

THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF PROVIDING STUDENTS A STRUCTURED CHEATING OPPORTUNITY

Khushwant K. S. Pittenger

Ashland University

kpitten@ashland.edu

ABSTRACT

This is a short paper briefly describing an alteration in the way students are traditionally tested in the classroom. In this particular class, the instructor gave the traditional in-class, timed tests consisting of multiple choice and short essay questions. However, the students were provided a structured cheating opportunity—time to consult their textbooks and notes for a very short amount of time at the end of the test. The paper provides the instructor's reasoning for trying this alteration and the outcomes from the instructor's and the students' perspective.

The assessment of student knowledge of the subject matter being taught has traditionally been an integral part of the teaching process (Guay, 1997). Tests and examinations are a crucial part of most courses today. A popular way to assess student knowledge is in-class timed tests. The nature of such tests may vary but most require the students to perform in a stressful situation without any outside help (Halsey, 1997). In such situations, students often complain about not being able to give their best effort while the instructors worry about student cheating (Halsey, 1997; Satterlee, 2002).

In-class open-book exams and take-home exams are viable options that many instructors use. The author has applied their exclusive use to graduate classes or upper level undergraduate classes only. In the undergraduate classes where teaching the professional business vocabulary is still a key objective of the class, the instructor has considered the use of in-class tests to be important. However, it was the author's impression that these tests present several challenges. From a student's point of view, they are a source of a high level of anxiety for obvious reasons (Bass, Burroughs, Gallion & Hodel, 2002; Barger, 1983). In addition, they can cause the temptation to cheat. A great deal of concern is being expressed in higher education literature about student cheating (Cole and Kiss, 2001; Schmelkin, Kaufman, Liefing, 2001). From an instructor's point of view, the students' poor preparation for such tests is a cause of concern (Bass, Burroughs, Gallion and Hodel, 2002). Students often do not read the textbook on a regular basis, relying on their cramming ability at the last minute, instead. Students may also not be meticulous about class notes.

EXPERIMENTATION

The author felt the need to experiment with the traditional testing technique without abandoning it. The author decided to incorporate an element of open book without making the test completely open book. The concern about the open book test was that the undergraduate students will consider this even more of an excuse not to study on a regular basis. The use of a "cheat sheet" (allowing students to write key information or formulas on an index card) was not deemed practical because of the qualitative nature of the class. This was a small (11 students) introductory organizational behavior class that met for 75 minutes on a biweekly basis. Unlike quantitative classes, there were few formulas. Instead comprehension of concepts was required to answer mostly applied questions related to organizational behavior concepts, and there were too many concepts to fit on a small sheet. The tests were mainly multiple-choice with some short essay questions. The students were told in advance they would be given an opportunity to cheat—they could use their textbooks and class notes for ten minutes once they had completed the test. The basic reason the instructor gave the students for this variation was the importance of being prepared to get the maximum benefit from a limited window of opportunity.

It was, however, the instructor's belief the technique would reduce test taking anxiety while motivating the students to study the textbook and class notes with greater intentionality. While the instructor had not observed any significant cheating, the goal was also to reduce the temptation for it by providing this structured "cheating opportunity," as it was termed in the class.

RESULTS

It was the observation of the instructor that the students in general seemed more relaxed about the exams. Their text books and notes were better marked up for key course content. Some students had prepared a personalized subject index with the location of the materials. Clearly, most students had spent some time looking through their course materials and thinking about their test taking strategy to maximize the benefit of this "cheating opportunity." In terms of student performance, the technique seemed to have eliminated the lowest scores that the instructor had experienced in similar classes before. The student satisfaction in the class also seemed higher. The author could only speculate about the reasons. To identify the possible benefits of the technique to the students, the author did an anonymous student survey at the end of the class. The survey was worded as follows:

STRUCTURED CHEATING OPPORTUNITY SURVEY

Instructions: I am interested in learning your reaction to the technique of allowing students to use books and notes for a specified limited time at the end of an examination. In the following questions, the word “cheat” is being used to refer to the fixed time period you were allowed to use your books and notes. Please mark the appropriate responses on the Scantron sheet.

1. Did cheating improve your learning of the subject matter?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Perhaps; not sure
 - (c) A little
 - (d) A great deal
 - (e) Definitely

2. Did cheating motivate you to improve your study habits?
 - (a) Definitely
 - (b) A great deal
 - (c) A little
 - (d) Perhaps; not sure
 - (e) No

3. Did cheating motivate you to study more thoroughly?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Perhaps; not sure
 - (c) A little
 - (d) A great deal
 - (e) Definitely

4. Did cheating improve your retention of the material?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Perhaps; not sure
 - (c) A little
 - (d) A great deal
 - (e) Definitely

5. Did the opportunity to cheat reduce your test taking anxiety?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Perhaps; not sure
 - (c) A little
 - (d) A great deal
 - (e) Definitely

6. Did the opportunity to cheat motivate you to spend more time on exam preparation?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Perhaps; not sure
 - (c) A little
 - (d) A great deal
 - (e) Definitely

7. Did the opportunity to cheat motivate you to take better notes?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Perhaps; not sure
 - (c) A little
 - (d) A great deal
 - (e) Definitely

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8. Did the opportunity to cheat reduce the temptation to cheat otherwise?

- (a) No
- (b) Perhaps; not sure
- (c) A little
- (d) A great deal
- (e) Definitely

9. Did cheating improve your performance?

- (a) No
- (b) Perhaps; not sure
- (c) A little
- (d) A great deal
- (e) Definitely

10. Should other professors use this technique?

- (a) No
- (b) Perhaps; not sure
- (c) Very rarely
- (d) Most of the time
- (e) Definitely

The survey and the analysis do not meet the rigor of quantitative social science research, but they provide some feedback on the student perception of the technique. The survey

also dissects the various ways this technique has the potential of helping the teaching and learning process. Summary results are presented in the following table.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS (N = 11)

Question	% of students for No	% of students for Not Sure	% of students for A Little	% of students for A Great Deal	% of students for Definitely	% of students with No Response
1 enhanced learning	18	36	27	0	18	0
*2 better study habits	27	0	45	18	9	0
3 more thoroughness of study	27	0	54	9	9	0
4 better material retention	27	0	54	9	9	0
5 reduced anxiety	36	9	18	18	18	0
6 more preparation	36	9	36	0	18	0
7 better notes	36	9	27	9	18	0
8 reduced cheating	45	9	0	0	9	36
9 better performance	27	0	36	18	18	0
10 recommendation	9	18	0	45	27	0

* The scores are reversed.

Students seemed to have objection to the question on cheating (question 8). Some of them wrote that they did not believe in cheating and hence the question was inappropriate. Only seven students answered this question. On the other nine questions, 72% of the students reported at least some improvement in their study habits, thoroughness with which they studied, retention of course material, and improvement in performance. Fifty four percent of the students said the technique may have reduced their anxiety level and motivated them to spend a little more time on exam preparation and to take better notes. Interestingly, most did recommend the technique be used by others. Overall, the majority of the students on each question suggested the technique impacted them positively even if only a little.

CONCLUSION

As is the case in Las Vegas with the gaming industry, there are risks and rewards associated with experimentation in teaching. The author experimented with student assessment on a small scale and learned that it has its costs and benefits. The logistics of this small experiment were more complex than originally anticipated. The students finished their tests at different times which made it complicated to determine how to administer the structured cheating opportunity. With each test, the author tried it in a different way. The student response while not overwhelmingly strong does provide positive feedback. The student feedback, however, suggests that the students perceived the benefits to be greater in areas other than originally anticipated by the author.

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It is the author's hope that this paper can serve the ABSEL audience in two ways. One, it can suggest a technique that other educators may want to try in their own courses and assess its risks and rewards for themselves. It is not a major modification or restructuring which can be overwhelming to try. Second, it can encourage others to experiment in their own courses even if on a small scale.

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