

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY: A VIGNETTE BASED STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty are topics of interest to academics in their roles as both teacher and researchers. Student cheating takes many forms ranging from copying on tests, to unauthorized collaboration on assignments, to copying published material without citation, to the outright purchase of a completed paper or project. Despite the attention to this topic and the volume of research exploring it, academic dishonesty continues to be a pervasive problem in colleges and universities [16].

This research builds on the authors' previous research studies (citations provided upon acceptance) that investigated whether students had different perceptions about what constitutes academically dishonest behavior for different types of assignments and about whether or not education about academically dishonest behaviors change students' perceptions about what constitutes cheating. We were specifically interested in perceptions as they related to programming assignments. To investigate the previous research goals, a survey instrument using a Likert scale was used to determine what student perceptions were as related to academically dishonest behaviors. To gain a richer understanding of students beliefs, in this study we propose using a vignette-based approach. The focus will still be on technology based assignments and to compare whether or not students in various disciplines have varying perceptions. We will look at students in IT-related degree programs, business majors and various additional majors. We will also investigate whether students get more ethical as they progress through their degree programs (compare freshman to seniors etc.). The richer vignette based approach will allow us to further explore students' perceptions and motivations regarding cheating especially with respect to digital assignments.

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research into cheating has a long tradition going back well over one hundred years [4] [7] [11]. While we cannot include a comprehensive review of this literature in our proposal, we present an overview of research on cheating with special attention to the work most relevant to the proposed study. A considerable portion of the work that has been done on cheating has attempted to establish the rate of occurrence. Self-reported incidence rates of cheating behavior vary widely from a low of 3% [13] to a high of 95% [17]. Researchers have also investigated personal and environmental factors associated with cheating. Many different personal factors including gender, age/class, marital status, religious orientation, and traits such as locus of control and moral obligation have been examined with inconsistent results [9]. The personal factor most consistently associated with a propensity to cheat is academic performance: students with lower grades and/or lower test scores are more likely to cheat [9] [10] [18]. Researchers have also tried to evaluate the impact of environmental factors on cheating, with the risk of being caught and peer behaviors identified as the most consistent predictors of cheating [9].

Technology and the Internet have had a profound impact on the delivery of education. Unfortunately, it has also opened numerous avenues for academic dishonesty. The wide availability of source material has made it easier for students to copy anything from a small portion of unattributed content, to entire papers

or assignments [6] [12]. However, technology has also provided new tools for detecting plagiarism. There are several tools that attempt to determine the degree of similarity between student work and documents found on the Internet or compiled in a database of source material. *Turnitin* is one of the most popular such tools. With the advent of such tools researchers have begun to use them in studies of academic dishonesty. Comparable to the results of self-report studies, cheating rates identified in studies using plagiarism detection software have varied widely: reported rates range from 10.8% [24] to 61% [15]. Even with automated systems, there is some subjectivity in the determination of plagiarism rates. Plagiarism detection software such as *Turnitin* is essentially a text matching tool; it is left to the instructor to review reports generated by the system and make a determination as to how much of the copied material is harmless (such as might be expected in a bibliography or in properly cited quotations from source material) and how much is actually cheating. Furthermore, researchers reporting plagiarism statistics have used different threshold values for the proportion of matching text in a document that is considered to be cheating. These values range from a low of 3% [15] to a high of 50% [14].

Some researchers have tried to evaluate how students react to knowledge that their work will be screened by plagiarism detection software. While students generally report favorable perceptions of the software [2] [14], warning students that such software will be used to evaluate their work does not appear to be a strong deterrent to cheating. One study compared plagiarism rates between students who were warned about the use of *Turnitin* and those who were not. In this study all of the plagiarized papers were submitted by students who knew their work would be screened while the control group, whose work was screened without their knowledge, submitted no plagiarized papers [26]. In another study, evaluating plagiarism rates between two subsequent assignments did show a small reduction when students were notified that their work would be screened [5]. Personalized feedback to students appears to be a more effective deterrent; written notification of plagiarism in one assignment reduced, but did not eliminate, plagiarism by the same students on a subsequent assignment [23]. Encouraging students to use *Turnitin* to evaluate their own work resulted in some attempts by students to reduce unintentional plagiarism (primarily in the form of poor paraphrasing) but failed to improve appropriate use of citations [22]. Dee and Jacob [10] report the use of web-based tutorial educating students about plagiarism and how to avoid it had a positive impact. Submitted work was evaluated using *Turnitin*. Students who completed the tutorial were less likely to submit papers containing copied text.

Findings from these recent studies suggest that some portion of plagiarism is due to a lack of knowledge as to what constitutes acceptable behavior on graded work. This conjecture is supported by a recent study investigating cheating behavior and attitudes among computer science and engineering students and faculty [8]. One aim of this study was to identify what behaviors are considered to be plagiarism; 100% of the faculty and 94% of the students identified submitting copied work as plagiarism and indicated that the individual turning in the copied work was responsible for the dishonesty. However, only 52% of the faculty and 30% of the students identified the person providing the material to be copied as responsible for the plagiarism. Furthermore, 63% of students indicated that they had given their work to another student. Other studies have also found that those who share their work with others are perceived as having committed a less serious offense than those who use the work of others [25].

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a vignette experiment methodology. “Vignettes are short descriptions of a person or a social situation which contain precise references to what are thought to be the most important factors in the decision-making or judgment-making processes of respondents” [1, p. 94]. Vignette-based studies can be used to assess beliefs, attitudes, or judgments [3], and “combine ideas from classical experiments and survey methodology to counterbalance each approach’s weakness” [3, p. 128].

For example, vignettes have an advantage over short-item survey instruments, as vignettes provide researchers with an opportunity to present respondents with a richer set of stimulus material, (i.e., a

greater level of external validity) within a more controlled environment (e.g., each subject may be presented with a series of vignettes that differ across one or more experimental factors).

Vignette studies have seen limited use in the academic dishonesty literature. One study used vignettes to determine students' attitudes towards various motivations for helping a peer to cheat [25]. Other vignette-based studies have examined the impact of various personality and situational variables on students' likelihood to cheat [19] [20] [21]. Findings of these studies have included: students who are motivated by extrinsic factors (grades, comparison against peers) are more likely to cheat than those motivated by intrinsic factors (desire to learn); students with low competence are more likely to cheat than those with high competence [20]; neutralizing attitudes or rationalizations that may be used to justify unethical behavior are associated with a greater likelihood of cheating as is the presence of a cheating culture in which students observe others committing dishonesty acts [21]; and, a focus on academic integrity is associated with a lower frequency of cheating than a focus on punishment [19].

In the proposed study, we wish to evaluate factors related to digital assignments, such as spreadsheets or computer programs. The authors of this proposal have previously evaluated student attitudes toward digital assignments and found that copying of programming assignments is perceived as more acceptable than copying on an essay assignment. We intend to further explore these attitudes by developing vignettes which illustrate different possible justifications for such attitudes. We hope that this study will allow us to replicate findings from our survey-based research and further extend our understanding of academic dishonesty in digital work. The vignettes will be authored to reflect ethical dilemmas students might encounter, and students will be asked to respond to the vignette in order to gauge attitudes. For example, you have completed an assignment and your roommate is struggling with it... Would you let your roommate look at the assignment for help? Give the assignment to them to copy? Give them the assignment with the understanding that they will only use part of it? Does the type of assignment make a difference?

The next steps in the proposed study are as follows:

- Develop vignettes
- Pilot test vignettes
- Refine vignettes
- Administer vignettes to students in courses which contain digital assignments. These include programming and business applications courses, etc.

Data analysis will involve determining whether students who respond to different vignette scenarios report a different likelihood that the vignette protagonist would cheat. We hope that this approach will give us greater insight into students' perceptions of acceptable behavior with regard to digital assignments. Knowledge gained from this study will help us to educate students and to structure digital assignments in such a way as to reduce the propensity to cheat.

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