

An Air of Integrity

Building a Preventative Classroom Environment

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AS TEACHING ASSISTANTS and faculty, we are often faced with countless responsibilities, and it is sometimes difficult to address issues such as academic integrity from an applied perspective. Often the policies of academic integrity are overlooked until we encounter a problem that needs immediate and direct attention. This chapter illustrates the feasibility of creating an environment that promotes academic integrity within our classrooms. Pedagogical methods and personal experiences will provide illustrations of creating a preventative classroom environment, emphasizing definitional elements of the term academic integrity.

How is Academic Integrity Defined?

To understand how to promote academic integrity, we must first understand the definition adopted by the university as a whole. Syracuse University defines academic integrity as “a commitment to the values of honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and respect.” Thus, a breach of academic integrity includes “any dishonest act which is committed in an academic context.” It includes plagiarism (“the use of someone else’s language, ideas, information, or original material without acknowledging the source”), copying from another student’s work, use of unauthorized aids in examinations, and so forth (Syracuse University, 2007). In addition, the university and this publication, drawing from Duke University’s Center for Academic Integrity,¹ recognize academic integrity as “a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility” (Center for Academic Integrity, n.d.).

Trust, honesty, fairness, respect, and responsibility: all vague and abstract terms that create this widely accepted definition of academic integrity. Hence, this characterization is filled with terms that, when an explanation is required, are met with a multitude of interpretations and applications. I will attempt to address the contents of these definitions in a way that promotes the applicability of these terms within the classroom.

Create a Community

The one thing that has proven to enable academic integrity on diverse campuses is the use of an honor code system or “modified” honor code system (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Such an arrangement centers on the idea that all members of the university should be involved in the formation, maintenance, and enforcement of integrity codes. The implementation of an honor code system creates and promotes a sense of community within the diverse environment of the university, eliminating the type of “us vs. them” mentality that is often associated with institutional policy. Additionally, with this sense of cohesiveness, all members of the university share a pride and responsibility that is essential to the definition of integrity and the legacy of being part of a prominent institution, all of which have been shown to reduce cheating and plagiarism (McCabe & Pavela, 2004, 10; McCabe & Treviño, 1993, 523). This sense of community and pride is integral to the learning environment and to teachers’ and students’ ability to transfer integrity policies to real-life situations within the classroom.

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of your students only creates half of a community, one confined to the student-teacher relationship. Informal introductions or short “ice breaker” exercises related to a course theme are two ways to encourage interaction within the classroom. For instance, in teaching an anthropology course that will introduce students to the idea of culture, the ice breaker I have used requires students to think creatively in groups and interact in a way most

classroom settings don’t allow. In this activity, students are divided into groups and asked to create a culture with distinct forms of greetings, gender segregation, or body language. These actions created by the students communicate the

cultural characteristics of each group, and other groups are able to observe and take note of these cultural attributes. While this may be a seemingly silly exercise, in it, students are engaged in a worthwhile activity that sets the thematic mood for the rest of the course. Students are forced to move from their comfort zone, both physically and socially, expanding their self-confidence and contributions within the micro-community of the classroom.

While an ice breaker is a good activity at the beginning of the semester, opportunities to foster relationships within the classroom should be encouraged throughout the course. Encouraging study groups and group work assignments also promote the establishment of peer-to-peer relationships, contributing to a comfortable learning environment. The idea of creating a community, or micro-community, is an integral part of the following shared experiences and suggestions for enhancing the integrity of your classroom.

Be Transparent

For establishing a comfortable learning environment, there are several characteristics students look for in an instructor. Among these are sincerity and honesty. While these terms may be abstract without a context in which to apply them, our very first encounter with our students in the classroom provides an opportunity to exhibit our candid and straightforward character. The application of these terms creates a foundation of trust and openness with our students that cultivates the learning environment throughout the semester.

During our first meeting, I often ask students to write down at least one thing they expect to gain from the class and to reflect on personal goals. In response, I listen to what students are expecting, address any concerns, and offer my own expectations of the class. I create an initial transparency of course requirements beyond those outlined in the syllabus by expressing my expectations of the students: that all students will participate in class, work hard, communicate any problems or concerns to me, and complete any assignments. This transparency places expectations out in the open for discussion and attempts to eliminate a sense of intimidation or confusion concerning what it is I expect from each person and the class as a whole. In addition, I share the expectations that I have for myself as an instructor: to provide a fair, honest, and individualized evaluation of each student. I also share a personal goal that is broadly related to class, such as guiding students to form and articulate well-informed opinions that can be expressed both verbally and in writing.

This exchange also openly identifies student and instructor responsibilities. In order to maintain a functioning community, each member must be accountable for his or her contribution, or lack thereof, to the learning environment. Through this transparent exchange of expectations and

responsibilities, I begin fostering an initial culture of truth within our micro-community.

Be Truthful

Another way in which trust is established is by truthfulness. It is an incredible feeling to have a room full of students who are “clicking” with the material, readings, and discussion, fully participating and challenging themselves and others to think critically about the issues presented. As an instructor, being asked a question that you don’t know the answer to can make or break the flow of interaction, and it happens to everyone at all levels of teaching. Instead of side-stepping the question, avoiding the topic through a vague explanation, or formulating an answer that is beyond the subject matter (and the students’ comprehension), face the question head-on as a teaching opportunity. Answer truthfully, telling the student “I don’t know ... *but* we can find out and discuss this together during our next class meeting.” The key to making this situation a successful learning exercise is to follow through with the last declaration. All students know when questions are being avoided, when they are being brushed off, and they can see through false knowledge. Circumvent any students’ thoughts of mistrust or perception of your lack of confidence by admitting to a lapse in memory or uncertainty in providing an accurate answer.

In turn, do not dwell on a student’s lack of preparedness. If a student admits to not knowing the answer to one of your questions, acknowledge his or her answer, move on, and address your concerns one-on-one with the student after class. Not only do these minute adjustments allow me to maintain authority in front of numerous individuals, but they also allow students to recognize the importance of being truthful, no matter the context or circumstances within the classroom. This technique also demonstrates your engagement and responsibility to the class. This will (hopefully) transmit to the students’ own accountability within the course, reminding students that it is important to a functional class that each member within this micro-community fulfills his or her responsibilities.

Be Flexible

An apparent lack of student interest in the subject matter or disengagement with the learning environment may be an indicator of potential integrity issues. Since cheating has been shown to be correlated with disinterest, preventative action is essential in deterring indifference and cheating practices (McCabe & Pavela, 2004, 14). By attending to the classroom environment, instructors are able to preempt potential deviations from academic integrity among students. One tool

for evaluating the learning processes of your “community” of students is mid-semester evaluations.

Mid-semester evaluations aid in taking preventative measures by allowing shortcomings and successes to be addressed. Each semester I give my students three open-ended response questions that ask:

1. What are the primary teaching strengths of your Instructor?
2. What are the primary weaknesses of your Instructor? Can you offer suggestions for improvement?
3. Do you feel you are receiving good instruction? Please comment on the overall quality of the section and any other issues relating to your section that you would like addressed.

This feedback allows me to improve my pedagogical style by changing techniques that students identify as needing improvement and strengthening methods that have been effective. Classrooms are composed of individuals with a variety of learning styles; changes in format, including formal and informal strategies, help to keep students engaged (Marton, Dall’Alba, & Beaty, 1993). The mid-semester evaluation helps me realize that what works for one class does not always work in another, because not all groups of students will react to or interact with the same material identically. For instance, within my Anthropology 185: Global Encounters class, mid-semester evaluations revealed that the majority of the students enjoyed the in-class discussions, but it was recommended to me that I attempt to include more in-class activities and group work. I was able to adjust to techniques that seem to best fit the flow of the class by providing students with a variety of ways to expand and express their knowledge through group or hands-on activities, open discussion, or class debates, and by modifying assessment strategies like free writing, pop quizzes, and group assignments. Through my experience, based on these adjustments, students came to class more prepared and were more interested in engaging with the course material with their peers.

Be Inspirational

Related to the previously described scenario for being truthful, promoting the importance of continual or lifetime learning is something we as members of academia greatly value. Allowing the learning environment to grow stagnant creates boredom and apathy toward the subject matter. Encouraging students to bring in outside knowledge and share personal experiences during class

discussions often facilitates dialogue beyond the provided course materials or allows tangents onto related topics, both of which challenge the class to further their application of knowledge.

One way I try to promote personal development is by asking students to write their personal goals on an index card at the beginning of the course and then surveying the students at the end of the semester, enabling them to see what they have gained from the course other than knowledge of the course material. One student in my anthropology class wrote:

As one of my first college courses, I entered the class unsure of what to expect. What I found out is that my ideas were challenged and some were changed. The topics, ethnographies and discussions forced me to think about the world in a way that is less centered around where I am, and expanded [my] views to a more macrocosmic relationship among all peoples, cultures, and customs. (student in ANT 185, Fall 2005)

Another way in which I have engaged students with course topics outside class is by providing information and material not presented within the course. As a way to create a personal connection with the class, I often include my own personal anecdotes to illustrate examples. The Internet is also a great source of

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real-world examples or current research on various topics. For instance, when teaching about the sociality of primates, I emailed my class a copy of a *New York Times* article about primate behavior and morality (Wade, 2007). Although this was not required reading, the article sparked interest in the topic, and a short debate ensued during the next class meeting. Furthermore, the promotion of learning as a continual process also allows us to inform students of the academic support

available to them through the university, aid them in research methods and resources, and provide them with an opportunity to teach themselves.

Conclusion

Although the promotion of academic integrity is the central point of this publication, “teachers will find that their greatest impact on students—including inspiring a commitment to academic integrity—will come in the context of personal respect, attention, and connection” (McCabe & Pavela, 2004, 13), and

it is through these character traits we as instructors will be able to foster trust, honesty, fairness, and integrity with our students.

It is our responsibility as instructors, and as current and future faculty, to partake in the integrity of the classroom and to maintain students' interest. Although time constraints, workload, and the idea of changing student behavior can be overwhelming and provide an easy excuse to be lackadaisical (McCabe & Pavela, 2004, 13-14), it is our responsibility to maintain a high standard of academic integrity and to work on the transference of this ascribed ideal to practical applications within our classrooms. In sharing my pedagogical experience, I hope I have inspired you to take the initiative to be forthright with students from the first day of class, provide an honest atmosphere within your classroom, be flexible in your pedagogical methods to enrich your micro-community, and encourage commitment to personal enrichment. By incorporating some of these strategies into our teaching philosophies, as professors, future professors, and instructors, we meet the requirement for educators to promote and maintain the academic integrity policy we have helped to create and abide by each time we gather in the classroom.

Notes

1. The Center for Academic Integrity, formerly at Duke University's Kenan Institute for Ethics, has moved during the publication of this volume. The Center is now hosted by the Rutland Institute for Ethics at Clemson University. The Center can still be found online at the same address: <http://www.academicintegrity.org>

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