

Reflections on academic integrity and academic dishonesty: How did we get here, and how do we get out?

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Abstract

In this article, I present a reflection based on my professional experience as a teacher and supervisor of national Grade 12 examination required as the first step for admission into post-secondary institutions in Nigeria, as well as experience as a doctoral student and graduate research assistant supporting a research grant on academic integrity in a Canadian University. I highlight the natural reaction of the society when one is perceived to have engaged in a dishonest act citing a notable example from the world's largest democracy, the US. I also highlight the definition of academic integrity and forms of academic dishonesty practices that resonates with me, and made recommendations on how to address what has become a thorn in the flesh of the academic world.

Key words: Academic integrity; academic dishonesty; cheating, plagiarism; teachers; parents; Canada.

Introduction

The 2016 presidential election in the United States was full of several interesting performances by the various actors. It brought out the different sides of American politics and was, by all means, very entertaining. Although I had no stake in the election, but often turned on the television before going to bed to get a recap of the day's news. As the election date of November 8, 2016 approached, there was a lot of drama, prominent among which was an allegation Mrs. Melania Trump had plagiarized a text from Mrs. Michelle Obama. In a series of event that followed, the speechwriter tendered her resignation which was rejected by then Republican Party Presidential candidate and current US President Donald Trump. At a dinner later that week, President Trump declared that the same text Mrs. Obama had previously read and had been applauded for, was later read by his wife and was condemned. By making fun of the episode, President Trump was able to put an end to the saga and re-focus the American populace on the election. The rest is now history. In as much as that allegation did not resurface during the campaign, it speaks to the embarrassment that could result from plagiarism. In the academia, we call this a violation of academic integrity. I would have described this as a form of academic dishonesty, if it had happened in an academic setting. That is why academic integrity is important. Its

neglect could bring a major embarrassment upon an individual, as well as a whole institution.

My Experiences

Experiences I had in two previous employment positions often come to mind whenever academic integrity is mentioned. The more I try not to remember some of the encounters I had in those jobs, they eagerly they force themselves back to my memory. As a teacher in a K-12 institution, I fell out with a colleague for catching her daughter cheating in an examination I supervised. The school authority delivered the appropriate punishment, despite opposition by certain members of staff to pardon the student since she belonged to 'one of their own'. In all fairness to the institution, there were members of staff who were on my side but preferred not to speak out to avoid offending said colleague. This highlights the tensions that can arise when violations of academic integrity are viewed differently among members of staff and administration, and I consider it to be one of the biggest threats. While I thought it was the last time I would ever see such solidarity in crime, I was wrong.

I encountered something similar in my other job working as a staff of the national examinations body in Nigeria. The council is mandated by the Federal Ministry of Education to conduct national common entrance examination for admission of students into secondary schools after Grade 6, as well as senior school certificate examinations for admission of Grade 12 students into universities and other institutions of higher learning. I had the dual responsibilities of supervising these examinations as well as leading research on the conduct of examinations with a view to identifying lessons learned to improve performance in future examinations. Both were tough jobs. As an external supervisor (as we were called by principals of secondary schools) since we were spread across 36 states, some teachers saw us as the enemies of the students, and some students believed that. I came face to face with teachers who were bribed by students and their parents to permit cheating during the exams. For every student I caught cheating, the rules of the examination body apply: result cancellation. I later learnt that some teachers and principals had special ways of alerting their students to hide textbooks because the 'external examiner is coming'. Back in my hotel room, some teachers came over in the evenings to plead with me to pardon certain students caught cheating. There were times we had to change hotels for fear of being attacked as a result of strange calls to our hotels. Several times recommendations of external supervisors had led to further investigations and eventual blacklisting of schools thereby suspending them from serving as examination centres.

Taking up a paid position as graduate research assistant to support a grant on academic integrity in Canadian context brought me face to face with a problem that knows no boundary. My experience working with the Principal Investigator of the project showed that Canadian researchers are beginning to realize the enormity of the problem in the

country and probably reason for the surge in research on the topic. It is time other countries of the world begin to learn from Canada to fund research on this important concept.

The foregoing is just a mild way to highlight the complication associated with academic integrity and how those who should be at the forefront of the campaign are unfortunately engaged in what I call solidarity in crime. By solidarity in crime, I mean when those who should be frowning at a criminal or dishonest act decides to join perpetrators of the crime and therefore see it as an acceptable norm. This reflection on academic integrity is important because the desired goals of teaching, learning, and research can only be satisfactorily accomplished in environments where ethical standards are upheld.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity means different thing to different researchers but often pointing towards honesty in all things relating to academic life for students, teachers, and educational administrators. An exercise to compare and contrast definitions of academic integrity by different authors is not the main focus of this paper, and I will therefore not go into that. For the purpose of this work however, I will use the definition of academic integrity from the International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI) (2014) as “a commitment to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (p. 16).

The first value, honesty can be considered as an institution’s determination to promote “the quest for truth and knowledge through personal honesty in learning, teaching, research, and service” (ICAI, 2014, p. 18). The second value, trust, speaks to “encouragement and support of free exchange of ideas which has the potential to enable scholarly inquiry to reach its highest potential” (ICAI, 2014, p. 20). This is concerned with cooperation without fear of theft of ideas or tarnishing of reputations. Fairness, which is value number three deals with “transparency, clear, and reasonable expectations” (ICAI, 2014, p. 22). Value number four, respect, is concerned with realizing that just as members of the community are from diverse backgrounds, so are their opinions, and respecting these opinions is a necessity for the success of the academic community. The fifth value, responsibility, is associated with personal accountability (Lokse, Lag & Solberg, 2017). It speaks to the “willingness of individuals and groups to lead by examples, uphold mutually agreed-upon standards, and take actions when they encounter wrong-doing” (ICAI, 2014, p. 26). ICAI (2014) equally noted that while these values hold great promise, translating them into action in the face of pressure and intimidation similar to my experience described in the previous section requires solid determination, commitment and courage. Courage is the “capacity to act according to one’s values without fear” (ICAI, 2014, p. 28). This courage is vital in the quest to promote academic integrity.

Forms of Academic Dishonesty

Law, Ting and Jerome (2013) identified two main forms of academic dishonesty: cheating on examinations (also known as examination malpractice) and plagiarism (associated with plagiarizing of assignments or reports or write-ups). Zafarghandi, Khoshroo, and Barkat (2012) identified cultural background of students as a factor influencing plagiarism behaviour. They maintained that some students who use memorization as a way of learning are more prone to plagiarism since they are mostly interested in ‘pouring’ what they have memorized verbatim into their blank sheets. One of my former supervisors would say that those who over memorize texts without seeking to understand it are prone to ‘vomiting’ what they have memorized verbatim into their sheets. I have repeated the term ‘vomiting’ here to provide context. In their investigation of master’s students’ perception of plagiarism, Zafarghandi et al. (2012) found that students’ understanding of plagiarism did not increase with more years at university. It therefore means that the current practice of telling students about plagiarism policy every year of their study, especially as they take on new courses, might not be effective.

Law et al. (2013) contended that certain factors promote academic dishonesty such as instructors who are either comfortable or indifferent towards cheating, as well as university integrity policies that are not clearly defined. The prevalence of academic dishonesty has been attributed to the availability of opportunities to cheat, pressures associated with obtaining high grades and a system that is more interested in rewarding academic dishonesty (Antenucci, Tackett, Wolf, & Claypoold, 2009). While university authorities condemn plagiarism as a major threat to academic integrity, the findings of a study by Law et al. (2013), which examined university students’ plagiarism in completing written assignments showed an interesting result which speaks to the magnitude of the challenge facing institutions in its bid to promote academic integrity. The entire 169 and 126 questionnaire administered before and after an academic reading and writing exercise respectively indicated that all the university students had been involved in plagiarism in different ways when completing written academic assignments. What is most disturbing about the findings is that the students do not consider plagiarism as a serious academic offence since they felt that the penalty would not exceed warning or counselling or assignment resubmission.

The World Bank (2001) attributed students’ involvement in cheating to the long-term impact of success in public examinations on a student’s life in terms of job and overall survival. The high stakes associated with the results from examinations make students to see it as a do or die affair. Table 1 shows some forms of malpractices.

Table 1:
Forms of malpractice in high stakes examinations

Development	Description	Involvement
Leakage	Contents of the examination disclosed	Usually involves teachers, examiners, printers, proofreaders or school administrators
External assistance	Unauthorized assistance to candidates during examinations	Involves invigilators, writing answers on the blackboard, circulating 4 sheets of work during the course of the exam
Smuggling of foreign materials	“Crib notes”, charts and answer booklets. Frequently smuggled in pants, shoes, hems or parts of the body	Involves only the candidates and/or their friends
Copying	Reproduction of another candidate’s work with or without permission	Usually relates to inadequate spacing between desks and lax supervision
Collusion	Unauthorized passing of information between candidates (scripts or notes)	Usually relates to inadequate spacing between desks and lax supervision
Intimidation	Examination officials, even markers of papers) are physically threatened	Involves candidates (sometimes places weapons in clear view of officials)
Substitution of scripts	Replacing answer sheets handed out during the course of the exam with ones written outside the center	Usually involves invigilators, even teachers working outside the examination room

Adapted from the World Bank (2001)

Bultas, Schmuke, Davis and Palmer (2017) argued that statistics relating to cheating in a college have consistently indicated that over 50% of college students are involved in dishonest academic conduct. In a survey of students in a religious affiliated university in the United States, the authors found that upper division and second-degree nursing students were less tolerant and more condemnatory of cheating than younger students. The most common dishonest classroom behaviours included asking and telling other students the content of the exam, while the most common dishonest clinical job related

behaviours included documentation of findings that were false as well as findings that were not accessed. Bultas and his colleagues' work although not the only one on academic integrity, have several implications. That younger students in a university were more tolerant of cheating in a university setting is in itself a problem. One would expect that younger students were still fresh in the institution with innocent minds and commitment to hard work devoid of dishonest practices. This could mean that they were already used to cheating before securing admission into the university. That students are already familiar with cheating at the early stages of their university education speaks to a systemic failure that might not necessarily be limited to post-secondary institutions. The question then is: how did we get here, and how do we get out?

It is true that academic dishonesty is not a new phenomenon, however, the problems seem to have escalated at the turn of the millennium (Styron & Styron, 2010; Hulsart & McCarthy, 2009; McCabe, 2005; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Naghdipour and Emeagwali (2013) argued that this is a disturbing development in education with the tendency to undermine the quality of education and subsequently undermining the quality of future professionals mostly being trained in educational institutions. They maintained that the emergence of different methods of cheating by students requires collaborative effort on the part of teachers, members of the academic community and other stakeholders to address the growing trend of dishonest academic behaviours. Unfortunately, some people appear to have become so accustomed to dishonest academic practices to the extent that they consider it the norm.

Teaching my students some years ago, I had mentioned that if you live with a dishonest academic behaviour for a long time, it eventually becomes a habit, which one might erroneously see as the right thing to do. Tierney and Sabharway (2017) described this as everyone does it. This notion is what has been a major challenge to academic integrity especially in societies where academic dishonesty is rewarded. They argued that dishonest practices in the new millennium have become a common practice in the society in general and post-secondary institutions in particular.

Eaton (2017) identified a challenge in the bid to address academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism, in higher education institutions. In a complete deviation from the focus of most works on academic dishonesty, which are often characterized by reactions and punishments, Eaton argued that the lack of consensus in what constitutes plagiarism is an important challenge. Drawing on the analysis of web-based documents from 20 English-speaking public institutions of Canadian higher education, the paper filled an important gap in literature by highlighting the different definitions, understanding, and treatment of plagiarism by these Canadian institutions at the policy level. While her comparative analysis brings to the fore the need for a coordinated approach among Canadian universities in their efforts at addressing plagiarism, the study is an important resource to address academic dishonesty globally. Eaton recommended that the first step in the effort

to uphold academic integrity should be a clear and explicit definition of plagiarism, and related types of academic dishonesty in a consistent manner across the country.

I am in agreement with Eaton (2017) that higher education institutions might inadvertently be part of the problem and will need to consider changing their approach as she advocated. It will continue to remain a great challenge if what University 'A' considers academic dishonesty e.g. plagiarism is different from University 'B's definition of the same thing. This is important as researchers such as Kier (2014) have also argued that some students have different perceptions of what constitute academic dishonesty and might not necessarily see themselves as engaging in a dishonest act when it is not made explicitly clear.

Way Forward

The promotion of academic integrity is the responsibility of all. Parents as the first teachers of their children need to begin to instill the value from home by highlighting the honour, recognition, and satisfaction that comes from earning one's grades. It will take me a long time to recover from the shock of seeing a parent some years ago in Nigeria attempting to bribe a teacher to 'remember' his 11-year old daughter during her final Grade 6 common entrance examination. While the teacher felt embarrassed by the request, what followed from the parent is among the drivers of examination malpractice: 'Teacher, please she needs to pass as I cannot afford another year of tuition and associated expenses if she fail. She will do better when she gets to secondary school.' That some parents in Nigeria support academic dishonest actions is an indirect endorsement with dire consequences for our collective future. I have also seen Nigerian parents who were happy to have their children repeat classes to ensure that they are able to defend their grades later in life. These parents encourage their children to work hard and earn their grades while discouraging them from any form of academic dishonesty. They are among the heroes of academic integrity who would never bribe any teacher on-behalf of their children. Teachers at all levels i.e. from kindergarten to post-secondary institutions need to show a commitment towards cleansing our society of academic dishonesty practices. There is a need to start discouraging the act of memorizing texts by students and encourage critical appraisal of every work. There is also a need for clear and consistent policies on academic integrity by institutions of higher education as well as management's commitment to smooth implementation of such policies.

The awareness campaign needs to go beyond the traditional walls of universities to areas not previously considered. For instance, with rising immigration, it is time to start including pamphlets about academic integrity in orientation packages for newcomers, and highlighting the role of students, teachers, and parents since most immigrants would either be retraining in new countries or settle down to raise families. Religious and cultural groups need to help in this awareness campaign by sensitizing their members on the values inherent in upholding academic integrity, and the consequences of academic dishonesty

including the shame and embarrassment it can bring on a family, community, and country. Public libraries are also important points of connection to the community, and present a venue to hold workshops on academic integrity. Posters and handbills written in plain language would also be helpful.

Conclusion

My knowledge about academic integrity has greatly improved as a result of my experiences in Canada. While most emphasis in some developing countries including Nigeria appears to be on cheating during examinations, the umbrella name “academic integrity” is seldom used. This might be responsible for why academic plagiarism though condemned by institutions of higher education in Nigeria, do not necessarily receive the same attention as cheating or examination malpractice. Many Nigerian teachers do not yet have the capacity to check students’ submissions for academic plagiarism via relevant plagiarism detecting software, which is a common practice in Canada, like most universities in the developed world. I have also realized that the various checks and balances in the Canadian educational system makes it rare to hear of cases of parents attempting to bribe teachers in order to help their children undeservedly pass examinations. This in my opinion is not just about the checks and balances. Rather, it is about a culture that would like the child to hold their head high and be proud of well-deserved achievements. It is about a culture that provides sound education and relevant resources to students to better position them to solve some of the complex problems facing humanity. It is exciting to see a culture in Canada where one cannot hear of school principals cheating or being sacked for promoting cheating in examinations unlike the case reported by Adibe (2016) where high school principals were sacked, and examination centres cancelled for cheating related offences. The absence in Canada of miracle centres like some countries of the world where students and some parents deliberately register their children for examinations in schools or centres where they can obtain good grades through cheating (Aworinde, 2015; Bello, Musa, Musa & Adaramola, 2009) testifies to the culture I found in Canada. That some elected officials in Nigeria are suspending important state matters in order to address examination malpractice by some private schools (Okoghenun, 2006) underscores the change I found in Canada where certain practices are unheard of.

Despite widespread cases of academic dishonesty across the world, all hope is not lost. While the Nigerian educational sector is committed to addressing the problem, there is no doubt that more works needs to be done. Canada’s determination towards upholding academic integrity as demonstrated by research funding on this important issue is commendable. That is not to say the country can now relax. Of course, more work still needs to be done. Teachers at all levels everywhere have important responsibilities of rising to the occasion. There is a need for them to identify the weaknesses of their students and help in skill building to make them more confident to work and live above academic dishonesty. Teachers alone cannot accomplish the task of ridding the society of this bad habit and promoting academic integrity. Society needs to see integrity as a collective

responsibility in order to create a future where original ideas can contribute towards addressing some of humanity's complex problems.

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