Reflections on Academic Integrity During COVID-19

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In July 2018, I started as Conestoga College's inaugural Academic Integrity Coordinator. The learning curve was steep. Conestoga had just launched their new online academic misconduct reporting system. It not only streamlined the filing process for faculty, which, I believe, removed a potential barrier (see also Prentice, 2020) to filing academic incidents, it also promoted College-wide consistency (especially as it pertains to issuing penalties and cultivating an educative and facilitative approach to academic integrity) and fairness for students working through an academic integrity breach, among other benefits.

Fast-forward nearly two years to when COVID-19 triggered a remote learning and working environment.

Higher education's reactionary, albeit necessary, switch to remote teaching and learning precipitated many anxieties about education in a fully remote environment. Reflecting on academic integrity during COVID-19, four noticeable features, or trends, stand out from my vantage point: 1) an assumption that cheating would automatically increase in a fully remote environment; 2) an increase in the polarizing perspectives on how to deal with or penalize academic misconduct; 3) a hyper-awareness of contract cheating and file-sharing sites (e.g., Course Hero and Chegg); and 4) a shift in how to best authenticate student work. Of course, these insights are not wholly original, and others have expressed similar observations.

What struck me most was what I initially interpreted as an assumption that cheating would be easier and more prevalent in a fully remote environment. Looking back, I believe this was more indicative of a general sense of uncertainty of the future and anxiety about the unknown. In unprecedented times, as indeed was the first-wave COVID-19 lockdown, I believe it was only natural for us to assume the worst. Faculty and administrators (myself included) wanted to know whether cheating would increase as a result of the new learning environment. I looked to works like Watson and Scottile (2010) and Harris et al. (2019) for answers. Watson and Scottile's study shows that "cheating in on-line courses is no more rampant than cheating in live classes" (p. 11). The authors did qualify this by stating, "the data showed that students were significantly more likely to obtain answers from others during an on-line test or quiz." This, they maintain, "presents problems for the standard lecture-based, test-driven course" (p. 11). This is echoed generally by Harris et al. in their more recent work where they maintain "that students at a large online university are no more likely to engage in most forms of cheating than the traditional-age

students in residential institutions" (2019, p. 419). While this may hold true for students in those contexts, there is one glaring caveat for students in the COVID-19 environment: they did not *choose* to study remotely. Alas, the world of education was flying blind. Essentially, this indicated that students and educators alike were feeling vulnerable.

From my vantage point, the world of unknowns had a polarizing effect on how faculty should handle penalties for academic misconduct, despite having in place a robust policy and procedure to guide our decisions. Some maintained (and I'm generalizing) that faculty should be more lenient and forgiving with students, given the unprecedented times and nascent struggles our students were facing, whereas others expressed a belief that the institution must "clamp down," so to speak, on potential cheating. The latter school of thought appeared to harbour a firm belief they had to protect the credential, as though it may be under siege. (The debate on the effectiveness and necessity of eProctoring services is a fine example of how a topic can provoke polarizing points of view. For a balanced and nuanced discussion on the benefits and limitations of eProctoring services, please see ICAI, 2020.) Again, these points of view are generalizations, but highlight well the very real concerns faculty had (and still have) as they navigate remote teaching.

It is possible that faculty may have been influenced by their immediate experiences. For instance, if a faculty recently worked through a plagiarism case, they may have been primed to lean towards the "protectionist" camp, whereas a more positive experience by another faculty may engender a push for compassion.

The truth is, both points of view are valid. As always, an institution must protect the integrity of its credential while simultaneously being cognizant of, and diligent in their efforts to mitigate, the struggles students face. These perspectives, of course, do not have to work in opposition to each other. COVID-19 happened to heighten our senses, at times causing some to appear at opposite ends. Not only did this new environment cause some to reflect on how to work through academic misconduct, but it awakened in many, and hyper-charged in others, the need to protect students from the seemingly ubiquitous contract cheating provider.

When I speak to those unfamiliar with contract cheating, their jaw tends to drop, expressing not only abhorrence but sometimes a disbelief in the practice. My institution has worked diligently over the past two years to create awareness and educate faculty and students about the dangers of contract cheating, framing it as the antithetical beast of academic integrity. Like a hungry predator, though, the contract cheating industry targets students, and the COVID-19 context whetted its appetite.

Whether true or not, like the popular assumption that cheating would increase due to remote learning, the notion that contract cheating specifically would rise precipitously was a very real concern among many. As a result, a "hyper-awareness" of the practice seemed to spread among

faculty and the institution at large. Additionally, faculty appeared to be monitoring, more than ever, file-sharing sites for material that should not be posted. Of course, this practice may have been a natural or progressive result of a growing awareness of these sites, rather than positively correlated to the switch to remote delivery. Regardless, it seems the COVID-19 world triggered in many an awareness of the threat contract cheating brings to education. How to best mitigate this threat is of utmost importance as we strive to authenticate student assessment.

My last observation is regarding the seemingly aggressive shove, given by our shift to remote delivery, to develop and expand (at break-neck speed) authentic assessments. Authentic assessment design is not new, yet our switch to remote delivery seemed to create a sense of urgency for it to be fully integrated into course delivery. Adjustments to courses to reduce traditional testing methods has led some to think outside the box, leading to some innovative strategies. While transforming assessments has indeed been exhausting for many, the "short-term pain for long-term gain" adage will certainly pay off, I think. This has highlighted how integral academic integrity is to course design and showcases the passion and dedication so many faculty have for their students and the programs in which they teach.

As we settle into the new normal, our lived experiences of remote education in a COVID-19 environment will provide a useful lens through which we can learn about our personal and institutional values. The trends we encountered will help highlight areas of improvement and excellence. We have much to learn from, reflect on, and build toward. One thing is for certain: as we move forward, we must do so with integrity.

References

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