



2017

On Cheating and Prosperity

Trey Conatser

University of Kentucky, trey.conatser@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/greaterfaculties>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Conatser, Trey (2017) "On Cheating and Prosperity," *Greater Faculties: A Review of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 1 , Article 5.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.13023/GF.2017.05>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/greaterfaculties/vol1/iss1/5>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Greater Faculties: A Review of Teaching and Learning by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact trey.conatser@uky.edu or nicolemartin@uky.edu.



On Cheating and Prosperity

Trey Conatser

*Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching
University of Kentucky*

During the week of July 18 it was impossible to open Facebook or Twitter and *not* witness the epic fallout from Melania Trump’s apparent plagiarism of Michelle Obama as she spoke at the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland, OH.¹ Among a buffet of gaffes, the “speech-gate” incident eclipsed all others and became a political and moral lightning rod. David Frum memorably describes it in *The Atlantic* as the “one easy-to-understand incident that encapsulates in one grim joke all this convention’s cavalcade of derp.” *Because* it was so easy to understand, it enveloped the convention’s wonkier missteps. Someone had broken the rules, and someone needed to pay.

And this is what’s fascinating about plagiarism: its persuasive simplicity as moral transgression, how it so readily stands in for a personal flaw, a crooked bent. It irreverently disregards the notions of ownership and meritocracy that, for better or worse, structure our interactions and relationships with others. In schoolroom language, it’s cheating, and cheaters never, or at least *shouldn’t* prosper.

Now at the outset of a new academic year, instructors find themselves affirming this wisdom as they distribute syllabi and review the required boilerplate, among which we always find the university-mandated statement on academic integrity.²

To some, the policy is mere legalese to note in passing, like the user agreements for new apps and online accounts that we never read (who has the time?) but accept regardless. To others it's a grave sermon on the dangers of flunking, probation, and expulsion. Were it not for the generational distance, students might recall *The Breakfast Club's* Principal Vernon, insisting from the border of authority and buffoonery that “if you mess with the bull, you get the horns.”

It's tempting to go through the motions here, but we'd do well to reflect on how we pitch this policy—and the concept of cheating—to our students. Not only does it affect how they see us as teachers and scholars; it also affects in profound ways how we see (or don't see) students as complex human beings. And this asks us to go against our gut reactions and our attachment to the moral legibility of cheating. If we understand cheating as an evasive concept, and as a *product* of rather than a challenge to our institutions and traditions, we're much less likely to incentivize it. And we'd do even better to lead our students (by example) to understand cheating first and foremost as a question of learning before we invoke the gavels (sledgehammers?) of law and morality. As a step towards this leadership, we can reconsider some of the more commonplace myths about students and cheating.

*To define cheating is to define
how learning and knowing work.*

The first myth is that everyone knows what cheating is. Even if we do (and whoever “we” designates here is probably not very inclusive), we surely don't share the same perspectives on it. While researching for *My Word!: Plagiarism and College Culture*, Susan Blum observed how students navigate the conflicting values and demands of traditional academic integrity and “bottom line” high achievement, both of which colleges trumpet with gusto. Or, as Scott Hippenstell opines in *The Chronicle*, post-Google generations might understand knowledge in profoundly different ways than their teachers do: not as memory-data “in” your brain, but as information “out there,” always available for recall when needed.

In other words, to define cheating is to define how learning and knowing work (ever an open-ended enterprise), and this is why we *don't* really know what cheating is exactly, at least in terms of the criteria that we often cite. Is hiding the test answers in your pocket, for example, much worse than cramming the night before and forgetting all of it afterwards? In either case, the grade wouldn't represent the skills and knowledge that you'd carry with you after the term is over, and this is essentially everything that a grade is supposed to represent.

The second myth is that severe or “zero tolerance” punishment deters cheating, which I like to call the “Leviathan theory” of academic integrity.³ Again and again, we see cheating occur despite the prohibitions and punishments we enact against it. This speaks to a fundamental relationship between institutional learning and academic dishonesty; as James Lang finds in *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*, “cheating and higher education in America have enjoyed a long and robust history together.” We can't scare our students out of cheating, it seems, nor should we try. Fear stymies understanding.

So what do we, the teachers hawking syllabi later this week, do with all of this? Lang urges us to think beyond “an individual's ethical profile or some general cultural milieu”: the archetypal lazy student or those awful, entitled millennials. (On a side note, many millennials are professors now, so we probably should stop referring to students in this way. There are lots of reasons, really, to stop citing the “millennial” category, which is less an empirical reality and more a discursive construct that erases difference.)⁴ When it comes to academic dishonesty, there's something more than discipline and punishment happening, something more than a “threat” of cheating against which we Spartans must guard, ever vigilant, lest the Medes break through.⁵



Figure 1: Academic Integrity?

Thankfully, there are some concrete ways that we can treat academic integrity with more nuance. For one, how do we talk about it when we review the syllabus? Is plagiarism something to “avoid” or something to “understand”? Is it “theft,” and if so, do we really have a sense of what is being stolen?⁶ Do we use the generic you or the third person? Is it an “instance,” “violation,” “offense,” “case,” etc., when we catch someone cheating? Without agonizing over our every word choice, we still can attend to how our language constructs our *ethos* as teachers, how it obscures and/or clarifies our ideas, and how it can convey our attitude towards students, especially through microaggressions. In short, how does our treatment of cheating (and other policies for that matter) “come across” to students?⁷

Fairness often vexes these discussions, and indeed, we want to give everyone more or less the same opportunities and rewards. But again, when we pause on fairness, the concept begins to lose its definition. “Fair to whom?” we might ask, recognizing that fairness to the individual may not always

align with fairness to the group. Moreover, we also might think about how much our notion of group fairness is informed by a framework of economic competition and materialism (we do “earn” a grade, after all, as if it were a wage or a yearly bonus), and how much we want that framework to inform our teaching. *Life isn't fair*, the wisdom goes, but all too often the notion of fairness itself can underwrite indifference towards those who need help.

Another important step is to appreciate where a lot of cheating comes from. Research continues to emphasize that environmental pressures significantly influence a student's academic (dis)honesty.⁸ Here is where Lang would point us to the Cirque-du-Soleil balancing act that many students find themselves performing in college. Carol Poster goes so far as to place cheating in an economy of time using a student's earning potential as a literal exchange rate, but the useful takeaway from this and many other essays is that students find themselves in an economy of scarcity in which, quite often, to spend time fulfilling one obligation means the neglect of another.

And there are certain times of the semester when students find themselves under more pressure. The most recent data from UT Austin (perhaps the only institution that publishes this sort of information) shows that academic disciplinary cases spiked in November, December, April, and May: in other words, the final weeks of the regular term semesters, when student workloads balloon and the stakes (for GPA) are at their highest.⁹ On the one hand, students tend to submit more work at this time of the semester; there are simply more opportunities to cheat. On the other hand, in the context of a growing conversation on how we think about student well-being, we have the opportunity to recognize how our demands in each course might strike harmony or cacophony with students' overall workloads and other obligations.

More than anything else, though, it's the ability to see cheating in a larger context that's important. “I see the longing in my tendency to experience plagiarism as personal—about me or my class,” Helen Rubinstein writes. Proposing instead that we understand plagiarism—and here I'd include all forms of cheating—as “an expression of a student's powerlessness,” she sets her resolve to respond to cheating not by failing the cheater, but by “try[ing] to help her *not* fail.” When we tell stories about students cheating, especially in a faculty lounge environment, we're tempted to construct them less as real people and more as antagonists in what at best amounts to a comedy of antics and errors and what at worst becomes a revenge tragedy.

Ultimately, we're constrained by the policy that we copy and paste (ironic, yes?) into our syllabi and review on the first day of class. We have a professional obligation to uphold and enact it. But we still exert a powerful influence in how we approach, articulate, and respond to cheating, and this goes a long way to helping cheaters, both would-be and committed, prosper. At stake in cheating is a student's ability to learn: the skill that all of us teach, regardless of discipline or subject. Resisting

the appeal of cheating's moral legibility, let's recognize that the ground is muddy, and the ethics a thicket. Let's approach academic integrity with a personal and professional integrity of our own.

NOTES

1. See Haberman, Rappaport, Healey, and Martin, "Questions Over Melania Trump's Speech Set Off Finger-Pointing," *The New York Times*, 19 July 2016, nyti.ms/2jNPNFF.
2. See, for example, the University of Kentucky Office of Academic Ombud Services page on "Academic Integrity: Cheating and Plagiarism," at www.uky.edu/Ombud/ForStudents_AcademicIntegrity.php.
3. This is drawn from the seventeenth-century political theory of Thomas Hobbes, whose notion of the state as a Leviathan has come to stand for harsh and unyielding punishments as disincentives to transgression.
4. For a critique of the millennial category as a discursive construct, see Rudick and Ellison, "The Power of Language: A Constitutive Response to Millennial Student Research," *Communication Education*, vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 363-375. For a critique of the millennial category as a discursive erasure of minority difference, see Marie, "Digital Mixtapes and Protests: Oh, to be a Queer, Black Millennial," *Autostraddle*, 16 August 2016, www.autostraddle.com/digital-mixtapes-and-protests-oh-to-be-a-queer-black-millennial-348765.
5. See, for example, how cheating figures as a threat to institutionalized education in Buchmann, "Cheating In College: Where It Happens, Why Students Do It and How to Stop It," *Huffington Post*, 20 February 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/cheating-in-college-where_b_4826136.
6. For a brief example of the complications when considering ideas and language as stolen property, see "Plagiarism Is Theft—But Of What?" *Discover Magazine*, 26 January 2016, blogs.discovermagazine.com/neuroskeptic/2016/01/26/plagiarism-is-theft/#.WPEAMVMrJ-X.
7. Maryellen Weimer similarly considers how syllabi convey instructional *ethos* to students in "What Does Your Syllabus Say About You and Your Course?" *Faculty Focus*, 24 August 2011, <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/what-does-your-syllabus-say-about-you-and-your-course/>. For a more radical understanding of how instructional documents, e.g., syllabi, can position students in relation to the course and instructor, see Heidebrink-Bruno, "Syllabus as Manifesto: A Critical Approach to Classroom Culture," *Hybrid Pedagogy*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/syllabus-manifesto-critical-approach-classroom-culture/>.
8. For an overview, see Lang, "How College Classes Encourage Cheating," *Boston Globe*, 04 August 2013, www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/08/03/how-college-classes-encourage-cheating/3Q34x5ysYcplWNA3yO2eLK/story.html.
9. At the time of this essay's original publication on the CELT website (19 August 2016), the report was publically accessible but since then appears to have been removed from the web presence of UT Austin's Office of the Dean of Students.

REFERENCES

- Blum, Susan D. *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*. Cornell University Press, 2009.
- The Breakfast Club*. Directed by John Hughes, performances by Molly Ringwald, Judd Nelson, Emilio Estevez, Anthony Michael Hall, Ally Sheedy, and Paul Gleason, Universal Pictures, 1985.
- Frum, David. "Ten Reasons Why Melania Trump's Speech Will Have a Lasting Impact." *The Atlantic*, 19 July 2016, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/melania-trumps-speech-matters/492038/.
- Hippensteel, Scott. "Memorization, Cheating, and Technology." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 October 2015, www.chronicle.com/article/Memorization-Cheating-and/233926.
- Lang, James. *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Poster, Carol. "The Economy of Cheating." *Inside Higher Ed*, 8 March 2016, www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/03/08/why-academic-cheating-all-about-economics-essay.
- Rubinstein, Helen. "When Plagiarism Is a Plea for Help." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 March 2016, www.chronicle.com/article/When-Plagiarism-Is-a-Plea-for/235884.

MEDIA

- "Greek Phalanx," Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain (Figure 1).
- Incase, "Street Scene Hong Kong," Flickr, CC-BY-2.0 (Title).

LICENSE

This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. Any material may be copied, redistributed, remixed, transformed, and built upon so long as appropriate credit is given to the author(s), a link to the CC-BY-4.0 license is provided, and all changes from the original are indicated. For more information, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

AUTHOR

Trey Conatser is a Faculty Instructional Consultant at the University of Kentucky's Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. He teaches courses on writing, rhetoric, literature, pedagogy, and digital humanities. He is completing his PhD in English from The Ohio State University.