

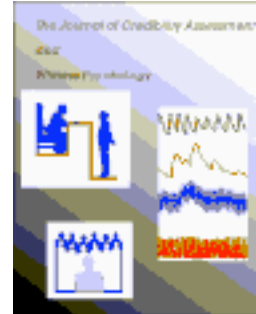
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Use of a Classroom Honor Code in Higher Education

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Abstract

The prevalence of academic dishonesty is increasing in colleges and universities and academic dishonesty is becoming harder to prevent. University honor codes are purported to be successful at reducing levels of academic dishonesty (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). However, relatively little research has been conducted on the effects of a classroom honor code at a university with no institutional honor code. In this study, a classroom honor code was instituted in an upper-level psychology class, at a large public university with no institutional honor code. Students were required to pledge on their weekly quiz, as well as exams, that they “neither gave nor received unauthorized aid”. At the end of the semester, students (n = 35) were surveyed on the use of the honor code. The results suggested that the classroom honor code had positive effects on the classroom environment and discouraged academic dishonesty.

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Use of a Classroom Honor Code in Higher Education

Professors today are not only challenged to help their students learn material, but also to prevent academic dishonesty. In 1993, 52% of students acknowledged copying from another student on a test or exam (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Davis and Ludvigson (1995) reported that 40-60% of college students have cheated, and half of those have done so on more than one occasion. There is some evidence that academic dishonesty is on the rise. Since 1964, research shows an increase of cheating on tests and exams (McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2001). A recent cross-sectional study reported that 89% of high school students, as well as 60% of college students, indicated that they copied someone else's homework within the past year (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002). With increasing use of the Internet, there is now rising concern about online plagiarism as well (Scanlon, 2003). In 1999, 10% of students admitted to plagiarizing from the Internet, whereas in 2005, 40% of students surveyed reported plagiarizing from the Internet (Center for Academic Integrity research, 2005).

With academic dishonesty is on the rise, prevention has become more difficult. Proctoring is increasingly challenging, particularly in the large class sizes typical of large public universities. A quick Internet search can provide anyone with many methods to cheat on exams. These creative tips include signal tapping (method worked out in advance to signal which letter is correct for multiple choice test), pasting notes inside a water bottle, use of invisible ink, writing answers under band-aids, and writing notes on one's leg and hiding it under shorts/skirts.

Technology is only further aiding those who want to cheat. Cameras the size of coins can photograph tests, and small MP3 players and calculators can hold vast quantities of information. Furthermore, today's Internet has introduced a new obstacle for higher education. The Center for Academic Integrity's Assessment Project survey, released in June 2005, suggests that 40% of students have plagiarized from the Internet (Center for Academic Integrity research, 2005). In addition, students can anonymously purchase papers on an array of topics, with virtually no chance of being caught. Web sites termed "paper mills", such as <http://www.fastpaper.com>, <http://www.academictermpapers.com>, and <http://www.papermasters.com>, can be located with a simple Internet search. In a national survey, 5% of students admitted to turning in a paper obtained largely from a paper mill or web site (McCabe, 2001).

This information can be disheartening for teachers. Students seem to devise new ways of cheating and faculty struggle to keep up, an observation referred to as a "cat and mouse" game (Young, 2001). An alternative to the "cat and mouse" strategy is what Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2001) refer to as an "integrity strategy". The hallmark of the integrity strategy is active promotion of responsible

behavior rather than a reaction to dishonest behavior. In contrast to having students adhere to externally-imposed rules, this strategy appeals to students' ethics and values.

One element of an integrity strategy, encouraged by Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2001), is the use of an honor code, which has been related to a reduction in academic dishonesty (McCabe & Treviño, 1993; McCabe et al., 2001). Honor codes typically have some of the following characteristics: unproctored examinations, a pledge students sign on exams and assignments, peer involvement in the judicial policies, and reporting requirements, in which students are encouraged to report on their peers' academic dishonesty (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001). At the University of Virginia, which boasts the nation's oldest student-run honor system, students pledge not to lie, cheat, or steal, and agree to report anyone doing so to a court of their peers (*The Code of Honor*, 2004). Those who are found guilty are expelled from the university. Since 2000, over 164 students have left or have been asked to leave the University of Virginia because of honor code violations (The Honor Committee: Statistics, 2006). Although honor code institutions often have unproctored exams, results based on data from nearly 50,000 undergraduates show that cheating on exams at institutions with honor codes is typically one-third to one-half less prevalent than cheating on campuses without honor codes (Center for Academic Integrity research, 2005).

Why might honor codes be related to a reduction of academic dishonesty? McCabe and Treviño (1993) propose that an honor code provides clarification of expectations regarding academic integrity, shifts the responsibility for control of academic dishonesty to the students, and provides incentives such as unproctored examinations. Students' perception of peer behavior was found to be an important contextual factor affecting academic integrity (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). Thus, at a school with an honor code, a peer culture with a pressure towards academic integrity may be present.

At larger public universities, an honor code is more difficult to establish. Students often commute to campus or attend the university part-time. Therefore, a strong sense of campus community, considered important for establishing and upholding an institutional honor code, may not exist (McCabe & Pavela, 2000). Modified honor codes have recently been proposed and used on some large campuses, such as University of Maryland-College Park with some success (McCabe & Pavela, 2005). An alternative option for large universities may be to use honor codes on a more "local" level—for example, on a department or classroom level—where an honor code community can be more easily created. While researchers have compared institutions with honor codes to those without, little research is available on the effect of classroom honor codes on academic integrity. One study did compare classes with and without an honor code (Cummings & Romano, 2002). Cummings and Romano (2002) reported no difference between the classes in the perception of instructor's trust for students,

but did find that students in the honor code class perceived cheating to be a greater risk.

After my undergraduate experiences at the University of Virginia, and my teaching experience at an honor code school, I was reluctant to teach at a school without an honor code. This research comes from my first semester teaching at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, where I instituted a classroom honor code for a cognitive psychology class. Survey data was collected at the end of the semester to measure students' perceptions and behaviors as a result of having experienced a classroom honor code.

Method

The Class

The honor code was instituted in a cognitive psychology course of 43 students at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Because class was only held once-a-week, a quiz was given at the beginning of each class period to encourage students to keep up with the reading and to review their lecture notes. Students picked up a quiz at the front of the room when they were ready to take the quiz. All quizzes were returned within the first five minutes of class starting. These quizzes were unproctored and required each student to sign a pledge. In addition to the weekly quizzes, the course also consisted of five writing assignments, a group presentation, a midterm, and a final. The midterm and final also required a signed pledge.

The Honor Code

Both the seriousness and consequences of academic dishonesty were discussed on the first day of class. Academic honesty was presented as a course requirement, and as such, the honor code was presented a compulsory part of the course. A contract was signed by everyone stating the following:

I promise to abide by an honor code in this class that I will neither give nor receive aid on any quizzes or exams, and that I will not plagiarize someone else's work.

From then on, for weekly quizzes, the midterm, and final, the students signed the following pledge:

I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this quiz/exam.

Students were not required to clear their desks or separate themselves before a quiz/exam. On exam days, as the instructor, I relayed to the students that I was

there to answer questions during exam time; I was not there to proctor them, as I trusted them to abide by the honor code they had signed.

Procedure

At the end of the semester, an IRB-approved voluntary survey was distributed. A teaching assistant collected the anonymous surveys in an envelope, with the understanding that the instructor would not look at the surveys until all final grades were submitted. The survey consisted of questions on perceptions of honor codes and cheating, how the classroom honor code affected thoughts and behavior, in this and other classes.

Results

Data from the 35 completed surveys were analyzed. Less than a quarter of the students (eight students) had experienced an honor code at some point in their life. Half of those had experienced a high school honor code (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies of various behaviors and perceptions as a result of classroom honor code.

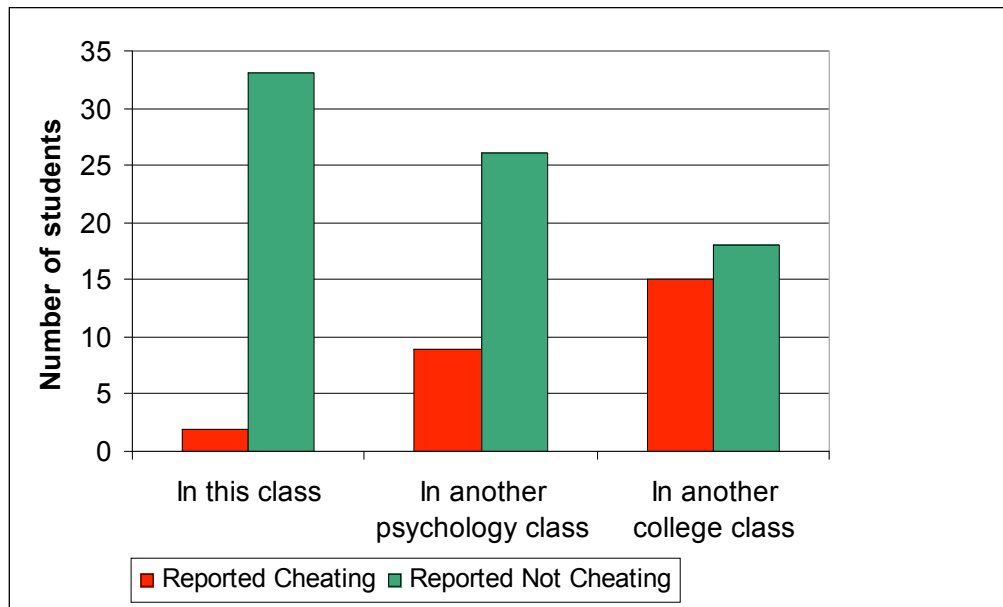
Item	Yes	No	Percent Yes
Have experienced honor code before.	8	27	22.9%
Honor code affected thoughts and/or behavior	18	17	51.4%
Have cheated in college	15	20	42.9%
Have cheated in another psychology class	9	26	25.7%
Tempted to cheat in this class	6	29	17.1%
Cheated in this class	2	33	5.7%
Witnessed cheating in college	21	14	60%
Witnessed cheating in another psychology class	14	21	40%
Witnessed cheating in this class	4	31	11.4%
Believe others may have cheated in this class	20	15	57.1%

A little over half of the students reported that the honor code had affected their thoughts and/or behavior. Answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed for how the honor code affected their thoughts and/or behavior (see Table 2). Twenty-five percent of students commented that they felt more trusted or respected as a result of the honor code. Twelve percent of students commented that the honor code encouraged them not to cheat or made them more aware of cheating.

Table 2. Analysis of answers to open-ended questions on the effect of the classroom honor code.

Item	Number of students (%)
Made me feel trusted/respected/more like a person	12 (35%)
Encouraged me to not cheat/made me more aware of cheating	7 (20%)
Felt personal obligation not to cheat	2 (6%)
Felt better about class or college/led to a better environment	5 (14%)

Students in this class reported levels of cheating comparable to other college students. Forty-three percent reporting cheated in another college class and 26% reported cheating in another psychology class (see Fig. 1). In this class, 17% of students (six students) reported that they were tempted to cheat. Six percent of the students (two students) reported cheating in this class. These two students had also cheated in at least one other class. For those that were tempted to cheat, but did not, they were asked an open-ended question about what prevented them from cheating. Three of the students (50% of those that were tempted to cheat) wrote that the honor code prevented them from cheating. Four students reported witnessing cheating. Two of the students who had witnessed cheating had cheated themselves; it is thus unclear whether they are reporting witnessing their own dishonesty or someone else's. Sixty-percent of students witnessed cheating in other college classes and 40% witnessed cheating in other psychology classes.



Fifty-seven percent of students believe that others in the class may have cheated. There was no correlation between perception of others cheating and witnessing cheating. There was no correlation between perceptions of others cheating and opinion of a classroom honor code ($r(33) = .07, p = .71$) or university-wide honor ($r(33) = .19, p = .26$). However, there is a significant correlation between having witnessed past cheating in other college classes and perception that people cheated in this class ($r(33) = .47, p = .004$).

There was an improvement of attitudes regarding honor codes. Forty-nine percent of students viewed an honor code in a classroom or university more favorably after the experience than before the experience of an honor code. To assess opinions of honor codes, a three-point scale was used (from -1 to 1), where -1 represented an unfavorable opinion, 0 represented the student was undecided, and 1 represented a positive opinion. There was a significant difference between students' report of their opinion of an honor code before the experience of one ($M = .34, SD = .54$) and how they viewed a classroom honor code after having experiencing one ($M = .80, SD = .38$) ($t(34) = -5.67, p = .000$). There was also a significant difference between students' report of their opinion of an honor code before the experience of a classroom honor code and how they viewed a university-wide honor code after the experience ($M = .60, SD = .60$) ($t(34) = -2.32, p = .027$).

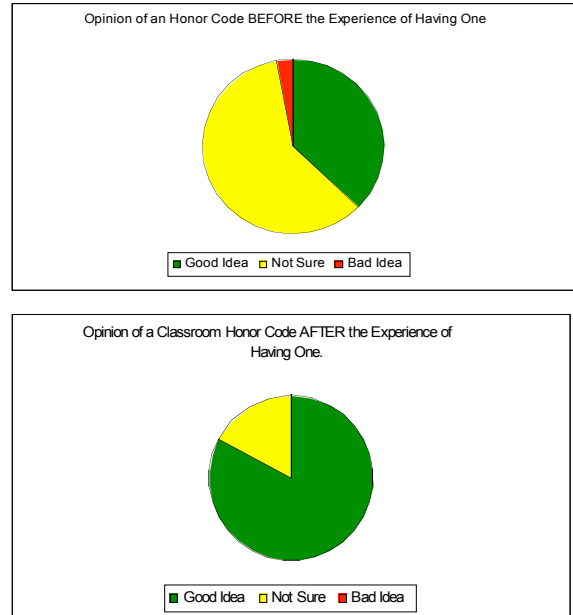


Figure 2. Opinions of Honor Code Before and After the Class.

Discussion

This research examined the effect of a classroom honor code on students' perceptions and behaviors. The honor code seemed to influence the classroom environment. Students reported feeling more trusted or more respected because of the honor code. A sample of some student comments supporting this notion is listed below:

“It made me feel more like a person than just a student.”

“I felt trusted and not so pressured like in other classes to have to appear as if I was not cheating-- I often feel guilty till proven innocent.”

“It made me more comfortable, like you didn't view us like children to watch over.”

“I liked it, I felt like I wasn't a suspect.”

Some of the comments suggested that the classroom honor code improved the student-faculty relationship:

“I felt like the professor had more faith in us.”

“Made me respect teacher more because she trusted us, unlike other teachers.”

“I thought it was cool because of the trust thing, it seems unheard of for a professor to trust students that much”

The most important goal of an honor code, however, is to reduce academic dishonesty. Some of the answers to the open-ended questions as to how the honor code affected the students' thoughts and behaviors suggested the honor code had an impact on some of the students. Listed below is a sampling of comments to this effect:

“Made me think about glancing at others papers”

“I would have felt guilty if I cheated, so I didn't.”

“It made me feel badly about even thinking about cheating”

“Encouraged me to not cheat”

Furthermore, the levels of cheating in this class were found to be relatively low, although 43% of the students reported cheating in another college class. Although there was ample opportunity to cheat on quizzes in this class, only two students actually reported cheating. Interestingly, six students admitted to being tempted, but half of those that were tempted self-reported that the classroom honor code prevented them from cheating. Hence, the classroom honor code was effective in preventing academic dishonesty for some students. This classroom honor code research is consistent with research on institutional honor codes that shows that although honor codes cannot completely prevent academic dishonesty, honor codes are able to significantly reduce academic dishonesty (McCabe & Treviño, 1993).

A few of the students, in response to open-ended questions, explained why the honor code was effective for them. These comments highlight the influence of the student-faculty relationship:

“I feel if someone puts trust in me, I don't want to let them down.”

“Even though I wouldn't have cheated anyway, it made me feel like I had more of an expressed personal obligation to you not to cheat.”

Results from research suggest that academic integrity is related to positive faculty evaluations (Stearns, 2001). It is possible the classroom honor code influenced the relationship between the student and instructor, thereby reducing

academic dishonesty. It is also possible the classroom honor code reduced cheating simply by defining and discussing academic dishonesty, as well as the consequences of partaking in academic dishonesty. As one student wrote, the classroom honor code “makes me more aware of the university policy.” Perception of peer behavior is suggested to be one of the most influential variables affecting academic integrity (McCabe & Treviño, 1993). The classroom honor code may have created a peer culture supportive of academic integrity. One student alluded to this possibility when he/she stated that the honor code “creates a sense of honesty among the students that leads to less cheating.”

An interesting outcome of this study was the change in students’ attitudes about honor codes. The experience of an honor code influenced students’ opinions on an honor code; in particular students viewed an honor code more favorably after experiencing one. As one student wrote, “I like them and I hadn’t heard of them before.” McKeachie (2002) describes how he allows his students to vote for an honor system in the class, but has found that only a minority of classes vote for the honor system. It is possible that, if his students experience an honor code once, they might vote favorably for such a system in the future. Initial reluctance in accepting an honor code may also come from the belief that others will not abide by the honor code. In the current study, although there was no correlation between perception of others cheating and actually witnessing others cheating, there was a significant correlation between having witnessed past cheating in other college classes and perception that people cheated in this class. Prior experience with academic dishonesty seemed to affect current perceptions.

One disadvantage with this research is its reliance on self-report by students. However, it should be noted that students did report cheating in other classes at rates comparable to those gathered from other surveys. Nonetheless, experimental research on honor codes would greatly enhance the literature in this area. Research comparing two similar classrooms, a control classroom without an honor code and a classroom with an honor code, would be helpful to isolate the effects of a classroom honor code. This study is exploratory in nature. Because this study is a case study, caution is advised in generalizing the results.

Future research in this area will involve pre-test measures as well as post-test measures. A peer-reporting requirement will be established, and more liberty will be given to the students on exam day (e.g., allowing a student to take the exam outside of the classroom). Also, a classroom honor code will be tested on a large lecture class (over 100 students) in the future.

At a large university, like the one where this study was conducted, it is often difficult to instate an institution-wide honor code. McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2002) examined use of a modified honor code, used increasingly for large institutions with no history of a traditional honor code. The modified honor code system typically includes student participation, but unproctored exams or use of a pledge can be used at the instructor’s option. They have been moderately

successful and are associated with lower levels of cheating (although not as low as a campus with a traditional honor code). This study offers an additional or alternative option for faculty at universities without an honor code. Honor code use could be used at a professor's discretion.

Using a classroom honor code is advantageous for a professor. It can lead to increased flexibility, reduce the need for proctoring, and potentially improve the student-professor relationship. Perhaps the most important benefit of using honor codes is that it encourages self-regulation of behavior (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001). A professor presenting an honor code motivates students to adhere to values, and not rules. Use of honor codes should be coupled, however, with other elements to reduce academic dishonesty which include defining and discussing academic dishonesty, creating a learning-oriented environment, and employing fair grading policies.

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