

To Cheat or Not to Cheat: Online Distance Education Challenges

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Abstract: Online Distance Learning (ODL) especially in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic is an important avenue for academic institutions to continue operating beyond the traditional face-to-face classroom setup. However, this venue poses an issue regarding academic integrity. This research seeks to examine among freshmen students of Ramon V. Del Rosario College of Business (RVR-COB) enrolled in the course Accounting Essentials for Business during the 2nd Term, AY 2020-2021 on the following: (1) The disposition of freshmen students regarding academic dishonesty particularly "cheating" in an ODL environment. (2) The possible reasons why students practice academic dishonesty during ODL. The result of the study showed that students cheat because they either want to pass or get high grades from the course. However, the result also showed that they still want to exercise academic honesty and will be even prouder of themselves if they were able to pass or get high marks in the courses that they enrolled in without resorting to cheating. This study recommends that all educational institutions, particularly the administrators, faculty members, etc., develop systems and protocols for ODL that will allow the students to learn more and be measured/graded with their capacity to learn without resorting to cheating.

Key Words: online distance learning; academic integrity; cheating; COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Online education in the last three decades has been popular due to the availability of more affordable personal computers and internet connectivity. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online education has become the mainstream teaching pedagogy in practically all levels of educational settings. Teaching and learning in an online setting are making a major impact on education as a whole and are fundamentally affecting the ethical values and morals of stakeholders, especially the students.

Due to the increased implementation of online education, special attention is now given to the ethical issues of its use. In general, academic fraud is one important issue with online education. This is a more challenging concern than the conventional face-to-face classes on campus since it is more difficult to know whether the student studying online is doing the work, assignment, or examination and not another person.

Another issue is whether or not students are honestly attending the synchronous classes and taking online examinations as required.

1.1 Online Distance Education

Kentnor (2015) in his paper defined distance education as a system of teaching and learning where the teacher and students are physically separated. Online distance learning is accomplished by sending lectures and learning materials via the Internet. Students do not work in a classroom but work from home. Online distance education utilizes a combination of technologies, including the use of the internet, computers, correspondences, audio, video, etc.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online distance learning (ODL) has become the new norm in

education with enrollments in online courses ever increasing. Educational institutions are realizing that ODL is here to stay and must meet the students' demand for learning while continuing to provide quality education. School owners and administrators accept the fact that online learning is critical to an academic institution's long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

TechSmith (2021) highlights in their complete guide for distance learning that there are many excellent benefits of distance learning that educational institutions can enjoy. In the school's long-term strategy, ODL may prove to be less expensive to support. Another reason is that distance learning is not limited by geography. For example, a student does not need to be physically in school in the Philippines to take classes at a university located in the Philippines. These are just some of the benefits of ODL.

A transition to online courses was necessitated because of the novel CORONA-19 virus prompting widespread consequences for higher education. Almost all private, as well as public schools and campuses, are being forced to create online-based learning opportunities and do it effectively. Ensuring academic integrity poses a serious concern in these circumstances.

The trend of educational institutions offering online courses has currently become the norm. While students love the convenience that online courses offer, instructors are concerned with ensuring that academic integrity is maintained.

1.2 Ethics and Moral Values: Challenges of Online Distance Education

There are several challenges in an online distance education setup. But if one inquires teachers teaching online courses what their major concern is, most if not all of them will answer 'maintaining the academic integrity of the course.' One major concern involving academic dishonesty would be that students would have different ways of misrepresenting themselves online. This misrepresentation may come in the form of someone else taking the examination or making the assignments, answering discussion forums, doing the projects, attending synchronous classes, etc. for them.

This concern of academic dishonesty in online education was so prevalent that many educational institutions around the world that offer online distance education must have processes for establishing that the student who enrolled in the

course is the same student who participates in and completes the work and gets the academic credit. Although such a control system does not cover the concerns on cheating done by the students while taking the course. Research suggests that students are using multiple ways to degrade the integrity of the course. While unethical methods have been used for years in traditional classes, it appears that online courses may be more susceptible to violations of academic integrity.

Concerns about the lack of face-to-face teacher-student interactions have forced many educational institutions to continuously examine their degree programs and course curricula and develop up-to-date and effective approaches to ensure academic integrity in the manner they deliver their online distance education. Academic dishonesty proves to be one of the biggest challenges in conducting ODL.

Singh & Thambusamy (2016) in their study described academic dishonesty as an act of deception done with the intent to misrepresent one's learning achievement for evaluation purposes. There are varied opinions as to whether more academic dishonesty occurs in online classes set up compared to traditional face-to-face classes. But a common belief is that cheating on examinations, assignments, projects, etc. has always occurred regardless of how the classes were conducted.

Several authors believe that our culture contributes to academic dishonesty. In the study of Kitara and Westfall (2009), they wrote about the growing concern about students cheating on examinations and assignments. "The McDonald's generation expects everything now and they don't want to work for it. They want it short and quick." In another study, results showed that many students believe that cheating is not a big deal and a victimless crime (Gomez, 2001).

Problems with academic dishonesty are a concern that the administration of various educational institutions is facing in the current online distance learning setup. Failure in addressing this problem by establishing integrity standards and ethical practices across the institute may cause a loss of integrity of the educational institution and a lack of students' respect for ethics and moral values.

2. RESEARCH RATIONALE

In the research of Larkin and Mintu-Wimsatt (2015), it was highlighted that academic integrity has been a major concern of faculty members handling and teaching online courses. Academic integrity is premised on intellectual honesty encompassing

honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

With the continued growth of online courses brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the academic integrity of students has received much attention. Through the Internet and other technology-mediated strategies, students today have many more ways to "cheat" compared to students decades ago. Academic dishonesty, particularly cheating, is not a new phenomenon. However, the difference between today's environment and that of previous decades is that cheating behavior is increasing and becoming common among students. So the question is posed, does online distance learning with the aid of the Internet provide a way to create a "cheating culture?"

This research seeks to examine among freshmen students of Ramon V. Del Rosario College of Business (RVR-COB) enrolled during the 2nd Term, Academic Year 2020-2021 on the following:

1. The disposition of freshmen students regarding academic dishonesty particularly "cheating" in an online distance learning environment.
2. The possible reasons freshmen students practice academic honesty or dishonesty during online distance learning.

This study aims to provide insights on how to encourage and enforce the practice of academic integrity among educational institutions offering online distance learning in their curricula.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by requesting freshmen students enrolled in the course Accounting Essentials for Business (ACCCOB1) during the 2nd Term, AY 2020-2021 of RVR-COB to accomplish a survey questionnaire. The Google survey form contains questions grouped into: (1) issues on academic honesty particularly "cheating" during examinations and accomplishing assignments and projects; (2) academic integrity in attending synchronous classes; (3) reasons for academic dishonesty; and (4) recommendations on how to foster academic integrity in ODL.

The researcher recognizes the responsibilities under the Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, assuring the students who voluntarily answered the survey questionnaire that the information collected and stored shall only be used for data reports and research only. The respondents were not required to identify their names, email addresses, and class sections to allow them to answer the questions truthfully.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Online Distance Learning especially in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic is an important avenue to any higher education where academic institutions can continue operating beyond the traditional face-to-face classroom setup. But this venue poses an issue regarding academic integrity. The following are the results of the survey in establishing the disposition of freshmen students regarding academic dishonesty particularly "cheating" in an online distance learning environment and the possible reasons for such behavior.

A total of 1,141 freshmen students, 634 were female and 507 were male enrolled in the RVR-COB during 2T, AY 2020-2021. 814 (71%) students participated in the survey. 462 (56.8%) were female and 352 (43.2%) were male. The average age of the respondents was 19 years old.

The respondents were classified into the following degree/programs in alphabetical order: Accountancy = 117 (14.4%); Commercial Law = 60 (7.4%); Decision Sciences and Innovations = 103 (12.7%); Economics = 83 (10.2%); Financial Management = 51 (6.3%); Management and Organization = 238 (29.2%); and Marketing and Advertising = 162 (19.9%).

For the following group categories, students were asked to answer truthfully questions on "*issues on academic honesty particularly cheating during examinations and accomplishing assignments and projects*" by using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (i.e., 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Very Often; and 5 = Always). Some of the questions were adapted from the study made by Malone (2006).

Results of the survey on issues of academic honesty particularly "cheating" during examinations and accomplishing assignments and projects reveal the following:

On Examination

I cheat on online theory and problem-solving examinations to pass the course.

Of the 814 total respondents, 497 (61.1%) answered "never". This means that 317 (38.9%) students are cheating in an online examination whether it is rarely, sometimes, very often, or always.

I open my notes or text/chat with my classmates for answers during online examinations.

Of the 814 total respondents, 468 (57.5%) answered "never". This means 346 (42.5%) open their notes or text their classmates.

I allow another person to take the online exam for me.
Of the 814 total respondents, 801 (98.4%) answered "never". This means that there are 13 (1.6%) students who allowed another to take the online exam for them.

I use educational tool kits, previous exams, and assignment resources to get a better chance of getting high grades in the exam.

Of the 814 total respondents, 476 (58.5%) answered "never". This means that 338 (41.5%) are using various resources to get a better chance of getting high grades in the examination.

My friend sends me screenshots of an online exam he/she is taking before the period when I will take the same exam.

Of the 814 total respondents, 705 (86.6%) answered "never". This means that the 109 (13.4%) students have been sent screenshots of an online exam taken by their friends before the period when the student will take the same exam.

When someone in class did me a favor, I allowed him/her to copy my answers in the theory and problem-solving exam.

Of the 814 total respondents, 663 (81.4%) answered "never". This means that 151 (18.6%) are allowing someone to copy his/her answers for a favor done for them.

I told a professor I was ill on an exam day because I was not prepared to take the online test.

Of the 814 total respondents, 793 (97.4%) answered "never". This means that there were 21 (2.6%) who lied to their professors because they were not prepared to take the online test.

On Assignments and Projects

I plagiarized the content of some of the reports that I have submitted.

Of the 814 total respondents, 767 (94.2%) answered "never". This implies that 47 (5.8%) students plagiarized the content of some of the reports that they submitted

I have put my name on an online group project although I did not contribute.

Of the 814 total respondents, 793 (97.4%) answered "never". This means that 21 (2.6%) students put their

names on an online group project although they made no contributions.

I allowed another student to take credit for an online work she/he did not contribute to.

Of the 814 total respondents, 559 (68.7%) answered "never". This means 255 (31.3%) students allowed another student to take credit for an online work they did not contribute.

I allowed another student to copy my homework/assignments.

Of the 814 total respondents, 521 (64%) answered "never". This means that the 293 (36%) students allowed another student to copy one's assignments whether rarely, sometimes, very often, or always.

I allow someone else to do my assignments.

Of the 814 total respondents, 759 (93.2%) answered "never". This means that 55 (6.8%) students allowed someone else to do their assignments.

Results of the survey on "academic integrity in attending synchronous classes" show the following:

On Attending Classes

I mute my teacher during synchronous class sessions and do other things (e.g., playing online games, watching movies, doing household chores, reading FB posts, etc.)

Of the 814 total respondents, 663 (81.4%) answered "never". 151 (18.6%) students may tend to mute their teachers during synchronous class sessions and do other things.

I attend classes just for the sake of attendance, but I am not listening during synchronous online class sessions.

Of the 814 total respondents, 446 (54.8%) answered "never". This result shows that 368 (45.2%) students simply attend their synchronous classes for the sake of attendance and not for the learnings they will obtain.

I told my teacher I have internet connection problems when I come in late during online class sessions even though it is not true so that I can avoid being marked tardy.

Of the 814 total respondents, 712 (87.5%) answered "never". This means that 102 (12.5%) students lie to their teachers just to avoid the penalty of being marked tardy in attending synchronous classes.

I come to online class unprepared.

Of the 814 total respondents, 285 (35%) answered "never". This shows that 529 (65%) students still try to prepare before attending their online classes

I don't ask questions during an online class session for fear of being perceived as a nerd or dumb.

Of the 814 total respondents, 253 (31.1%) answered "never". This means that 561 (69%) of the students were not comfortable asking questions during class sessions.

To understand the reasons for freshmen students' dishonest or honest behavior during online distance learning, the proponent included the following questions where the students were asked to answer truthfully the following questions using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree).

Results of the survey on "reasons for academic dishonesty reveal" the following:

For me, getting high grades at all costs is most important.

Of the 814 total respondents, 358 (44%) agree with this statement. This implies that these students will do anything and everything even to the point of cheating just to get high grades.

For me, getting high grades at all costs is most important. because that is what my parents expect from me.

Of the 814 total respondents, 336 (41.3%) agree with this statement. This implies that parental pressure may be a factor why students would cheat just to get high grades.

Earning my grades with integrity makes me proud and fulfilled.

740 (90.91%) out of 814 agree with the statement. This implies that most of the students surveyed still believe that they will be proud and fulfilled if they were able to earn their grades honestly.

Getting a good grade is more important than learning and being honest in an online class.

Only 81 (10%) out of 814 agree with the statement. This implies that most of the students surveyed still believe that it is more important to learn and be honest in conducting themselves in an online class than to get good grades.

The survey conducted also included a portion to provide recommendations on how to encourage and

enforce the practice of academic integrity among educational institutions offering online distance learning in their curricula.

Results of the survey to "foster academic integrity" in ODL highlight the following: (1) 81.7% or 665 respondents believe that academic integrity applies equally in the online environment and the classroom setting. (2) 81% or 659 of the students surveyed agree that the responsibility for maintaining academic integrity in an online learning environment is a shared responsibility between the school and home. (3) 81% or 659 of the respondents believe that incorporating ethics and morality in an online course can help reduce instances of academic dishonesty. (4) 82.6% or 672 of the students asked agreed that providing clear and student-friendly instructions on why and how to make academic integrity central to the learning process will help in reducing instances of academic dishonesty. And (5) 54.1% (440) of the respondents agreed and 26.3% (214) were not sure as to whether the adoption of increasingly tough sanctions and support for instructors who find and report violations will help in reducing instances of academic dishonesty.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The trend of universities offering online distance learning is here to stay. Given that students and faculty in an online learning environment are separated in terms of space and maybe even by time, perhaps attention must be given to revisiting the different curriculum offerings of the schools. This is a wakeup call to all educational institutions particularly the administrators, faculty members, and all those in charge of the education of the young people to develop systems and protocols for ODL that will allow the students to learn more and be measured/graded with their capacity to learn without resorting to cheating to pass or obtain high grades. The result of the study showed that students cheat because they either want to simply pass or get high grades from the course. But the result also showed that they still want to exercise academic honesty and will be even prouder of themselves if they were able to pass or get high marks in the courses that they enrolled in without resorting to cheating.

Academic integrity applies equally in the online environment and the classroom setting and the responsibility for maintaining academic integrity in an online learning environment is a shared

responsibility between the school and home. The proponent recommends that educational institutions must incorporate ethics and morality in every online course that they offer which may help reduce instances of academic dishonesty. Teachers must always provide clear and student-friendly instructions on why and how to make academic integrity central to the learning process to reduce instances of academic dishonesty. Schools and universities can adopt sanctions for students and support instructors who find and report violations of academic dishonesty.

Since online distance learning is becoming the "new norm", educational institutions must revisit the way they teach and test the students. The traditional way of written graded examination which carries the bulk of the grades of the students in courses like accounting subjects must be revisited and modified to align with the new norm of online distance learning. Written examinations can still be part of the grades but not a big portion of the final grades of the students. These examinations should measure critical thinking rather than memorization. The course can implement a capstone simulation group project that will harness students' creativity and innovativeness which they can apply in their future professional occupations. The teaching and learning should provide a lot of practice sets focusing on skill-building, critical thinking, and ethics. In the end, "manner matters" and forming the students to have morally sound values and ethics will be beneficial to the workplace and the society.

6. AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

The proponent is proposing that further studies can be done on the following. First, include students from other colleges other than RVR-COB of DLSU. Second, include other year levels other than freshmen students. Third, more schools offering ODL may be included in the sample study. And lastly, use regression analysis or other advanced statistical tools in analyzing the results to further strengthen the integrity of the methodology used.

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