Defining Academic Dishonesty Enabled by Technology

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between academic dishonesty and technology. Two arguments emerge in this paper: a definition of academic dishonesty must be socially constructed and technology enables, but does not cause, dishonest practices. A review of recent studies suggests technology enables dishonest activity due to students misunderstanding of the term. A socially constructed definition of academic dishonesty would clarify for students and those in the educational community what academic dishonesty is and how technology enables dishonest activity. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the understanding today’s students have of dishonest practices involving technology and to identify how technology is used to enable academic dishonesty.
Defining Academic Dishonesty Enabled by Technology

A social constructivist views knowledge as a social construction; meaning is created out of shared social interactions (Miller, 2002). Academic dishonesty is socially constructed and students define “dishonesty” through social interactions. Prensky (2001) argues students today are Digital Natives, members of a digital generation born with digital technology. Could Prensky’s (2001) Digital Natives have socially constructed their own definition of academic dishonesty? Is cheating with technology really considered dishonest for the digital generation? Students’ methods and attitudes towards academic dishonesty have changed (Ma, Lu, Turner & Wan., 2007). The Internet has increased learning opportunities, but has also challenged students’ academic integrity (Ma et al., 2007). The use and accessibility of the Internet, computers, and CD-ROMs improve cheating efficiency for technology-savvy teenagers; cheating is quicker and easier than ever (Conradson & Hernández-Ramos, 2004).

Educational technologists may be undermined by an unclear definition of what cheating means in this digital age. This paper reviews research to argue there are differing socially constructed definitions of academic dishonesty which make it challenging to track rates of cheating when technology is involved. A clear definition of academic dishonesty is needed. It is also argued through a social constructivist perspective that technology enables but does not cause academic dishonesty. The pressure from peers, parent or teachers to perform at a high level may lead to cheating, and technology simply enables the activity (Conradson & Hernández -Ramos, 2004). To conclude, it is suggested future research between Web 2.0 applications and academic dishonesty is needed to benefit educators as they increase the use of technology in the classroom.
Defining Academic Dishonesty

An operational definition of academic dishonesty inclusive of technology needs to be constructed by educational professionals, students and researchers in order to identify changing rates and to design generalizable preventative techniques. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, meaning is created out of shared ideas and beliefs; meaning is socially created (Miller, 2002). Students in kindergarten through to college have been raised with digital technologies; they are Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001). It is argued that Digital Natives have socially constructed what academic dishonesty means, and this definition is not the same as the prevailing definition applied in schools. Those who were not born into a digital world, Prensky’s (2001) Digital Immigrants, include the educational researchers who can’t decide on one agreed upon definition or overall term! A brief review results in cybercheating, cyberplagiarism, digital cheating, e-cheating, Internet plagiarism, digital plagiarism and academic dishonesty (Conradson et al., 2004, Ma et al., 2007; Ma, Wan and Lu, 2008; McMurty, 2001; Stephens, Young & Calabrese, 2007; and Vandehey, Diekhoff & LaBeff, 2007).

Prensky’s (2001) Digital Immigrants have constructed for themselves what academic dishonestly means, but have not constructed one simple term to encompass the concept. Cybercheating refers to using technology tools in inappropriate ways for academic use, and cyberplagiarism means copying material from the Internet and claiming it as one’s own (Conradson et al., 2004). Digital cheating and digital plagiarism are used interchangeably by Ma et al., (2007, 2008) to mean using websites, e-mail, chat rooms, digital devices and search engines as tools for plagiarism and cheating. Internet plagiarism refers to copying work directly from the Internet and submitting it as an original idea (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2006). E-cheating is any electronic cheating which is made possible by technology (McMurty, 2001). Stephens et al.,
Academic Dishonesty and Technology (2007) distinguish between digital-only cheaters and conventional-digital cheaters. A digital-only cheater uses only digital technology and electronic sources to cheat compared to a conventional-digital cheater who combines digital technology and electronic sources with copying by hand, collaborating in person and using printed text sources (Stephens et al., 2007). Academic dishonesty is used by Kelley and Bonner (2005) to mean plagiarism and cheating on tests, exams or assignments using digital text, the Internet or traditional means.

It is no wonder teachers and students may have different ideas of what academic dishonesty means when there isn’t one standard term. To compound the problem, students may have socially constructed a different meaning of academic dishonestly which teachers do not understand. Students may not consider dishonest practices that are enabled through technology (Internet plagiarism or collaborative websites) as truly cheating. Teachers claim their definition of cheating differs from that of their students’ and students often confuse helping with cheating (Cromwell, 2004). High school students copy material directly from the Internet and submit it as their own because of their misunderstanding of academic plagiarism (Ma et al., 2007). Today’s students have socially constructed a definition of academic behaviour where copying from the Internet or a digital source is acceptable; it is not unethical for technology to enable dishonesty.

To avoid misunderstandings and discrepancies, it is proposed that academic dishonesty be socially constructed to refer to all activity involving traditional or technological innovations in order to engage in plagiarism, copy solutions during examinations from an audio, visual or textual source, and obtain a copy of a test or an assignment in advance. A cheater is considered anyone who engages in the above activities through traditional or technological means. The list of technological innovations is potentially exhaustive and includes computers, data transfer devices (memory sticks, DVDs, CDs, MP3s), the Internet, websites, Web 2.0, mobile
A variety of studies which define academic dishonesty differently makes drawing comparisons and studying the influence of emerging technologies unreliable (Vandehey et al., 2007). A growing concern is the challenge to compare rates of academic dishonesty and correlate the data with digital technologies to identify a rise or fall in dishonest practices. Researchers and educators are challenged to identify academic dishonesty, investigate students’ constructions of dishonesty and to design preventative solutions. With one socially constructed operational definition, it is hypothesised Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives would have the same understanding of academic dishonesty, inclusive of technology. Studies, rates, instructional techniques and preventative measures could be designed and compared with increased reliability.

The Relationship between Academic Dishonesty and Technology

Academic dishonesty is perceived to be on the rise in popular media. The Washington Post published an article describing a statistical increase in Internet plagiarism (Schulte, 2002). In 2006, Newsweek claimed Internet plagiarism had quadrupled “in the past six years” (Flynn-Vencat, 2006 ¶ 3). The Newsweek article opened with the claim academic dishonesty has increased in the last ten years and over 70% of students surveyed had cheated. Newsweek highlighted the findings of a survey by Duke University’s Center for Academic Integrity involving 18,000 high school and 50,000 college students. The survey data was collected in 1999, yet Newsweek used it in reference to student activity in 2006. It is tempting to manipulate statistics and suggest the obvious: dishonesty and technology are rising together; there must be a
strong positive correlation between academic dishonesty and technological innovations! Through a review of three studies a different argument arises. The relationship between technology and dishonesty is one where digital technologies enable, but are not the cause of, academic dishonesty.

The relationship between digital technologies and academic dishonesty has been linked in several studies (Ma et al., 2007, 2008; Conradson & Hernández-Ramos, 2004; Underwood & Szabo, 2003; Stephens et al., 2008). The Josephson Institute, in the 2006 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, surveyed 35,000 middle and high school students across America. They found one-third of students plagiarized material from the Internet for an assignment at least once in the previous academic year (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2006). Internet plagiarism increased with academic level: 23.8% of 1827 middle school students and 32.9% of 34,202 high school students surveyed copied an Internet document for a classroom assignment (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2006). The results are similar to an identical survey given in 2004. There was not a rise in academic dishonesty between 2004 and 2006 despite increased digital technologies, but instead an acceptance by students of dishonest practices enabled through technology (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2006).

The research of Ma et al., (2007) supports the argument that students are more accepting of academic dishonesty when it is enabled through technology. The researchers investigated middle school students’ attitudes toward Internet use and plagiarism. They gathered empirical evidence through interviews and focus groups with 36 students, 9 teachers and 2 media specialists from three different schools. Two-thirds of students saw a classmate cheat using the Internet, one-third used the Internet to answer homework problems without trying to answer for themselves and one-fourth of students used the Internet to copy and paste text to submit as their own (Ma et al.,
Students, teachers and the media specialists believe the convenience of the Internet has contributed to academic plagiarism and cheating (Ma et al., 2007).

Peer pressure and the proliferation of websites designed for plagiarism support and strengthen the acceptance of digital cheating (Ma et al., 2007). Students feel if their peers are cheating with technology to obtain higher grades they should cheat too (Ma et al., 2007). Related to peer pressure and the desire to obtain better scores is research by Conradson & Hernández-Ramos (2004). Through a general review of literature, the authors examined how and why high school students use the Internet to plagiarize assignments. They concluded there is an increase in copying text from the Internet or from a digital source without properly citing the work (Conradson & Hernández-Ramos, 2004). Academic dishonesty occurs because of student access to the Internet or digital text sources, and also because students do not understand or relate well to assessment practices (Conradson & Hernández-Ramos, 2004). Students desire higher grades and wish to perform well due to peer and parental pressure, and because students do not relate to traditional forms of assessment or clearly understand academic dishonesty, they rely on plagiarized assignments enabled by technology (Conradson & Hernández-Ramos, 2004).

The Internet has made digital cheating more accessible and websites designed for plagiarism make digital plagiarism convenient (Ma et al., 2008). Cromwell (2004) claims Internet sites promoting and targeting plagiarisers have created a new field in cheating. During the research phase for this paper, a Google™ search with the term “free essay” resulted in 388,000 hits! The titles of the sites reveal the popularity of Internet plagiarism: Free Essay Website, Free Essay Paper Writing Here, Anti-Essays, and eCheat. Please see Appendix A for the top fifteen site addresses. Teachers report high school students hand in the exact same papers, void of original thought due to the utilization of plagiarism websites (Ma et al., 2007).
Technology did not create a generation of cheaters, but academic dishonesty enabled through technology is acceptable by peers (Conradson & Hernández-Ramos, 2004; Ma et al., 2007, 2008). This relationship implies the current definition of academic dishonestly constructed by Digital Natives may not include technology enabled cheating.

**The Enabler: In Defence of Technology**

The Internet and digital technologies do not cause academic dishonesty; instead they enable students to cheat. However, this implies without Internet access or digital technologies, perhaps some students would not cheat by any definition. To address this, several studies were reviewed and their results revealed changing definitions have made it appear academic dishonesty is on the rise: academic dishonesty is not rising along with technological advances.

The current paper began with an argument for a consistent definition of academic dishonesty. In the pursuit of comparable results, Vandehey et al., (2007) use the same operational definition of academic dishonesty and measuring instruments in three studies covering 20 years. In all three studies, “students were defined as ‘cheaters’ if they reported cheating at some time in their college career on quizzes, exams, or assignments, however they defined those terms. All others were defined as ‘noncheaters’ ” (Vandehey et al., 2007, p. 468). They collected data in 1984, 1994 and 2004 to examine the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of university students related to academic dishonesty using a 49 item survey and two open ended questions. Internet cheating was added to the list of methods of cheating on the 2004 survey. The goal was to investigate academic cheating over 20 years to identify changes in student attitudes toward cheating, to examine ways to deter cheating and to examine the differences between those who cheat and those who don’t cheat. Four hundred and one university students enrolled in
introductory sociology and psychology classes voluntarily and anonymously completed the survey in 2004. The researchers found 57.4% of the 2004 students admitted to cheating at some point in university, which was a non-significant decline from 1994 data (61.2%).

Interestingly, and in defence of technology, the researchers did not find a relationship between cheaters and noncheaters related to the use of the Internet: use of the Internet was not a defining variable of a cheater. The findings of Vandehey et al., (2007) do not show an increase in academic cheating over twenty years despite technological advances and student use of the Internet. However, the study has limited generalization due to the age of the participants (first and second year students), and the three studies were held at the same campus of one university.

Despite limitations, the findings of Vandehey et al., (2007) support those of Brown and Emmett (2001) and the argument that technology is not causing a rise in academic dishonesty. Brown and Emmett (2001) studied the relationship between reported levels of academic cheating by college students and year of publication as well as the independent variables of sample size, study type (observations vs. survey) and the dishonest practices in a comparison of 31 studies published over 33 years. Through stepwise linear multiple regression, simple linear and non-linear regression the authors concluded that between 1933 and 1999 cheating in college did not increase. Brown and Emmett (2001) reported that cheating has not really increased over a 33-year period despite technological advances, but that changing definitions of cheating have resulted in the appearance of an increase. However, the researchers did not investigate use of the Internet in the dishonest practices independent variable. The one specific mention of technology in the study was the use of a pre-programmed calculator during an exam. Yet, the comparison did reveal that changing definitions are linked to a perceived rise in academic dishonesty.
Furthering this research, Stephens et al., (2007) compared university students’ use of and beliefs about conventional and digital cheating and did not find digital technologies to be the cause of academic dishonesty. An anonymous online survey concerning twelve academic behaviours using a three-point Likert scale was completed by 1305 students from two universities. The twelve behaviours included six traditional forms of cheating and six forms of digitally cheating. Two aspects of moral cognition were also investigated using a five-point Likert scale. Chi-square analysis and multinomial logistic regression analyses were used to assess data. The researchers identified four groups: non-cheaters, conventional-only, digital-only and digital-conventional.

Stephens et al., (2007) found most students (45%) use a combination of digital and conventional methods and very few (4.2%) relied on digital-only methods. However, a greater percentage of students reported engaging in digital plagiarism (copying from the Internet) and using digital cheat sheets (defined as “notes stored on a digital device”) than conventional methods (Stephens et al., 2007). Perceptions of peer acceptability of digital cheating were strong indicators of cheating behaviour but the researchers found students do not view digital cheating as less serious than conventional cheating! The finding challenges that of Ma et al., (2007) who found students to be accepting of digital cheating. This implies, in direct contrast to this paper’s argument, the Digital Natives’ definition of academic dishonesty may be socially constructed in a similar manner as the Digital Immigrants, where technology enabled cheating is unethical! In fact, “students beliefs about the seriousness of cheating is a strong negative predictor of cheating behaviour, conventional and digital” (Stephens et al., p. 250, 2007). The researchers conclude that digital technologies are not a cause of cheating, they are a conduit; they have not created a
new generation of cheaters, they have simply enabled academic dishonesty (Stephens et al., 2007).

**Conclusion**

The current paper argues digital technologies enable students to cheat when students don’t understand the full meaning of academic dishonesty. Having access to digital technologies does not necessarily increase the rate of academic dishonesty (Stephens et al., 2007; Vandehey et al., 2007). The term “academic dishonesty” frames a more complicated picture involving peer acceptance and blurred definitions of what dishonesty academic activity is. Technology enables but does not cause cheating: peer pressure, websites designed for plagiarism, pressure to achieve, having few consequences for digital cheating and, importantly, lacking an understanding of academic plagiarism, are all causes of academic dishonesty (Ma et al., 2008; Stephens et al., 2007).

Future research is needed to identify the current, prevailing socially constructed definition of academic dishonesty. Specifically, an investigation of the similarities and differences between Prensky’s (2001) Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives when it comes to the definition of academic dishonesty. The constructed definition needs to be flexible and inclusive of Web 2.0 and future applications. A consistent term and a meaningful definition would allow for fair comparisons of data concerning academic dishonesty inclusive of technology. Valid comparisons would help researchers and educators identify trends and changes in rates of academic dishonesty and clarify why students choose to cheat.
References


Appendix A


1. Search Essays: www.123helpme.com
2. Anti-Essays: www.antiessays.com
3. Free Essays, Term Papers and Book Reports: www.freeessays123.com
4. eCheat: www.echeat.com
5. Free For Essays has Free Term Papers: www.freeforessays.com
7. Essay Crawler: www.essaycrawler.com
12. Research Haven: www.researchhaven.com