What's Happening in Character Education?

How a Meaningful Curriculum Can Help Prevent Cheating

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Teaching a challenging curriculum is a double-edged sword in regards to academic integrity. Challenges that are useful to students to achieve mastery learning can help students rise to the occasion and persist in their studies. Challenges that are perceived to be unfair and of little relevance to student interest or needs can lead to increase student rationalizations to cheat. Some students in high-achieving schools have been noted to claim a "right to cheat" as they cite the multiple academic challenges they face (extreme workloads, poor instruction, demands for perfection) and argue their school circumstances are unjust and unfair.

Academic integrity has a direct connection to many of Character.org's 11 Principles for Effective Character Education. At the heart of completing work with integrity is the recognition that core values such as honesty, responsibility and fairness are relevant to students and teachers (Principles 1 & 2) and that academic integrity should be reflected in how teachers lead their classes (Principle 3.3) and teach ethical analysis[1] (Principle 3.2). Academic integrity is clearly one measure of how students demonstrate moral action (Principle 5) and seek to develop their own intrinsic motivation (Principle 7). And with the focus of this current Blog on Principle 6, let us examine how academic integrity is particularly strengthened as teachers implement strategies to teach a meaningful and challenging curriculum.

The research on academic integrity consistently points to certain teacher and student behaviors that either support academic integrity or contribute to increased student cheating. No teacher wants to encourage cheating, but student cheating is recognized to increase when students disengage from learning or perceive lessons to be busy work, or completed to achieve status (grades or prestige) and not mastery of the subject. Thus, as Character.org encourages teachers to practice learning strategies such as cooperative and experiential learning to engage students in authentic learning; these strategies also help reduce the tendency for student cheating.

One way to successfully engage students (and resist cheating) is to make the required curriculum meaningful and relevant to students. Highlighting practical life applications into the lessons or tying lessons to service learning can help. Service-learning makes learning practical and relevant to life and thus encourages mastery learning and academic integrity in addition to being a strategy to promote moral action (Principle 5).

West Haven High school has facilitated a specific service-learning club with a focus on academic integrity since 2008. The students of the Academic Integrity Committee (a Character.org 2012 Promising Practice winner) have worked to revise their school's integrity policies and annually create awareness campaigns to encourage their peers to appreciate the importance of integrity in school work.

Teaching with respect to the diversity of students in every class (ability and ethnicity) is another important focus of Principle 6. The goal to differentiate instruction to meet the various learning abilities, styles and backgrounds of our students can be one of most challenging requirements we face as educators. One way to address the multiple needs of students is to segregate or pull out various student populations (gifted, special needs, ESL) that represent unique needs. However, successful teachers also recognize how to use the students themselves to help as role models and provide supplemental instruction to peers as lessons allow for collaborative learning. Sustaining academic integrity in collaborative work has its own challenges, but these can be met by ensuring all students produce individual work that demonstrate their own thinking and effort.

Finally, Principle 6 highlights the goal of students to develop an awareness and ability to reflect on their own performance values in completing their school work. Performance values such as cooperation, perseverance, excellence and optimism, are complementary to the moral values of caring, respect and integrity, and can be cultivated by our students as we provide them opportunity to reflect on their work. Integrity can become a moral compass for performance reflection as students review their contributions to group work, analyze their effort and evaluate their accuracy in citing sources.

Within the National Schools of Character program, Principle 6 can be the most difficult to fully evaluate as it has so many unique applications. Principle 6 does merit considerable attention as it highlights meaningful keys to effective academic and character development and specifically the character of integrity.

Character.org has many useful resources on its website to support the implementation of Principle 6 and academic integrity.