How can I teach in ways that minimize cheating and plagiarism?

Cheating in higher education is not uncommon; research that tracks cheating behaviors in the college classroom suggests that about 60% of university students admit to cheating in some form (McCabe, Butterfield, & Treviño, 2017), regardless of the course modality. Why do so many students cheat? Researchers who study cheating often focus on factors that normalize cheating, such as students’ adoption of cultural values of competition and getting ahead at any cost or students’ identification with social groups or certain majors in which cheating is de rigueur. This focus on the situational, cultural, or social variables that make cheating seem acceptable to students leads institutions and instructors to counter academic dishonesty by implementing academic dishonesty policies, by sometimes requiring students to sign honor codes, and often by carefully monitoring students and reviewing their work to catch breaches of academic integrity. But while these approaches may be part of the solution to minimizing cheating, they are insufficient (and potentially ineffective) unless we look at cheating in a different way.

Understanding the psychology of cheating

When we focus on cheating as a misbehavior to be eradicated through warning, monitoring, and punishing, we use what psychologists call extrinsic approaches to behavior modification. But anyone who has tried to use extrinsic systems of persuasion and punishment to eradicate a behavior is likely to have discovered that for many individuals, the risk of punishment may not modify a normalized or valued behavior. And if the behavior is modified, it is often a temporary change that neither leads to lasting change nor impacts how the individual thinks about that behavior. Punishment systems also tend to change students’ relationships to their instructors: we are perceived as the police who don’t trust them, and this makes it harder for students to trust us and to come to us for help.

Punishment-oriented approaches clearly have unintended negative consequences and might not prevent cheating. Above and beyond these problems, punishment doesn’t help students learn appropriate behaviors. A more effective approach is to create the conditions that intrinsically motivate students to engage honestly and with effort in the work of our courses. Research on human motivation supports this approach: we see greater change in people when we encourage the positive behaviors and values we want to see than when we try to eradicate undesired behaviors with warnings or threats (Sharot & Garrett, 2016). Some key principles from the psychology of motivation can help us consider how to support students’ honest investment of their energy in the work of our courses.

Principles of human motivation that help minimize cheating

- **When humans see the value and purpose of an activity, they engage with that activity in a deep and thoughtful way.** What this implies is that we should focus on ensuring that students fully understand the value and purpose of the work of our courses in relation to their own learning. When students are intrinsically motivated to learn, they will see cheating for what it is—a short-circuiting of their own learning goals. When students don’t see the purpose of the work we assign or the value of the course itself, they are more likely to cheat.
• **When a difficult task is broken down into smaller elements, humans are more likely to perceive that task as manageable and to engage with effort.** What this implies is that we should structure work for students so that they engage in small steps toward big projects and assignments and can recognize their progress and learning as they take those steps. When students make progress toward a high-stakes assessment and receive helpful feedback to continue to develop their skills, they are less likely to cheat on that assessment. **When students are not prepared for high-stakes assessments, they panic and cheat.**

• **When humans feel that they are capable of achieving a specific goal, they are more likely to put energy and effort into that goal, even when it is challenging for them.** What this implies is that we should focus on ensuring students make progress they can track as they do the work in our courses. When students see the development of their skills and ability, they develop greater self-efficacy and are more motivated to learn and less motivated to cheat. **When students are convinced that they cannot do the work of the course or of the assignment, they are more likely to cheat.**

**Putting these principles into action**

If you reflect on these principles of motivation, you can see that they work together to ensure that students invest honest effort in their learning. Students are less likely to take shortcuts that involve breaches of academic honesty when they value the work of the course, engage in small steps that lead them to bigger assessments, and see clearly how these steps are preparing them to succeed. Putting these ideas into action requires a little work from us in terms of how we present our courses to our students and how we structure their work, but the good news is that we can proactively help students do the right thing through good teaching decisions rather than try to catch them when they choose the wrong path!

**Strategy: Communicate and clarify the value and purpose of the assessments in your course.**

All too often students aren’t given the chance to consider how what they learn from the work of a course will help them change and develop as students and people. If we don’t communicate how the work of our course can help students, they won’t necessarily make those connections themselves. If students see assessments and assignments as hoops to jump through for a grade, they won’t see the need to engage in the work those assessments require and may end up cheating. Take the time to explain to students—in writing—that their work will help them develop important skills, give you information about their progress, and prepare them for new experiences in their own lives.

**Examples of communicating the value and purpose of assessments to students**

**Language to use when assessments involve solving problems**
“Over the course of the semester, you will practice applying principles of physics and concepts related to climate to make predictions about weather. Our midterm is largely based on that kind of predictive work and the items on it will be familiar to you. This midterm will allow me to see how you are putting all the pieces of our course together, and I’ve designed it so that I can see clearly where you are still struggling as well as where you
are doing well. In the areas where there is confusion, I will revisit that work with you and provide further feedback and practice to strengthen your thinking. It’s okay to make mistakes on the midterm and I will provide ways for you to regain points. In your future work in the field, you will need to practice making good judgements about weather patterns quickly. Be sure to put your own honest effort into the test—it will pay off in what you learn about your own learning and what I learn about how I can help you improve in areas that are still challenging.”

Language to use when the assessments are papers or projects
“you will work on the final project all semester and make changes based on feedback you get from me and from your classmates. The project will showcase how you can now use sociological theories to analyze and respond to a current social issue. I am assigning this project because I want you to be able to use what you learn in this class long after the semester ends. The project will allow you to practice skills like research, argument, and problem solving, which are skills you will use in every dimension of your life at the University: both academic and personal problems can be solved when we do some research into the problem, use theories to guide our research and thinking, and present our solutions in ways that are clear and focused. I want you to put your all into this project so that you can use sociological principles to lead a better life.”

Strategy: Create an assessment plan that includes more assessments.
When courses are structured around one or two assessments that make up a large part of students’ grades, the stakes are so high that students often panic and decide to cheat rather than risk failure. And if students don’t feel they’ve had enough preparation for these high-stakes assessments, the temptation to take shortcuts will be even stronger. An assessment plan that helps students resist that temptation and invest their energy in learning honestly is designed to give students several opportunities to demonstrate their learning; for example, rather than one or two long exams, give students 5 shorter exams. When students see that no one assignment can sink their grade, they are more likely to view course work as a way to learn rather than a performance for a grade, and they will engage more fully and honestly. You might also consider doing away with high-stakes assessments altogether!

Examples of assessment plans that include more assessments
Assessment plan in a course involving problem-solving
The instructor gives weekly quizzes that are 5-10 items in length. Students can drop the lowest score of the 14 quizzes. Students are informed that each quiz is worth 4% of the course grade. Students can choose to rework a certain number of problems (in office hours or discussion section in the presence of an instructor or TA), identifying how they worked the problem originally, where they went wrong, and how they now understand the conceptual work they originally struggled with.

Assessment plan in a course involving papers or projects
The instructor requires students to submit small pieces of a large project each week (i.e., decisions about topic of paper, three possible resources for a paper, a plan for conducting research, a draft of first paragraph, a progress report on analysis and writing, a draft of interpretation or key ideas about the research, etc.). These one- or two-page assignments
require students to share their work to date but also their thinking about that work: students are asked to write the thinking or action steps they took to complete this piece of the work as well as a difficulty they encountered and what they learned that will guide them in their next assignment.

**Strategy: Create preparatory work and require students to track their progress through that work.**

When students are confronted with an assessment for which they aren’t prepared, their anxiety can lead them to cheat. We never want our students to begin an assignment or assessment without practicing the skills they require: with a little thought about the right practice to prepare students, we won’t have to put them in that situation. The best way to create that preparatory work is to analyze the skills an assessment requires and create in-class and out-of-class activities and homework that require those specific skills. This work might be worth only a few points and may be graded for completion only. Students’ attempts at this work will allow you to see where they are struggling so that you can provide support and new practice experiences. Require students to use your feedback on their practice to reflect and make decisions about how to improve on the next homework, draft, role play, etc. Tracking their progress gives students a sense of control over their learning and counters the feelings of confusion and anxiety that lead to cheating.

After you have planned sequences of practice, feedback, and reflection for your students, be sure to make explicit how these learning steps will build their abilities and lead them to success on important assessments and assignments. The combination of good preparation and self-regulation of learning is a strong antidote to the temptation to take shortcuts. But students sometimes don’t see the plan for their learning if we don’t take some time to show them that plan at the outset of the course.

**Examples of preparatory work and how to communicate it to students**

For a course that involves problem solving

“I’ve designed our work this semester in four big sequences. Each sequence adds a new level of complexity to the formulae we will be working with. At the end of each sequence you will have a small exam with problems that are similar to the ones you have worked on in class and in your problem sets. I will have you work with the TA to develop a study plan as we begin to work on practice exams toward the end of each sequence: your study plan involves analyzing your problem sets and taking the feedback that I give you to figure out where you need more support. The exams will be challenging, but if you do the homework and the in-class problems, you can succeed. This course is about developing your skills and it’s designed to do so. I don’t subscribe to the idea that math ability is innate and neither should you!”

For a course that involves writing papers or projects

“I’ve planned work for you this semester that builds toward the three case study papers that are the big assignments for our course. Each week, I will present you with a short scenario and guide you to practice analyzing it in the same way that you will be required to analyze the three case studies. You will draft a short written analytic response to two of those scenarios after we’ve worked on them. This will allow me to see how your skills are developing and to give you ways to improve your thinking. Those analytic responses and
my feedback will prepare you for the longer case study papers. In addition, after the first and second case study papers, you will create a plan to strengthen one or two areas after getting my feedback. You’ll use that plan to improve on successive papers so that you will be ready when the final case study comes.”

Resources

For support in minimizing cheating and plagiarism, please feel free to request a consultation with an instructional consultant at ITLAL.