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Investigating Academic Dishonesty among Language Teacher Trainees: The Why and How of Cheating

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Abstract

Academic dishonesty is prevalent across college campuses worldwide, with many students having committed the offence at some point of their academic pursuit. This study addresses the growing concern in academia regarding the diminishing sense of academic integrity and ethical values among students. The paper endeavors to broaden the understanding of the topic in two ways, firstly by focusing on a specific category of students — namely 1ESL teacher trainees and secondly by investigating the incidence and motive for cheating in examinations among teacher trainees. The rationale for highlighting this particular group stems from the higher expectations for ethical behavior from teacher trainees, who are expected to respond ethically and prevent academic dishonesty in their capacity as professional practitioners. An online survey was conducted among 71 students enrolled in a four-year teacher education program in a university in Malaysia. The results showed that a majority of respondents (82\%) had cheated before and did so albeit knowing the consequences. Predictably the most quoted reason for cheating was lack of preparation and the pressure to excel, as well as instructional situations that are perceived as excessively demanding, Crib notes and copying from peers was clearly the preferred methods. The study helps explain academic dishonesty among teacher trainees and also allow those interested in curbing cheating to focus upon important predictors of academic dishonesty.

1. Introduction

“Our goal is to determine what moral issues mean to a teacher in practice.” (Husu & Tirri, 2003, p. 345). A decade of research in academic institutions has shown that present day students are 13 times more likely to engage in academic dishonesty, (Graves 2001, Graves & Stephen 2008, McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield 2001)
this translates into nearly 75% of students on most campuses around the world engaging in some form of cheating (Whitley 1998, Whitley, Nelson, and Jones 1999, Hutton 2006). In particular the habit of cheating during examinations was found to have increased by three folds over a period of 65 years (Graves and Stephen 2008). These are worrying trends faced by universities worldwide. Cheating in academia does not bode well for any profession but especially so for the teaching fraternity. The seriousness of this issue warrants close investigation, prompting the researchers to embark on investigating the issue of academic dishonesty among teacher trainees at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Technologi MARA Malaysia. We present the findings of our study in the hope to understand and curb cheating among prospective teachers.

2. Review of related literature

2.1. Why should we be concerned about cheating among teacher trainees?

Cizek (2003) in his article “When teachers cheat” probes into the cheating behavior of teachers and discusses the central role of teachers as models of appropriate social and ethical behavior. Teachers’ act of cheating has multiple consequences on students’ behavior. Firstly, it affects students’ attitude towards the act of cheating and their motivation to excel. More importantly, educators’ cheating may increase students’ predisposition towards cheating in other contexts thus initiating a snowball effect.

Our interest in understanding and remediating academic dishonesty stems from our commitment to protect the rights of our honest students. “Cheaters do hurt themselves, but they do not only hurt themselves. They also degrade the education and affront the integrity of their honest peers” (Whithley, Jr, Keith-Spiegel 2002, p vii). In many cases when cheating goes undetected and the culprit scores higher than their peers, the frustration is palpable. The message that is conveyed is sickening and motivation of honest students suffers. The best resolution to assist and respect honest students is for academics and teachers to take a stand and be involved in maintaining a climate of integrity in the classroom and in the entire campus. Research shows that when cheating is overlooked or nonchalantly handled, honest students feel disadvantaged and are tempted to engage in acts of cheating in order to “level the playing field”.

2.1.1. There are 4 main reasons why there should be concern about cheating among teacher trainees:

i. Character development of teachers.

Most teacher training programs spell out the intended attributes of trainees as part of their teacher preparation. Among these are instructional competence, subject matter expertise as well as teacher’s moral which is demonstrated via sound character development and academic integrity. Teachers are not just transmitters of knowledge but are moral agents, and thus classroom interaction is fundamentally and inevitably moral in nature. A teacher has the responsibility and authority to uphold and maintain academic integrity and must show commitment to social and ethical values. Thus” teacher’s morality as defined by Buzzelli and Johnston (2001), “constitutes the set of a person’s beliefs and understandings which are evaluative in nature: that is, which distinguish, whether consciously or unconsciously, between what is right and wrong, good and bad” (p. 876).

ii. Cheating is contagious.

Cheating is not an isolated incident and neither can it be rectified silently. People are interconnected and are influenced by the behavior of others. Research conducted by Whithley (1998) and Cizek (2003) provide strong evidence of this. In order to influence the value of cheaters we must also influence the value of others within their community. “We live in a world of networked ethics” (Walker, Wiemeler, Procke 2009) Cheating is contagious and peers are motivated to model the cheating behavior of others and are willing to dispense with their moral and ethical standards if they believe that cheating will benefit them. Teachers are the front liners who can make a big
difference and can exercise authority to uphold integrity and influence moral and ethical standards. It has been shown that teachers who cheat may be very tolerant with students’ act of cheating therefore creating a behavioral norm that condones cheating. Cheating then becomes contagious as more and more student cheat and benefit from it, subsequently motivating others to model the behavior. Eventually the honest students become the minority group who feels penalized and feel compelled to cheat to enjoy the ‘valuable benefits.’

iii. Significance on teacher’s future behaviors

Cheating among practicing teachers may have other implications on teachers’ future behavior. Research by Sims (1993) and Lawson (2004) has shown that cheating in academic setting is strongly linked to future acts of unethical behavior in business practices. It is highly likely that teachers who had cheated in examinations may demonstrate a similar lack of integrity in their task of imparting knowledge, exercising autonomy and fairness in classroom settings and in conducting assessments. Some instances of academic dishonesty includes failing to provide adequate supervision during assessments, providing illicit assistance and clues before or after examinations and excluding low achieving students from taking tests in order to inflate the institution’s performance. (McCabe et al 1996) (Sara & Holmes, 2009) Other equally unethical practices would be to persuade or remind certain students that it is alright to be absent on the day of the test. Such misdemeanors have far reaching effects on students’ behavior, respect for teachers and the credibility of the institution. A recent example of such incidents was when three low achieving students in SK Bandar Bintangor, Sabah were prevented from sitting for the UPSR exams for fear of affecting the school’s performance. (Borneo Post, 2011) Although prompt action was taken by the Examination Syndicate, the damage had been done.

iv. Reputation of the institution.

Academic dishonesty is not an issue to be taken lightly as it can tarnish the reputation of universities and the credibility of its graduates. Universiti Teknologi MARA’s mission is to place the University on the world map. The Vice Chancellor with the introduction of the University honour code has taken a clear stand to stamp out plagiarism and all forms of cheating. It is pertinent however that the code is practiced consistently and seriously university wide. Sara & Holmes (2009) conducted a qualitative study on academic dishonesty in a University College in Terengganu, Malaysia and reported that despite clear guidelines provided by the university, lecturers implementation of the regulations were erratic and selective. The lack of institutional support compounded the problem. Such incidences of academic dishonesty and grade tampering affect public confidence in higher education. Edward Fiske (2009) reports the act of deception by University of Miami, when scores of certain athletes and special admission students were omitted in order to boost the SAT scores of that year. On the local scene in 2001, the Certificate of Legal Practice (CLP) credibility was questioned in the wake of accusations of grade tampering. (Desperate Call, 2001) A crisis of sorts is facing higher education.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

The Faculty of Education, Universiti Technologi MARA was established in 1997 and is entrusted with the mission of preparing professional Bumiputera teachers for the nation’s schools. Comprising of 6 other departments, the TESL department is the mainstay and niche department. The B. Ed TESL degree is a four year programme that awards students an Honours degree in TESL and a Qualified Teacher status. An invitation to participate in an online survey was sent out to all TESL teacher trainees. 71 students expressed interest and took part in the online survey. The survey consisted of 23 questions exploring respondents’ behaviours and perceptions of academic dishonesty, their stand on cheating in examinations and their opinion on ways to curb cheating in academia. It took an average of 15 minutes for the students to complete the survey.
3.2. Survey instrument

An online questionnaire assessing practices and perceptions associated with cheating was administered to 71 pre-service teachers (N= 71). The online survey site used to execute this research is Google Documents. Distributing the survey online via survey engines was selected for several important reasons. Firstly it aided the process of disseminating as well as reaching a bigger pool of respondents. Secondly, due to the nature of the survey sites, the identity of the respondents remained confidential. This was an extremely important criterion because the questions proposed and the information shared by the respondents was on a rather sensitive topic and by fully ensuring the security and privacy of information, full cooperation and accurate information was obtained. This is the main difference of this study with other studies employing interviews or self-administered questionnaire. An online survey provided anonymity and the lack of face to face contact between researcher and respondent was a boon, thus enhancing accuracy of result.

3.3. Purpose of study

The objective of the study is to investigate the perceptions regarding cheating in examinations among trainee teachers in Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia with a view of setting policies that encourage academic integrity and introducing values of academic honesty.

The study is guided by the following questions:

• How prevalent is cheating among teacher trainees?
• Why do teacher trainees cheat during exams?
• What are teacher trainees’ perceptions regarding the consequences of academic dishonesty?
• What are some ways to prevent academic dishonesty among teacher trainees?

4. Discussion of results

Table 1. Question 1: Have you cheated in a test or exam before?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>80 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20 %</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Question 2: How often do you cheat?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice</td>
<td>61 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometime</td>
<td>37 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every time</td>
<td>2 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
80% of the trainee teachers admitted to having cheated in exams. In terms of regularity of the act, the findings show that a total of 61% of the total respondents have cheated at least once or twice during their study and 2% admitted to cheating everytime. Only 9% has never succumbed to the act of cheating in examinations.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3. Question 3: Do you know the consequences of cheating?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked if respondents are aware of the consequences of cheating, 86% of trainee teachers admit knowing the consequences of cheating with only 6% of the respondents claiming ignorance. Meanwhile 8% claimed of being unsure of the consequences. The relatively high percentage of awareness is good news and shows that the university has been successful in its dissemination of information regarding cheating and plagiarism. The three questions presented above have assisted the researchers in answering the first research question on the prevalence in cheating during exams among teacher trainees in UiTM.

<table>
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<th>Table 4. Question 4: Reasons for cheating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everybody does it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never got caught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never got punished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short cut to studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to get good grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing and repeating papers are a hassle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course is insignificant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to cheat (least likelihood of getting caught)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer influence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the table above, it is clear that students’ main reason for cheating (77%) is due to their lack of preparation for the exams, test or quiz. This is followed by the heavy workload at university (67%), the pressure to attain good grades (60%) by third parties such as the sponsors and parents or due to the high standards they set for themselves. The average student has workload of a minimum of 5-6 subjects per semester in UiTM which may contribute to this ‘push’ for them to cheat. These subjects might include a minimum of 2 quizzes, 2 assignments, a major project and a graded presentation with 20 to 40% awarded for the final exams.

The responses shared by the trainee teachers managed to shed some light in understanding why these individuals cheat although they are future teachers themselves; a person who is assumed to have high discipline and morale conscious in segregating the right from the wrong.
The findings above show that 50% of the respondents expressed feelings of guilt, 38% were undecided and felt somewhat guilty, while the remaining 12% did not feel any guilt at all. Although a minority the 12% who does not feel any remorse does not reflect well on the ethical compass of trainee teachers. This is an important issue to discuss as it reflects the morals of future graduates joining the teaching profession and raising their own family. The values they pass on and the examples they show will affect future generations. There is also the issue of continued offense and persistence in committing the act. Although 50% of the students felt guilty for cheating, it did not stop them from committing the offense as shown below in the findings for question number 6.

The findings for this question support similar findings by Poythress and Cizek (2003) that says, cheaters today show little remorse for cheating in exams.

54% of respondents do not feel their cheating habits in university define the type of employee they would be. This is definitely an area of research worth exploring as evidence abound that demonstrates students’ cheating habits during study years does predict the type of employee they would become. Steps should be taken to address students’ misguided belief that decisions made during their university years are temporary and is due to unexpected circumstances.
Question 8: In your opinion, what measures can the university take that might or will inhibit you from cheating?

These were some of the solutions suggested by the respondents.

- Prior to entering the exam hall, conduct spot-checks on the students. A thorough check is required. Females should be checked for notes underneath their veil and sleeves. Most importantly, there should be someone checking the toilets because some students might leave their book/notes inside the toilet.
- There should be deterrent messages about the consequences of cheating such as displaying pictures of those being caught cheating and stating their punishment. It may be harsh, but maybe by doing so students would take cheating seriously.
- Place CCTV cameras that can monitor all students and make sure they know the existence of the camera.
- More vigilant observation from the invigilator.
- Consider replacing tests with written assignments.
- Set the seats in exam halls further apart so that students won’t be able to call or ask their friends for answers.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study provides insight into academic dishonesty among teacher trainees, allowing those interested in curbing cheating to focus upon important predictors of academic dishonesty. The findings lend support to the worrying trends faced by universities worldwide, suggesting that academic dishonesty is endemic even among prospective teachers. Serious attention should be expended on setting policies that encourage academic integrity and introducing values of academic honesty across the curriculum.

The following are recommendations and measures suggested to the faculties and educational institutions:

- It is recommended that the faculty consider the mode of assessments implemented on the students to give more assignments and conduct graded in-class activities as major contributor to grades instead of focusing the grades on final exams alone.
- It is also recommended that the faculty consider introducing “Ethics” as a compulsory subject offered in university and to provide training to lecturers and staff on dealing with academic dishonesty.
- The faculty and university administration should also be more stringent in dealing with academic offenders as leniency might cause students to be take advantage and continue to cheat during exams.
- Apart from abolishing irrelevant or insignificant subjects, the faculty is also recommended to simplify the court appearance for the lecturers and the students. Currently in UiTM, the registered procedure to report a cheating is very complex and arduous. A student can only be caught if the evidence or notes is on him or her with the presence of 2-3 other invigilators as witnesses. Reporting a case also requires solid evidence or image captured as proof. Under UiTM’s Act 176, if a student is found guilty, he or she will be fined up to RM200, graded fail for the subject that he or she was caught cheating in and suspended for one semester before being allowed to re-sit for the same paper next semester. Clearly, there are too many procedures for a staff or lecturer when he or she reports a cheating case. Incidentally the punishment is not heavy enough to instill fear. Hence, it is best if the procedures are simplified to encourage more to come forth in the case of reporting an academic misconduct.
References

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Desperate call by a student,(2001, December 7). Kuala Lumpur Malay Mail