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How We Drive Students to Cheat

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Instead of bemoaning the fact that students cheat, we need to ask how our instructional practices may be encouraging them to do it.

An acquaintance recently told me about the following conversation she had had with her 11th grade son.

Mom: How did your U.S. history test go today?

Son: I think I did really well. I felt like I got almost everything right, but the good thing was that I sat next to Anthony. Ms. Mandry gave us two different tests, but I was able to figure out her pattern, and then I got about 10 answers off Anthony. I mostly had them right anyway, but that definitely helped.

Mom: I'm not so sure I want you to be telling me about how well you did because you cheated off Anthony. I'd rather you do well because you know the material.

Son: But I mostly did well on my own, and you don't know how many different skills I had to use to figure out that, like, number 37 on my test was number 13 on Anthony's test! I had to use deductive reasoning and finding a pattern and all kinds of really important skills. I think you should be proud of me!

Proud? I doubt it. When kids cheat, we usually feel betrayed, or we blame them for being lazy. Sometimes we even attack their character. But just like many adults, kids who cheat have rational reasons for cheating. Students who cheat lack something. Usually they lack a sense of the relevance of what they're learning, or know-how, or timely feedback. Recognizing why students cheat can help us make a few instructional shifts that will thwart cheating, promote real learning instead of task completion, and increase the chances that our assessments will provide accurate information about student learning.

Lack of Relevance

Students aren't the only ones who cheat. Adults do it, too. They fudge their way through onerous pages of forms or claim they forgot to attach a document to buy a bit more time. When adults cheat, their excuse is often that their time is too valuable to waste or that it's not that big a deal. They can't possibly spend time messing around doing things that have no authenticity or relevance. Finding shortcuts is a strategy that helps them negotiate their busy lives.

Kids are the same way. They hate wasting time doing things they deem useless. When students don't see how the content they're learning is connected to their lives, cheating comes easy. When they perceive tasks as busywork, they look for shortcuts. I can just hear the 11th grader in that opening conversation saying to his mom, "It's not like I'm ever going to use this stuff again."

So we teachers need to create authentic, relevant learning tasks and help students understand why the content matters. For example, when my students read Tim O'Brien's powerful Vietnam War narrative *The Things They Carried* (Mariner Books, 2009), I work to write provocative guiding questions that connect the book's themes with current events and the students' lives:

- How does war affect individuals and society?
- Do the benefits of enlisting in the military outweigh the risks of war?
- Should military service be compulsory or voluntary?
- How does the emotional baggage we "carry" affect our view of the military and U.S. involvement in current conflicts?

Students often find these questions deeply engaging. But to develop meaningful answers, the students have to put in some hard work, not only reading the book, but also reading lots of essays and nonfiction to build their background knowledge. I can't expect them to do all this work just for a grade; they need someone to share their thinking with.

Thus, giving students an audience to whom they can demonstrate their learning is another way to create authenticity. So at the end of the unit on *The Things They Carried*, my students write a commentary to the *Denver Post* discussing one of the guiding questions. Even though none of the commentaries have been published to date, students feel empowered because they are writing to an audience bigger than their teacher.

They also host a 90-minute luncheon for military stakeholders. Their job for this final project is to converse with people who have direct involvement with the military, including enlisted soldiers and officers, their spouses and parents, veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and social workers who support these veterans. In engaging with these stakeholders, students aren't expected to find the "right answers" to the guiding questions; they are expected to share the well-informed perspectives on war they have gained from the unit of study and to learn from others who may have differing views.

Students need to know that the content we're teaching is connected to the world outside school. If we pose thoughtful questions and give students an audience for their learning, they're less likely to feel that what we're teaching is a waste of time—and they won't be so inclined to cheat.

Lack of Know-How

Sometimes teachers feel that they have to be the fount of all knowledge, talking at students to "give" them that knowledge. Unfortunately, lectures rarely give students insight into how the teacher has constructed meaning. To them, the teacher may appear to be a magician who has some secret way of knowing.

Students may be tempted to cheat if they think knowledge is not accessible to everyone and therefore only some people will figure it out. They don't realize there is a process behind the teacher's thinking—a process that they, too, can learn.

Case in point: When a class studies *The Catcher in the Rye* (Little, Brown and Company, 1951), the symbolism of Holden Caulfield's red hunting cap is a common subject for a discussion question. For students who have limited experience examining the writer's craft, pulling the symbolic meaning of the red hunting cap out of their proverbial magician's hat is nearly impossible. How in the world, from just reading the work, is an adolescent supposed to know what J. D. Salinger thought when he wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*? The student almost certainly doesn't know—and in most cases, when the teacher first read the novel, he or she didn't know either.

What's important is not helping students understand the symbolic meaning of the red hunting cap; rather, it's showing students how to examine the writer's craft to construct meaning. The power of the teaching and learning that's going on here lies in showing students how to recognize a symbol and then infer what it might mean as it recurs in the novel. Thus, students need the teacher to model how he or she notices the circumstances surrounding the appearance of the red cap. (For example, the teacher might think aloud to show students how she notices when the cap appears and what causes Holden to don the cap.) When kids see how an expert constructs meaning, they are empowered to try doing the same.

As veteran teachers, it's easy for us to forget what it was like learning the material the first time around. Sometimes we skip steps or assume the kids know more than they do. When we forget to show students how we construct meaning, we inadvertently encourage them to cheat. When we give them the impression that we value the right answer more than critical thinking, we drive them even closer to the precipice. They give up because they don't know the magic formula for getting to the answer—and they head for

SparkNotes or some other source that does.

Lack of Feedback and Time

People cheat when they have too much to do and too little time to do it. When teachers feel this time pressure, we sometimes blast through the curriculum, modeling for students that they can rush through it, too. Sometimes students misinterpret the speed with which we deliver information as proof that the content is unimportant. Marisol, a 10th grader, writes in her journal, "I don't have time to really understand the information we are learning in science. It can't be that important if the teacher is only spending one class period on it."

When teachers feel pressured by high-stakes assessments, they are sometimes driven to cover the content instead of giving students opportunities to wrestle with it. In extreme cases, the pressure to produce results has led principals and higher-ups to cheat by doctoring test scores, fudging data, and manipulating graduation rates. At the very least, this kind of time pressure can make it difficult for teachers to give students the individual help and feedback they need—which is especially unfortunate because research says that feedback is one of the most effective ways to improve learning (Hattie, 2009).

The lack of such individual feedback, combined with the feeling that one low test score or poorly done writing assignment can be deleterious to their grade point average, can lead students to cheat. Whitman, an 11th grader, writes, "If I don't know the material or how to write a paper the way the teacher wants, I have to cheat. When the teacher doesn't have time to help me, what else can I do? I can't afford to get a bad grade that might keep me from getting into college."

I remember feeling the same way in high school chemistry. I always did the work for the chemistry labs, but I struggled when it came to writing the lab report conclusions. Each time my reports were returned, the teacher deducted points but provided no feedback. I read the textbook. I went in for extra help. But I still didn't understand how to write a lab report correctly. When I didn't know what else to do, I cheated by copying the lab report conclusion of a friend. I didn't feel good about it, but I did what I had to do to survive the class. If the teacher had given me descriptive feedback on what I did well and then suggested some ways to do it better, my labs would have improved and I probably wouldn't have self-selected myself out of science classes.

Sue Brookhart (2008) writes, "Feedback can lead to learning only if the students have opportunities to use it. One of the best ways you can help students learn to use feedback is to make sure you build in opportunities for students to use it fairly soon after they receive it" (p. 73). Doing this takes time. It means that something has to come off the plate. If we treat covering content as more important than giving students opportunities to get feedback and improve, we push students to take the easy way out—especially if they don't know what else to do.

Shifting Our View of Learning

We can reduce the temptation for students to cheat if we adjust the way we define thinking and learning. We can start by acknowledging that learning is more than a grade or test score. Many students know this. Jessica, a 12th grader, writes in her response journal, "I cheat because in some classes the grades don't prove that I know something."

Thinking is messy. As educators, we have to decide what we value and then match our instructional and assessment practices to those beliefs. Do we want to get messy and let kids wrestle with critical thinking? Or do we want to keep things neat, going for one right answer and preparing students to shine on standardized assessments? If it's the former, we need to make it clear to students through our instructional activities and assessments that we expect more from them than regurgitating the "right" answers. We also need to allow students to demonstrate their understanding in ways that fit their thinking. We owe it to our students to give them more than one way to share what they know. When we don't, we drive them to cheat.

Another important shift in mind-set is in how we define the strategies that students use to survive in school. Instead of labeling collaboration as cheating, we might build it into our testing and evaluation processes, letting kids talk and work through problems with peers.

I can hear the critics now complaining that we can't allow students to converse and collaborate in testing situations because they aren't allowed to do so on standardized assessments. But we know that in the world outside school, collaboration will be an essential skill for them. As Tony Wagner (2008) writes, "I have yet to talk to a recent graduate, college teacher, community leader, or business leader who said that not knowing enough academic content was a problem. In my interviews, everyone stressed the importance of critical thinking, communication skills, and collaboration" (p. 25). If we don't give students opportunities in school to collaborate and work with others, we shouldn't penalize them and label them as cheaters for doing it on their own.

Removing the Temptation to Cheat

Students can always find ways to cheat. Instead of bemoaning the fact that kids cheat, we need to examine our instructional practices to see whether we're actually driving them to do it. By transforming our instruction to promote more authentic, empowered learning, we'll be able to accurately assess students' learning without the distortion that comes from cheating.

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