

Are Polish Students Dishonest?

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13.1. Introduction

According to The Economist (2005), cheating in Poland is seen “as no more of a moral question than disobeying traffic rules,” a statement which prompted us to devote our research to the question of academic dishonesty. We predicted that since this phenomenon seems to be so widespread in our country, this would consequently be represented at our university.

As English majors, we decided to focus our study on our fellow philology students in the Jagiellonian University (UJ) philology department. In order to effectively illustrate the true scale of the problem, we designed a questionnaire to investigate the number of examination cheaters and plagiarizers, identify the most common and effective methods of cheating amongst students, as well as to help us define the source(s) of academic dishonesty and possible solutions.

13.2. Design of the Questionnaire

We designed one questionnaire, which consisted of two parts, the first comprising the following questions:

1. Have you even cheated on a test during your academic career?
2. Have you ever submitted a piece of work that was not written entirely by yourself?
3. Have you ever purchased an essay or paid for essay writing services?
4. What do you think are the most common reasons why students cheat?
5. What are the most common ways of cheating?
6. Which method(s) have you used?

The second part consisted of questions aimed at discovering how cheating itself is perceived and to what degree it may influence one’s academic career:

1. Do you think academic dishonesty is an offence?
2. Do you think cheating is a major problem at your university?
3. Do you think cheaters should be expelled from the university?
4. Do you think cheaters should receive a failing mark for the class?
5. Do you think that people who rely on academic dishonesty are more likely to be dishonest in other areas of their lives? (relationships, careers, etc.)

Afterwards, students were asked to write any additional comments and observations.

13.3. Participants

The questionnaire was distributed among 80 philology students (66 females and 14 males). Finding male students to complete the questionnaire was difficult, as it is mainly women who choose to pursue philological studies. Therefore, in our analysis we did not differentiate between sexes and we considered all students on equal terms.

13.4. Results

Not surprisingly, the questionnaire showed that more than half of the respondents admitted to having cheated on a test during their academic career (43 students). However, very few respondents (2) indicated that they had ever submitted a piece of work that was not written entirely by themselves. The response to the question concerning purchasing an essay or paying for essay writing services was also quite unexpected. None of the students indicated that they had ever done either, suggesting that this practice might be unknown to philology students at the Jagiellonian University. In regards to reasons why students cheat, 62 students indicated that it was due to the pressure to pass and receive good grades; 52 suggested laziness; 22, unreal expectations at the university; and five, the inability to cope with peer pressure. Some respondents acknowledged the fact that there are too many details to be remembered or excessive theory. It was also suggested that cheating may be caused by sheer lack of interest in one's studies or the lack of time to prepare properly due to studying in more than one faculty.

The following question concerned the most common ways of cheating and, as we had predicted, cheat sheets are the most popular, according to 68 people, referring to one's neighbour's test, the second (50 people), followed by consulting one's friend (48 people), and relying on past papers (38 people). Purchasing test papers or writing in invisible ink is extremely rare (8 and 3 students, respectively).

Interestingly, there is some discrepancy between the questionnaire results addressing methods considered to be most widely used and those that students

actually resort to, as only 16 people indicated that they had ever used cheat sheets, 34 people admitted to consulting their friends, 20 had relied on past papers and 20 had resorted to relying on their neighbour's test. Three people had used invisible ink, and only one person had ever purchased test papers.

Students were also asked about what might be done to prevent cheating. As for cheating during examinations, the most frequent suggestion was that there should be more practical tasks involving deeper mental involvement rather than cramming. Secondly, teachers' expectations should be more realistic and exam questions should be formulated in a clear, comprehensible way. Furthermore, exams ought to be closely supervised and there should be more oral exams instead of written ones. Students should be assessed regularly throughout the course, which might help them prepare for the final exam.

It was also suggested that there should be a change in the organization of classes. The instructor should make it clear what (s)he expects from the students and what (s)he expects them to master. Teachers should encourage creativity and make it possible for students to think independently. Interestingly, philology students mentioned eliminating what they perceive to be the "useless" subjects, such as Latin. Generally, it seems that the ideal solution, according to the questionnaire respondents, would be to change the mentality of our society to emphasise the value of knowledge over high marks.

Fifty-one students consider academic dishonesty an offence. Twenty-one disagreed, and seven specified that it is an offence only in case of plagiarism, while cheating during exams is not.

Forty-eight respondents express the opinion that cheating is a major problem at the university, while 30 do not support this opinion. Despite a high number of respondents indicating that cheating is a major problem, only 18 of them are of the opinion that cheaters should be expelled from the university. Four students posit that only plagiarizers are deserving of such punishment. A considerable number of students (61) share the view that cheaters should receive a failing mark for the class/or test.

The final question addressed a possible link between academic dishonesty and dishonesty in other areas of life, with 43 respondents agreeing that there may be a correspondence between the two.

13.5. Conclusions

In general, the results of our survey were not surprising to us though we had anticipated a higher frequency of students admitting to having committed plagiarism. Apparently, students make a strong distinction between cheating during exams and plagiarizing. As articulated by one respondent, "cheating is more a question of one's conscience, while plagiarizing is an infringement of the copyrights."

The results of the study also draw attention to the fact that many students begin their misadventures in academic dishonesty as early as primary school. Since nothing is done about it at that early point, they feel free to carry on with these practices in their adult life. This suggests that the most reasonable solution would be to try to “nip it at the bud” and as one of our subjects proposed, “instil in young people the cult of education.”

QUESTIONS AND TASKS

1. Which of the results of our questionnaire surprised you the most and why?
2. Is academic dishonesty a major problem in your country? What is the general attitude towards such behaviour?
3. Imagine that you are a teacher. What would you do to prevent cheating during your exams?

REFERENCES

The Economist. (2005). Time for the tricks to stop. *The Economist*. 5 October. Retrieved November 22, 2010, from http://www.economist.com/node/4493839?story_id=E1_QQJPRPJ.