



Keeping Ethical Choices an Arm's Length Away

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Are we unknown as students? Career success and the perfect GPA are individual aspirations that can contradict some ethical decisions made in class. Just as an email message can separate us from the emotions of face-to-face interactions, student anonymity in a classroom dilutes the essential emotions that keep us from making honorable, ethical decisions. I believe that an increase in academic dishonesty in distance learning and large lecture classes is attributed to not only the difficulties of policing students but also an isolation of the student.

The anonymous student is alone, separated from the interactions that allow us to understand the effects of our choices. The grade we receive is ours alone. For most of us, an assignment is a competition against an algorithm. Rarely do we turn in a paper in person, handing it to our instructor, individually, under our name, looking the professor in the eye, with the trust that we have presented our own ideas with an effort worthy of our grade. Why do we lie to professors?

We don't know them.

Think of your favorite teacher. The teacher has connected with you, made you feel part of a class and made you believe and feel pride in what you're accomplishing at school. Now think of a teacher whose assignment you fudged; remember that sideways glance during the midterm, the paper with the changed date so it could be turned in twice. Are these the same classes? Are they the same teachers? I doubt it. The connections you make with another person are what create that pride, shame, honesty, and guilt. So it's no surprise that students might take the risk of cheating and receiving a failing grade. We cannot expect students to encounter the same effects of their decisions from a number delivered on a computer screen.

Professors and students must create common ground to find trust in the classroom. A professor with a genuine interest in their students' success, a connection to the student as an individual, or a concern for their struggles will be respected. A professor with a quick word to a student as they turn in the final, a note written on the top of a term paper, or a sign of respect for the student's effort towards an assignment will break the walls of anonymity. When we can associate our decisions with another person, we become able to realize the full morality of our situation.

The professor isn't the only connection in the classroom that can reflect the effects of our ethical decisions back to us. A presentation to a class of peers also allows our work to have a face and a name, our name. If we stood up and presented someone else's work as our own, the chances of a "Princess

Bride"-style accusation from a classmate would be slim. Still, the emotions involved in presenting would motivate us to produce at least more honest work and at most, our best work.

This is not a call to shame students away from cheating or seek a retroactive scarlet letter to deter us from choices we know are wrong. Neither is this a push away from self-accountability or the development of our own convictions. It is a call to pull our focus from our safe, isolated islands into connections even if they seem to hinder our own personal goals. We all have innate moral capacities that help us judge our decisions as students. Still, the traits we most want to develop are uniquely established and exhibited in our community, away from a harbor of our solely personal aspirations. If we can take our shared moral intuitions and apply them to our academic system, we can achieve our community ideals of honor, civility, and honesty.

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