

Reading 3

The Take-Home Lesson from the Harvard Cheating Scandal

Last Friday, Reuters reported that more than half of the students involved in last year's cheating scandal at Harvard have been suspended. This was even labeled "the largest academic scandal to hit the Ivy League school in recent memory." In this post, I wanted to discuss my own thoughts on the matter, and more importantly on the general idea of giving take-home exams in a mathematics class.

As you may or may not recall, in the Spring 2012 term course on "Introduction to Congress," 279 students were given a take-home final exam. The professor for the class, Matthew B. Platt, started noticing similarities in the responses to the questions, which indicated they had collaborated, something they were specifically instructed not to do. After this, of the 100 students implicated, 60 were suspended and the rest received some sort of probation. The large scale of the cheating has led to much speculation as to whether the students were really at fault, or whether it was wrong for the professor to assign such difficult take-home questions and then expect the students to work alone. In September, Farhad Manjoo wrote a piece arguing that the students should be encouraged to collaborate on an "unfair test," and if individual responses were required then the test should be taken in class.

I disagree with Manjoo for a few different reasons. First of all, I do not think that cheating is a good way to take any sort of stance against something you find unfair. If it really is unfair there are other channels, like talking directly to the professor, and students have lots of advocates they can approach, like the Dean of Students, Ombudsman, etc. As demonstrated by this case, by cheating they only hurt themselves and in the end didn't change the system in any significant way (although I don't know what, if any, were the repercussions for the professor of this class).

Secondly, I think that take-home exams are a valuable testing and teaching tool. I myself really like this for upper level courses, since I can do exactly what the professor for Intro to Congress did—I can ask harder questions. Especially in mathematics, but I imagine in other disciplines,

From: "The Take-Home Lesson from the Harvard Cheating Scandal," Adriana Salerno, AMS Blog (www.ams.org), February 3, 2013. Used with permission.

too, it is important to let the students let the question sink in and try several approaches (the first few may fail) before finding the correct answer. For a proof-based course, it is sometimes important to let the students use their notes and books. (I don't let them use the internet because there are too many people on there willing to give you the answer.) Unless you are having them do computations or write proofs that they have already seen in class, it is hard to tell how much time someone will need to solve a problem. I think this is a useful teaching tool because it allows them to work like mathematicians, trying to figure out a brand new proof at home, using the material from class.

Of course, mathematicians collaborate sometimes; they don't always just work on their own. And this is another point Manjoo makes, that we should encourage collaboration as it is going to be an important skill in the "real world." Unfortunately, collaboration sometimes turns into a few students leading the others through the answers. Students don't have the same understanding of pedagogy and are more inclined to help their peers by giving them the answers. (I really think most cheating comes from a sense of loyalty of students with students than from any malicious intent.) But the point is, as instructors we want to know how much each student knows, and thus we need to, at some point, evaluate them individually. I am a big supporter of collaboration, since it is another important part of doing mathematics, and I encourage them to work together on homework and on final projects (which I do for many classes instead of a final exam).

Taking Manjoo's side for a second, I do know some people who allow collaboration on take-homes, and then the individual assessment is in the form of an oral exam (based on the take-home). That is a pretty good tool for knowing how much each student contributed to the answers, but is quite time-consuming (and intimidating to the shyer students). Catherine Roberts wrote about some examples of collaborative assessment. Some seem to work well, but she does point out that "one danger with collaborative exams is that students frequently defer to the person who is perceived as the "smartest"—they don't want to waste precious time learning the material but rather hope to get the best score possible by relying on the class genius." In any case, even if we allow collaboration on exams, there needs to be some individual accountability. It is my job to teach mathematics, it is the student's job to learn mathematics, and I need some way to know if we're all doing our job!

But I still wonder, why were so many students inclined to cheat in the first place? It seems like there is a deeper problem here, which has to do with the students' philosophy of learning. This reminds me of something I learned in a math ed class in grad school: The difference between learning-oriented and performance-oriented students. Performance-oriented students were more worried about the grades in the class than learning the material in the class. It's not surprising that learning-oriented students actually tend to do better in classes and are also more likely to succeed, especially in mathematics. So I can imagine that if I were a performance-oriented student, was given a very hard take-home exam, and a friend was in the same class, I would be tempted to collaborate so that we could both get a better grade. But if I were a learning-oriented student, and possibly understood why our professor was giving us a take-home exam full of difficult questions, I would just work as hard as I could on my own and hope for the best. Applying this to the Intro to Congress class, which Manjoo says "had a reputation for being easy," I am not surprised if many of the students who enrolled were more performance oriented. (This was supposed to be an easy A.)

At any rate, this leads me to the only thing I think I learned from the cheating scandal, and maybe my one criticism of the Harvard professor involved (of whom I know very little). It seems like the instructions for what was allowed for the test were clear, but maybe not the reasons for having such a test in the first place. From now on I will try to be painfully clear about my own goals as a teacher. (I do this already, but it can't hurt to try harder.) If you're giving a hard take-home exam, which many students will be tempted to cheat on, you should be clear about why you're doing it. That is, explain your pedagogy, share your philosophy of teaching, make yourself an ally (I'm doing this because it's the best way for you to learn or for me to assess what you've learned) rather than their adversary (I'm giving you this test so you will fail). I have also tried to make cheating less tempting by giving exams in two parts, an in-class worth about 60–70% of the grade, and a take-home with harder questions for the rest of the grade. I think this takes some of the pressure away but allows me to assess (and teach) the way I want to.

By the way, I have caught very few students cheating on my take-home exams, but that doesn't mean they're not doing it! The fact is I can't police and control all of my students, nor do I want to. In the end, what bothers me most about cheating is that they are avoiding learning the material. If

they get through my class by cheating, they will be stuck with not knowing very much in the future. They may pass my class and graduate college by cheating, but mediocrity is harder to hide when you are out there in the “real world.” Or at least that’s what I tell myself to feel better about the whole thing.

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Glossary

accountability	responsibility for something
adversary	an opponent in a conflict or contest
advocates	people who support or speak in favor of something or someone
ally	person joined in an association with others for a common purpose
channels	means of communication or expression
computations	the calculating of something; calculations using a computer
defer	to acknowledge the merit of somebody else’s judgment or opinion
implicated	connected to an activity such as a crime
intimidating	instilling fear or a sense of inadequacy
malicious	motivated by a desire to cause harm to another
mediocrity	a quality that is adequate or acceptable but not very good
pedagogy	science of teaching; method of teaching
police	to ensure that rules and procedures are followed correctly

probation	period of supervision during which students are subject to dismissal unless they improve their behavior and satisfy the conditions of the punishment
proofs	sequence of steps used in establishing the validity of a mathematical proposition
repercussions	results of an action, especially unforeseen problems
speculation	reasoning based on incomplete facts or information
stance	attitude or view that somebody takes
suspended	prohibited from attending for a limited period of time
take-home	an exam that may be worked on without supervision outside the classroom

Discussion of Reading 3

These questions, which test your reading comprehension, involve a detailed examination of Reading 3. While many of the answers are found in the text, some questions require critical thinking and analysis. Discuss the answers to these questions with your classmates.

1. Explain why Adriana Salerno disagrees with Farhad Manjoo's idea that "students should be encouraged to collaborate on an 'unfair test.'"
2. What is Salerno's opinion on take-home exams?
3. What problems can result from giving students take-home exams?
4. Explain the difference between learning-oriented and performance-oriented students, according to Salerno.
5. What did Salerno learn from the cheating scandal at Harvard?
6. How has Salerno tried to make cheating on exams less tempting?
7. What bothers Salerno most about cheating?
8. Write a one-sentence statement of the main idea of the article in your own words.

Reaction Writing: What Is Your Opinion on This Topic?

This activity will reinforce your understanding of the important concepts and vocabulary words found in this chapter. Write several paragraphs expressing your point of view on how collaboration on tests should be treated in higher education and what sanctions the students involved in the cheating scandal at Harvard should receive. Use at least **ten** vocabulary words from the glossaries in this chapter.

Research Question

Plagiarism is the use of someone's original words or ideas without attribution. Attribution involves using quotation marks for direct quotations and citing sources for both quotations and paraphrases. Plagiarism is a violation of a school's academic policies and honor code. Plagiarism is also a federal crime that violates U.S. copyright law.

How does U.S. copyright law prevent plagiarism in the United States? Do research on the Internet or in books, newspapers, and magazines to find current information on this topic. Keep the articles you collect in a news file that you can continue to develop. Investigate these issues:

- What is the definition of copyright and what is its purpose?
- What does U.S. copyright law protect?
- What categories of material are not covered by U.S. copyright law?
- Which countries are on the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) list of abusers of copyright?
- How does the definition of plagiarism differ from country to country?
- What recent cases of plagiarism have been publicized?
- How has access to the Internet made it easier for students to plagiarize?
- What are the rules for citation of sources in the United States?

Writing Assignment: Summary

A summary is a condensed form of a longer document, usually about one-third to one-fourth of the length of the original. It should be written in paraphrased language and contain only the main idea and major points of the original document. You may quote a few sentences from the original article, but most of the summary must be written in your own words.

Assignment

Write a 250- to 300-word summary of one of the readings in this chapter.

Organization

- I. Introduction (author, title, source, date, and main idea)
- II. Major point and supporting points
- III. Major point and supporting points
- IV. Conclusion (restatement of main idea)
- V. References/Works Cited/Bibliography
Example: Salerno, Adriana. (2013, Feb. 3). The take-home lesson from the Harvard cheating scandal.
Retrieved from <http://blogs.ams.org>

Guidelines

- Use your own words as much as possible (paraphrasing), but you may select one or two quotations.
- Give author, title, source, date, and the main idea in the first sentence.
- Divide the summary into three or four paragraphs.
- Style: Objective and formal
- Tone: Impersonal and balanced
- Length: 250–300 words
(See Appendix D for an example of a summary.)

Oral Presentation

Give an oral presentation to the class in which you discuss the summary you did for the writing assignment. If you have the technical capability, use PowerPoint or another similar program for your presentation. (See Appendix C: How to Give an Oral Presentation.)

↔ Debate

In a debate, two teams present opposing arguments on a controversial topic with the goal of convincing the audience of their point of view. The Pro team presents arguments in favor of a topic. The Con team presents arguments in opposition to a topic. Each team has a leader who gives an opening statement and a closing statement. The team members develop questions and answers on the topic.

Form two teams, with a leader for each team, and then debate this:

- **Resolved:** *The punishment for students who cheat on a test should be suspension from school.*

You can prepare for the debate by accessing the information listed under Websites and Suggested Readings.

■ Role Play

These realistic scenarios add to the liveliness of the classroom and stimulate the learning environment. Participation in role plays will improve your spoken English through active and interactive learning.

After you plan and practice this role play, perform it for the class.

- **Scenario:** A college professor meets with a student whom the professor suspects of cheating by collaborating on a take-home test.
- **Setting:** The professor's office in the college
- **Goal:** To determine whether the student has cheated by collaborating with other students and to arrive at a fair resolution to the problem

⌘ Thinking about It

In this task, you are called upon to think critically about social, economic, and political issues. The focus changes from a detailed examination of the readings to a broad view of the relevant issues under consideration. You refine your critical-thinking skills through analysis of three questions that are related to the readings and can respond to the questions either by writing a short essay or having a class discussion. These questions require analysis and synthesis of information, inference and interpretation, and evaluation of strengths and

weaknesses of policies. The information listed under Websites and Suggested Readings will be helpful.

- What rules and regulations about material on the Internet are included in the current U.S. copyright law?
- What provisions in U.S. copyright law apply to international copyright protection?
- Which countries, besides the United States, have comprehensive copyright laws?

Websites

These websites provide information for the Debate and Thinking about It tasks. They offer different perspectives on the topic.*

Avoiding Plagiarism (Purdue University's OWL):

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/930/1/>

Plagiarism.org: www.plagiarism.org

Turnitin.com: <http://turnitin.com>

U.S. Copyright Office: www.copyright.gov

(See Circular 1, Copyright Basics, published by the U.S. Copyright Office:
www.copyright.gov/circs/)

World Intellectual Property Organization: www.wipo.org

Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR): www.ustr.gov

Suggested Readings

These online and print articles and books offer diverse points of view and in-depth information on this chapter's topic.**

Anderman, Eric M. (Ed.), and Murdock, Tamera B. (2006). *Psychology of academic cheating*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Science.

Bleeker, Karen Clos. 2008. *To be honest: Championing academic integrity in community colleges*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges Press.

*Note that URLs can change without notice. Try the shortest URL address available if you encounter a broken link.

**For online articles, we provide the author, date, article title, and retrieval site.

Copyright Law of the United States of America and Related Laws Contained in Title 17 of the *United States Code*: Circular 92 (Chapter 2: Copyright Ownership and Transfer): 2011

Flood, Alison. (2013, May 29). Rudyard Kipling admitted to plagiarism in *Jungle Book*. Retrieved from www.guardian.co.uk

Powers, Martine, and Landergan, Katherine. (2013, Feb. 2). Harvard details suspensions in massive cheating scandal. Retrieved from www.bostonglobe.com

Decoo, William. (2002). *Crisis on campus: Confronting academic misconduct*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Mallon, Thomas. (2001). *Stolen words: The classic book on plagiarism*. San Diego: Harcourt.

Martin, John V., (Ed.) (2002). *Copyright: Current issues and laws*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Paul, Stephanie. (2006, January). Plagiarism: What is it, exactly? Retrieved from www.legalzoom.com

Perez-Pena, Richard. (2013, Sept. 17). Students accused of cheating return awkwardly to a changed Harvard. *New York Times*, A12.

Randall, Marilyn. (2001). *Pragmatic plagiarism: Authorship, profit, and power*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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