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Slip-Sliding Away, Down the Ethical Slope

By Robert J. Sternberg

“You see your roommate at his computer, writing a paper. You notice him transferring text from an online document to the paper he is writing without attribution. He changes a few words here and there so he cannot be accused of plagiarism. Is there a problem here? What, if anything, should you do?”

“Professor Johnson is known for not giving back exams because he uses pretty much the same questions from year to year. Your roommate comes back to your room with a big smile. A fraternity brother has managed to slip out a copy of last year’s exam and has given it to him. Your roommate figures he can get an edge on this year’s exam by studying last year’s. ‘Not my fault,’ he says, ‘that Professor Johnson reuses his test questions.’ Is there a problem here? What, if anything, should you do?”

In presenting problems such as these to various student groups, I have been taken aback by the number of those who either do not see an ethical breach or, if they have, feel that it is minor or not of concern to them. It’s a problem that goes much deeper than the occasional incident—we find cheating on the rise even before students get to college, and many cheaters more concerned with getting caught than with actually committing the act.

When it comes to unethical behavior such as cheating, our society has, I believe, engaged in a fundamental misperception. It derives from our conviction that, through religious training or other ethical training—at home, for example—students have been brought up to know right from wrong and thus to behave ethically. The misperception is that it is easy to do the right thing, and that doing the wrong thing requires extra mental or other effort. In fact, the opposite is true: It is often hard to do the right thing, which is why there is cheating.

To behave ethically is not a one-step process: Do the right thing. It is a sometimes arduous eight-step process. To behave ethically, you must:

1. Recognize that there is a situation that deserves to be noticed and reflected upon.
2. Define the situation as having an ethical component.
3. Decide that the ethical component is important enough to deserve attention.
4. View the ethical component as relevant to you personally.
5. Ascertain what ethical rule applies to the situation.
6. Figure out how to apply the ethical rule.
7. Prepare for possible adverse consequences, such as retaliation, if you should act ethically.
8. Act.

All of those steps can be relatively difficult to execute, and, unfortunately, behaving ethically can be as challenging for parents as it is for students. Parents may cross the line by going from helping their children with homework, papers, science projects, and writing college-application essays to essentially doing the work. It then is little wonder that students reach college and hire others to do their work for them. This point came home in a Chronicle Review article, “The Shadow Scholar,” by an individual who anonymously writes student papers for pay. Of course, it is not clear that professors are immune: Just as students are outsourcing the writing of papers, so are some professors now outsourcing the grading of papers. One wonders whether our society will eventually eliminate the middlemen—college students and faculty—and simply have the outsourced writers and the outsourced graders work together directly.

More realistically, educators need to stop assuming that ethical behavior is the normal course of action for a well-educated individual, and that cheating and other forms of unethical behavior are not the norm. Rather, they have to assume that behaving ethically is often challenging, as any fired whistle-blower can tell you.

Schools need to teach students the steps involved in ethical behavior and the challenges of executing them. And they need to do so with real-life case studies relevant to the students’ lives. The steps toward ethical behavior are

not ones that students can internalize by memorization, but only through active experiential learning with personally relevant examples.

There is a larger question our society must face: Have we abrogated what should be a fundamental responsibility of higher education? The financiers who helped to create the financial meltdown of 2008 were, for the most part, bright and well educated. Many were graduates of this country's finest colleges and universities. Is it possible that, in placing so much emphasis on grades and test scores, we are failing to select for and teach the qualities that will produce not just ethical individuals but also ethical leaders?

We have come, in large part, to use standardized-test scores and other objective measurements to provide opportunities to students who score well—opportunities that are much scarcer for others. But is it enough to look for such narrowly defined academic skills? Is it not time to search for and develop the wisdom and positive ethical skills that we need in order to steer this country up the slippery slope rather than down?

Once started on that slide, it is hard to stop before the crash at the bottom. Just ask any disgraced politician, executive, clergyman, or educator. While unethical behavior may start in schools with plagiarism or stolen exams, we know all too sadly, and all too well, that it doesn't end there.

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Notes

¹<http://chronicle.com/article/Slip-Sliding-Away-Down-the/125862/>