

CEVIN SOLING OPINION JAN 29, 2015 6:38 AM

Why I Think Students Should Cheat

The benefits of cheating are obvious – improved grades in an environment where failure is not an opportunity for learning, but rather a badge of shame. When students do poorly on a test, there is no reason for students to review their responses because they will likely never be tested on the same thing ever again. The test itself is largely arbitrary and often not meaningful.



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YOU HAVE BEEN kidnapped and dragged off to a remote location where your abductors have tied you to a chair. One of your captors is seated in front of you. He holds up ten flash cards and informs you that he is going to ask you a series of questions and the answers are printed on the backs of the cards. He assures you that once he has finished asking these questions, you will be released. There is a catch, though. For every question you get wrong, he will signal his accomplice to cut off one of your fingers. As he begins to read the first question, you notice there is a mirror on the opposite wall where you can see the reflection of the text on the card. Because you have been taught that cheating is dishonest, you interrupt your kidnapper and let him know that you are able to read the card and that he must conceal them better so that you cannot inadvertently cheat. He adjusts himself accordingly and proceeds to ask you a series of dry and uninspired questions on topics that hold no interest for you, while his accomplice menacingly holds out a set of cutting pliers.

Cevin Soling

About

Cevin Soling directed *The War on Kids*, the first theatrically released documentary on education. He is a graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and lectures on education issues and other subjects. Soling's films have appeared on the BBC, HBO, Showtime, The Sundance Channel, MTV, The Learning Channel and other outlets. His media appearances include being a featured guest on *The Colbert Report*.

While cheating is technically wrong, everyone should cringe at this conception of morality because it fails to account for context. In this example, cheating is not only justified, it is necessary because it aids a helpless victim who has been involuntarily subjected to unreasonable conditions. Unfortunately, this kind of clarity is absent when it comes to compulsory education.

One of the most salient features of all public schools is the importance of grades. Because grades are the currency and sole commodity of schools, they are used both to motivate and punish. They are a major component of a student's

portfolio and have the potential to impact their future. Educators might try to stress the value of "learning" over grades, but that is a complete farce. When learning is not commensurately represented by grades, students rightly feel cheated by the system and become apathetic. To insist on valuing learning over grades is offensively disingenuous and hypocritical. It is akin to telling workers at McDonald's that they should care more about doing their job than their salary.

Students have no input regarding how or what they learn, and they are alienated from the work they do at school. Except for a few rare assignments, students are not inspired by their work, and any personal attachment they could have is undermined by the fact that they must compromise their efforts to meet the demands and expectations of the person who grades their work.

It's important to bear in mind that students prepare for tests with the intention that they will retain the material just long enough to take the test and then forget most of what they learned soon afterwards. This completely undermines the purpose and value of testing. Advocates of testing who denigrate cheating conveniently fail to acknowledge this. Testing demands that students view knowledge as a disposable commodity that is only relevant when it is tested. This contributes to the process of devaluing education.

The benefits of cheating are obvious – improved grades in an environment where failure is not an opportunity for learning, but rather a badge of shame. When students do poorly on a test, there is no reason for students to review their responses because they will likely never be tested on the same thing ever again. The test itself is largely arbitrary and often not meaningful. Organizations such as FairTest are devoted to sharing research that exposes the problems of bad testing practices.

The main arguments against cheating in school are that it is unethical, promotes bad habits, and impacts self-esteem through the attainment of an unearned reward. None of these concerns are even remotely valid because none consider the environment. Children are routinely rounded up and forcibly placed in an institution where they are subjected to a hierarchy that places them at the bottom. Like the hostage, they are held captive even if they are not physically bound. They are deprived of any power over their own lives, including the ability to pursue their interests, and are subjected to a barrage of tests that have consequences for each wrong answer.

Maintaining ethics is part of an unwritten contract of being a willing participant in a community. Students placed in school against their will and routinely disrespected have no obligation to adhere to the ethical codes of their oppressors. Cheating is an act of resistance, and resistance against oppressive powers should be encouraged and celebrated, rather than deemed a "bad habit" or an unethical act. The concern regarding self-esteem that is highlighted by The Child Study Center as promoting the "worst damage," lacks any scientific support whatsoever.

If students feel bad for cheating, it is because the environment has created a set of conditions where cheating is necessary and justifiable. For this same reason, many students are proud that they cheat. Cheating often requires creativity in terms of execution as well as ingenuity to avoid being caught. It also serves as a statement of disdain against an arbitrary and repressive institution. For these reasons, cheating can be a source for pride that boosts self-esteem. Given this construct, cheating is not simply something many students do; it is something all students in compulsory schools should do. Cheating is a moral imperative.

Punishing students for cheating is completely misguided. People should be most concerned about the student who does not cheat. They are the ones who appear to have internalized their oppression and might lack the necessary skills to rally and lobby against abuses of power that are perpetrated by governing bodies. Cheating should be recognized as the necessary and logical outcome of an arbitrary and oppressive institution. Punishing students who cheat is yet another abuse of autocratic power. In a healthy society, people ridicule and shame those who force children to endure the kind of environment that demands they must cheat.