

The role of critical thinking in academic dishonesty policies

Sarah Roberts-Cady

Fort Lewis College

roberts_s@fortlewis.edu

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Abstract

Colleges and universities have adopted two main strategies for addressing academic dishonesty: the behavior modification strategy and the character development strategy. Both of these strategies are often lacking one important component: teaching students to think critically about values. This paper explores the importance of integrating critical thinking into academic dishonesty policies.

The problem

Cheating appears to be pervasive in colleges and universities. In a review of forty-eight studies conducted in the United States and Canada between 1970 and 1996, Bernard J. Whitley Jr. (1998) found a mean of 70.4% of college students admitted to some form of cheating. Studies conducted since that time confirm that academic dishonesty persists at an alarming rate in countries all over the world (McCabe 2005; Lin & Wen, 2007; Lambert, Ellen, & Taylor 2006; Diekhoff, Labeff, Shinorhara, & Yasukawa, 1999; McCabe, Feghali, & Abdallah, 2008). In response to the problem, educators have adopted two main strategies for reducing academic dishonesty in higher education, which I will call the "behavior modification strategy" and the "character development strategy". Unfortunately, there is one important component that is often missing or neglected in both strategies: teaching students to think critically about values.

The behavior modification strategy

The most common way for educators to try to prevent cheating is to adopt the behavior modification strategy. Most colleges and universities have written codes of conduct that prohibit cheating. The focus of the behavior modification strategy is on enforcing those codes of conduct in the classroom. One way to do this is by making it more difficult for students to cheat. For example, it is often suggested that teachers should create writing assignments with very specific goals and instructions, such that one could not purchase a paper from a "paper mill" that fulfills those goals. Rather than asking an age-old philosophical question about Immanuel Kant's moral theory, a professor might ask the students to use Kant's moral theory as a way of viewing a specific and recent campus controversy. Similarly, teachers are often advised not to recycle old exams and assignments, but to create new ones each term. This prevents students from cheating by using an old test borrowed or purchased from others.

Another behavior modification method is to increase the detection of cheating. Carefully supervising (proctoring) exams is the classic way to do this. This method has been demonstrated to effectively reduce cheating (Covey, Saladin, & Killen, 2001). An increasingly popular way of detecting plagiarism is to use a service such as the Essay Verification Engine or *Turnitin*. In this method, an electronically

submitted paper is run through a program that can quickly detect passages in the paper that are identical to other sources and even provide the sources of the material. Recent research supports the claim that these electronic detection services really do improve a teachers' ability to detect plagiarism (Evans, 2006).

A third behavior modification method is to give harsh penalties for cheating such as suspension or expulsion. More recently, some colleges have begun placing a note on students' transcripts when they are caught cheating. This lets potential employers or graduate schools know that the students flunked due to academic dishonesty.

There are some advantages to adopting the behavior modification methods. These approaches certainly can reduce the incidence of cheating. Further, by reducing cheating, they are encouraging students to achieve the learning goals of the course. But enthusiasm for the behavior modification strategy must be tempered by an understanding of its limitations. It appears that the behavior modification methods motivate students to behave honestly either by making cheating more difficult or by appealing to students' fear of getting caught (Graham, Monday, O'Brien, & Steffan 1994; Covey et al., 2001). Of course, it stands to reason that students who were deterred from cheating by these methods may still cheat when they believe they can do so without getting caught. More significantly, this strategy does nothing to encourage students to think carefully and critically about their choices. Indeed, one could even argue that the authoritarian manipulation of behavior through fear is at odds with the liberal arts goal of developing thoughtful, responsible citizens who can make good choices on their own.

The character development strategy

An alternative to the behavior modification strategy is the character development strategy. Rather than simply focusing on changing student behavior, this strategy focuses on changing the students themselves. The goal is to get students to develop good character, especially the trait of honesty. Honest students will not cheat, regardless of whether or not they might get caught.

Arguably, schools that implement honour codes use this strategy¹. Traditional honour codes (such as those used at the College of William and Mary, the University of Virginia, West Point, and Princeton), have freshmen sign a pledge not to lie, cheat or steal. The pledge is often signed with much ceremony, emphasising the importance of integrity at the institution. Rather than using authority figures to enforce that pledge, the schools rely on students to hold each other responsible. Often the pledge includes a non-toleration clause, which mandates that students report on each other if they witness a violation. In addition, students serve on the judicial committees. The idea is that the colleges establish a culture of honour; students expect of themselves and others that they will not lie, cheat or steal. These schools traditionally reject many of the behavior modification strategies completely. For example, they often have mandated unproctored exams. The hope is that this will create an atmosphere of trust. At the same time, given the importance placed on integrity, they impose serious and immediate penalties for violations.

Alternately, some schools have developed what McCabe and Pavela (2000) refer to as "modified honour codes". Examples of modified honour codes can be found at the University of Maryland at College Park, Kansas State University, University of Tennessee, University of Georgia, and Case Western Reserve. Often these schools use honour pledges similar to those found in traditional honour codes. Like traditional honour code schools, they attempt to give the students a feeling of ownership by having a significant amount of student involvement in judicial committees. Unlike the traditional honour codes, students are often not required to report each other, though they are encouraged to confront each other. Further, the schools with modified honour codes sometimes combine this strategy with some of the behaviour

modification methods listed above. For example, usually exams are still proctored at these schools.

There are numerous advantages to the character development strategy. One major advantage is that it seems to work even better than the behavior modification strategy. In a landmark study, McCabe and Trevino (1993) surveyed 6,069 students in 31 US colleges and universities, 14 of which had honour codes. They found that 47% of students attending a college without an honour code admitted to one or more incidents of test or exam cheating, compared to 24% of students at honour code schools (McCabe & Trevino 1993). What is more, 56% of students at non-code colleges admitted to serious cheating on written work, compared to 32% at the honour code institutions (McCabe & Trevino 1993). Since that study was published, McCabe and his colleagues have conducted additional studies that corroborate the findings (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield 2001; 2002). While these findings are significant, most advocates of honour codes cite a more important reason for favoring character-development strategies: they argue that colleges and universities should attend to students' moral development as well as their academic development. They believe that a primary goal of a liberal arts education is to develop good citizens and that good citizenship requires the development of good character.

While I agree that character development is an appropriate goal, I have some concerns about *how* honour codes do this. The leading experts in academic integrity studies, W. J. Bowers (1964) and Donald McCabe, both argue that the primary reason schools with honour codes have lower levels of cheating is because of *peer pressure* to be honest. McCabe and Trevino (2002) write,

In the early 1960s sociologist William Bowers conducted a landmark study of cheating among college students for his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. Bowers surveyed over 5,000 students on 99 campuses and reported that at least half of those in his sample engaged in some form of academic dishonesty since coming to college; he believed this estimate was conservative. And although he acknowledged the importance of factors such as students' high school experience and value orientation and institutional size and selectivity, Bowers felt that students' college peers had perhaps the most powerful effect on their attitude toward cheating. He argued that 'students are less apt to cheat as the campus wide climate of disapproval [of cheating] increases.' Indeed, Bowers believed it was peer pressure that explained why schools and honors systems generally had lower levels of cheating. Our research has corroborated Bowers's major conclusion (2002, para.10).

If Bowers, McCabe and Trevino are correct, the colleges with honour codes are encouraging students to adopt their values in response to peer pressure. It is surprising that this is happening at liberal arts institutions, who claim to have as their goal the development of citizens who can think for themselves. Admittedly, peer pressure is effective. One could even argue that it is an inevitable part of how humans develop. The problem is that if one uses peer pressure alone to establish one's values, then it is only one's location that determines whether one adopts the integrity of the Princeton honour code, the violent strategies of gang warfare, or the hatred of the Nazis. That is, one would have no recourse for resisting or responding critically to the value system of one's peers. It is essential that humans develop the capacity to critically evaluate their ethical choices in a thoughtful and careful way. Liberal arts institutions are perhaps the most appropriate place for the development of this part of moral personhood.

Integrating critical thinking into academic dishonesty policies

While there are many interesting and important debates about the goals of a liberal arts education, almost everyone agrees that a central goal is to teach students to think critically. To the extent that we want our students to be more than mere receptacles of the knowledge of previous generations, but also to be actively generating new knowledge, new ideas, and new solutions to problems, we must focus on their development as careful, critical thinkers. To the extent that we recognise the limitations and fallibility of the “truths” accepted by any generation, we must encourage the next generation to think critically about the tradition that they inherit. What does it mean to think critically? I believe critical thinking is about asking new questions, more questions, and better questions. Critical thinking is about identifying assumptions – one’s own and others’ – so that one can evaluate those assumptions. Critical thinking is about looking for evidence or reasons supporting a claim. Critical thinking is asking about how we determine what counts as evidence or good reasons. While everyone agrees that these are important skills for development in academic areas like physics and history, somehow people often fail to see their importance in ethics². When it comes to our students’ moral development, we resort to manipulation through peer pressure or fear of punishment. We seem to forget our goal of teaching students to make decisions in thoughtful, careful ways. If we can teach students to think clearly and carefully about widely accepted values, like honesty, we’ll be providing them with the foundational tools they need to grapple with more controversial ethical issues like euthanasia and stem cell research. We certainly don’t want those issues decided based on peer pressure or fear. Given the complexity of ethical issues and the fallibility of humans, our best chance at contributing to our students’ moral development is not merely to pass down a certain set of values, but to nurture a tendency to think critically and carefully about values.

The first step to thinking critically about values is learning to identify one’s own ethical assumptions. Everyone has assumptions about what values are important and about how ethical problems should be approached. Often people have these assumptions without even realising that they are assumptions. Just as students are often awakened to their own cultural assumptions by studying abroad, students can be awakened to their own ethical assumptions by exposure to alternative ethical assumptions. A class in moral philosophy could go a long way toward doing this. In a moral philosophy class, students are usually introduced to a wide variety of moral theories. Learning different moral theories can help one begin to see that there are alternative approaches to ethical problems, and to locate one’s own approach among them. The next step is to encourage students to critically evaluate these ethical assumptions. Again, reading and discussing different moral theories can help students see arguments for different perspectives on ethics. They can learn to evaluate those arguments and develop good arguments of their own. Further, they may begin to see that the question is not simply whether or not they ought to value honesty, but why. That is, they can begin to articulate reasons for their values. What it means to take values seriously is not simply to hold on to one’s values firmly. That’s dogmatism. What it means to take values seriously is to care enough to engage in a thoughtful examination of values, such that one has good reasons for adopting certain values rather than others. Similarly, what it means to be a responsible citizen is not merely to have shared values with other members of one’s community; it means taking a thoughtful approach to one’s values so that one can take thoughtful action.

How can critical thinking be integrated into a policy on academic dishonesty? One way is to integrate a discussion of academic integrity into liberal arts courses that already exist, such as philosophy or literature. A critical and thoughtful examination of academic dishonesty can be a part of the liberal arts education itself. In addition, one could create opportunities for campus-wide discussions by having a public lecture or a panel discussion on academic integrity. Further, one could develop academic dishonesty policies that use cases of cheating as teachable moments. Many

institutions claim to be creating teachable moments by implementing a “two-strike” policy: students do not receive any punishment on the first violation of academic integrity policies, but they receive a significant punishment if they are caught cheating again. Presumably, all that students learn is that they shouldn’t cheat again if they want to avoid getting punished. A better use of that teachable moment would be to establish a policy of putting a temporary notation on a student’s transcript with the violation of an academic code, which can only be removed by successful completion of a noncredit seminar on critical thinking about ethics. This method has been used at University of Maryland, Kansas State, and Case Western Reserve³. The idea is to use codes of conduct to create opportunities for students to critically reflect on their values. Educators need to do more than pressure students into changing their behavior; they need to teach them to think critically about that behavior.

Someone might object to my arguments by pointing out that they overemphasise the role of cognitive analysis in moral decision-making. Certainly real moral decisions are not simply the conclusions of rational arguments. There is no doubt that a person’s upbringing, environment, peer pressure, emotions, and instincts all influence how a person acts. Further, there is no doubt that these influences are important and can be appropriate. The point of this paper is only to defend the claim that critical thinking is one very important part of being a morally responsible person. And it is a part that, oddly enough, is being neglected in arenas of higher education that claim to have critical thinking as a primary goal. If the academic classroom is to have a role in students’ moral development, it seems clear that this is the most important role for it to play. As my colleague Chuck Yoos said to me, “If we don’t teach critical thinking about honesty in a liberal arts college, where will it be taught?” (personal communication, 2007).

Admittedly, there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that integrating critical thinking into academic dishonesty policies will actually reduce the rate of cheating. As far as I know, no one has done any studies to find out. Perhaps this paper can be read as the call of a philosopher to her colleagues in the social sciences to conduct a study on the relation between critical thinking and cheating. My guess is that critical thinking about ethics would reduce cheating. Yet my thesis does not rest on my being right about that. Regardless of the effect on rates of cheating, liberal arts institutions ought to take seriously the goal of teaching students to think critically about their values.

Donald McCabe (2005) wrote, “Our goal should not simply be to reduce cheating, rather, our goal should be to find innovative and creative ways to use academic integrity as a building block in our efforts to develop more responsible students and, ultimately, more responsible citizens.” Unfortunately, most contemporary approaches to academic dishonesty neglect the role that critical thinking plays in responsible citizenship. That is not to say that one should abandon these approaches altogether. There are appropriate and effective forms of behavior modification and character development. The point is that these alone are not sufficient if they do not explicitly include critical thinking. It is contradictory for educators to try to change behavior through fear and peer pressure, while all the while claiming to be developing citizens who can think for themselves and make good decisions. Critical thinking is an essential part of changing behavior, developing character, and encouraging good citizenship. If the goal is not simply to reduce cheating, but to create better citizens, then critical thinking must be incorporated into academic dishonesty policies.

Endnotes

¹Chuck Yoos argues that most honour codes systems are better categorised as “character remediation” programs than “character development” programs. He argues that their primary function is judicial—intervening only when there is an alleged violation of the code (C. Yoos, personal communication, July 31, 2008). Others might argue that honour codes are not about character development at all; forcing students

to sign pledges and creating peer-enforcement systems could be seen as just another form of behavior modification. I will not address these arguments here. Instead, I will simply focus on the ways that honour code systems fail to integrate critical thinking about values.

²It is perhaps important to clarify what I mean by the terms “ethics,” “morality” and “values” and “moral theory.” I use the word “values” to refer to whatever is important to a person. As such, one might value anything from honesty to financial success. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably to refer to the framework that one uses to translate one’s values into a system for evaluating character and/or actions. Philosophers who study moral theory are examining the question of whether or not one could offer reasons (personal, cultural or universally valid reasons) for preferring a certain moral framework over others.

³Instead of a course on ethics, some schools require students (who are caught cheating) to take a class on what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. While that is certainly worthwhile, it does not accomplish the goal of critical thinking about values.

Author biography

Sarah Roberts-Cady is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, where she teaches courses in ethics, feminist philosophy, history of philosophy and logic.

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