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A Cheating Pandemic Too?

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Without fail, every recent conversation that even remotely touches upon assessment leads to an increasingly intricate and technical discussion about how to prevent the cheating, presumed to be rampant, now that we're all online. Should we use Lockdown Browser? Should we enable webcams? But what about smart phones? What proctoring services are available? Will time limits help? How many questions should we have in our question bank? What's a good proportion of questions in the bank to questions drawn for the exam? Should we shuffle questions? Should we show only one question at a time? Should we allow students to see their incorrect answers right away? The questions concerning cheating proliferate—with each solution presenting further considerations and, often, new challenges.

These conversations can't help but remind me of one of the many theories for the pandemic "panic buying" of toilet paper: psychologists claimed that such hoarding was an attempt to retain or regain a sense of control over an uncontrollable situation, in which feelings of fear, disorientation, and overwhelm (in addition to actual physical danger) abound. We can't control Covid-19 (yet), but we may be able to control how many toilet paper rolls we have stashed away in our homes. Perhaps teaching online feels similar to instructors: something that was

thrust upon us, something most of us didn't want to do, something that most of us probably aren't doing very well (either by default or by design). Trying to tamp down on cheating may be the academy's version of toilet paper hoarding.

When I'm part of these conversations, I keep James M. Lang's *Cheating Lessons* in mind. (If you don't have time for the whole book now, he wrote a series in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that offers many of the same insights in shorter form.) Here are a few important considerations about cheating:

- • So far, we don't have evidence that students are cheating now more than ever—though our *worries* about cheating have obviously increased. Even typical indicators of cheating, for instance, fast time on a test or an unusually high score, may be attributable to other factors. One colleague told me that some of her students were studying more at home, without all the distractions, and were more relaxed about taking tests—which led to better performance.
- • Most students in any given class won't cheat (even if most people admit to having cheated at least once over the course of their lives; I know I have); this seems to be an especially important time to be viewing our students charitably, with positive regard, and avoiding a “deficit” lens.
- • Why do people cheat? Well, among other reasons, we know that certain conditions in a learning environment can *incentivize* cheating; one example is a single, high-stakes assessment for which students have been given little to no practice or preparation (e.g., one exam worth 50% of their course grade). To the extent that we can give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge or mastery of a skill, to the extent that we can offer them practice and timely feedback, and to the extent that we can help reduce their anxiety at this anxiety-inducing time, we will go a long way in creating conditions where they will not make the choice to cheat.
- • What is cheating anyway? We can't assume students will know in the context of our specific class; even within the same field, the same department, these definitions and expectations may vary (just as there is no consistency across what we mean by different assignment types). Some students, like the first-generation population, are severely disadvantaged by this kind of “hidden curriculum.” The less that's tacit, the more that's explicit (or “transparent”)—on cheating and otherwise—the better for all students (but especially for underserved populations).
- • But okay, let's assume, for a moment, that students know it's cheating to look up answers online or in their books, and they do it anyway. One colleague of mine said, “Who cares? The point is I want them to learn. Maybe looking up the answers will help them learn.” What is our end goal here? How can we leverage or even embrace (perhaps newly) open testing situations?
- • Or, rather than focusing on the cheating that we defeatedly accept will occur—and trying to prevent the inevitable with complicated surveillance and other apparatuses—perhaps we might sidestep the issue entirely by designing our assessments to be as “cheat-proof” as possible. Questions of foundational knowledge are easy to look up; “higher-order” questions—application, analysis, evaluation, or creation—are not.

(“Which of the following is the best definition of karma”? is easy to find in the textbook I use. “What would a Marxist interpretation of this [current news headline about religion]?” isn’t.) For those teaching large classes, those with heavy teaching loads, those without TAs, those stretched to capacity already, etc., these questions needn’t be asked only in short-answer or essay form, which can take way longer to grade. Multiple-choice questions can work here too, even if we don’t usually think of them as such. (A caveat: some folks find these kinds of multiple-choice questions harder to create.)

I’m not convinced that we have to accept cheating as inevitable, even now. We, as instructors, have some control(!) over the learning environments, the testing conditions, and the assessments themselves. Let’s continue to use the influence we do have to encourage authentic, deep, transformative learning—not short-cuts or hacks.

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