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Teaching for Academic Integrity

The phrase “academic integrity” is well known to all of us.

Sometimes the phrase is used as a synonym for different forms of academic misconduct, like cheating or plagiarism. On other occasions, it is used to describe a set of values, like honesty and respect. In either case, the phrase directs our collective attention – as professors, administrators, and staff -- to student behaviour: it conveys a sense for what students shouldn't do academically, while urging them to become a better student in a moral or ethical sense.

So important is academic integrity to our sense of common scholarly and pedagogical endeavour – in fact – that it is often given pride of place in universities' strategic and academic plans and provides the rationale for elaborate policy development, enforcement mechanisms,

and appeal processes. There's a vibrant body of literature dedicated to this subject too.¹

Yet generally speaking, students themselves are only dimly aware of “academic integrity” when they arrive on campus – save, perhaps, for a sense for its technical elements like references or citations or the most egregious forms of cheating. In general, the scholarship in this area is clear on this point: institutions and academics are deeply invested in academic integrity, but their students, generally, are not. As one writer has put it, academic integrity remains the “quintessential insiders' game.”

This paradox is complicated further by the varied understanding of academic integrity within the ranks of professors themselves, the ways in which the digital revolution has reshaped considerations of knowledge production, access, and authorship, and the changing student demographics on many

¹ Bruce Macfarlane, Jingjing Zhang & Annie Pun (2014) “Academic integrity: a review of the literature,” *Studies in Higher Education*, 39:2, 339-358, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2012.709495](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.709495)

campuses, which introduces difficult questions related to cultural and educational differences.

With this broad context in mind, the co-facilitators designed a retreat that focussed on academic integrity, more specifically, the role that teaching might play in addressing the many issues noted above.

A series of questions, listed below, gave the day-long session its basic shape. Questions 1 and 2 were debated and discussed in small-break out groups, while consideration of question 3 took the form of a workshop. The final set of questions brought the group back together as a whole and generated a list of “best practices” in the area of “teaching for academic integrity.” Thoughtful personal, pedagogical, disciplinary-specific, philosophical, and institutional viewpoints shone through the day’s proceedings.

1. What does the phrase “academic integrity” mean to you?

Our first session was dedicated to the phrase “academic integrity.” The scholarly literature on this subject suggests that faculty members feel very strongly about this idea – and they do! -- but rarely articulate clearly what the phrase means, either to themselves or to their students. Put another way, professors get very good at policing the boundaries of academic integrity in their day-to-day teaching life, but often do so in the absence of an overt or shared sense of the values they feel students ought to possess.

Spurred on by this question, the group discussion was distinguished by many features. Notably it revealed the wide range of ways that professors thought about this term. For some participants, the term seemed tied to a strong sense of personal values – an individual mode of correct or moral conduct which applied not only to university affairs, but to life more generally. Here, the link between personal integrity and academic integrity was emphasized – a solid grounding in the former was thus tied to the successful realization of the latter.

Other participants focussed on the “academic” side of the equation and reflected on their encounters with integrity issues as classroom teachers, scholarly researchers, and administrators. In contrast to the personal dimension, then, this viewpoint stressed a professional one: here was an issue – some participants suggested -- that was bound up with a sense of “our calling” as professors, the scholarly traditions and norms within our respective disciplines, how we view knowledge creation and dissemination, and the reputation of our institutions.

The personal and professional interpretations of “academic integrity” were joined by a more institutional or even judicial frame of mind: for the working professor – some made clear – it was all about bringing about compliance with university rules related to cheating and plagiarism. Here the discussion produced numerous stories about the lack of student preparedness, the challenges of holding students to high standards when classes are too large, and strengths/weaknesses of university policies in this area.

Our sense, as facilitators, is that this third and final way of framing of the term was the dominant one – at least in the early stages of the retreat. For most participants, most of the time, academic integrity was synonymous with “student-as-problem” and “professor-as-police officer.”

2. What values/practices do you associate with academic integrity? Why are these values/practices important? Does your university possess policies or supports that help in the realization of these values/practices?

Several groups identified moral values associated with academic integrity including honesty, respectfulness and responsibility, but the associated *practices* that were discussed focused on the technical (*e.g.* citation forms, showing good and bad examples) and punitive (*e.g.* catching miscreants). There was some concern that the practices associated with academic integrity are not connected, in either

4. What do you do in the classroom to support academic integrity? Under optimal conditions, what *could* you do in the classroom? What might a list of “best practices” in this area of “teaching for academic integrity” look like?

The fourth and final series of questions were designed to bring academic integrity and teaching together into a single conversation.

How might academic integrity be viewed or practiced – we asked – if it was understood not as a judicial responsibility, but as a pedagogical possibility? This shift in perspective, some participants observed, would require a clear-eyed view of the values that anchor academic integrity in the first place and an openness to being intentional about those values in a class or across a degree. Perhaps, it was suggested, academic integrity could be incorporated into learning outcomes and/or graduate attributes. One participant remarked that this kind of “cultural change” holds out the possibility of shifting students’ perspectives, from the fear of plagiarism to the joy of embodying a higher set of standards or values. It would, in other words, be a source of empowerment. Wouldn’t that be something!

How this cultural change might be realized brought about many suggestions related to the practicalities of day-to-day teaching, including: dedicated sessions or activities on the subject; ethical or “contract” grading schemes; and “Google-proof” assignments, for example. Experiential learning, broadly defined, was cited as one way that academic integrity in the classroom can be brought to life. Students who might have to work directly with a community partner – it was suggested – would see the significance of academic integrity in the “real world.” Professional programs, another participant noted, often come with ethics components, which might be easily extended to questions of academic integrity alongside professional ones.

More generally, teaching for academic integrity would require an eagerness to lift the class out of the content for a period of time to reflect upon how to handle or relate to that content in an ethical sense. Classroom dynamics, in fact, send powerful signals to students about what counts and why. It was also noted that other parts of the university, such as centres of teaching and learning, libraries, and research institutes, might also play a critical role in reinforcing the positive side of academic integrity. Online modules, for example, could be easily created.

By the time the retreat reached this final set of questions, a broad shift in perspective had taken place.

At the outset of the day, most folks most of the time understood academic integrity in a punitive, judicial, and/or technical way; in other words, the phrase pointed to a set of practices that students should not do, and the penalties that followed if they did. By the end of the day, however, as we considered the role of teaching, the group’s discourse had shifted: it was far more aspirational in nature.

Overall, there was a rough consensus that, as teaching professors, there is a need to be more upfront and intentional about academic integrity as a set of positive values. We spend too much time telling students the rules – one person noted – and not enough time explaining why the rules are important in the first place. By bringing pedagogy and academic integrity together, then, we might be better placed to cultivate a sense of academic “citizenship” that transcends the narrow focus on cheating and plagiarism and better prepare students for life after graduation.