Combating Student Cheating in the Digital Era

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Cheaters never prosper? In today's highly competitive environment, some children think they do! With access to the latest technology and overwhelming pressures to excel, an escalating number of students feel less obliged to work and more compelled to search for an easy way out.

Although cheating is not new to the classroom, the ways in which students cheat and their attitudes toward cheating have taken a fresh spin. The digital era has created modern challenges for teachers while causing growing concern for academic integrity. The reality is that with the advancement of technology, new methods of cheating have developed. As educators, we must take a proactive approach to keeping in touch with current devices. Awareness of technological tools is invaluable not only to teaching, but also important for a well-rounded understanding of today's deceitfulness in the classroom.

Current Trends

Say good-bye to the days of hand-written notes hidden inside shirt sleeves. Today's cheaters are much more high tech and technologically savvy. For example, have you ever heard of a key logger? Students have used this battery-size device to record their teacher's keystrokes, capture valuable information such as passwords, tests, email communication and more. As the keys are typed on a computer, information is stored inside a memory chip. Once the data is captured, the key logger can be plugged into most CPUs and opened with any word processor or text editor.

The use of printers and handheld devices also is surfacing as a popular means to subvert the rules. Although a time-consuming procedure, students have used home printers to replicate and replace a product label (e.g. water bottle), print test notes on the inside copy, and adhere it to the object. With the time spent completing such a task, these same children could have studied adequately for multiple exams.
Camera phones, iPods, MP3 players, calculators and text messaging devices are the most frequently used cheating tools on tests and assignments. Students use iPods and MP3 players to record test notes and play them back during exams. Others take digital images of tests or keep their phones in their pockets to text answers to friends. Even graphing calculators can store a great deal of information which can serve as a way to reference notes for any course.

Although intuitive teachers can protect themselves from most cheating incidents, the Web causes additional challenges outside the immediate classroom. Sites such as MonsterPapers.com, bignerds.com, cheater.com and academicpapers.com, all offer access to unlimited papers. If a student cannot locate an appropriate paper to match his or her assigned topic, the Internet also contains sites that advertise the service of writing for a fee. These writers, known as ghost writers, are willing to complete student reports, master's degree theses and even Ph.D. dissertations; the nearer the deadline, the higher the costs. Unsurprisingly, the Center for Academic Integrity (2005) reported that more than half of the students studied from 61 schools admitted to some level of plagiarism using the Internet.

As if the challenges with plagiarism aren't enough to worry about, consider a site that can answer any question you text within minutes. Cha Cha, a new service that has been gaining attention, does just that. Although there has been no great evidence that students have been using this service in the classroom, many instructors are rethinking their policies about cell phones in the classroom.

What Can We Do?

Web sites, digital devices, search engines and emails all have provided students with a more convenient way to cheat and plagiarize. Teachers continually face an ever growing arsenal of deceitfulness in a digital world. Faculty who remain passive and unacquainted will be taken advantage of. Those who maintain a proactive attitude will have a less difficult time. These six suggestions are vital steps to protecting your classroom.

1. Apply high-tech defenses against high-tech cheating.

Teachers can use software packages such as turnitin.com to battle plagiarism. An entire class can be registered into the system and the site will detect plagiarized sentences while providing its original source. Other antiplagiarism tools include search engines such as ask.com, google.com and dogpile.com.

2. Provide a clear definition of cheating and plagiarism.

Students must be taught the differences between creating and borrowing. A clear definition of plagiarism will help children understand why they cannot simply copy and paste information without properly citing references. It is the teacher's obligation to explain what is acceptable or objectionable.


Faculty should visit sites that offer papers and ideas for cheating. Take a close look into the resources offered and inform your students of what you discovered. Chances are that the class will be more reluctant to cheat if you appear knowledgeable about these capabilities.
4. Avoid assigning generic subjects.

The broader the topic, such as World War I, the easier it is to find pre-written papers. Teachers should avoid assigning generic subjects and should focus on narrow topics, which are difficult to replicate. Ask students to complete some of their writing during class and monitor their progress. If the quality of their end result is surprisingly different, treat it as a sign of suspicion.

5. Awareness is key.

Whether or not you personally send text messages, use email or know how to work an iPhone, it is to your advantage to be aware of these devices and their capabilities. Students will be quick to take advantage of teachers who are oblivious to modern technology. Protect yourself and always aim to be one step ahead of your class.

6. Set rules and restrictions.

The current debate, especially in higher education, is whether or not to allow students to use portable electronics in the classroom. Although many ideas are in question, there should be no reason for most digital devices during an exam. Set firm rules and consequences at your school for violators who are caught with electronics while test taking. If possible, you may want to suggest that all bags, text books and other personal belongings are placed in the front of the classroom while testing.

Reflection

Cheating has been in existence for as long as there have been teachers, students and assessments. The difference today is that cheaters often utilize "James Bond type" devices to capture key strokes, play back voice recordings and send secret messages. It used to be as easy as catching a glance at a classmate's exam. Now, teachers must also keep a close-eye out for electronic gadgets, replicated product labels and the use of search engines. As if we don't have enough to worry about?

Over time, the teaching profession has evolved to include the responsibilities of faith formation, teaching a subject, managing a classroom and providing a safe environment. Most recently, teachers are also required to comprehend modern technology. Although the challenge is great, as educators there is no alternative. The truth of the matter is that in some states, studies show "more than 75 percent of preschool children" [are already] "using computers (Miller, 2005)." We must adapt to the times and embrace the new era. It is our obligation to educate students about the appropriate use of technology. A reluctance to learn is an injustice to the future of education.
