
Cybercheating: has morality evaporated in business education?

Melodie R. Phillips

Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, USA

Veronica Horton

University of Akron, Akron, Ohio, USA

Keywords

Business education, Internet, Ethics

Abstract

This article addresses many new problems facing educators with regard to integrating the Internet in to the marketing curriculum. Traditional modes of education and research have led to abuses of academic integrity by a small percentage of undergraduate students. Recent findings indicate that the Internet has led to an explosion of sites designed to provide research and term papers for a fee to students. This article begins by examining the current state of integration and research regarding the use of the Internet in marketing education. Then it explores current issues of concern facing educators relating to the use of the Internet by students. Areas of interest include student research and reference techniques, plagiarism and accessibility to custom and off-the-shelf term papers.

Introduction

Studies examining issues of academic integrity have been of interest to educators since the 1940s. Concerns regarding the use of cheating techniques during examinations, plagiarism, efforts to counter standardized examinations through substitute test takers and networks of available examinations have all troubled educators. Particularly problematic for business academicians is the trend that business students are the most likely to engage in these types of breeches of academic integrity (as featured on NBC News, throughout February 1999). This paper will address the newest nemesis in the academic marketplace – the Internet. Specifically, how the Internet is capitalizing on the information age and profiting from student demand for “educational assistance” at the expense of ethics, morality and hard work.

Faculty uneasiness surrounding the Internet, unfortunately, reflects the possibility for unscrupulous use of the Internet by students and entrepreneurs. Originally visualized as an outlet for information sharing, the Internet has generated concerns by academics with regard to the quality of information available, the training of students to properly cite information, the problem of “cut and paste” term papers and the unforeseen proliferation of Web sites developed to provide term papers (for free or a price!) to students. This recent phenomenon has been the result of opportunists seeking to make a quick profit with minimal capital investment.

We begin by exploring how the Internet is moving into the classroom as a student-generated activity and the associated problems and benefits. We will then consider the role of the professor in effectively incorporating the Internet into the business

curriculum without assuming the role of policeman in the educational process.

Background

Investigations into academic integrity (or lack there of i.e., cheating) in students is nothing new. Concerns regarding plagiarism, cheating on exams, and failing to cite factual information have been of serious concern to educators since the turn of the century. Recent studies have indicated that student dishonesty on campus is widespread (Allen *et al.*, 1998; Davis *et al.*, 1992) with upwards of 50 per cent (Bowers, 1964; Stannard and Bowers, 1970) to 75 per cent (Baird, 1980) of students indicating some level of participation in academic dishonesty (Karlins *et al.*, 1988). Unfortunately, these figures show no indication of declining in frequency (Haines *et al.*, 1986). The terms “rampant” and “pervasive” (Karlins *et al.*, 1988) have unfortunately become associated with declining levels of academic integrity and increasing complaints of cheating.

While early studies were aimed at identifying the frequency of cheating episodes and the types of incidents, recent efforts have identified a number of factors related to the frequency or propensity to cheat. Factors correlated with cheating have been identified as lack of maturity and commitment and the impact of neutralizing attitudes (Haines *et al.*, 1986). Simple opportunity is also believed to play a role in this behavior.

Traditional studies investigating cheating have investigated academic dishonesty in terms of a number of categories:

- exam cheating in which students looked on others' papers, carried in reference materials, or somehow exchanged information;
- assignment cheating involving sharing information inappropriately or copying other student efforts; and
- term project or paper plagiarism.

Efforts to investigate plagiarism by students on term projects, however, should focus on the recycling of work from semester to semester. Karlins *et al.* (1988) reported that 80 per cent of cheating efforts occurred across semesters instead of within semesters.

There have been a number of studies aimed at identifying the accuracy of self-reported activity (Allen *et al.*, 1988) in the hopes of identifying inflationary or inhibitory reporting factors. Yet the fact remains that a troubling number of undergraduate students have continued to participate in and voluntarily admit to engaging in activities that are perceived as violations of academic integrity. Many who cite their reasons for continuing to engage in this behavior include the minimal threat of being caught, and even in the event of discovery, the perceived benefits outweigh minimal negative consequences anticipated. Haines *et al.* (1986) found that a mere 1.3 per cent of students actually reported being caught in the act. Further explanations seem to center around increasing competitiveness for graduate school and jobs. It has been reported that students feel that cheating is now required to merely keep up with the pack (Hickman, 1998).

Certain demographic characteristics have also been associated with higher reported incidences of cheating. These include age, marital status and gender. Males, younger students and singles (Haines *et al.*, 1986) tend to report higher levels of academic dishonesty. In addition, increasing levels of parental support and lack of employment are also positively correlated with participation in these activities. It is believed that parental support for the college expenses reduces personal involvement and responsibility for the educational process.

While it remains unclear if cheating activities reflect moral development problems or are simply behavioral problems, the troubling issue remains that many faculties are reluctant to identify and report cheating behavior, and the result is a student population that is not particularly concerned with perceived limited consequences of being "caught in the act" (Hickman, 1998; Phillips and Horton, 1998a).

A new tool, unfortunately, has entered the marketplace enhancing the ease of finding suitable term papers, reducing the risk of being caught, and minimizing the effort required: the Internet. It is no longer necessary to find a fraternity/sorority network or a previous student from whom to acquire research and term papers. Currently, there are no less than 70 active sites on the Internet for students to acquire a range of

term paper products (Hickman, 1998). These products range from free (often very low quality), previously turned in work, to customized papers in which page charges vary by the number and type of specifications mandated by the buyer/student.

Understanding the role of the Internet in the classroom and academic dishonesty

The up and coming value of this approach (WWW) as a reference source to students seems unmatched:

The Internet has distinctive powers to complement, reinforce, and enhance some of our most effective traditional approaches to university teaching and learning (Rudenstine, 1997, p. A48).

The computer-based instruction enables students to follow individual learning paths, offers the convenience of self-paced work, richer materials, and an automatic measurement of progress (Phillips and Horton, 1998b; Brown *et al.*, 1996):

If one accepts the premise that learning is enhanced through discovery, the Internet sets the stage of individualized growth (Corder and Ruby, 1996, p. 31).

It is now possible to introduce the student population to a new avenue of "educational browsing" that provides visual, auditory and interactive stimulation.

Unfortunately, it is this very appeal and demand for skills that has opened the door for opportunistic marketers to ply their trades to the student population. The concern of marketing academicians as we enter the new millennium is not merely how to embrace and incorporate the Internet into undergraduate education, but how to become savvy instructors that can effectively encourage the appropriate uses of the Internet, dissuade the shortcuts, and recognize the results of unscrupulous efforts garnered from the Internet and its associated entrepreneurs.

Capitalism at its best

The Internet has truly come into its own for the resourceful student in the marketplace. It is currently possible to gain access to a multitude of sites offering a variety of services to potential buyers. The Appendix highlights some of the options available to students. The wide variety of services provided by these sites ranges from cheating tips for examinations, to access to banks of reusable essays/papers, and customized paper ordering. Many of these sites offer yearly memberships to enable repeated access to information, while others merely charge on an as needed basis.

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Sites such as the Evil House of Cheat have reveled in the media coverage afforded them, thus allowing the promotion of their services with no advertising expenditures. This site has been featured on the Howard Stern radio show, the *NY Times*, the *LA Times*, the *Washington Post* and CNN. While the educator benefits from this media coverage through increasing awareness of these services, students also continue to gain more and more knowledge regarding these services.

From an educational perspective, what is troubling is the minimal discussion afforded regarding plagiarism, consequences and morality. Many of these sites have "Warning" pages discussing that plagiarism is a serious offense (<http://www.papermasters.com/Legal%20resources.htm>), and that proper citations should be afforded for referenced material. While this is a touching sentiment, it has never been necessary, from an academic perspective, to then pay \$18.95 and up for customized reference materials! Why would a potential researcher require a customized paper, with specific topic, page limit and reference styles for mere reference material? Further, why would a student want to spend \$24.95 a page for a customized, rush paper (<http://www.papermasters.com>).

The typical format for a customized term paper merely requires the purchaser to specify the research area (field of study), report needs (i.e. term paper, book report, essay, dissertation, etc.), number of pages, number of bibliographic sources required, report style (MLA, APA, Turabian) and indicate a selected shipping method, and oh, yeah, payment methods! Additional required information includes the title, author, date of publication, place of publication and any other relevant information – this of course, enables the completion of the cover sheet for this reference material (www.a1-termpaper.com/custom.shtml). Many of these sites also offer a guarantee that customized papers will never be resold (<http://www.papermasters.com>). It can only be assumed that this guarantee is reliable from a firm that specializes in violations of academic integrity! Further, why would one need a guarantee of this sort for a paper merely used as a reference?

Educational strategies to improve appropriate uses of the Internet

It seems clear that it is necessary to instigate a number of educational strategies targeted at stimulating use of the Internet yet discouraging and monitoring for abuses of the Internet and the associated outputs. It is

necessary to minimize the opportunity and perceived advantage of utilizing the Internet as a research "crutch" versus research tool.

Strategies for monitoring and discouraging cheating

Strategy 1

Tailor research projects to topics that are not "classics" in which multiple outlets for previously published works are available. The instructor should stay current and integrate recent events in the assignment of the material.

Strategy 2

Incorporate group thinking and effort into assignments. This reduces the last minute effort and the desperation that might yield the actual purchase of a project.

Strategy 3

While a less than desirable alternative, police the Internet for potential violations. Search for term papers on topics related to assigned projects and require students to turn in paper copies of their Internet research cites. This will minimize the "cut and paste" approach to research from information taken from corporate home pages. Further, make students aware of the monitoring activities that a faculty member engages in to alleviate cheating activities. Many students will think twice about the "cut and paste" approach, if they believe that a faculty member is checking their sources and facts.

Strategy 4

Develop a well thought-out policy regarding academic dishonesty and address it in the syllabus. This reduces the risk that students perceive that a faculty member is unaware of these opportunities. Further, make sure it states clearly for the student the associated consequences of engaging in plagiarism regarding the Internet and the WWW.

The role of the university and faculty in prevention

In an academic environment in which many students feel that cheating is rarely noticed and that the faculty is reluctant to act upon a particular episode, students seem more predisposed to engage in questionable behavior. The real dilemma facing academicians is how to change the environment and the motivation to cheat. Further, the equitable punishment of offenders is necessary. Isolated cases or negotiated private settlements with individual faculty members encourages rampant cheating amongst those students motivated through feelings of insecurity, immaturity, competitiveness or mere laziness (Ulig and Howes, 1967).

Universities and/or colleges must take an active role in curbing the propensity to challenge academic morals and ethics. The development of standardized consequences by colleges will allow procedures to be put into place that will deter cheating and enable due process for those students accused of offenses. Furthermore, this information should be disseminated to students promoting an awareness that "school doesn't suck", but getting caught certainly does (see <http://www.schoolsucks.com>). Steps in the direction of curtailing cheating include the following:

- Colleges should encourage and support the faculty to identify and follow through with cases of cheating.
- Develop a system of punishments to fit the crime. Lesser offenses like copying someone's homework should receive less severe penalties than buying a term paper, recycling a paper or cheating in examinations.
- Develop a system of record keeping in which individual offenses are recorded. Repeat activity should result in the most severe penalties. Without a system of record keeping, the repeat offender goes through life minimizing each episode as a one time only offense reflecting some situational factor.
- Promote the climate of academic integrity and achievement. Pride in one's individual accomplishments and performance become primary.
- Allow student participation in disciplinary hearings, to enable information about the process to permeate the campus and encourage conformance.
- Students seem genuinely confused as to what constitutes cheating behaviors. These inappropriate activities should be identified and discussed with student populations.

Discussion

It has been referred to as a knowledge revolution. Virtual classrooms are being developed by cable operators and telecommunications companies, and multimedia products are available that replace the traditional classroom instruction (Ives and Jarvenpaa, 1996). The Internet is clearly entering the world of education. Interestingly, although the Internet has long been the domain of the academic, moving it into mainstream curriculum may prove to be quite difficult. Yet it has been suggested (On-Line Educator, 1996) that once educators come to terms with the new technology they will embrace it heartily. Even when there is

some trepidation on the part of professors, marketing educators may find that the pull from the business world pushes them to drive down the Information Highway. As noted by Horton and Phillips (1999) and Gustafson and Thomsen (1996), students will be a part of a virtual office tomorrow, so it is important to expose them to the virtual classroom environment today.

It behooves marketing educators to become conscious of the Internet and both its positive and negative applications. Seasoned academicians must realize that the technology savvy student will utilize the Internet for their optimum advantage. The perception of faculty reluctance to utilize these tools may merely facilitate less than desirable student uses of the Internet.

While academic concerns with curriculum integration are numerous, many of these issues regarding the use of the Internet are easily overcome. The positives of stimulating the curiosity of students, opening up round the clock access to current information and broadening the perspectives of the young business student seem unparalleled. Related to these issues are concerns as to whether this new source of information (Internet) should replace or merely supplement previous forms of research behavior. There is also the underlying question of reliability and validity of information widely available through this electronically interconnected information base. In just a few short years, the WWW has emerged as a mainstream approach to information dissemination and each day several thousand new Web sites are published (Fleischman, 1996). As a result, the question of validity remains an issue of considerable concern.

Unfortunately, it is this wealth of information and ease of access that has ultimately led to concerns regarding the proliferation of cheating, utilizing the Internet as the primary resource. How easy is it to cheat using the Internet? Unfortunately, all that is required is typing in the words "term paper" using a search engine like Yahoo! and a plethora of sites is instantaneously generated. Further, it is the ease of this access and the feeling that detection is unlikely that has led to increasing temptation. The consequences are perceived as limited and unlikely, further encouraging students to test the waters.

As noted earlier, the reality of cybercheating is an issue that is challenging educators and their institutions. As Web sites such as those noted in the Appendix continue to proliferate, educators will have to be increasingly savvy in their approach to assignments and indeed students.

Conclusion

The question in educational research that is often posed is "why is this important in a real world context?" Unfortunately, in issues of cheating and dishonest behavior, these activities do not limit themselves to the classroom. The strategies for survival demonstrated in college translate to professional graduate work and ultimately to their professional careers (Sierles *et al.*, 1980). Reducing cheating and understanding the implications of these activities are paramount to educating the leaders of tomorrow regarding ethical and acceptable practices.

While the world of cyberspace appears to be the popular place to go these days, one question remains glaringly unanswered: does the Internet truly offer students a better learning method? Or does this approach merely offer creative shortcuts in the learning process that may ultimately lead to a student being enticed by the term paper brokers? As the business world's entry into the realm of virtual reality continues, there will be an even greater push for marketing graduates to be experienced and comfortable with this technology. However, the burden of assuring the appropriate uses of this medium falls upon the faculty.

Hence it is essential that the faculty become learned in this new and exciting educational tool. Through the education and familiarity of the faculty, students will be less likely to assume that academic misbehavior will go undetected. Further, it enables the faculty to open dialogue with students to assure that these behaviors are viewed in the proper context – unacceptable, punishable and minimizing the value of their education dollar.

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Appendix

Table A1

Sample of Internet sites to purchase research, term papers and gather useful tips!

Name of site	Web address	Services available
School Sucks	www.schoolsucks.com	Free access to thousands of papers (good or bad), no rating system, gateway to other related sites
A1 – Term paper	www.a1-term paper.com	Custom papers/free quotes, report style/citation style options, dissertations!, e-mail delivery/Fed Express
Paper Masters	www.papermasters.com	Free revisions!, custom papers, 24 hour access
Jungle Page, Inc.	www.junglepage.com	Pre-written essays, custom essays, college entrance essays, book reports, proofreading, resumes
Term Papers 911	www.term papers911.com	Term paper data base – recent cites, holiday sales!
Evil House of Cheat	www.cheathouse.com	9,500 essays in 44 categories, cheating tips
Papers Inn	www.papersinn.com	Free papers/essays/book reports, student center, custom papers, three-day delivery period
Research Papers Online	www.ezwrite.com	Custom papers and themes, reference papers new and previously not circulated
