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CYBER CHEATING: THE NEW CHALENGE TO THE EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

Cheating behavior among students is an "evergreen" issue to the educators. Copying other students work, carrying reference materials in the examination hall and sharing information inappropriately are some examples of the outdated styles of cheating. Nowadays, educators are facing the new "art" of cheating: cyber cheating. This paper addresses this issue. It explains how the Internet as the main source of information has indirectly opened this new avenue to cheat. It follows with a discussion on several proposed strategies to prevent the widespread of this cheating style among students. A brief conclusion regarding this issue ends this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, issue on quality of graduates has been a major topic of discussion. Many express their dissatisfactions on the performance of graduates' in the university as well as those who manage to enter the working sector. Universities have taken varieties of actions to boost the quality of their graduates. Revising the syllabus contents, offering updated courses and improving the educational facilities are some of the remedial actions taken to solve the problem.

Educators as one of the major actors in the education process should alert of the factors that affect the quality of graduates. Cheating behavior among students is one of the contributing factors that distort the quality of graduates, as student's abilities are not accurately evaluated. Furthermore, those students who involve in this unethical behavior are likely to have difficulties in applying their knowledge or advancing their studies (Lupton, Chapman, &Weiss, 2000).

In the United States, more than 200 journal articles discussing issues about cheating have been published by academicians and researchers (Payne & Nantz, 1994). Studies carried out by Allen et al., 1998 and Davis et al., 1992 indicates the widespread of student dishonesty on campus. Earlier studies report that more than 70% of U.S college undergraduates students involved in some form of cheating during their college life (Stern & Havlicek, 1986 and Baird, 1980). Moreover, Haines et al., 1986 states there is no indication of declining in frequency in the level of students' participation in academic dishonesty.

Nowadays, the computerized learning environment provides great help to students in their learning process. As mentioned by Phillips and Horton, 1998 and Brown et al, 1996, the computer–based instructions enables students to follow individual learning paths, offers the convenience of self-paced work, richer materials and automatic measurement of progress.

Unfortunately, the Internet as the main source of information has indirectly opened the new avenue to cheat. It enables students to find suitable term papers, reducing the risk of being caught and minimizing the effort required to perform their responsibility as students (Melodie R.P., and Veronica H, 2000). The availability of on line term – paper mill and chat rooms where students can exchange their assignments or solutions makes cheating hard to resist. Copying other students work, carrying reference materials in the examination hall and sharing information inappropriately have become the outdated styles of cheating. Currently, educators are facing the new "art" of cheating i.e. cyber cheating.

CYBER CHEATING

According to Hickman, 1998, there are no less than 70 active sites on the Internet for students to access a range of term paper products. Some of the services provided by these sites are cheating tips for examinations, availability to access to reusable essays or papers and also customized paper ordering (Melodie R.P., and Veronica H, 2000). Users could apply for yearly membership that enables them to have repeated access to information or they could be charged on as needed basis.

The existence of these sites allows students to select suitable essays or papers that suit their needs or they could also request for the customized paper. As for the customized paper, students are required to specify the area, types of report such as essay, book report or dissertation, number of pages, number of bibliographic sources required, report styles such as APA, shipping and payment methods. On top of that the customized paper also comes with the guarantee that it will never be resold (Melodie R.P.and Veronica H., 2000).

In the developed countries such as United States the above-described cheating styles have become common problem to the educators. At least 8,000 students a week are visiting the above-described sites (Hickman, J. N., 1998) and it is quite impractical to assume that none of them use the facilities offer by these sites to perform their duties as students. Furthermore, one of the owners of these sites claimed that he had sold between 1,000 to 2,000 papers during his first year of operation (Hickman, J.N., 1998). In today's globalization era, we could no longer claim that the above cheating trend is only the "western problem". In fact, educators should realize, in the current situation where borders and barriers are faded away, this problem will becomes ours sooner or later.

Another common and easiest style of cheating is "cut and paste" (McMurty, K., 2001). Students could type the selected topic into the search engine, which eventually comes out with the list of the relevant articles. The next step is to choose the best one, copy the text and paste it into a word processing program. Alternative way is to cut and paste paragraphs or sentences from the various articles found in the Internet and claim the work as one's own (Benning, V., 1998). Besides this, students could also exchange or share assignments by sending attachment file via e-mail (McMurty, K., 2001). The facilities offered by the Internet enable students to do their assignments or essays without much effort.

Cyber cheating has in a way exposed the educators to the new challenge in producing good and quality students. The possibility to do assignments or essays at the "click of a mouse" make it difficult for educators to control and reduce the temptation to cheat among students. To make thing worse, 95percent of the "cheaters" said they have never been caught (Kleiner et al., 1999). On top of that, in the same article, 90 percent of the college kids in the United States believe cheater never pay the price.

Proving the above cheating styles also is another difficult task to the educators (Margaret et al, 1999). For example any suspicion of such cheating styles should be backed up by hard proof. To have this, the educators should be familiar with the source of the paper or essay and should be able to access the original source. Even with the help of several search engines such as Medline and Alta Vista, this is not an easy job and it is also extremely time consuming (Stebelman, 1998).

Realizing the important to control the widespread of cyber cheating among students, Boston University filed suit to stop eight companies from selling the term papers over the Internet (Hickman, J.N., 1998). A professor at the University of California at Berkeley and two employees of the National Institutes of Health have designed computer programs to identify cyber cheating (Zack, 1998 and Hickman, J.N., 1998). Following are several strategies that could be adopted by educators to combat the problem.

STRATEGIES

Encourage group work.

Incorporate group thinking and efforts in doing assignments could be a help to overcome cyber-cheating problem
(Melodie,R.P and Veronica,H) . Group work teaches students to share different ideas. At the same time it reduces the last minute approach which lead to the desperation to download paper from the Internet or to apply the "cut and paste" technique. Monitoring the group work such as checking the group meeting report could also help the educators to keep track of the student's work. At least the group meeting report could be the evidence of the student's genuine effort and hard work. Finally, group presentation will further slim down the chances of downloading their work from the Internet. A thorough understanding of the work would only enable them to give good oral presentation.

Develop a system of punishments.

It is good if universities could clearly list down the punishments for cyber cheating in their academic integrity policies. This action would somehow display the seriousness of the universities in controlling these new cheating styles to the students. Logically, downloading papers or essays from the Internet should have greater penalties than copying someone's homework and students should have a clear picture on this issue. Besides this, all faculties should address their policies regarding this problem in their syllabus and clearly explain the consequences of committing this problem to the students. This earlier "warning" will urge the students to think twice before engaging themselves in the "cut and paste" approach. In addition, this will show the awareness of the faculty members regarding the new styles of cheating among students.

Explain the meaning of cheating.

Confusion in what is meant by cheating could be part of this problem. Some students do not have clear idea on the proper way to cite or use information from the articles found in the Internet. Some of them may get confused with the word plagiarism, as stated by Kleiner et al., 1999 " When does taking information off the Internet constitute research, and when is it plagiarism?" Hence, students may have created the "cheating crime" without even realized it. To overcome this problem, educators should take time to explain the correct way of using and utilizing information taken from the Internet. Internet abuse and what constitutes cheating behavior could be a good topic of discussions with the students.

Be up to date.

Knowing what is currently available on line before assigning a paper would help educators to detect the cyber-cheating problem among their students. Educators must know at least some of the available references on line, as this will help them to detect the originality of their students' work. Of course, surfing through the Internet would be time consuming but it is worth doing in preventing this problem. Asking students to submit copies of their references could also give great help. This will deter students from applying the "cut and paste" techniques as they are submitting the evidence together with their work!

Recycling the same assignments from past semesters will stimulate the temptation to cheat among students. Karlins et al., 1998 states that 80 percent of cheating efforts occurred across semesters instead of within semesters. Therefore educators should always update the topic. They should also be more specific on the topic chosen. Give clear instructions regarding the scope to be covered, format, length and number of sources required. Educators should bear in mind that the more specific and focus the assignment is, the more difficult it will be for the students to directly downloading the assignment from the Internet. For University, which has several branches like UiTM, assigning the same paper to the students in all branches would carry higher risk as "inter-branches" exchange or sharing of assignments might take place.

CONCLUSION

The Internet is entering the educational world. It brings thousands benefits to the educators as well as the students. Obtaining information is no longer a tedious and tiring process. As the information delivery channel it enables users to gather information around the world just by "a click of a mouse". Due to the technological wonders offer by the Internet, Universities around the world spend a big portion of their budget wiring students and educators to this facility. The investment made is expected to be compensated by the invaluable returns such as ability to produce quality graduates.

Unfortunately, the abuse of the Internet as the main source of information among students has become a common problem to the educators. The true function of the Internet which offer a better learning method to the students have been abused to be the shortcuts tools in their learning process. As discussed earlier, the reality of cyber cheating has worsened the cheating behavior among students. The ease of getting paper that meet the requirements and the uncontrollable "cut and paste" approach in writing up their essays or project papers increase the temptation to cheat among students. Moreover, the perceptions that their unethical behavior is difficult to be detected have further encourage the students to test their "luck".

Preventing the widespread of this new art of cheating styles among students is the new challenge to the educators around the world. The real dilemma is on how to change the environments that offer so many opportunities to cheat. Cyber cheating is quick, easy and difficult to justify. These characteristics have made the cheating style hard to resist. Hopefully, this article may bring some "lights" to the educators in tackling this problem.

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