

# Applying Intercultural Concepts to Academic Integrity

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THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS on academic integrity have provided you with explanations of theory, classroom policies, establishment and enforcement of policies, and practical issues. This chapter will explore some cultural and behavioral issues related to academic integrity. It will not, however, focus on specific countries or cultures at the risk of stereotyping or unfairly treating them. You will find that books on academic integrity scarcely mention the effect of culture on cheating and plagiarism. Journal articles giving more detailed explanations are available but rare. In the Works Cited and Resources sections of this chapter you will find some citations for further research.

## **“Welcome to My Culture” Is Not Enough**

Cheating in U.S. institutions may have a different character than cheating in institutions outside of the U.S. One young teacher of English in a foreign country expressed his disgust by writing the following:

In my two years of teaching, I routinely caught my students copying each others' homework, baldly plagiarizing off the Internet, surreptitiously hiding their books during an exam, attempting to bully a smarter student into sharing his work, or simply good old-fashioned leaning over his neighbor's desk to see what the answer was. (Schiavenza, 2007)

He went on to say,

A friend of mine once taught a film studies course at a teacher's college

... and she often caught her students plagiarizing what should have been the easiest of assignments: writing a film review. She was flabbergasted that her students thought she couldn't tell the difference between a Roger Ebert essay and [those of] second-year ... college students.

Do cultural differences in academic habits mean the international student is more likely to cheat? Not necessarily. Even though most international students, like their American counterparts, understand that cheating is considered wrong by the authorities in academia, some of them may engage in it for such personal reasons as stress, fear of failure, expectations from parents, pressures from class bullies, and so on. One faculty member put her answer to this reality this way:

As an anthropologist I accept that other cultures conceptualize things like cheating differently. I have no problem accepting this, but I still say: so what? In my culture I explain what cheating is and when you do it in my class I flunk you and recommend to the dean of students that you be expelled. Welcome to my culture. (Throw, 2007)

She implies, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." And I agree with this, *as long as the student knows what the "Romans" do and how and why they do it.* Because

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culture shock may play a part, this process of learning U.S. academic cultural nuances may take some international students longer than others. In terms of culture's effect on academic integrity, today's faculty find themselves in the position of teaching in intercultural classrooms.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, simply knowing one's discipline is insufficient. One needs intercultural awareness and competence (Chen

& Starosta, 2003; Spitsberg, 2004; Sapp, 2002; Powell & Andersen, 1994; Lieberman, 1994).

To understand fully any individual student's response to cheating and plagiarism, faculty, departments, staff, and students sitting in judgment need to understand their own levels of intercultural competence. Chen and Starosta (2003, 344) explain the importance of three interrelated components: (1) intercultural sensitivity, the *affective* approach that focuses on the readiness to understand and appreciate cultural differences, (2) intercultural awareness, the *cognitive* approach that focuses on the understanding of cultural conventions that

affect thinking and behavior, and (3) intercultural adroitness, the *behavioral* approach that focuses on the skills involved in intercultural interactions. An apparent lack of such understanding is why Throw's "welcome to my culture" is an insufficient response in the global classroom.

### Proposed Axioms

These and other critiques and comments have led me to propose some axioms about academic integrity. These may not be comprehensive, but they provide some notion of the common characteristics of academic integrity in the U.S. and around the world, and are worth discussing with students, professors, and colleagues.

- No culture condones cheating.
- Some cultures are more lax than others in their interpretations and enforcement of rules on cheating.
- Some students from cultures in which there is corruption at the institutional and faculty levels may be bolder in their cheating practices.
- The mindset of international students coming to the U.S. includes notions about the practices of learning and concepts used in those learning processes, many of which may differ from those common in the U.S. classroom.
- Rules about cheating in the U.S. classroom are formulated to mesh with specific cultural practices involving a specific mindset.
- The boundaries for establishing what counts as cheating are constantly stretched, both by those who understand the language and by those who don't.
- Descriptions and explanations of what constitutes cheating will be misinterpreted, misapplied, and misplaced (unconsciously or consciously) by American students as well as by international students, but potentially for different reasons.
- Attitudes about cheating vary greatly both within the American culture and among cultures globally.

The axioms proposed above do not absolve anyone for having cheated. With some exceptions, all academic institutions treat cheating as a serious matter. However, I propose that faculty and peers of accused students withhold judgment until a full and impartial review of an alleged incident has been made. Institutional procedures exist to determine whether an alleged infraction is *intentional* or *unintentional* (Lathrop & Foss, 2000, 162-3), *cultural* or *personal*

(Storti, 1999, 15-7). This is often a judgment call based on input from a variety of people and a review of the circumstances.

### “Contrast-American” Assumptions and Values

In each culture, there are normative cultural assumptions, values, attitudes, and behaviors. *International students* who enroll in any course of study must understand these normative constructs and how they may contrast with the norms of their home countries. It is also vital that *faculty* understand normative ideas about themselves and about the students from other cultures with whom they interact. Of course, there is a difficulty. No one can know all of the assumptions and values of another culture, let alone all other cultures. International student advisors and faculty who interact frequently with international students come closer than most in this respect. As regards academic integrity, much difficulty can be avoided by attending to the front end of the issue: understanding the concepts that drive faculty members’ and students’ own behavior.

Stewart, Danielian, and Foster (1998) offer an extensive and diverse set of cultural *assumptions* and *values*. A few samples from this set that may affect academic integrity appear below. The authors summarize their findings in a table juxtaposing American and “contrast-American” assumptions and values, grouped into six conceptual categories:

- definition of activity,
- definition of social relations,
- motivation,
- perception of the world,
- perception of the self and the individual, and
- generalized forms. (167-71)

For example, in the “definition of activity” category, one finds the common American value of active (student-centered) learning paired with the contrast-American concept of passive (rote) learning. I have chosen a few concepts to illustrate the linking of cultural variance to academic integrity. The “contrast-American” assumptions and values that affect academic integrity include (but are not limited to) the following.

#### *Definition of Social Relations*

*Relationships.* “Contrast-American” interpersonal relationships are person centered rather than task centered. They tend to be few but enduring. Some, such as friendships, can be established from childhood. Relationships are often considered long term rather than based on a temporary situation such as

rooming together in a dormitory.

*Social obligations.* Such obligations are inherent in friendship, but also extend to other social situations. These are not usually flexible, and are rarely expressed in written, legal terms. Thus, there is pressure to help others even if it means cheating.

*Collective responsibility.* The group one identifies with may also share the shame if one does not succeed.

#### *Perception of the World*

*Connection.* In many cultures one perceives oneself as part of nature rather than detached, as part of a hierarchy rather than apart from any hierarchy. This perception forces the individual to perceive the self as subject to forces above himself or herself in the hierarchy. Such a perception leads to a tendency to obey others who are perceived to be higher ranking. Those who perceive themselves as detached from nature may not automatically accept as truth something stated by someone of higher rank.

#### *Perception of the Self and the Individual*

*Self-reliance.* In contrast to American norms, many other cultures encourage reliance on a variety of groups, such as superiors, patrons, parents, and friends. The individual should not stand alone but should seek help when in need. When help is received from people other than friends and other close relations, there may be obligations to be repaid. Thus, sharing homework or getting extra help from faculty may incur an obligation.

This is but a brief sampling of the many assumptions and values identified by Stewart, Danielian, and Foster. The reader is encouraged to review this resource for a more detailed discussion of these aspects of culture to gain an understanding of how one's own assumptions and values may differ from others', and may guide the reasoning underlying one's behaviors.

#### **Language and Ambiguity**

LaRay Barna (1994) discusses *language differences* as potential barriers to communication. These are also relevant to academic integrity. The miscommunications that can occur among students for whom English is a second language are well known. It takes years for some students to master the level of English needed to produce a dissertation. In addition, the way in which directions are expressed by faculty may confuse some students for whom English is a second language because of a tendency to interpret what is being said in terms of their

own cultural concepts. Some educators reject the notion that lack of familiarity with English excuses the misunderstanding of classroom instructions. They maintain that foreigners must know the language before coming to the U.S. However, in my thirty years of experience with international students, I have found that it takes one to two semesters for them to be able to speak and grasp the local version of English. This is often the case even for students having a TOEFL score of 600 or better.

Similarly, ambiguity can be a factor in misunderstanding. A directive from a professor may appear to the non-native English speaker as unclear due to the way the word translates into his or her native language, or to the various meanings the word may have when translated, or to the context in which the directive was given. In this way, students from high-context cultures, in which meaning comes from *how* something is said as much or more than from the actual words used,<sup>2</sup> may interpret directives according to their own cultural nuances.

For example, a professor may say “you will neither give nor receive help on this take-home test.” The concept of “receiving help” might not be the same for some international students as for American students. The international student

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could infer that contact with other students should cease once he or she sits down to write the answers, or that help is only inappropriate when given in the context of answering questions, not in the process of understanding the topic. An international student from a society in which friendship and group norms are stronger than the individualistic norms of American society might

wonder, “Does this mean I cannot ask my friend the meaning of some words in the test question? Does this mean that I can discuss this *topic* with my friend, but *not the test question*? Or does it mean that I can ask my friend how the question may be interpreted, but not the answer to the question?”

To our hypothetical student, having the friend say in regard to the test question, “this goes here, and that goes there” might be considered “helping,” which of course would be cheating. But, in the same case, the international student might think that it would be acceptable to review his understanding of the topic, or even the meaning of the question, with a friend, and that this would not be considered giving or receiving help. Such a student lacks the cultural experience to assume, on the basis of the test-taking situation, the need

to cease asking all questions about the topic. It is incumbent on the professor to provide clarification, *in advance*. Faculty members need to be aware of the cultural aspects of communication, and discuss with students their understanding of cultural norms relative to the instructions given for an exam.

However, problems may arise from the ongoing nature of study and communication between friends. Students who have consistently studied together are likely to have a similar understanding of the topic, which can lead to nearly identical written responses on an exam. In such a case, the faculty member must assess whether the students cheated after the rules were laid down, or whether previous study produced the resemblance. This could involve an oral follow-up to the exam.

### Asking Questions

A common cultural problem for many international students has to do with asking questions, a critical behavior in American classrooms. In some countries, asking questions is either forbidden or discouraged, as questioning the professor may be perceived as a challenge to authority. Among peers, asking questions can also be considered stupid: stupid for making the professor lose face, or stupid in revealing a failure to understand the material as initially delivered. In rare cases where the professor really does want to have questions asked, peers might consider it “brown nosing” or seeking to win points with the professor at the expense of other students.

To overcome these inhibitions, professors should make students aware that questions can be asked through a variety of media: aloud in class, privately during office hours, and by email. Students should be encouraged to ask questions in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons:

- If the information makes you wonder about its meaning, then you need to ask a question.
- If after the professor has said something, you wonder “why,” then you need to ask a question.
- If you have never heard a term or phrase the professor uses, then you need to ask a question.
- If you are in the habit of collaborating closely with friends on your work, then you need to ask a question about when working with friends is acceptable, as violating these rules can lead to shame for both you and your friends.

### Conclusion and Suggestions

Do not accept culture alone as an excuse for cheating, but do explore and keep

an open mind about cultural differences, language issues, and behavioral norms that may be contributing factors. What is clear for a professor is not always clear to a student, even if the student is encouraged to ask questions.

There are many steps that faculty can take to reduce the risk that issues of academic integrity involving international students will arise:

- Recognize that culture plays a role in international and domestic student behavior.
- Consult with foreign students' advisors, faculty from other countries, and experienced international students about perceptions related to cheating and plagiarism.
- Support efforts on campus to prevent cheating.
- Explore their own cultural assumptions and values for biases that inform their behavior.
- Acknowledge before each exam, project, or paper that there is often pressure to cheat, and discuss ways to overcome this.
- Discuss their methods of grading.
- Acknowledge the seriousness of cheating by reviewing the axioms proposed above with students.
- Explain their definitions, policies, and processes related to cheating and plagiarism.
- Avoid the trap of assuming "we're all adults and we know that cheating is forbidden"—this does not go far enough toward understanding the motivations and circumstances that lead to "cheating" behaviors.

The list of American/contrast-American assumptions and values found in Stewart, Danielian, and Foster and the discussion of barriers to communication found in Barna highlight the strength of differences between cultures, the possibilities for complex mixings of these values, and the number of potential reasons for people to engage in cheating and plagiarism. When a student is found cheating, faculty and honor courts generally invoke expectations based on assumptions and values characteristic of an American university. However, American institutions do not, ostensibly, accept people from abroad for the purpose of changing their identity or cultural character (although this may happen as a by-product). Indeed, most American universities recognize the vital contribution of international students to their mission as centers of learning in a pluralistic and globalized world. It is thus the responsibility of the American university to minimize cultural barriers relating to academic integrity. This enhances the possibilities of success for institutions, academic departments, professors, and students.

### Notes

1. The term faculty will be used to refer to all who provide classroom or web-based instruction, unless the context dictates otherwise.
2. A discussion of the concept of high-context cultures can be found in Hall (1976). High-context cultures are contrasted with low-context cultures, in which the communication is in the words and little else. Hall uses Japan as an example of a high-context culture and the United States as an example of a low-context culture.

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### Resources

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