

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

## Reflection on Developing Students' Academic Integrity in a University in Hong Kong

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reflects on the findings of two studies, in which students completed scenario tasks regarding academic misconduct. Results showed that the scenarios addressing process and self-regulation levels are more engaging, while authenticity and relevance are two other engagement factors in scenario design. This Reflection also draws inspiration from recent psychopathy studies and suggests that a lack of empathy and mindfulness in the personality (high levels of “Meanness” and “Disinhibition”) would lead to a low level of mastery motivation, which in turn would contribute to a greater tendency of academic misconduct. Educators and policymakers should note that an over-emphasis on disciplinary measures (policies and penalties) for academic misconduct prevention is not enough, as a penalty does not foster mastery motivation.

**Keywords:** Academic integrity, academic misconduct, scenario design, mastery motivation

## INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while observing the scaling up in use of advanced technologies in higher education around the world, some educators might start to worry about the increasing risks of academic misbehaviours/misconduct when most teaching and assessment made a switch from face-to-face to online/hybrid teaching modes. Lancaster and Cotarlan (2021) reported a terrifying fact that there was a 196.25% increase of contact cheating requests in five STEM<sup>1</sup> subjects, comparing the time period of April to August 2019 with the period of April to August 2020, in some selected websites. Their study analysed the use of commercial websites (such as [Chegg](#), [OneClass](#), etc.) which claim to offer students “homework help”, but it was eventually discovered that someone in these commercials offered solutions to examination questions in their file-sharing systems. The worst news is that a few university tutors were also involved.

## APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

### *A general principle*

In his recent book, Phillip Dawson (2021) calls for striking a balance between ensuring assessment security (an adversarial, punitive, and evidence-based approach) and nurturing academic integrity (a positive, educative, and values-based approach) to address cheating in higher education. Educators should take measures to “harden assessment against attempts to cheat”, as well as to educate students on the values of academic integrity (Dawson, 2021).

### *Disciplinary and educational measures at HKU*

Like other higher education institutions around the world, faculty members at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) had re-engaged in the discussion on assessment redesign, plagiarism detection, and online invigilated exams in professional development to make cheating more difficult, a conversation which was necessary when the university decided to arrange fully online examinations when the campus went on lockdown during the pandemic. As a disciplinary measure, the university also emphasised the possible penalties for any misconduct or violation of relevant policies. However, students might just pay attention to avoid being caught, rather than appreciating the morality of academic honesty in this measure (Young et al., 2018).

In terms of educational measures, there was also a lack of discussion on innovative ways to develop students' academic integrity at a course level at HKU. Although HKU have introduced mandatory *Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative*<sup>2</sup> (CITI) online courses, participants generally perceived the topics to be too obsolete and hence felt disengaged in the traditional *learning* approaches. As Braunschweiger and Goodman (2007) analysed, the CITI course had been considered a tool to train critical thinking skills and avoid unintended misconduct (cognitive learning), but it does not facilitate students' development of value-based practice. One can argue that knowing the correct answers to questions does not necessarily lead the learner to act ethically during adverse circumstances in the learner's academic life.

Nonetheless, faculty members seem to assume that students are immune to the temptation and opportunity to plagiarise from the internet/peers to cope with the heavy workload. In fact, the pressure for grades, a heavy academic workload, and self-perceived inadequate skills were found to be some of the top reasons for committing plagiarism in the Asian context (Harji, et al., 2017; Kwong, et al., 2010).

## PILOTING AN INNOVATIVE MEASURE AT HKU

To facilitate HKU students to develop value-based practices at an early stage of their academic lives, an innovative mobile learning activity was implemented in 2021 during a training course for postgraduate research students (university tutors) as a pilot project. It aimed to facilitate students' understanding of the six fundamental values of academic integrity put forth by the ICAI<sup>3</sup>: “honesty”, “trust”, “fairness”, “respect”, “responsibility”, and “courage”. With the application of Augmented Reality (AR) technology in a mobile app (see Wong et al., 2018), participants were challenged to make ethical decisions at critical moments in various cases, some of which were developed from real-life scenarios reported by students. It was to make it *relevant* to the students. The original stories were also modified to fit specific locations on campus. Though the cases are virtual, some participants perceived them to be authentic experiences because they were in venues where the scenarios happened. Three cases were used in the pilot study, including data falsification, citation, and proper use of library resources.

In a post-reflection, participants were asked to justify their choices in specific situations, rather than reciting the model answers. It is anticipated that through the guided reflection, participants could consolidate their thoughts to better prepare for future encounters. Compared with the two abovementioned measures (policy and mandatory CITI courses), the implementation of this pilot mobile learning activity to cultivate academic integrity also reinforced students' abilities to interpret situations, and more importantly, allowed students to develop their own rationales to inform their decision-making. The implementation treats students as *active learners*.

My earlier study on the pilot project at HKU (Lau, 2021) identified that, among the ICAI values, “honesty” and “respect” are the most familiar values to the participants, while the frequency of mentioning the other four ICAI values (“trust”, “fairness”, “responsibility”, and “courage”) remained low in their reflection. The findings suggested that participants might feel more connected to “honesty” and “respect”, and they tend to use these two values to support their decision-making in the scenarios. To help students build new connections with the other four values, four additional scenarios were introduced to the HKU participants as a follow-up study in 2022, including Class Materials Sharing (“fairness”), Freeriding (“fairness”, “courage”), Internship (“responsibility”, “trust”) and Proofreading Service (“responsibility”).

In the follow-up study, the 26 participants were required to complete a total of seven scenarios. Preliminary results of the clickstream statistics showed that the time-on-task in two scenarios (Freeriding and Internship) was relatively longer than the other five scenarios, though the estimated completion time of each was similar. On average, participants spent 40% of the total task time in the Freeriding (19%) and Internship (21%) scenarios, while each of the other scenarios they spent 9-16% time. Different design rationales of the scenarios seemed to be a possible reason for this observation.

## THE RATIONALE FOR SCENARIO DESIGN

### *Task, process, and self-regulation levels*

The design of the scenarios fits well with John Hattie's (2012) idea about effective feedback to students, i.e., three levels of feedback, including the task, process, and self-regulation levels. Some scenarios (including Data Falsification, Citation, and Proper Use of Library Resources) were designed in the traditional way, in which only one “correct” or “model” answer exists. The rationale for these questions is at the task level, to clarify the fundamental understanding of the principles and values in general. Thus, the message/feedback to the participants is simple, i.e., “it is correct/incorrect”, and “this is right/wrong”. Another scenario (for example, Freeriding) addressing the process level, aims to engage participants in the process to reach a proper decision.

Follow-up questions (depending on the choices being selected) serve as guide/feedback to participants to explore the possible consequences of different choices and to formulate appropriate steps to analyse a case. Finally, the Internship scenario is designed to develop participants' capacity to self-regulate their practice. After learning the consequences of the decisions, participants will receive a few questions as the takeaway messages. Though participants are not required to respond to the questions at the moment, these thought-provoking questions (for example, "which value is more important to you?"), can guide participants to establish their own priority of the values which is mental preparation for any similar circumstance. The preliminary result of the follow-up study suggest that scenarios addressing process and self-regulation levels are more engaging.

### *Authenticity and relevance*

In the four new scenarios, though it is my intention to help students associate with the four targeted values, the options provided did not explicitly mention any value. Also, the options are carefully designed in an authentic way so that none of them appear to be the "correct" answer. Such a setting aimed to add a sense of *authenticity* to the learning experience and encourage participants to examine the options and potential conflicts. For example, the first question in the Freeriding case scenario obviously challenges a participant to make a choice between protecting the best friend (representing *friendship*, a personal value) and reporting freeriding behaviours (representing *fairness*, a value for common good). Furthermore, a follow-up question requires the participant to choose an action regarding the option chosen. This action actually represents the *courage* to take a stand, i.e., whether a person is willing to endure discomfort for the value he/she believes in. At a deeper layer, this scenario tries to simulate a reality that potential risks exist, even though a person acts in accordance with ICAI values. Eventually, a major difference is whether the occurrence of unethical behaviours afterward could be minimised because of the present efforts one makes.

The Internship case scenario is also developed based on similar thoughts. From these examples, it is suggested that Authenticity and Relevance are important factors in the scenario design for student engagement.

## **INSPIRATIONS FROM PSYCHOPATHY STUDIES**

In my pilot study (Lau, 2021), flexible thematic analysis of participants' reflections indicated an interesting finding: two posteriori codes (Empathy and Mindfulness) resulted from an examination of the student reflections. Students demonstrated concerns about these personal values or abilities in developing academic integrity. While the study on Empathy and Mindfulness in the academic integrity development context was relatively limited, I tried to find insights from some adolescent studies about psychopathy (psychopathic personality), because recent studies reveal that psychopathy is a strong predictor of engaging in unethical behaviours (Jonason, et al., 2017), especially dishonesty in an academic context (Baran & Jonason, 2020; Plessen, et al., 2020).

### *Disinhibition and meanness of psychopathy*

A recently developed triarchic model of psychopathy is characterised by three distinct phenotypic domains (Boldness, Disinhibition, and Meanness). Boldness demonstrates venturesomeness, self-assurance, and a high tolerance for uncertainty; Disinhibition describes poor impulse control and self-regulation towards temptation or immediate gratification; and Meanness represents the tendency of aggressive recourse-seeking, lack of empathy and exploitativeness (Patrick, et al., 2009; Baran & Jonason, 2020). In these studies, the concept of Disinhibition and Meanness seems to be the opposite side of Mindfulness and Empathy. Furthermore, Baran and Jonason (2020) also identified that undergraduates with higher levels of Disinhibition and Meanness (but

not Boldness) reported more frequent academic dishonesty during their study. It is reasonable to assume that a lack of Empathy and Mindfulness in the personality would lead to a greater tendency to commit academic misconduct.

### *Mastery and performance motivation*

In a learning context, a low level of mastery motivation (or a high level of performance motivation) demonstrates the tendency to set achievement goals for avoiding penalties, anxiety, and proving oneself to others (Elliot & Murayama, 2008). Baran and Jonason (2020) also explained the role of motivation in cheating. They reveal that high levels of Meanness and Disinhibition can lead to a low level of mastery motivation, which in turn contributes to academic cheating. This seems to suggest that an over-emphasis on disciplinary measures (policies and penalty) for academic misconduct prevention is not enough, as the penalty does not foster mastery motivation. Maintaining a high level of mastery motivation would be a key step to balancing the adverse influence of disciplinary measures.

## **IMPLICATION ON THE LEARNING OF ASIAN STUDENTS: FEELING SAFE TO DEVELOP PERSONAL BELIEFS**

The above-mentioned projects demonstrate an innovative approach to facilitating Asian students to develop value-based practices of academic integrity in higher education. This approach makes use of relevant scenarios addressing the authentic dilemmatic situations most students will encounter. Apart from the guide for students to analyse the consequences and reflect on their decisions, this approach also encourages students to develop personal beliefs by providing them meaningful feedback, (i.e., process and self-regulation feedback). This learning experience is different from the traditional Asian classroom learning (e.g., in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.), in which conversations between the teacher and students primarily provide task feedback (e.g., clarifications, facts, definition, etc.) because of the assumption that there should only be one correct answer and no room to consider/discuss other options. Unfortunately, the teacher's authority figure (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) further reinforces this assumption. However, the mobile app in this approach provides a virtual space that is safe for students to explore different possibilities or compare the consequences. Students might also feel more confident and empowered in future encounters because they have established personal beliefs based on the virtual scenarios.

## **CONCLUSION**

This Reflection summarises a general principle and some measures to develop students' academic integrity at HKU. An innovative measure (use of mobile learning) had been introduced to HKU tutors (research post-graduates) for understanding the six fundamental values of academic integrity through studying various scenarios. The rationale for applying scenario design were detailed. Preliminary results showed that the scenarios addressing process and self-regulation levels tend to attract student attention. Authenticity and Relevance are also important factors in scenario designs for student engagement. In the pilot study, students demonstrated concerns about Empathy and Mindfulness in developing academic integrity. Inspirations regarding empathy and mindfulness had been drawn from psychopathy studies. A lack of empathy and mindfulness in the personality would lead to a greater tendency of academic misconduct. A high level of mastery motivation is proven to reduce the frequency of cheating in an academic context.

For a new direction, introducing exercises for developing students' empathy and mindfulness before or after the mobile learning activity might help supplement the university's educational measures for developing

academic integrity. Meaningful engagement in relevant training is also important to nurture students' mastery motivation.

## ENDNOTES

1. STEM is the abbreviation for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects.
2. Check out [HKU's website](#) for more information about the CITI online courses.
3. ICAI refers to the [International Centre for Academic Integrity](#), which helps academic institutions and communities around the world cultivate a culture of academic integrity.

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