University Students' Judgments of the Acceptability of Cheating Behaviours

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Abstract

Academic malpractices are widespread across Nigeria. One explanation for this may be that Nigerian students do not understand those study behaviours that are ethical and those that are unethical. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the types of behaviours that university students believe are acceptable. Two hundred and fifty-two university students enrolled in the education program rated the acceptability of 30 study practices, some of which were ethical and others were unethical. The results show that most students found cheating behaviours as never acceptable. However, there was considerable variability in the judgments of the acceptability of ethical study practices. Recommendations for teaching and future research were made.

Introduction

Around 70% of university students in Nigeria admit to engaging in academic malpractices (Korb, under review). The most frequent malpractice behaviours are relatively unsophisticated such as reading a peer's answer script during the exam. However, educators need to continue to examine the factors that prompt students to cheat with the goal of identifying strategies to decrease the frequency of academic malpractices in Nigeria. A thorough understanding of why students engage in malpractices based on quality empirical research is necessary for educators to identify solutions to the malpractices scourge.

According to Murdock and Anderman (2006), students consider three questions when determining whether to cheat: a) What is my purpose?, b) Can I do this task?, and c) What are the costs associated with cheating? The first question focuses on a student's educational goals. A student who adopts performance goals such as out-performing their peers or obtaining a certificate will tend to cheat more frequently than a student who adopts mastery goals with a focus on mastering the educational content. The second question focuses on a student's self-efficacy, or belief in their capabilities in school. A student who does not believe they can pass the exam will cheat more frequently than a student who is confident in their abilities. The final question, which is the focus of this paper, is the cost associated with cheating. Before deciding whether to cheat, a student will weigh the costs of cheating with the potential reward. If the cost of cheating (i.e., punishment) outweighs the reward (i.e., passing the exam), then the student will not cheat. The cost of cheating includes the punishment that will result if they are caught cheating as well as the cost to their self-image. A student's self-image suffers when he behaves in ways that violates his norms of acceptable behaviour. Therefore, a student will not engage in cheating behaviours that he believes will hurt his self-image of being a moral individual even without the threat of being caught.

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The facts of academic malpractices in Nigeria are as follows. First, a high percentage of Nigerian students actually do engage in malpractices. Second, students should not engage in behaviours that they view as morally unacceptable. One explanation for the high rate of cheating behaviours may be that Nigerian students do not understand which types of study behaviours are morally acceptable. In other words, if a student believes that reading their peer's answer script during an exam is morally acceptable, then engaging in that behaviour is not considered as a cost to one's self image. The purpose of this study is to identify the types of behaviours that university students believe are acceptable.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study. First, do Nigerian university students believe that engaging in academic malpractice is acceptable? Second, do Nigerian university students correctly differentiate between acceptable study behaviours and unacceptable cheating behaviours? These research questions were addressed by asking university students to rate the acceptability of a range of cheating behaviours and ethical study practices.

Methods

Participants

Four different questionnaires, one of which was the questionnaire for this study, were distributed randomly as continuous assessment credit to the 850 students enrolled in the educational psychology core course at the University of Jos. Because students randomly received different questionnaires, the participants in this study represent a random selection of students enrolled in this course. The study participants included 252 students in the 200-level education program (54% male, 46% female). Most of the students were admitted to the university through direct entry (44%), 31% of the students went through the remedial program and 24% enrolled through UME. The average age of the participants was 24.0 years.

Instrument

A questionnaire listed thirty different types of behaviours that students engage in to pass their exams. Participants rated each of these different types of behaviours on their acceptability. The behaviours were divided into three sections: before the exam, during the exam, and after the exam. Some of the behaviours were typical study practices, such as "study for the exam with a group of students." Other uncommon but acceptable study behaviours were listed, such as "memorize the textbook." See Table 2 for the list of ethical study practices. Mixed in with ethical study practices were unacceptable cheating practices, including "give another student the answer when they ask for help in an exam" and "pay the lecturer to give you a higher grade." See Table 1 for the list of cheating practices. Participants were instructed to rate how acceptable each behaviour is on a nine point scale from *1: Never Acceptable* to *9: Always Acceptable.*

Procedure [1]

At the end of a class session, the instructor gave directions for the questionnaires and class representatives distributed the questionnaires to the students. Because students were receiving course credit for completing the questionnaires, they had to list their name and matriculation number on the completed questionnaire. To encourage students to complete the questionnaire honestly, the following procedures were used to assure students that their responses would never be linked to them personally. A solid line was drawn immediately below the area where they were to write their name and matriculation number with the words "Do not write your name below. The top section will be removed upon submission" written in all capital letters. The instructor informed students that as soon as they submitted the questionnaire, their name and matriculation number would be cut off along the solid line so they would receive credit for completing the questionnaire, but they could not subsequently

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[1] The same procedure was used as in Korb (in press).

be linked to their responses. The questionnaires were returned by the students to the instructor within three weeks.

Results

The first research question asked whether Nigerian university students believe that engaging in academic malpractice is acceptable. As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of university students believe that most cheating behaviours are never acceptable. Except for four types of cheating behaviours, over 85% of students agreed that these cheating behaviours were never acceptable. The four exceptions include sharing answers during an exam (i.e., give help during an exam, place the script so students can read your answer, and ask for an answer during an exam) and copying another student's Continuous Assessment. However, the percentage of students who rated these four behaviours as never acceptable was still over 60%.

The second research question asked whether Nigerian university students correctly differentiate between ethical study behaviours and unacceptable cheating behaviours. Table 1 demonstrates that most students acknowledge that cheating behaviours are never acceptable. Table 2 shows participants' judgments of the acceptability of ethical study behaviours.

There are two debatable study behaviours listed in Table 2: complete Continuous Assessment with peers and beg the lecturer to increase the final grade. Depending on one's perspective, these behaviours could be listed in either Table 1 with unacceptable behaviours or Table 2 of ethical behaviours. As can be seen, university students also considered completing Continuous Assessment with peers as a debatable study behaviour with almost as many students reporting that it was never acceptable (22%) as always acceptable (18%). Most students considered begging the lecturer to increase your final grade as never acceptable.

For each of the ethical study behaviours, an overall acceptability score was calculated by computing the mean judgment across participants. Table 2 ranks the study behaviours that

Acceptability of Cheating Behaviours

Table 1. Percent of Students Responding *Never Acceptable* to Cheating Behaviours.

Cheating Behaviour	Percent	Mean	SD
Give another student the answer when they ask for help in exam	62%	1.96	1.65
Place script so that your peer can read your answer	71%	1.73	1.56
Ask another student for an answer during the exam	73%	1.73	1.55
Copy another student's Continuous Assessment	75%	1.65	1.38
Read another student's answers on their exam script	85%	1.54	1.66
Obtain exam questions before the exam	87%	1.37	1.06
Trade scripts with another student so that they write your answer	89%	1.30	1.19
Ask another to impersonate you for the exam	90%	1.29	1.16
Use handsets to get texts from another person with answers	90%	1.26	0.95
Trade scripts during the exam so you write an answer for your peer	90%	1.25	1.10
Use handsets to send texts to other people with answers	91%	1.24	1.06
Arrive early to the exam hall to write answers on the table	91%	1.23	0.91
Write answers on exam script before the exam	92%	1.23	1.05
Use handset to store answers	92%	1.23	1.01
Write answers on body, clothing, or personal belongings	93%	1.23	1.02
Bring portions of the notes or textbook into the hall	93%	1.23	0.99
You impersonate another person for an exam	94%	1.23	0.92
Pay the lecturer to give you a higher grade	94%	1.19	0.92
Bring sheet of paper into exam hall with answers written on it	94%	1.17	0.81

Note. SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 2. Students Rankings of Acceptability of Ethical Study Behaviours.

Study behaviour	Mean	SD	Percent	
			Never	Always
Get exam questions from previous year to study from	7.83	2.00	2%	63%
Ask lecturer to clarify questions from lecture	7.67	2.14	3%	62%
Copy other student's notes from a missed lecture	7.05	2.26	1%	45%
Study for exam with a group of students	6.78	2.29	0%	37%
Ask classmates to clarify questions from lecture	6.73	2.33	1%	37%
Memorize the textbook	5.40	0.78	0%	6%
Complete Continuous Assessment with peers	**4.89**	**2.94**	**22%**	**18%**
Ask lecturer for notes that were missed in class	3.97	2.79	26%	14%
Memorize notes word-for-word	3.87	2.81	31%	12%
Study alone when classmates study as group	3.32	2.29	32%	4%
Beg the lecturer to increase your final grade	**1.33**	**1.11**	**87%**	**1%**

Note. Scale ranges from 9: Always to 1: Never Acceptable. SD = Standard Deviation.

Bold behaviours are debatable about whether they are ethical.

students rate as most acceptable to least acceptable based on this mean acceptability score. University students ranked studying from the previous year's exam as the most acceptable study behaviour and studying alone while classmates are studying as a group as the least acceptable study behaviour (with the exception of the debatable begging). Perhaps the most striking result from Table 2 is the large standard deviations of the mean acceptability score. The largest standard deviation of the unacceptable study behaviours listed in Table 1 was 1.66. All but two of the ethical study practices listed in Table 2 have considerably larger standard deviations than the unethical practices listed in Table 1, indicating that there is substantial variability in the judgments of the acceptability of these ethical study practices.

This is particularly noteworthy for completing the Continuous Assessment with peers, asking the lecturer for notes that were missed in class, and memorizing the notes word-for-word. Almost as many students rated these three behaviours as never acceptable and always acceptable. Clearly, university students have considerably varying judgments of the acceptability of these study practices.

Discussion

Nigerian university students generally agreed that most cheating behaviours were never acceptable. However, Korb (under review) found that 70% of university students have engaged in academic malpractices. Therefore, the original explanation that university students do not understand which types of behaviours are morally acceptable is clearly incorrect. Even though most students realize that cheating is never acceptable, they persist in cheating. Therefore, educational researchers should next consider situational factors that might influence cheating behaviours.

Murdock and colleagues examined situational classroom factors that affect American students' judgments of the acceptability of cheating (Murdock, Miller, & Kohlhardt, 2004). They found that students' judgments of the acceptability of cheating actually has two components: the extent to which cheating is judged as morally acceptable and the extent to which cheating is justified in a particular situation. In their study, students' ratings of the moral acceptability of cheating was not influenced by classroom factors. However, the justification of cheating was influenced by classroom factors. Students rated cheating as justifiable in classrooms with uncaring teachers and low quality teaching practices. Therefore, Murdock and colleagues concluded that decisions to cheat are influenced not just by whether cheating is considered right or wrong, but by the extent to which cheating is considered justifiable in a particular situation. The present study only examined the extent to which Nigerian university students viewed cheating as morally acceptable. Additional

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research should replicate and extend the findings of Murdock and colleagues among Nigerian students: in which settings do Nigerian students view cheating as justifiable?

This current study supports Korb's (under review) finding that most cheating practices are relatively unsophisticated, including sharing answers during the exam and copying Continuous Assessments. This study found that these malpractices were rated as acceptable more often than more advanced malpractices such as impersonation, carrying answers into the lecture hall, and paying the lecturer for a higher grade.

Recommendations

This study found that there is considerable variation in the judgments of acceptability of ethical study practices, providing evidence that university students are not certain about the right way to study. Thus, teachers need to spend class time educating students about positive, effective study skills. Few students understand and use good study practices without explicit instruction (Weinstein, Meyer, Husman, Van Mater Stone, & McKeachie, 2006). Therefore, direct instruction in study skills is necessary. For example, teachers should instruct their students on how to set goals for their education as well as specific study practices such as effectively reading textbooks and studying notes for the exam. When teachers spend the time necessary for teaching study skills, then students will not be uncertain about ethical study practices and will be more prepared for their exams. As Murdock and Anderman (2006) note, students who are confident in their abilities engage in less cheating behaviours.

Second, teachers need to demonstrate excellence in the classroom by using good teaching practices and showing concern for their students. Murdock and colleagues (2004) found that students who thought cheating was morally unacceptable may still think that cheating is justifiable when they are in a class with a bad teacher or a teacher who does not appear to care for their students. Therefore, teachers can contribute to the "War against

Malpractices" by using high quality teaching practices as well as demonstrating that they care for their students' welfare.

In order to maximize learning of the entire course content, teachers should rotate exam questions. This study found that students rated studying from the previous year's exam questions as the most acceptable study practice. This implies that most students study from previous exam questions. If students know which questions will be on the exam, they will only study those questions but will ignore the rest of the content that was covered in class. By writing different questions for every exam, students will be obliged to study the entire content and therefore learn more in the class.

University students in this study were uncertain about whether completing Continuous Assessments with a group is an acceptable practice. Consequently, when assigning Continuous Assessments, the teacher needs to be clear about whether the assignment is to be completed independently or as a group. In some situations, group work can be beneficial. However, the teacher needs to carefully consider the purposes of assigning a Continuous Assessment. One purpose is to give students credit for their achievement in the class. With group assignments, it is often difficult to determine whether all of the students in the group equally contributed to the assignment and thus have equal class achievement. Another purpose of Continuous Assessment is to help the teacher understand what aspects of the content that the students struggle with so the teacher can adequately plan future instruction (Woolfolk, 2007). Furthermore, Continuous Assessments help students learn by providing opportunities for students to practice their skills, obtain feedback about their performance, and motivation to study (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). With these latter goals, independent completion of Continuous Assessments is often more beneficial than group work.

Finally, educational researchers need to continue conducting empirical research to ascertain the factors that contribute to cheating amongst students. When educational

researchers have a good understanding of situations in which cheating occurs, then they can recommend strategies for preventing future academic malpractices.

Conclusion

Most Nigerian university students understand that academic malpractices is morally unacceptable. However, the high rate of students who engage in malpractices demonstrates that situational factors must influence students to cheat in under specific conditions. Future research should identify the situational factors that influence university malpractices.

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