Reducing University Students’ Exam Cheating Practices: the case of 2nd year Students of Civics and Ethical Studies Department at Ambo University

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Abstract
University students’ exam cheating is a global phenomenon that exists almost in every country. Its effect has been long-lasting and catastrophic in many instances and its impediment for growth is largely looming. This study attempted to investigate students’ exam cheating Ambo University, Civics and Ethical Studies Department, second year students. The findings show that, out of the total of sixty students in the class ten of them did attempt to cheat on the observed exam. The attempts had different forms including trying to copy from others; referring to notes and texts through cell phones. However after intervention the level of cheating has significantly been reduced. Only two students were alleged to have attempted to cheat during the exam and one of them was caught, not because of credible evidence for his cheating, rather simply to deter other potential cheaters. Rightly so, no other student was observed while attempting to cheat after this alleged cheater was caught.

Key terms: University students, Cheating on Examinations, Reducing Cheating

1. Introduction
Unethical behavior seems to be increasing exponentially in every facet of today’s environment to which the academia is not an exception. Academic cheating which is one of the most visible academic unethical behaviors has long been identified as one of the problems affecting values and ethics of higher learning because, among other things, it can conceal the true nature of the students’ academic performances. As higher learning institutions are considered to be the sources of qualified manpower that can take responsibility in diverse endeavors of the human progress, mitigating the problem of cheating plays an immense role. Research shows that different pressures pressures lead to decisions to engage in various forms of academic dishonesty (Bowers, 1964).
Cheating is an institutional and societal problem. And academic dishonesty is more detrimental to the educational community than stakeholders realize because it affects faculty, students, and administration (Boehm, et al., 2009).  

According to Graves and Stephen (2008), the fact that, nowadays, college students are growing up in a society where ethical values are declining and scandals involving dishonesty in government, business and other organizations are frequent occurrences leads to academic dishonesty.  

Despite the tremendous efforts given to mitigating the widespread and much known problem of cheating, it appears that little progress has been made in addressing it. Perhaps, because it has long been part and parcel of the academic culture of the society. Indeed, plagiarism and cheating are reflections of the need to get good grades at all cost; and, they continue to be serious problems in academia (Danielsen, Simon, & Pavlick, 2006 as cited in Witherspoon et al., 2012).

2. Literature Review

The system of higher education exposed for large scale misconduct. Among these dishonest behaviors, cheating in exams is the most serious one. According to many authors, cheating is an institutional and societal problem and academic dishonesty is more detrimental to the educational community than stakeholders realize because it affects faculty, students, and administration (Bohem, et al. 2009).

According to research conducted by Jimma University, the three types of academic dishonesty are widespread among university students in Ethiopia with the prevalence ranging from 82%-96%. Moreover, assignment-related dishonesty is significantly higher than exam-related and research-related dishonesties (Tefera Tadesse and Kinde Getachew, 2010).

Another study conducted by Hawassa University revealed that cheating is a common problem among undergraduate students of Hawassa University College of medicine and health science. The prevalence of self reported accounts of cheating by students was 19.8%. Such prevalence of cheating especially in college of medicine and health sciences should be unacceptable as it reflects the ethics of our future health care providers.
3. Research Methods

Qualitative data collection has been used as the main research method for this study. Data collection, findings, reflections and actions were documented for each stage of the research process. In this study, the subject of the research is the second year Civics and Ethical Studies department students. All the students were part of the research because of easy manageability. All the sixty students in the class were observed in exam classroom during two exams. Techniques including observation, Focused Group Discussion and key informant interviews were used to gather the necessary data for this particular research.

First the prevalence of the cheating behaviors was observed by the researcher during an exam in a classroom after which the students were asked to identify the reasons for such behaviors. A wide range of reasons were pointed out by the respondents to random interviews. Some of the reasons identified include the belief among the students that ‘other students cheat’; lack of trust in the assessment process and its integrity; loose control system during examinations; lack of enough time to cover all the portions of courses and the low level of enforcing penalties for cheaters. Based on these identified factors leading to widespread cheating tendencies, some important actions were taken.

4. Pre-intervention Results of cheating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cheating</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attempts made to cheat</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaters caught</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaters penalized</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table1.1

According to the data received before the intervention, out of the total of sixty students in the class ten of them did attempt to cheat on the observed exam. The attempts had different forms including trying to copy from others; referring to notes and texts through cell phones. However, only four of those who attempted to cheat were caught with alleged evidences for their behaviors. Nevertheless, one of the alleged cheaters was set free because of lack of credible
evidences proving his/her cheating. In all the cases, the observer noticed the deficiency in the enforcement mechanisms.

5. Proposed action

By using the result from the observation and based on reasons for cheating identified by the respondents certain actions were taken to mitigate the problem. The intervention involved provision of relatively enough time for reading before the exam; severely penalizing the cheaters and; awareness creation works about the integrity of the assessment method, and strict control by the examiners during the following exam.

5.1 Implementation of action/intervention

Based on the reasons for cheating informed by the students necessary and possible efforts were made towards addressing the problem by implementing the aforementioned proposed actions. The students were given awareness creating session which was organized for building students confidence on the integrity of the assessment system. In order to address the problem of shortage of preparation time for exams the students were given the chance to decide on the amount of time needed; and by general consensus they needed a seven day period for preparation. In order to deter potential cheaters those who cheated on the first exam were seriously punished (the results of all those who were caught cheating were disqualified). Furthermore, the examiners were told to strictly monitor the students during the second exam.

After the completion of the second exam, the data on the level of cheating in all its forms were collected through observation and interview with some examiners. Accordingly, the data have shown the reduction of the cheating behaviors among the students under study. The overall evaluation of the result of the intervention is presented here under.

5.2 Evaluation of the action/intervention

Indeed, the intervention made a reasonably significant improvement in the level of cheating observed among the students. The table below shows the raw data of the post-intervention cheating behavior.
5.2.1 Post-intervention Results of cheating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cheating</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attempts made to cheat</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaters caught</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaters penalized</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table1.2

As it can be observed from the data, in the post-intervention exam the level of cheating has significantly been reduced. Only two students were alleged to have attempted to cheat during the exam and one of them was caught, not because of credible evidence for his cheating, rather simply to deter other potential cheaters. Rightly so, no other student was observed while attempting to cheat after this alleged cheater was caught.

By comparing the overall cheating behaviors on the two exams one can witness a noteworthy improvement. The number of students who were alleged to have attempted to cheat was reduced from ten to two show 80% reductions which is a remarkable improvement. Even then, the number of caught cheaters declined from four to one demonstrating a 75% decline. In the final analysis, the difference between the numbers of punished cheaters in the two cases implies that actually the problem was effectively addressed.

Therefore, the result proved that the reasons identified as being behind cheating were substantially correct, and the interventions made brought a significant difference in addressing the problem of cheating. Nevertheless, the observations of alleged attempts to cheat and the incidence of a caught cheater signify the need for more works (interventions) in order to avoid the problem of cheating altogether. Thus, it is important to take note of some other factors behind cheating behaviors other than those stated by the respondents in order to fully avoid the cheating habits among students.

5.3 Next step (action research cycle)
It has already been hinted (in the evaluation of the intervention part) that those reasons for cheating as identified by respondents are not exhaustive which obviously lead to the complicatedness of having a full picture of the problem. Of course, it appears to be extremely difficult to have a comprehensive list of all the reasons behind cheating on exams. The obvious next step should, therefore, be undertaking a similar research with a much deeper investigation in order to comprehensively disclose the reasons behind cheating on exams. Yet, it is equally important to focus on designing appropriate intervention strategies to address the identified problems.

6. Conclusion

This study revealed that cheating on examinations in academic institutions is a worldwide issue. It found that though there are different factors current cheating in the university is very strongly associated with lack of trust in the assessment integrity; lose control system; lack of enough time to cover all the portions of courses and the absence or low level of enforcing penalties for cheaters. However, if appropriate measures of reducing students cheating on examination are taken, this study showed that there is a possibility to reduce as well as stop this problem that negatively affects social values and weakens economy because it produces professionals with questionable credentials.

References


Graves and Stephen (2008) Student Cheating Habits: A Predictor of Workplace Deviance. *Journal of Diversity Management* Vol 3 No.1, Austin State University, USA