

Fall 2008

Academic Dishonesty and the Culture of Assessment

Emrys Westacott
Alfred University, westacott@alfred.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Westacott, Emrys, "Academic Dishonesty and the Culture of Assessment" (2008). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -- Online Archive*. 65.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/65>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

EMRYS WESTACOTT

Academic Dishonesty and the Culture of Assessment

EMRYS WESTACOTT

ALFRED UNIVERSITY

Mention the escalation of academic dishonesty and most of us working in education are immediately inclined to whistle for our moral high horse. But too much moralistic tongue-clicking can blind us to the ways in which we who constitute the system contribute to the very malady we lament. For if academic dishonesty is like a disease—and we repeatedly hear it described as an “epidemic”—we may all be carriers, even cultivators, of the virus that causes it. Let me explain.

Socrates sought to understand the essence of a thing by asking what all instances of it have in common. This approach is open to well-known objections, but it can have its uses. In the present case, for example, I think it leads to the following important observation: all instances of academic dishonesty are attempts to appear cleverer, more knowledgeable, more skillful, or more industrious than one really is. Buying or copying a term paper, plagiarizing from the Internet, using a crib sheet on an exam, accessing external assistance from beyond the exam room by means of a cell phone, fabricating a lab report, having another student sign one’s name on an attendance sheet—all such practices serve this same purpose. The goal is to produce an appearance that is more impressive than the reality.

So far, so obvious, you might say. But what is not so obvious—and this is a key point in the argument I am making—is that this same prioritizing of appearance over reality permeates much of our education system. It is endorsed by parents, teachers, and administrators, and it is encouraged by many of our well-intentioned pedagogical practices. Students absorb this ordering of values over many years, especially in high school; so by the time they reach college they have been marinating in the toxin for a long time. Here are some examples of what I mean.

The College Board, The Princeton Review, Kaplan and many other organizations offer extensive advice on test-taking strategies for students taking SATs, GREs, AP exams, and so on. Most of us view such guidance as innocent and making use of it as sensible; but underlying it is an attitude that should give us pause. Here is how The Princeton Review describes its approach to “cracking the new SAT”:

This book will show you how to exploit the standardized format of the SAT. ETS uses the same tricks over and over again; once you become aware of them, you won't fall for them . . .

Our job isn't to teach you math or English . . . Instead we're going to teach you the SAT. You'll soon see that the SAT involves a very different skill set. . . .

You don't have to prove that you know why your answer is correct. The only thing EST's scoring machine cares about is the answer you come up with. If you darken the right space on your answer sheet, you'll get credit, even if you didn't quite understand the question. (The Princeton Review, *Cracking the New SAT* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp. 10–12.)

There is nothing surprising here. But we should reflect on both the message being conveyed and the alternative view that is being undermined. The message conveyed is that although SAT scores are supposed to reflect knowledge and abilities within a field, there are clever stratagems you can use to boost your scores beyond what you would get if you just relied on what you actually know. These test-prep “power tactics” (as SparkNotes calls them) are, in effect, ways of making yourself look smarter than you are. The view being undermined is that what really matters is genuine understanding of the material: achieve this—ideally on the basis of an interest in the subject and a love of learning—and the tests can take care of themselves.

Or consider a specific test-preparation methodology: using vocabulary lists to prepare for the verbal section of the SAT. One idea behind the test, presumably, is to gauge the range and depth of a student's grasp of English. Those with the best understanding will usually have acquired it through enthusiastically reading a lot of well-written texts in a variety of genres. This is how one becomes well-read. Poring over vocabulary lists, by contrast, is a short cut—but not to *being* well-read; the idea, once again, is to *appear* more well-read than one actually is.

Of course, studying vocabulary lists can have pedagogical value. Students who do this usually improve their knowledge of English; so the appearance given by the higher test score is not deceptive. In the same way, focusing on specific types of math problems that are likely to come up on the SAT can improve one's understanding of mathematics. Nevertheless, I would still argue that continually orienting one's studies toward the test subtly fosters an attitude that, from the standpoint of our highest pedagogical ideals, is inherently cynical.

This tremendous emphasis on grades and test results is probably the feature of education today most responsible for cultivating a strategic attitude

toward learning. The “culture of assessment” has many powerful advocates armed with cogent arguments. In the last issue of *JNCHC*, for instance, Gregory Lanier provides a detailed and sympathetic account of why honors programs should accommodate rather than resist this trend in his article “Towards Reliable Assessment.” But in my view, the outlook engendered by the constant concern with assessment is like a pervasive weed that everywhere chokes out healthier, more idealistic, more creative attitudes among both teachers and students, especially in our high schools. Parents’ night at my local high school largely consists of teachers explaining in boring detail their modes of assessment and grading policies. On one occasion I asked my daughter’s AP biology teacher if she would be taking the students outside at all during the year to examine nature in the raw. Her answer: she’d love to, but she couldn’t spare the time given the need to cover everything on the AP syllabus. Inevitably, the AP exam would be the guiding star that the class steered by: not love of nature, appreciation of natural forms, or delight in fathoming how living things function, but whatever needs to be known to do well on the test. Success on the test is the “measurable outcome” by which students are judged—and teachers, and principals, and schools, and, ultimately, entire education systems.

Students naturally soak up this message. Not long ago I suggested to a high school Spanish student that her Spanish might benefit from doing things like learning a Spanish song, reading young children’s books in Spanish, or watching some Spanish TV. Her response was dismissive: she saw no point in doing anything except studying the material she knew would be on the next test. Once again, the underlying attitude here is that what matters is not how well she knows Spanish but how well she performs on the assignment that supposedly indicates how well she knows Spanish.

Study aids such as SparkNotes and CliffsNotes also do their bit to reinforce such attitudes. Ideally, they are supposed to be helpful in directing attention, assisting understanding, and facilitating review. But in text-heavy disciplines like literature and history, they more often direct students away from *experiencing* a work and toward covering up one’s ignorance in class or on some assignment. We’re all familiar with the situation. The quiz on *Great Expectations* is a few hours away. You’re still three hundred pages from the end. So you put the novel aside and skim the notes, gleaned the basic plot along with some information about the main characters and salient themes. Now you’re ready for the test. The purpose, once again, is to enable you to *appear* to be something you are not—viz. a person who has read *Great Expectations*.

Even some of our best-intentioned practices may reinforce the prioritizing of appearances over reality, usually by directing excessive attention to

evaluation. Review sessions prior to a final exam are popular with students and are typically offered by dedicated faculty. Ideally, they provide a final overview of a course and give students the chance to clarify topics they have not fully understood. In practice, though, they are seen by quite a few as a last chance to pick up enough bits and bobs to help them perform on the final *as if* they had kept abreast throughout the semester. Similarly, extra credit assignments may have a legitimate function in some circumstances, but they are often viewed by students as a sort of safety net hastily strung beneath a plummeting grade; they, too, indirectly emphasize assessment over experience, grades over understanding, appearances over reality.

Most teachers dislike students trying to haggle over grades, but this behavior is a predictable response to the educational environment students find themselves in. If appearances seem to matter more than reality—grades on a transcript more than less easily measured values like holistic grasp of a subject, appreciation of beauty, intellectual excitement, insight, or wisdom—we shouldn't be surprised to encounter such strategizing. The heroine of the 1995 film *Clueless* is praised by her litigator father for viewing a received grade as “just a jumping off point to start negotiations” and managing to negotiate it from a C up to an A. In the movie this is amusing, although in real life most of us would be highly critical, particularly of an instructor open to such influence. But while we might view the student's machinations with distaste, there would be no talk of dishonesty or cheating since no rules would have been broken. Yet the mindset behind this sort of manipulation overlaps with the attitude that underlies cheating: the goal is to secure the external trappings of success even though one lacks the internal merits of which they are supposedly a sign.

Test strategizing; syllabi and curricula made subservient to assessment; study aids that short circuit the learning process; continual emphasis on the details of evaluation; marginalization of more holistic, less easily measured pedagogical goals; grades as bargaining chips; grades as carrots; grades as sticks—all of this tends to produce and legitimize an attitude toward education that stresses appearance over reality. It promotes a frame of mind that is more likely to entertain the idea of trying to appear accomplished by using those other strategies that we classify as dishonest. It produces an environment in which the virus flourishes.

Obviously, not everyone will agree with this point of view. Three objections, in particular, will probably occur to many readers and deserve consideration.

First, some will argue that the appearance-reality distinction should not be drawn so sharply. Appearances often tell us a lot about the reality that gives rise to them. Scores on aptitude tests are usually related to aptitude;

high grades are a sign that a student has mastered material; low grades indicate the opposite.

This objection makes a good point, but it also misses the point. To be sure, there is usually a general correlation between measured performance and underlying achievement. The problem, though, is that everyone's attention has come to be excessively focused on the former. When school teachers are evaluated entirely by "outcomes" in the form of student test scores, the test becomes their overriding concern. Students pick up on this and begin to see the point and purpose of their studies as success on the tests. Success on the test becomes the end; coming to class, reading literature, learning about history, understanding science, or practicing the arts come to be viewed as simply means to that end. A strategic or instrumentalist attitude toward education becomes entrenched. It is reinforced by the college admissions process which makes admission to some college and/or a good financial aid package the end while grades, exam results, and extracurricular activities become the means. Once in college, students find that professors often expect this attitude and express the expectation through their own emphasis on such matters as attendance, late paper policies, grading criteria, and so on.

Sadly, but inevitably, teachers may come to internalize this way of thinking about education almost as much as the students. Cruising the corridors of colleges where I have taught, I have often been struck by the fact that the majority of conversations relating to academics that I overhear between students seem to concern assessment rather than course content. But as I participate in or eavesdrop on conversations among faculty, I get the impression that the same could increasingly be said about us also.

A second objection is that we should still insist on a very sharp line between any of the practices I have mentioned and cheating. Using clever guess methodologies or SparkNotes, contesting a grade, asking for extra-credit opportunities, or writing a note at the end of an exam saying how much you enjoyed the class may be appearance-oriented strategies. But they are all kosher, all clearly within the rules. Even aggressive haggling over grades or shameless toadying, while objectionable, do not constitute academic dishonesty. There is a big difference between what we should penalize and what we should merely discourage.

I agree that we have to make this distinction. And I am certainly not arguing that cheating should be tolerated or that what I am calling a strategic attitude should be a punishable offense. But we need to realize that, when we invoke this distinction, we are thinking legalistically. We are distinguishing between two kinds of strategic attitude—the kind that breaks the rules and the kind that doesn't. In focusing on where to draw this line and how to catch those on the wrong side of it, we lose sight of a more fundamental distinction

between strategic and non-strategic approaches to education. Our situation is rather like that of those fighting corruption in government by uncovering technical violations of ethical rules while all around them the corridors swarm with lobbyists and legislation is being packed with pork.

I am not claiming that students don't understand the rules concerning academic dishonesty or are confused over what constitutes a violation. To be sure, there are some grey areas, but most of the time things are pretty clear cut. I am arguing, rather, that by endorsing and even fostering a pervasive instrumentalism, we help create conditions in which cheating is likely to be common.

An analogy might help my case here. When raising children, parents typically reward good behavior and punish bad behavior; it is generally assumed that this will ensure that the children grow up to be people who abide by the moral rules the parents enforce. But someone who follows the rules from fear of punishment or hope of reward or mechanically as a sort of conditioned response is not our moral ideal. Most parents hope, I assume, that their children will grow to be *genuinely* good-hearted, kind, loving, compassionate, and generous. The hope is not just that they will practice the appropriate kinds of behavior; it is that they will possess these virtues at the core of their personality. Rewards and punishments may have a role to play in steering them toward this ideal. But by themselves they will not be sufficient; and too heavy an emphasis on them can be counterproductive, leading to a mindset that is more calculating and self-interested than one would wish. What is needed, in addition, are positive role models that exhibit the virtues in question.

Indeed, I would argue that in both the classroom and the home, positive role models who motivate and inspire are usually more effective pedagogically than rigid rule enforcement. And in an ideal world, nothing more than good examples would ever be needed. Which brings us to the third objection—that my outlook is hopelessly utopian. If you want to talk about reality, some will say, then start out by facing up to it. The population needs educating, and you cannot expect the majority to undertake their studies cheerfully, driven only by innate curiosity and love of learning. Most will at times resemble Shakespeare's "whining schoolboy . . . creeping like a snail unwillingly to school." Even Samuel Johnson attributed his superior command of Latin to his having a good teacher who, he said, "whipt me very well." A strategic attitude to learning will always be with us; we have to do what we can with the tools and materials we're given.

Well, some may say I'm a dreamer; but I'm not the only one. The proof of this is the success of honors programs across so many and such diverse colleges and universities. Honors students are typically people who go to college motivated by a genuine love of intellectual pursuits, whose natural curiosity

has not been pressed out of them by years of relentless carrot-and-stick schooling. They tend to be distinguished by the depth of their desire to learn, to understand, to create, to express, and to contribute. This is also the root of their success as students since those who enjoy studying don't regard it as a chore; they are simply doing what they want to do, so they go at it more readily, for longer, and with greater intensity. The same could be said, I suspect, about most of the faculty working in honors programs.

Honors programs thus do not just serve the individual students participating in them; they also help to keep alive a tremendously important ideal. Acts of academic dishonesty obviously are at odds with this ideal, but they do not directly threaten it. The rash of plagiarism and other forms of cheating currently troubling teachers everywhere is, rather, a symptom of a deeper problem: the ascendancy of an instrumentalist view of education that focuses, to say it again, on assessment over enjoyment, outcomes over experience, appearances over reality. This is the corrosive atmosphere eating away at the ideal.

The best response to the apparent increase in academic dishonesty is thus not to rely on ever more sophisticated technologies for catching the miscreants. That is like using ever stronger pesticides to keep down the mosquito population. Inevitably, more resistant strains of the pest emerge (read: cleverer counterdishonestydetecting software). Ultimately, we need to drain the swamp, doing what we can to eliminate the favorable breeding conditions. Honors programs can, should, and do play a vital role here. They remind the academic community of its deepest values and its highest ideals—in particular, the ideal of studying not just (or even primarily) for some measurable outcome, but for the sake of learning itself and the delight we take in being intellectually alive.

The author may be contacted at
westacott@alfred.edu.