

What Justifies Cheating?

Contextual Factors that University Students use to Justify Examination Malpractice

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify contextual factors that university students may use to justify engaging in examination malpractice. In the study, 173 education students completed a questionnaire to identify the situations where they justify cheating behavior. Participants were asked to indicate how willing they would be to assist a peer who asks for an answer during an examination in twenty different situations. Only 10% of the students said they would never engage in examination malpractice despite the situation. The most common factors that students used to justify cheating were factors related to the peer who asked for assistance, such that a family member passed away, and factors that related to the lecturer, such as the lecturer not attending class. Therefore, educators need to improve the educational context so that students cannot justify cheating as an acceptable option.

Introduction

Examination malpractices present a serious threat to the integrity and quality of the Nigerian educational system. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) recently reported that 16.7% of the results of the November/December 2010 exam were withheld because of suspected involvement in malpractices (Odeh, 2010). At the tertiary level, Bayero University, Kano recently expelled 87 students and rusticated 17 others in December 2010 for involvement in examination malpractice (Jaafar, 2011). Educational researchers must make a concerted effort to identify the roots of the problem of examination malpractice using empirical research. Empirical research can then provide guidance for identifying practical solutions that will create a more open and trustworthy educational system in Nigeria.

Korb (2010) conducted a study to determine whether university students found malpractices to be morally acceptable, testing the hypothesis that perhaps Nigerian students do not understand which types of study behaviours are morally acceptable and those study behaviors that are unethical. To do this, a questionnaire with thirty different types of study behaviors were listed, some of which were acceptable study behaviors such as “Ask lecturer to clarify questions from lecture” whereas other behaviors were malpractices, such as “Ask another student for an answer during the exam.” University students evaluated whether each study behavior was acceptable on a nine point scale from Never Acceptable to Always Acceptable.

The study found that 62% of the participants ranked all of the malpractices as never acceptable. Therefore, a majority of university students understand that engaging in malpractices is never acceptable. In a follow-up study, Korb (in press) assessed how frequently university students actually engaged in malpractices. Of the sampled university students, 69% admitted to engaging in at least one form of malpractice.

When looking at the findings of these studies together, only 38% of university students believe that examination malpractice could be morally acceptable (Korb, 2010), yet 69% of university students actually engaged in examination malpractice (Korb, in press). This means that a large proportion of university students engage in examination malpractice despite knowing that examination malpractice is morally unethical. This discrepancy calls for additional research to determine what factors may influence a student to engage in examination malpractice even though they acknowledge that the malpractice is unethical.

A possible explanation of these findings comes from a study conducted by Murdock and colleagues (Murdock, Miller, & Kohlhardt, 2004) in which they found that students decide whether to engage in cheating not just by the moral evaluation of whether cheating is considered right or wrong, but also by the extent to which cheating is considered justifiable in a particular situation. In other words, a student may know that malpractice is unethical, but may justify the cheating based on a particular situation, or contextual factor. In their study, Murdock and colleagues had senior secondary students read a vignette about a classroom environment. In half of the vignettes, the teacher was portrayed as a good instructor, while in other half of the vignettes, the teacher was portrayed as a bad instructor. After reading the vignettes, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their beliefs about cheating in that particular classroom, including their beliefs about the moral acceptability of cheating on an exam and whether cheating was justified in that context.

Results demonstrated that the participants' beliefs of the moral acceptability of cheating was not influenced by the characteristics of the teacher as much as their beliefs of the justifiability of cheating. In other words, cheating was considered morally unacceptable in regardless of whether the teacher was good or bad. However, cheating was ranked as more justifiable in the classroom with the bad teacher. This means that a student's decision to

engage in malpractice is primarily determined by whether they can justify cheating based on the contextual factors.

The findings of this study might explain why so many Nigerian university students engage in malpractice despite recognizing that it is morally unacceptable. It is possible that even though the students know that malpractice is unethical, they justify cheating based on contextual factors surrounding the examination. The purpose of this study was to identify contextual factors that might influence university students to engage in academic malpractices.

Research Questions

1. In what type of situations do students find examination malpractice to be justifiable?
2. What percentage of the students never justify examination malpractice?

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 173 randomly selected education students in their first year at the University of Jos. In the sample, 52% were male and 48% were female. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 39 years, with an average age of 23.18 years ($SD = 3.42$). Seventy-four percent of the sample entered into the university through UME, while the remaining 26% entered through the remedial program.

Three different questionnaires, one of which was the questionnaire for this study, were randomly distributed as course credit to the 550 students enrolled in a general education course. Because students randomly received different questionnaires, the participants in this study represent a random selection of all students enrolled in this course.

Instrument

Participants completed a questionnaire to identify factors that students may use to justify engaging in examination malpractice. The directions on the questionnaire stated, “During the examination for one of your education classes, the person sitting next to you asks for an answer. For each situation listed below, indicate how willing you would be to help that person by sharing your answer.” A seven point scale was presented with 1 representing “Definitely NOT help” and 7 representing “Definitely will help.” Twenty situations were then presented, some representing factors about the student asking for assistance such as “The student studied hard but is dull so he did not understand the material.” Other situations examined lecturer characteristics such as “The lecturer never showed up for class.” See Table 1 for the list of situational factors.

Procedure

The questionnaire was given to the university students in a general education course. At the end of lecture, the instructor gave directions for the questionnaire and class representatives distributed the questionnaire to the students. The students returned the questionnaires to the instructor within three weeks.

Results

The first research question asked in what type of situations do students find examination malpractice to be justifiable. This research question was answered by calculating the mean “justifiability” score across participants for each of the twenty situations. Table 1 presents the results of this research question. To assist in interpretation, the percentage of students who ticked two or higher was also calculated. This is the percentage of students who indicated that they might engage in examination malpractice in that situation.

From Table 1, it can be seen that four of the top five situations that students use to justify examination malpractice are situations based on the characteristics of the peer needing the assistance: the student lost a relative, the student was sick, the student was a close friend,

Table 1. Justifiability of Providing Answers to a Peer During an Examination.

Rank			
Order ^a	Situation	Mean ^b	Percent ^c
1	The student lost a family member just before the exam.	4.10	80%
2	The student was sick throughout the term.	3.80	75%
3	The student is a close friend of yours.	3.52	73%
4	The lecturer never showed for class.	3.23	60%
5	Student studied but is dull so did not understand the lesson.	3.16	67%
6	Questions on the exam were not covered in lecture or book.	3.12	60%
7	Student could not afford the textbook and other materials.	3.06	66%
8	The lecturer did not care about the students.	3.02	62%
9	The lecturer was a poor instructor.	2.79	61%
10	A strike interrupted the term.	2.58	52%
11	The student is from the same area that you are from.	2.56	51%
12	The invigilators are not paying attention.	2.32	45%
13	Student had no time to study due to taking care of the children.	2.17	44%
14	The student's work would not release them to attend class.	2.15	41%
15	The lecturer provided lots of support to help the students learn.	2.07	28%
16	The lecturer covered the material well.	2.02	30%
17	The invigilators are being watchful.	1.70	20%
18	The student has never been seen before.	1.55	22%
19	The student never attended class because of laziness.	1.22	7%
20	The student partied throughout the term so they never studied.	1.21	6%

^a Situations are rank ordered from most justifiable to least justifiable.

^b Mean across participants. Responses range from 1 Definitely not help to 7 Definitely will help.

^c Percent of students who ticked two or higher, indicating that they might engage in examination malpractice in that situation.

and the student studied hard but is dull. Likewise, the two situations with the lowest justifiability factor were also related to the student needing the assistance: participants were unwilling to engage in examination malpractice if the peer asking for assistance was lazy or if

the peer partied throughout the term. Therefore, students justify cheating most based on the characteristics of the peer asking for assistance.

Instructor characteristics were both used to justify examination malpractices as well as deter students from engaging in malpractices. Positive instructor characteristics such as providing lots of support to help the students learn, covering the material well, and being vigilant during the examinations were a strong deterrent for students justifying examination malpractice: 80% of the students reported they would not provide an answer during an exam if the invigilators were being watchful. Similarly, 70% of the students said they would not provide assistance to their peer if the instructor covered the material well. On the other hand, about 60% of the students reported that they would justify examination malpractice if the lecture never showed to class, the questions on the examination were not covered by the lecturer, the lecturer did not care about the students, or the lecturer was a poor instructor.

The second research question asked what percentage of the students would never justify examination malpractice. Only 17 out of the 173 students (9.8%) indicated that they would never justify examination malpractice despite the situation by ticking 1, definitely NOT help, to all twenty situations.

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to identify contextual factors that might influence university students to justify engaging in examination malpractices. To do this, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to provide an answer to a peer during an exam in specific situations. This study found that only about 10% of the university students reported that they would never justify engaging in examination malpractice. When compared to the 62% of university students who indicated that cheating was never morally acceptable (Korb, 2010), this clearly indicates that there are two different factors to consider in examination malpractice: the moral acceptability of cheating and the contextual factors that

can be used to justify the decision to cheat. This result is in agreement with the findings from Murdock and colleagues (2004) who also found that students decide whether to engage in cheating not just by the moral evaluation of whether cheating is considered right or wrong, but also by the extent to which cheating is considered justifiable in a particular situation. Because students justify engaging in examination malpractice based on the educational environment, educators need to create an educational environment where students never feel justified in engaging in malpractices.

This study found that instructional practices can be used to justify students' willingness to engage in examination malpractice. Students justify examination malpractice when the lecturer does not show to class, the questions on the examination were not covered by the lecturer, the lecturer does not care about the students, and the lecturer is a poor instructor. This means that one of the most effective ways that lecturers can decrease the rate of examination malpractice is to simply be conscientious instructors: give lectures, and give them excellently. Secondly, when the examination is unrealistic whereby the questions asked were not covered in lecture, students also feel justified in engaging in examination malpractice. Therefore, lecturers should write examination questions that reflect what was covered in class. A major deterrents for engaging in examination malpractice is a situation in which the exam invigilators are vigilant.

The top situations that students use to justify engaging in examination malpractice are related to the peer who is asking for assistance. Students are very willing to assist a peer who was a close friend, sick during the term, studied hard but was dull, or who lost a family member. This willingness to assist a peer represents a serious flaw in beliefs toward assessment and examinations. The purpose of examinations is to measure the degree of learning that has taken place in a class (Cohen & Swerdlik, 1999). If a student cannot answer an examination question without asking their peer for assistance, then it means that they have

not learned the material that is necessary to pass the class. Theoretically, courses at the university are designed to adequately prepare the student for their professional career. If a student has not learned the material in the course and thus cannot pass the exam without cheating, then that means they have not been adequately prepared for their professional career. Therefore, students should be unwilling to provide answers to their colleagues during examinations because other students should be able to pass the examinations to be adequately prepared for their future careers. On the other hand, if students are willing to provide illicit assistance to their peers to pass the exams, then there are two potential problems: either students grossly misunderstand the purpose of examinations or courses are not designed in such a way that students understand that knowing the course material is necessary to prepare them for their future profession.

Recommendations

Only 10% of the university students sampled in this study said that they would never be willing to engage in examination malpractice. This situation requires a strong plan of action by educators to curb the threat of examination malpractice to the Nigerian educational system.

Students were most willing to justify malpractices in situations when a needy peer asked for assistance. To deter students from providing answers to needy peers during examinations, educators need to teach students about the purpose of examinations and why it is important that examination scores accurately reflect what each student has learned in the course. When educators clearly communicate the rationale for integrity on exams, then it is more likely that students will internalize and voluntarily obey examination rules (Reeve, 2001).

A second way of reducing students' willingness to engage in examination malpractice is to structure courses in such a way that students can clearly see how the course will help

them be successful in their future profession. If students see a clear link between effective performance in the class and their future accomplishment, then they will be less likely to justify assisting their peers in examination malpractice. Therefore, lecturers should make a concerted effort to make practical applications from their classes to their students' future profession.

Another way to reduce the incidence of examination malpractice is to decrease the importance of one final examination on course grades. When course grades largely depend on scores from only one exam, then the stakes for a high score on that exam are much greater which can increase the temptation to engage in malpractices. However, if course grades could be a composite of multiple assignments, papers, and exams, then students would feel less pressure to perform well at all costs on the final exam because failure on one examination or assignment would not necessarily mean failure in the course.

Lecturer factors also contributed to students' willingness to engage in examination malpractice. Therefore, lecturers should make an effort to ensure that they attend all classes, write clear exam questions that are directly related to course content, and demonstrate that they care for students' welfare. Indeed, lecturers should place strong emphasis on preparing students for their future careers, and portraying exam performance as whether students are prepared for their future career. When lecturers make their classes valuable and meaningful, then students will be less likely to justify engaging in examination malpractices.

Conclusion

This study found that about 90% of university students would justify examination malpractice based on the contextual factors. However, that figure varied depending on the situation in which the cheating behavior would take place. Even though most university students realize that examination malpractice is never acceptable, this study demonstrated

that students justify cheating behavior based on contextual factors. Therefore, educators need to create an educational context that makes examination malpractice unjustifiable.

Examination malpractice presents a serious threat to the Nigerian educational system. Additional empirical research is necessary to develop an explanatory theory of examination malpractice in the Nigerian context. Empirical research is also necessary to identify strategies that successfully reduce the incidence of malpractices.

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