

**Cheating in Schools: To Take Punitive Actions and/or
Implement Proactive, Preventive Strategies?**

Part II

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

My last article focused on the prevalence of cheating in schools, although I emphasized that the problem was not confined to students. I wrote of adults in high profile positions who fabricated accomplishments on their resumes or falsified research findings or engaged in illegal financial schemes. I referred to the use of PEDs in the world of athletics, with suspensions becoming a regular occurrence. Each day appears to bring forth yet another account of adults exposed for sacrificing honesty for lies in an attempt to further their careers, finances, and/or standing in society. Given the questionable behavior of well-known adults who unfortunately often serve as models for our youth, is it little wonder that cheating pervades our schools?

Prior to describing preventive steps that can be undertaken to lessen the incidence of cheating, I think it will be useful if I review several of the key points from my September article. The reader is directed to that article for a more in-depth discussion of this issue.

A “Radical Proposition” about Cheating

A large part of my September piece was predicated on an article by James Lang published in *The Boston Globe* titled “How College Classes Encourage Cheating.” Lang is the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts and the author of *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. While Lang’s observations pertained to the college environment, I believe his views are equally relevant for students of all ages. His perspective was not only thought-provoking but centered on issues about which I have written extensively, especially related to student ownership, intrinsic motivation, and a positive classroom climate.

Lang, citing a cheating scandal that took place at Harvard University last year that resulted in the suspension of more than 60 students in a government class, argues against

the view that “cheating has become commonplace in our schools as the result of the increasingly amoral larger society in which they operate.” Instead, he notes that during the past 50 years, the rate of students who acknowledge cheating at least on one occasion while in college has remained at 75 percent.

Lang acknowledges that “75 percent is a disheartening number” and reports that to confront this problem college administrators “have focused on creating first-year orientations or seminars on academic integrity, or on instituting deterrent measures like suspensions or expulsions for students who are caught.” However, Lang questions the efficacy of these measures given the consistency of the rate of cheating during the past 50 years.

The crux of last month’s article was what Lang labels a “radical proposition,” namely, “the very nature of the college education we provide to our students, in both its design and delivery, may turn out to be the deepest cause of cheating on campus. In other words, it may be that cheating rates are so high because too many university curriculums and courses are designed for cheating.”

Lest this “radical proposition” be interpreted to blame the professor and excuse the perpetrator of cheating, Lang asserts, “Students who cheat in higher education deserve appropriate punishment; we will not solve the problem by blaming ourselves and letting students off the hook. . . . We should continue to monitor cheating rates in higher education—not simply to measure the moral values of our students, but as a barometer that can help us understand how well we are motivating them to learn, and how we can continue to improve.”

While Lang refers to “higher education” and is on the faculty of a college, I believe it is important for us to recognize, as I mentioned earlier, that his position is equally relevant for the elementary, middle, and high school environments. Let’s explore Lang’s position further.

Lang cites the fascinating research of Dan Ariely, the James Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University, to offer a different perspective. Ariely is author of several bestselling books, including the intriguing *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*. As

much as we might wish to think differently, Ariely has demonstrated through a number of creative studies that most individuals are willing to engage in dishonest actions under particular circumstances. He contends that how far people are willing to cheat or be dishonest “depends on the structure of their daily environment.”

Lang concludes, “The structure of that environment proves more influential than an individual’s ethical profile or some general cultural milieu.” Although some may question Lang’s conclusion, a reading of Ariely’s book or an equally fascinating book, *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We can Stick to the Plan* by Francesca Gino, a faculty member at Harvard Business School who has collaborated with Ariely on several research projects, offers ample support for his position.

Intrinsic Motivation: An Antidote to Cheating

In detailing changes that might be incorporated within educational practices to lessen cheating, I wish to emphasize that similar to Lang and Ariely, my intention is not in any manner to excuse acts of cheating or lying on the part of students or to cast blame on educators. Instead, I believe that we should ask the question, “What classroom variables are likely not only to serve as buffers against cheating but, as importantly, to nurture such qualities as self-discipline, responsibility, and accountability in students so that they are less likely to engage in questionable behaviors in the future?”

Lang subscribes to the viewpoint that cheating is best addressed by redesigning “college classes to help students develop motivation on their own.” He highlights two kinds of motivation about which I have written extensively in previous articles, namely, extrinsic and intrinsic. Lang writes, “Educational theorists tell us that people learn best when they are trying to answer a question, solve a problem, or meet a challenge that matters to them.” These behaviors fall under the rubric of intrinsic motivation since “you are learning because you see your subject matter as relevant to your life or your future.”

In elaborating this position, Lang proposes, “Courses that rely upon infrequent, high-stakes assessments (such as three exams and nothing else) put intense pressure on each of those grade-earning opportunities, and ratchet up the incentive to cheat on each.” He also believes that such an atmosphere emphasizes performance over learning and increases the probability of cheating.

How best to nurture intrinsic motivation? Lang sees the solution as residing in creating a classroom that invites problem solving and collaborative learning. An example he offers is the Great Problems Seminars at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, “an interdisciplinary first-year sequence of courses that asks students to confront major world problems and devise solutions. . . . Instead of seeing an endless series of names and dates, the students in a great problems seminar learn to look at history as a trove of experiences that may be useful to apply in the present. In a course like this, it would seem there is little incentive to cheat.”

In support of Lang’s position to create classrooms in which intrinsic motivation flourishes, I often recommend to teachers that they (a) offer choices to students such as which books to read for a report or which subjects to select for a study, (b) explain the rationale for tests and homework so that these educational practices are not experienced as arbitrary with little purpose other than to increase stress and pressure on students, (c) invite students of whatever age to attend at least part of a parent-teacher conference to increase a sense of responsibility for one’s education, (d) engage students in creating some of the disciplinary rules in the classroom so that self-discipline is promoted, and (e) openly discuss during the first day or two of the new school year the ways in which the fear of mistakes and humiliation impact on learning and explore with students how to minimize this fear (e.g., I have advised teachers to say, “What can I do as a teacher and what can you do as a class so that no one is afraid to make a mistake?”). All of these themes as well as related ones are addressed in a number of my previous website articles.

I would add one more suggestion to this list that deals specifically with cheating. It is similar to the strategy I recommend about openly discussing with students the fear of making mistakes or not understanding material. I think that teachers might consider introducing a dialogue with their students about the topic of cheating. This can be done at the start of school, but teachers should be sensitive to avoid succumbing to a lecture mode about the wrongs of cheating or the punishment that will follow from such behavior.

Instead, teachers might acknowledge that they believe that cheating is commonplace even though they wish it were not. Teachers could ask the class what

factors might lead students to cheat, how do they as students feel about cheating, and what practical, realistic actions both teachers and students might take to lessen the occurrence of dishonest behaviors in the classroom. I believe that such a problem-solving, non-accusatory approach might heighten a sense of ownership for one's behavior, thereby reinforcing intrinsic motivation and responsibility while decreasing the probability of cheating.

To Reduce Competition and Anxiety

In another publication I cited last month from the New York University Child Study Center, co-authors Drs. Ali Mattu and Courtney Weiner suggest a number of interventions to address cheating. I was especially interested in the section "reduce competition and anxiety in the classroom" that included the following three recommendations for lessening conditions that contribute to dishonesty in the classroom. They are:

1. "Provide personal, one-on-one feedback. Many teachers are busy and overburdened, but it is important for students to feel they are more than just a grade or a GPA."

This suggestion captures the belief that the relationship that teachers develop with students has a significant impact in determining whether or not cheating occurs in the classroom. In this regard, I was impressed by the insight of Marsha Kolich of Phoenix who wrote in response to my September article:

I would have never considered being dishonest with teachers I held in high esteem: those highly competent, dedicated educators who connected well with most of the students in their classes and had high expectations for all students because they really cared about their students' success and I really cared about what they thought of me. Those were the teachers I never wanted to disappoint, certainly not by cheating in their class.

Lang also highlights the importance of the relationship students have with their teacher, noting, "The large class size makes it difficult for the students to develop a personal relationship with the professor, and this impersonal learning environment leads to higher levels of academic dishonesty as well." Of course, while class size is a

important factor, it is important to remember that there are classes with a relatively high number of students in which the teacher-student relationship is very positive and classes with fewer students in which teacher-student relationships are characterized by distance and negativity.

2. A second recommendation by Mattu and Weiner is to “avoid posting grades publicly.”

Years ago in response to several student suicides, the principal of the high school in the town in which I live asked that the name of honor roll students no longer be listed in the local newspaper. He and others were very concerned about the stress students were experiencing. Many ridiculed his action, including late night television personalities. Others applauded his decision, recognizing that this principal was not trying to minimize or hide the achievements of students who made the honor roll but rather was seeking ways to lessen the stress felt by students to have their name listed in the local newspaper. Interestingly, within a few months his decision seemed to be a non-issue for both students and parents alike.

3. The third recommendation proposed by Mattu and Weiner is to “include projects and assignments that require collaborative group work.”

I believe that the learning process at all levels of education will be enriched through collaboration among students. Such an approach, which affords students the opportunity to actively cooperate with their classmates, increases participation, reduces competition, and lessens cheating.

Some Concluding Thoughts

I am aware that it is unrealistic to assume that lying and cheating in schools can be eradicated through the preventive measures noted in this article. Conversely, harsher consequences meted out by some schools do not appear to offer an effective alternative. However, I believe that if teachers introduce preventive practices in a consistent, systematic way, not only will the learning environment be enriched, but cheating will become less prevalent than research indicates it is at the current time. Perhaps such preventive practices might serve to help youngsters develop a strong moral compass

during their school years that will continue to guide the decisions they make during their adult lives.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>