

Contract cheating values in school assessments – what values are we really teaching our young students?

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Contract cheating in higher education is a menace that academics and researchers are grappling with world-over. Contract cheating is when students get a third party to complete an assessment for them, most times for a price.

Recent studies have shown contract cheating takes place most in business and computing disciplines (Lancaster, 2020). Studies have also posited how students from previously undocumented countries have shared their thoughts in educational corruption and contract cheating, both as students accessing such services or as those providing such services (Lancaster et al., 2019). Others have highlighted ways to raise awareness (Khan et al, 2020) or even how digital forensics could be used to track and catch possible cases (Johnson and Davies, 2020).

However, the recent scandals surrounding high profile cases in an admissions scandal in the United States, or even the latest case a California mother charged for paying someone else to take an online test for her child, have brought sharply to focus the need to look at where, how and why students are acquiring and accepting contract cheating as an alternative means of completing assessments. The aim of the research was to understand how primary school assessments are being completed.

The study used a qualitative mixed method. First it used case study method to capture the story for two parents with child(ren) in different schools. Then the study used qualitative descriptive coding to record the experiences and compare the assessment design and how they have been accepted and perceived by the parents and their children. The parents shared their experiences and story from schools in a middle eastern country. The two parents had child(ren) in two different private schools, both following British curriculum. The parents' experience included assessments from primary classes, years 1 to 6.

However, the schools in question catered to different economic demographics – one was a high-end school with fees ranging from US\$7500 to US\$125000, and the second one was medium range with fees from US\$1900 to US\$3800. This was considered to be indicative also of the general buying power of the parents of respective schools. This is because in the country the private schools were segmented to lower-medium-high range based on the wide range of income levels in the nation (Khan et al, 2015)

Other differences included demographic make of the teachers, management and student body. According to the parents, while School A's teachers and management were mostly British passport holders, and majority of students held passports from western nations such as UK, USA, Australia, Canada, and other developed nations; School B's teachers and management mostly reflected South East Asia and Middle East including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines among others as did their student population. However, it was not possible to get exact numbers or specifications beyond this data.

Based on parents' stories of their child(ren) who were in these schools from and covered years 1 - 6, assessments in both schools ranged from writing poems, to revision sheets, to making 3D models, posters, charts, videos, presentation slides and so on. Higher the grade, more complicated the assessment method became.

Comparing the two parents' experiences, School A consistently designed assessments that followed take-home model – assessments were sent home with questions posed either online or through written instructions, students were given a certain period of time to complete the assessment, bring it back to classroom, display it and then present it. Whereas, School B rarely designed take-home assessments.

All major assessments were given to students in classrooms and expected to complete the assessments in the class, using an in-class design model.

This distinction in assessment model was quite interesting. Parent from School A said it was not unusual for a parent to complete the assessment for the student. In fact, lower the class and age of the child, more involved parents were expected to be in completing the assessments.

Parent shared interesting insights on assessment completion, using terms and phrases such as “its ok”, “not a big deal”, “all moms help them”, “sometimes we let older siblings help”, “we know other parents who bought the model from a stationery shop”. In fact, parent said projects completed by parents were always highly appreciated, even became Star of the Week project and so on.

In comparison parent from School B said their children found “working in classroom fun”, “teachers are always there to help”, “less tension for us”, “teacher is there to explain the question more”, “frustrating because sometimes I don't have all the material I think the child might need”.

These results are fascinating as they show the overarching benefits of assessment design on possibly instilling values of integrity in primary school students. If schools are setting assessments that are expecting parents to help followed by students then presenting the project as their own, the message is dangerous as it actually says it is ok to have someone

else do an assessment for a student. It then becomes crucial to review curricula and assessment designs to see if we are teaching the correct values to our students when they are young and most impressionable.

The authors are currently in the process of acquiring funding and large-scale approval to expand this study to formally cover more schools, both primary and secondary classes, collect data through formal interviews, focus groups and surveys to see if the results found in this study are consistent.

References

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