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Building a Culture of Academic Integrity [Baker]

Part of the journal section “Forum: Building a Culture of Academic Integrity”

Kimberley M. Baker “Building a Culture of Academic Integrity”

1. The decision to invite keynote speaker James M. Lang to the conference, and the creation of the morning plenary panel in particular, was born out of a book group that Martha Reineke and I participated in on Lang’s book, *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* (2013). In this book, Lang argues that our best strategies for reducing cheating involve using effective pedagogies that focus on promoting learning. Thus, in contrast to approaches to academic dishonesty that focus on teaching students to fear the consequences of being caught and corresponding surveillance strategies that assume all students are potential cheaters, Lang’s approach is to establish a classroom environment where students develop motivation and skill so that cheating is not a significant temptation. Lang offers four strategies that produce a learning centered and “cheating resistant” environment: fostering intrinsic motivation, learning through mastery, lowering the stakes, and instilling self-efficacy.

2. First, Lang argues that the single most effective strategy for eliminating cheating is to help students develop an intrinsic motivation to learn (p. 62). After all, students who have an intense desire to ask questions and seek answers on their own have no need to “cheat” by taking answers from someone else. Furthermore, Lang argues that this motivation comes from providing opportunities for students to connect material from class to their own lives in a meaningful way. For example, when the course is designed to explore “big” ideas, students can then meaningfully connect with the course from a variety of different perspectives, ensuring that they have room to answer their own questions rather than those designated by the professor (p. 64).

3. During our panel discussion, Martha Reineke (UNI Professor of Religion) provided examples of how her Capstone class, *Monsters, Vampires and Religion: An Awesome Alliance*, strategically developed intrinsic motivation in students. When designing the course, Reineke began with the recognition that monsters are present across cultures. Furthermore, although monsters and their myths may take different forms, the idea of monsters allows a society to collectively express anxieties about the times in which they live. By framing her course around the “big” idea of monsters, Reineke was able to open up room for students to think about and investigate this issue from a wide range of standpoints. Additionally, Reineke created an assignment in which students explored the issue of monsters from their different disciplinary backgrounds. For example, a psychology student created a project in which she imagined notes from a counseling session with a monster and then made recommendations for therapy. By

contrast, a biology student wrote an essay on the ethical issues that arise in biomedical engineering. By encouraging students to engage with the topic from their own interests, Reineke was able to motivate students to invest seriously in the topic and understand how it relates to their own lives. From the perspective of cheating, this assignment also virtually eliminates the possibility of submitting someone else's work as their own because the assignments are personalized and unique.

4. Second, Lang argues that students may feel more motivated to cheat when their coursework is evaluated on performance rather than actual learning (p. 85). When students are asked to demonstrate specific skills based on objective measures, they can feel a great deal of anxiety about performing in a particular way. By contrast, when students are able to demonstrate learning in different ways and to choose for themselves how to show their mastery of course material, students become invested in the process of learning itself. When students are able to make choices about how they reveal their learning, the classroom becomes an accommodating space that can capture a variety of learning styles and mastery levels.

5. Timothy Adamson (Hawkeye Community College Instructor in Philosophy) combines this strategy of asking students to demonstrate mastery with his own effort to focus on "big" ideas in his ethics course. As the end of semester final exam, Adamson asks students to write a 4-5 page essay in which they describe what they have learned throughout the semester in the course. The topic itself is quite broad, and Adamson encourages students to use this breadth to choose how they want to show what they have learned. Students may decide what examples and texts to use in the answer, allowing them to focus on issues and topics that they feel the most confident with. In addition, Adamson also asks students to connect this learning with their own lives by asking them to comment on how they have changed as a result of taking the course. By maintaining a genuine openness to the variety of ways students can express their learning, Adamson is able to open the final exam up so that students can approach the essay from a variety of different positions. Also, this focus on the big ideas of the course encourages students to focus on mastery of the class as a whole rather than single issues and small details.

6. Third, Lang recommends that professors lower the stakes for assignments to help avoid the impulse to cheat. Students may be tempted to cheat when they feel a tremendous amount of pressure on a single assignment (p. 105). For example, when students' final grades rely heavily on one comprehensive exam at the end of the semester, they can feel pressured to cheat because they have one chance to earn that grade. By lowering the stakes, instructors can reduce the temptation to cheat because one single assignment does not have a dramatic influence on the final grade. In particular, Lang recommends frequent, low scoring opportunities that allow students to develop and master skills over time.

7. Prior to reading Lang's book, I had an assignment in my Sociology research methods course in which students used a template to analyze scholarly articles. They completed this analysis on six articles in total, with three articles submitted on two different occasions. These two sets of article analyses were worth a relatively high percentage of the final grade. What I noticed, however, was that students who did well on the first set of analysis, also did well on the second set.

Students who performed poorly on the first set, however, generally did not improve on the second set. So, with this high-stakes assignment, students were not actually learning how to do it better. In addition, because the assignment was weighted heavily, students were incredibly anxious about the assignment. To address this problem, I separated out each analysis into a separate assignment, I made each assignment worth relatively few points, and I gave students opportunities in class to work in small groups on the first few submissions. By lowering the stakes and offering support and frequent feedback, I have found that almost all students improve over time. By the time a student has completed the assignment six times, it is pretty hard to avoid improving. With this modification, students are better able to demonstrate learning and they feel less anxiety about any single assignment.

8. Finally, Lang argues that students with low levels of self-efficacy in regard to an academic task are more inclined to cheat than those who believe that they have the ability to succeed at a particular task (p. 47). At some level, this idea makes a lot of sense. Those students who believe they have the ability to succeed look forward to having the opportunity to demonstrate how well they can perform. By contrast, those students who lack confidence about their abilities or, worse, anticipate performing poorly, are more likely to look for ways to avoid the appearance of failure by cheating or perhaps not even doing the assignment in the first place. Lang recommends two strategies for improving students' sense of self-efficacy (p. 129). The first is to help students develop metacognitive skills so that they can accurately develop a sense of what they know and how well they know it. Second, faculty need to improve communication so that they can convey the value of coursework, offer clear and constructive feedback, and actually acknowledge student successes. These strategies can help students better gauge their own learning and understand where they need to ask for more support

9. Lisa Brodersen (Allen College Professor of Nursing) has incorporated both of these strategies into her research methods course for graduate-level nursing students. In this course, students must eventually write an annotated bibliography that is worth 40% of their final grade. To help students develop metacognitive skills to self-assess their progress toward this final assignment, Brodersen has created multiple low-stakes, formative assignments that gradually step toward the final annotated bibliography. For example, students begin by working with a template to guide them in writing annotations. Eventually, students submit a practice reference list. Then they submit a practice annotation. All along the way, students receive feedback helping them to identify strengths and weaknesses. By the time students submit the final annotated bibliography, they have had multiple opportunities to submit work and receive feedback to help them self-assess their own performance. Additionally, Brodersen has worked diligently to improve communication by providing clear assignment instructions and explaining why each assignment is important. Brodersen has been especially focused on providing useful feedback that helps students identify their weaknesses and see clear paths for improvement. Finally, Brodersen looks for opportunities to acknowledge success, particularly when students have improved over time. Together these strategies have helped Brodersen to create an assignment in which students gradually build skills and confidence to perform well on the final assignment.

10. Together these four strategies from Lang’s book can be used to create a classroom environment where cheating is rare. Ultimately, across all of these strategies and the presenters from this panel, the common thread is that all of these strategies are focused primarily on improving learning rather than eliminating cheating. With sound pedagogical practice focused on developing students’ skills and assessing mastery, cheating becomes a relatively small issue for students who are focused on learning and have the skills to accurately assess their own abilities. In my own practice, I have found that when I focus on what I want students to learn as a whole rather than the particular performances I assess, I am better able to develop assignments that support students’ development. In the original article analysis assignment I used in research methods (described above), I was initially focused on whether or not students could successfully read scholarly articles. Because they had little experience with this kind of material, the answer was often that they could not read and analyze these articles well. When I took a step back and refocused on my goal of actually teaching students how to read scholarly articles and how to think like a scholar, I was better able to imagine a series of assignments that actually helped students develop those skills. Sure, this assignment reduces the desire to cheat by lowering the point value for each individual assignment, but the actual impact is a real improvement in students’ abilities to analyze scholarly literature. Ultimately, this goal is way more important than creating a cheat-proof classroom environment. Also, gladly, students appear to enjoy this environment more as well. Rather than being stressed out about assignments, they often look forward to showing me how they are improving over time. Any time students are this motivated to demonstrate their own learning, we have created intrinsically-motivated students who do focus on those “big” ideas.

References

Lang, James M. (2013). *Cheating lessons: Learning from academic dishonesty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



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