Transformational eLearning:
Academic Integrity in Online Education

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Abstract

Conversations about academic integrity are too often focused on its violation. Leadership is required to emphasize the intrinsic value of learning and engender a sense of agency and ownership in online education. Student agency can be reinforced through fair assessment conditions and an emphasis on mastery over performance. Defining the purpose of education and establishing clear boundaries throughout the semester support a culture of responsibility and give meaning to learning. Empowering students and holding them accountable, therefore, helps ensure student success while reducing the incentives for academic dishonesty. While eLearning offers expanded opportunities for agency and empowerment in education, without leadership it can be devoid of meaning beyond mere credentialing. Transformational leadership and academic integrity are equally integral components of the educational process. Instruction that does not empower discovery while ensuring integrity alienates students and cheapens degrees. As instructors increasingly engage students in digital and blended environments, expectations of academic integrity must be addressed through a combination of course design, culture building, and restorative justice. In order for distance learning to match the prestige and success of on-site instruction, educators will need to provide leadership while coaching students in the responsibilities of education to create the conditions for transformational eLearning.
Transformational eLearning: Academic Integrity in Online Education

Discussion

Education can be described as a transfer of responsibility from one person to another. In order for students to become increasingly responsible for their learning, they must acquire purpose and meaning through the leadership of their instructors and the culture of their institutions. Conversely, lack of leadership and accountability will inevitably result in academic dishonesty and mere instrumentality. Special attention must be paid to student agency and personal investment in online learning in order to mitigate its limitations while exploiting its capabilities. The flexibility and asynchronicity of digital learning ought to be matched with consistency and engagement throughout the course.

While leadership is usually apparent in face-to-face classes, it may be more crucial in online education because of fewer shared norms and a weakened sense of community. However, there is potential for increased individualized feedback in asynchronous, digital classes, which can potentially foster greater independence and autonomy than traditional classrooms. Leadership that empowers students and engenders a sense of responsibility for their own education is increasingly necessary for digital environments. Without the informal rules and emotional connections fostered by traditional brick-and-mortar classes, online learning requires explicit boundaries and consistent technological safeguards to ensure fairness and academic integrity. In order to achieve this, more needs to be understood about why students cheat, how leadership relates to academic integrity, and what facilitates student success in eLearning.

Motivations for Academic Dishonesty

The reasons for academic dishonesty include opportunity, culture, and desperation, and all three of these motivations need to be addressed in online education. When students perceive
that their peers are not acting with integrity they are much more likely to use unauthorized resources themselves. In-person classes can quickly address this impulse through limiting resources and attentive proctoring. Establishing fairness in testing conditions through monitoring is the most basic protection against academic dishonesty. Institutional culture can also influence student behavior as it helps to establish both formal and informal codes of conduct that students internalize.

Establishing a culture of academic integrity online cannot succeed in a piecemeal fashion, however. Institutions without consistent standards of integrity and fairness discourage faculty members from both creating safeguards against academic dishonesty and enforcing the consequences for breaches of integrity. When distance learners are permitted to shop around for courses that do not adequately prevent cheating, individual instructors who work to prevent academic dishonesty are at a disadvantage. Administrators must support online faculty with the technological tools and academic standards needed to create fair conditions for all students across the curriculum. As a result, each online instructor is then allowed to contextualize the concept of academic integrity within her or his digital classroom while reinforcing expectations through consistently applied technological safeguards.

Course design and leadership also play important roles in influencing student behavior. High-stakes, summative exams can place students in desperate situations where the pressure to achieve outweighs concerns for integrity, learning, and skill development. Scaffolding assignments and offering low-stakes, formative quizzes and tests allow learners to try out ideas and invest themselves in assignments before a final grade is given on a particular topic or skill. Leadership regarding the meaning and value of academic integrity should also be offered at the introduction of each assignment to underscore the role of integrity within a specific learning
module. Without leadership and opportunities for improvement and mastery, online faculty members can expect to spend more time policing students rather than offering them instruction.

**Transformational Leadership and Transactional Distance**

If lack of leadership results in increased academic dishonesty, then it is important to understand how successful leadership encourages academic integrity. James MacGregor Burns (1978) first defined the concept of transforming leadership as "a process in which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" (p. 20). Burns was describing political leadership in this context and he contrasted it with transactional leadership, which he defined as a give and take relationship (1978). Transforming, or transformational, leadership has similar potential in online education to influence students through demonstrated expertise, intellectual stimulation, and personalization. In contrast, transactional leadership occurs within digital classrooms when instructors are simply course managers assigning grades for correct answers.

Another point of contrast between transforming and transactional leadership styles that applies to online education is that while the former is based on mutual respect, the latter is based on mere hierarchy. Psychological mechanisms similar to the ones Burns (1978) describes within politics are at work in digital classrooms, and these motivating stimuli should influence the decisions instructors make in the design and delivery of their courses. It should be clear to most educators that when their authority is based on respect rather than position, they can expect higher levels of academic integrity within their courses. What is less clear, however, is how to achieve this kind of connection with students in a digital environment. The answer to this dilemma may lie in the amount of structure, dialog, and autonomy present in the course design, or what Michael G. Moore described in his theory of “transactional distance” (1997).
According to Moore’s (1993) theory, the distance that students feel between themselves and their instructors results from an interaction of variables that define the pedagogical aspects of education: structure, dialog, and autonomy. These variables map loosely with Burns’ three elements of transforming leadership suggesting that leadership and transactional distance overlap through the leader’s expertise, the dialog from the intellectual stimulation provided, and finally, the amount of autonomy provided by personalization. These theories also converge with the need for shared values and purpose between leader and follower or teacher and student. Transformational leadership promises to not only alleviate transactional distance in online education, but also, increase academic integrity through shared values and empowerment. Ultimately, online instructors must challenge students to take greater ownership of their work, invest in knowing the relative strengths and weaknesses of individual students, and coach students into becoming lifelong learners with their own motivations for learning.

**Academic Integrity and Student Success in eLearning**

As stated above, education is the transferring of responsibility from one person to another; therefore, student success is closely aligned with agency and intrinsic rewards. What distinguishes transformational leadership from more traditional notions of educational leadership is that rather than cultivating followers, it seeks to empower followers into becoming leaders themselves. While extrinsic measures are increasingly the measure of student success in higher education, emphasizing the intrinsic rewards of learning promises to develop both qualitative and quantitative outcomes ranging from community and engagement to retention and job placement. Students motivated by purely instrumental rewards are less likely to succeed and more likely to engage in academic dishonesty. Success in digital learning environments requires that instructors
not only define what academic integrity is, but also, explain how it relates to specific skill development and knowledge acquisition.

Violations of academic integrity are not an unusual part of academic and moral development. How educators react in these moments can either encourage students to delve into the ethical and intellectual implications of their behavior or make them feel antagonistic toward those who evaluate them as well as education as a whole. Understanding the motivations for academic dishonesty and equipping students with the ethical and scholarly tools for avoiding it in the future are essential components to making such occurrences stages of development rather than academic disqualifiers. Therefore, restorative measures should be undertaken to use academic misconduct violations as teachable moments for students and instructors alike. Learners who resort to dishonesty can be encouraged to confront the role they played in turning their education into a means rather than an end. Institutions, therefore, have an obligation to create environments for reflection on and discussion of academic integrity by all stakeholders.

Institutions and instructors must also acknowledge the roles they play in creating the conditions whereby students think cheating is a viable option, and then confront the motivations and opportunities for academic dishonesty within online courses. Instructors are likely to feel wronged by lapses of academic integrity; however, poorly designed courses, assignments, and assessments can put undue pressure on students and increase the likelihood of academic dishonesty. Without room to fail and grow or an understanding of the goals of education, many students will take shortcuts to hide their weaknesses or exaggerate their strengths. Institutions that emphasize the process of learning rather than its outcome will go a long way toward achieving their missions and instilling cultures of integrity. This type of instruction takes time and resources, and programs that simply seek to profit from eLearning rather than create new
opportunities for quality education will continue to grapple with academic dishonesty along with high student attrition and low graduation rates.

**Conclusion and Future Study**

Developing a culture of academic integrity and purpose in online environments can be difficult because students are embedded in different contexts and operate with competing identities; distance learners are often also employees, caregivers, military personnel, spouses, and parents in addition to being students. The digital classroom requires leadership that both models integrity and develops independence. While individual instructors must continually embed the “why” of learning into their lessons, they cannot be expected to bear the responsibility for protecting academic integrity alone. Institutions that equip faculty members with tools for safeguarding online environments and reward those who invest in more frequent low-stakes and formative assessments, scaffolded assignments, and personalized feedback are creating the conditions for both academic integrity and student success.

Finally, every institution of higher learning will benefit from a dedicated Director of Academic Integrity. This position requires going beyond addressing infractions of honor codes, lapses in academic integrity, and maintaining a level playing field in online classrooms. In order to avoid speaking of academic integrity only in its absence, leadership must be provided alongside a coherent communication strategy to support the meaning of academic integrity throughout the institution. Also, students facing accusations of academic dishonesty need advocates from within the institution and a restorative process for acknowledging the harm caused by these actions with opportunities for reintegration into the community through reflection, recognition, and discussion. Only through a strong sense of community and purpose in learning can educators hope to see academic integrity as the rule rather than the exception.
References
