitions and the most important of all, “they are words from students, not the prof!”

Suggestion # 2

Create an environment where academic dishonesty is socially unacceptable through academic honour codes.

This practice is getting more popular nowadays in the United States and is supported by studies on the issue. McCabe and Trevino reported in their survey that 53 percent of students attending schools that did not have honour codes self-reported one or more instances of test cheating whereas only 29 percent of students at honour code schools did so. As the two researchers mentioned, there is no simple explanation for why honour codes reduce cheating, but their success suggests that students respond positively to such strategies that place responsibility on them for governing and adjudicating issues of academic dishonesty. Students appear willing to accept this responsibility in exchange for the privileges often associated with honour codes, such as unproctored tests.

The setting up of an explicit institutional policy concerning academic integrity is always the first step in creating such an environment. The faculty’s commitment to exercising the policy and their efforts to help students understand the policy is the second. For example, students at Kingston University, UK are required to sign a “declaration” at the start of their studies in which they acknowledge that plagiarism is in breach of the University regulations. They are informed of the possible penalty and have to ensure that “ Except in the case of designated group activities, I understand that all work submitted for assessment will be the result of my own efforts. SIGNATURE” (Source: Stuart Marks)

Another “honour pledge” used by Pat Cabe in her class is “I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on this test. SIGNATURE”. The statement is printed on every test and it is expected to be signed before any marking is done.

McCabe’s article also mentioned that in University of Maryland at College Park, students are actively involved in promoting academic integrity through a variety of strategies—asking students to sign an Honour Pledge as part of the application process; establishing an Honour Council, which makes various presentations about academic integrity on campus throughout the year; and recommending strategies that professors can use to minimize cheating in their classes.

Suggestions for administering a test:

- Re-state the penalty clearly at the beginning of the class, e.g. expulsion, an “F” grade, certain points to be deducted from the final grade, etc.;
- Make certain you are in the room all the time;
- Seat students randomly in alternate chairs;
- Check students’ ID photos;
- Spend some time at the back of the room: students who want to cheat will turn around to see where you are;
- If you have suspicions about students but are not sure, allow them to finish the exam, but take notes on what you have observed;
- Do not allow students to rush chaotically to turn their exam script in at the end of the period;
- Before grading the papers, log them on, so you will know immediately who did not submit one.

Suggestions for marking written assignments:

- Read carefully to check for plagiarism, paraphrasing and citation without acknowledgment. Copying is more likely to occur if students believe that their teacher does not read their assignments carefully;
- If possible, ask students to present or explain their ideas in the assignment to see if they understand it or not;
- Give them help when they are preparing their paper is the most positive way to prevent plagiarism;
- Change your assignments every semester, if possible.

Suggestions for setting multiple choice questions:

- Use alternate forms;
- Randomize test questions and answers.

We do believe that most students are basically honest. Most cheating incidents are slips resulting from momentary panic. As teachers, we can set good examples and demonstrate to our students what academic integrity means. We can make it clear to them that cheating is unacceptable and back up our words when it becomes necessary to do so. We can help them to exercise self-discipline, as every adult does. In case of reasonable doubt, give the students the benefit of the doubt.

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