Cheating: how to prevent it and what to do when prevention fails*
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4.1 Introduction

• Prevention is the best strategy for dealing with cheating.
• There are several things you can do if prevention fails.
• I’ll talk about some ideas for preventing cheating and talk about how to deal with cheating formally through the University Ombuds Office.

4.2 Prevention of cheating and plagiarism

4.2.1 Being explicit about your policy

Make your policies crystal clear at the beginning of the semester, put them in your syllabus, and go over them in the middle of the semester again.

Excerpt from my 201 syllabus (feel free to borrow from this):

**Academic Honesty.** YOU ARE TO WORK INDEPENDENTLY UNLESS I INSTRUCT YOU TO WORK IN GROUPS. This specifically means that you cannot collaborate on homework or tests. You will fail a test or homework on which you have cheated. You will fail the course and be reported to Ombuds if you are repeatedly dishonest. I expect that you are familiar with the consequences for cheating or plagiarism, which are outlined in detail in the *Undergraduate rights and responsibilities* handbook.

This isn’t the only way to go; here’s an excerpt from John McCarthy’s 101 syllabus from this semester:

*Academic Honesty*
In this course, you are urged and expected to act like a responsible, mature individual. You are assumed to be familiar with the explanation of academic honesty in [http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/rights02/acad_honest.htm](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/rights02/acad_honest.htm). Collaboration on homework assignments is prohibited. Persons who collaborate on a homework assignment will receive an F for that assignment. Collaboration includes knowingly permitting someone else to copy your work. Cheating on an exam includes copying another's work, knowingly allowing your work to be copied, use of notes or books, possession of cheat sheets (cribs), and talking to other students during the exam. The penalty for cheating on an exam is an F for the course, which will be reported to the Academic Honesty Board. Cheating on the optional term paper involves plagiarism. Details about what constitutes plagiarism will be provided on the handout that describes the term paper, to be distributed later in the semester. The penalty for cheating on the term paper is an F for the course, which will be reported to the Academic Honesty Board. Because attendance is part of your grade, it is cheating to sign the attendance sheet for another person, to ask another person to assign the attendance sheet for you, or to sign the
attendance sheet without actually attending the lecture (e.g., by making a quick exit after signing). The penalty for this kind of cheating is an F for the attendance/class participation portion of your final grade. If you have questions about this policy, talk to John or your TA.”

As you see, the penalties are different in the two policies; the University does not rigidly regulate individual instructors’ policies.

**Whatever your policy is, be explicit about it! If you are not clear about what it means to cheat or plagiarize in your class, this opens up potential grounds for the student’s appeal in case you formally charge him/her with cheating.**

4.2.2 Make cheating unnecessary

- Many students resort to cheating as a desperate measure because they are afraid to get a bad grade.
- Placing a disproportionately heavy grade load on an assignment makes cheating more likely on that assignment.

*A personal example:* I started out by breaking down the final grade into 50% for homework, 30% for take-home tests, and 20% for quizzes. I thought that this would reduce test-taking anxiety. Hah! I’ve had at least one incident of cheating (students copying homework off each other) every semester.

- The best thing to do is to make it look like no one assignment is worth a significant portion of the grade. Break it down into smaller bits, e.g., “10 homeworks, worth 5 pts each.” Sounds a lot less scary than 50%.
- Make take-home assignments “cheap”—they are the easiest to cheat on.
- Make class participation weigh heavily in the grade; this one is impossible to cheat on.
- Give your students at least one good opportunity for extra credit, and make it late in the class. Give an extra credit quiz, make one of the homeworks count as extra credit instead of an obligatory assignment, or include some extra credit questions on the test. You’ll be the most popular TA ever, and they’ll relax.

4.2.3 Make cheating impossible

- If you remove the occasion for cheating, you remove the cheating.

1. Avoid take-home exams. I’ll never make that mistake again!
2. When you give an in-class exam or quiz, don’t just sit at your desk reading Schmo (1985). Look at the students, circle around the class now and then, and make them sit far away from each other if possible.
3. Another strategy is to let the students bring a “cheat sheet” (a.k.a. a “crib sheet”) and make them turn it in, or to have an open-notes exam. Open-notes exams don’t work with all kinds of material, of course.
• Structure your assignments so that cheating is difficult or impossible.

1. Make your assignments original; using problems from common sources like The Language Files makes cheating easy. Mix and match!
2. Avoid multiple choice, true/false, and one-word answer tests. Easy to copy.
3. If you assign a term paper, pick the topic yourself and make it specific and unique. No topics like “Should Bilingual Education be abandoned?” or “Should English be the official language of the United States?”.
4. Make students do a fair amount of whole-sentence writing—it makes cheating easier to detect, which most of the students know.

Bad question: “Is able in the word gables a morpheme?”  Yes____   No____

Good question: “Using the definition of morpheme, explain whether able in the word gables is a morpheme.”
Or: “Define morpheme and give an example.”

It’s a bit more work grading, but at least you don’t have to worry about your students cheating, and they’ll learn more.

4.3 What to do if prevention fails

The University Ombuds policy is fairly specific; you should study it since you expect the students to know it.

4.3.1 Informal resolution

• According to the policy, you may choose to resolve the incident informally. The occasion must be a proper one for this. If the student plagiarized a paper or cheated on an exam, you should report the incident. It could be a second or third offense, which is grounds for expulsion.
• Informal resolution may mean that the student will rewrite the paper, retake a different version of the exam, or you could decide to count the assignment as a zero and move on as though nothing happened.
• In my opinion, informal resolution is the best thing to do. Trust me, you do not want to get involved with Ombuds.

4.3.2 The formal procedure

• If the student denies the accusation and you think you have strong evidence of cheating, it is your professional duty to report the incident. You don’t want somebody like that to end up a lawyer or something (Hah).
• Follow the procedure exactly. This is just like the legal system and you will fail on a technicality.
• The Academic Honesty Board presumes that the student is innocent until proven guilty; they are not supposed to side with you just because you are a teacher.
The procedure itself:

- Notify the student in writing before taking action within 5 class days of the incident that you are taking action.
- The student can an appeal, in which case you will have a hearing.
- The hearing is a formal, documented, regimented affair with a student/faculty committee.
- Neither side can bring a lawyer, but they can bring witnesses.
- The panel is supposed to ignore attacks on personal character and credibility; they stick to the particulars of the case. In this sense it’s different from a legal hearing.
- If you plan to introduce any materials for the hearing such as copies of the test, your syllabus with the policy, or the handout you plan to use at the hearing, get them over to Ombuds at least 10 days before the hearing. This is tricky because they don’t tell you that you are supposed to do this until about 3 days before the hearing!
- Come prepared; when I had my hearing, I brought a handout that went through the tests in question and compared them point-by-point.
- Be professional and don’t take it too seriously. You have nothing to lose; the students have everything to lose.

4.4 Concluding remark

Prevent, prevent, prevent.

* This handout owes a lot to discussions with John Kingston and John McCarthy.