



The 'cheating'.com academic society: A personal view

By Vedran Katavic

One does not advertise cheating as a model of civil behaviour. Nor does one try to promote it. It has a life of its own. The topic of academic cheating is a topic investigated deeply and thoroughly by a great number of excellent researchers. My experience with cheating relates to both the academic cheating by students and cheating by faculty or scientists in publishing [1]. I am not going to preach or express outrage about the existence of dishonesty and cheating. Nor will I say it is the largest problem academia is facing. I will only try to explore some reasons or reasoning behind cheating. (Un)luckily, I do not have extensive experience in cheating to be able to tell you about all the ways and the latest technology used for cheating. Most of what I know I got from the Internet [2] or by word of mouth.

Cheating is not new. Nor is it reserved for the classroom or the academia. Even the ancient Greeks had 'problems' with cheating. Some of their athletes, the Olympians, were celebrated as kings and worshipped like gods when they won at the 'Games'. Some of those competing tried to cheat. Once found out, they were either whipped, flogged, banned from the games, or they (and their cities) had to pay fines, in the form of donations for sculptures of Zeus (the 'Zanes'), which were erected at the stadium. How many were beaten and banned from the games I do not know, but quite a few Zanes were unearthed during archaeological excavations in the late 19th century.

Let me fast forward to modern times, and continue by paraphrasing W.C. Fields (a US actor, 1880-1946) [3]: A goal worth achieving is a goal worth cheating for. He aptly put into words what many believe to be true, if not right. So it seems there is nothing new under the sun two and a half millennia later.

What is interesting about cheating are our own attitudes towards it [4, 5]. From my experience, there are two: one can be complacent or one can be outraged by it. One's attitude greatly depends on earlier behaviour and experience. It also depends on the society's norms, especially the 'hidden' agenda. By hidden I mean the things one sees or things that happen without consequences despite existing rules and regulations. This is a great push towards the acceptance of cheating. On the other hand, one's attitude may change against cheating in several typical scenarios:

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1) You become a teacher, invest your time in teaching and stimulating the minds of your students, remembering what motivated you to study. The more you invest, the less likely it is you will complacently accept the fact that your students are cheating. The overwhelming feeling of having been cheated remains a painful and lasting memory. As a teacher one thinks back to what you and other students did in the past, thinking how much better off the students would be if they didn't cheat; 2) you become a parent and want to be proud of the accomplishments of your children, and you don't want someone else's cheating to rob your children of their innocence and their future; or 3) you experience an episode of cheating (one's own or by someone close to you) gone sour, in humiliating circumstances and with painful consequences.

Most assume that academic cheating is a problem of the classroom. That it is, but it may also be only a symptom, students' emulation of the society. It may be mirroring a country's perceived overall level of corruption [6]. Academic cheating may be more prevalent in situations of increased peer or societal pressures, where students are expected to do too much in too little time, or the tests have no (perceived) relevance or reward. The students (may)

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cheat, or try to cheat as best as they can, using the oldest and most basic ways of cheating like cheat-sheets or cribs, or even inventing new techniques involving advanced technology. Occasionally one gets to hear in the news that a school has decided to install devices that jam mobile phones or the like. Some of the cheaters invest so much time into creating the elaborate schemes that most would say it may well have been easier to study. Some teachers have recognised the effort and the 'genius' of cheating, and have opened museums with exhibits of creations from 'caught' attempts of cheating [7]. Obviously such schemes show that the problems run deeper and are not isolated incidents.

Let me change track a little and move away from the classroom. Why not change track completely and move away from studying or preparations (any and every which way) for examinations, and go deeper into the mind of cheaters. And when I say cheaters, I do not have a specific stereotype in mind. I do not believe there is a specific 'type'. To delve deeper into the mind of a cheater I will use the com-

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plete opposite from preparing for an exam, e.g. playing computer games, with the accent on playing. Playing computer games can be fun. One can be competitive and play against one's peers (on-line or at LAN parties) or less competitive and play against the computer. The accomplishments in playing against the computer are less tangible, and have a smaller overall social 'value' or prestige with one's peers. Rather they have a pure psychological effect of reward for the player to have 'accomplished' something by virtue of one's reflexes, wit, logic or any combination thereof. So, where is the 'logic' in cheating in games? I do not know. But the number of web pages offering cheat codes, hints, and walk-throughs for computer games is huge, and the number of people using those codes also. What do the cheaters accomplish? Do they fool themselves into believing they mastered a game, and that they are good at it? Or do they just not care. I would say the latter. I would then transfer and translate that answer to the academic environment. The less the students recognise the importance and the joy of learning, the more likely it is they will not care. They will care about passing exams, moving ahead in their 'studies', but will lack the drive and the pleasure of having those moments of clarity when all knowledge comes into place, like a big jigsaw puzzle. The cheaters rob themselves of the greatest feeling there is. Instead of enjoying the fruit of one's labour, they worry if will they be caught and when, what will happen, how embarrassing that might be, etc. drowning in the sea of not caring. And what do they achieve? They cheat themselves, their colleagues, their teachers, the school, and in the end the whole system—accomplishing nothing. Imagine a world where everybody cheated everybody. How would engineers or doctors be confident they are performing well, if their best is just not good enough?

Some people have made cheating their business. There are many on-line services that cater to specific needs of the student population in need of off-the shelf, or maybe custom-made essays, or even doctoral dissertations—hence the title of this article. (Before deciding on the title, I had to go on-line to check if I were not endorsing some website of the same name—which I did and had to change it). What the legal status of those 'companies' is, I do not know. I do not know if you sign a contract with them giving you exclusive rights to 'original' work, or you yourself run the risk of being cheated in the cheating process by getting just another copy of text used over and over again. For some schools, new websites (a brief list among other plagiarism-related resources can be found at ref. 8) help detect and reduce such flagrant dishonesty. But not all schools can benefit from such on-line detection simply due to the nature of their assignments.

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Adams and Pimple [9] re-evaluated the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that drive us to indulge in socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviours. They conclude that the intrinsic factor (propensity) to do misconduct is of lesser importance than the extrinsic factor (opportunity) and that situational prevention is key to reduction of misconduct. Although counterintuitive, this actually does make sense. The cheaters or the ones prone to cheating will always be equally prone to cheat, but maybe we (and their peers) can influence their 'window of opportunity' to cheat. Some say that Honour Codes are a good tool to reduce academic dishonesty. I would say that is true only if, by subscribing to the Honour Code, students and faculty start caring for the bigger picture. Otherwise it is just another piece of paper or another rule to be ignored.

Achieving something through cheating, may be attractive for some. Fortunately, this is not so for all. But the temptations are great. Our students may not necessarily be (mis)fortunate ancient Greek Olympians, trying to cheat their way into glory. In the long run, no one remembers the (small-time) cheaters. They live with their shame as best they can, as well they should. To be able to prevent cheating, we must lead by example.

An unfortunate anagram of teaching is cheating. Hopefully, or rather metaphorically, we can influence one by changing the other. What we might have to do to prevent cheating is change teaching by setting achievable goals, rewarding success justly and according to academic principles, investing more time in reinforcing students' knowledge and skills, constantly re-evaluating our perceptions and effectiveness. It takes getting to know one's students, becoming the students' partners, involving them in the excitement of learning and teaching, rather than being their 'executioners'. We, as teachers have to stop teaching at or against the students, and rather learn and teach together with the students. So, maybe it is time we all changed. In time the pressure of truthful and honest students-peers will make it almost impossible to be a cheater. So the students may grow up to be responsible researchers. The easiest way to do just that is by caring and not by cheating.

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