

Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty, by James M. Lang. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$26.95 hardbound.

Dishonesty in Context

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A few years ago, when I was teaching composition courses at Auburn University, I had a freshman from Harlem in my class. He had traveled from New York to Alabama to accept a scholarship and become the first person in his family to attend college. He was kind and thoughtful, and I liked him very much, but he was woefully unprepared for higher education; he had trouble comprehending more than a few paragraphs and could not write basic

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sentences. The university, however, was proud of this recruit, who contributed both geographic and racial diversity to the otherwise (relatively) non-diverse student body.

Encouraged by his tenacity, I met with this student regularly to teach him sentence structure and to help him turn his spoken words into written sentences. Although he improved by degrees over the course of the semester, he was never able to write a complete coherent paragraph.

During the last weeks of class, I informed him that he needed to earn at least a C+ on his final paper to avoid repeating the course. He was conspicuously absent from class whenever preliminary drafts were due, and he never responded to my prodding emails. Shortly before the due date, he materialized in my office and presented a piece of paper that contained several sentences. He asked me questions and attempted to record my responses on his paper. I reminded him that although I was happy to offer guidance, he needed to submit original work. He nodded and left my office. When, at last, he submitted his final paper, it consisted of roughly four intelligible paragraphs that regrettably had nothing to do with the assignment. I inserted these paragraphs into a

Google search and discovered that they were lifted, verbatim, from a *Wikipedia* article unrelated to the assignment. I failed the student but showed him mercy—and spared the university embarrassment—by not reporting him to the administration for disciplinary action.

To this day I wonder if there was something I could have done differently to prevent this student from plagiarizing, or whether his cheating was the inevitable consequence of being unprepared for university study. Many teachers have similar stories.

Academic dishonesty, a topic now admirably undertaken by James M. Lang, has received more scholarly treatment than I was aware of before reading *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. Like many of us, Lang grew interested in the subject because of his experiences with students who cheated in his classes. The more research he did on academic dishonesty, the more frustrated he became with “the same basic prescriptions” that were either quixotic or impracticable for one faculty member to undertake alone. One day, Lang realized that if he “looked through the lens of cognitive theory and tried to understand cheating as an inappropriate response to a learning environment that wasn’t working for the student,” he could “empower individual faculty members

to respond more effectively to academic dishonesty by modifying the learning environments they constructed.”

Lang’s goal is not to score points or court confrontation, but simply to help teachers and administrators to reduce cheating by restructuring the content and configuration of their courses and classrooms.

Lang divides *Cheating Lessons* into three parts. The first is a synthesis of the existing scholarly literature on academic dishonesty that concludes with four case studies, about which little needs to be said here. The second part consists of practical guidance to teachers who wish to structure their classrooms to minimize cheating and to cultivate the exchange of ideas. And the third, which is an extension of the second, considers speculations about potential changes to curricula and pedagogy to promote academic integrity not just in the classroom, but across campus.

Most original are parts two and three, which are premised on the structuralist assumption that systems shape and inform the production of knowledge. The treatment of academic dishonesty as a symptom of deterministic models and paradigms makes this book unique. If the models and paradigms can be changed, Lang’s argument runs,

then academic dishonesty might decline: the shift needs to be away from the “*dispositional factors that influence cheating*—such as the student’s gender, or membership in a fraternity or sorority, and so on”—toward “*contextual factors*,” the most significant of which is “the classroom environment in which students engage in a cheating behavior” (emphases in original). What’s exciting about the structuralist paradigm—if it’s accurate—is that teachers and administrators have the power and agency to facilitate constructive change.

But what if the structuralist paradigm isn’t correct? What if dispositional factors are more determinative than contextual factors in generating academic dishonesty? Lang’s argument depends upon a profound assumption that he expects his readers to share. It’s most likely that dispositional and contextual factors are interactive, not mutually exclusive: consider the student who is not as intelligent as his peers and who resorts to cheating because of his insecurity and the pressure on him to succeed. Lang *is* onto something, though: students are less likely to learn in an environment that compels them “to complete a difficult task with the promise of an extrinsic reward or the threat of punishment”

than they are in an environment that inspires them “with appeals to the intrinsic joy or beauty or utility of *the task itself*” (emphasis in original). In other words, “in an environment characterized by extrinsic motivation, the learners or competitors care about what happens *after* the performance rather than relishing or enjoying the performance itself” (emphasis in original).

How does Lang propose that teachers and administrators structure their courses and curricula to foster what he calls “intrinsic motivation” (as against “extrinsic rewards”) among students? For starters, he urges professors to help students learn for mastery and not for grades, to lower the stakes per assignment by multiplying the options for students to earn points or credit, and to instill self-efficacy by challenging students and by affording them increased opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge. In the abstract, these suggestions seem obvious and unhelpful, so Lang backs them up with interviews with accomplished teachers as well as anecdotes about successful classroom experiments: the improvising by Andy Kaufman as he taught Russian literature to prison inmates, for instance, or the unique grading system implemented by John Boyer at Virginia Tech. All the tactics and approaches discussed

and promoted by Lang can be traced back to the premise that “the best means we have to reduce cheating is to increase motivation and learning.”

Teachers everywhere seek to inspire their students to love and pursue knowledge, and despite a plethora of opinions about how best to do so, no general consensus has arisen to establish a definitive course of action for all students and disciplines. Many teachers chose their profession and discipline because they relished their own education and wanted to pass on their knowledge and love of learning to others. Lang’s insistence that teachers inspire a passion for learning is hardly novel; rather, it is *the* touchstone and stands in contradistinction to the utilitarian, standardized, test-centered, and results-oriented educational strategies that politicians, bureaucrats, and policy wonks now sponsor and defend. In this respect, *Cheating Lessons* is a refreshing alternative; it’s written *by* an educator *for* educators and not, thank goodness, for semiliterate politicians and their sycophantic advisers.

One thing this book is not: a template or checklist for constructing your own productive learning environment for students. Each learning environment is contextual; one model will not suit every setting and purpose. Because Lang cannot

and does not provide step-by-step how-to instructions, *Cheating Lessons* borders on the self-help genre and is more inspirational and aspirational than it is informational. And Lang’s meandering style—for example, his digressions about Robert Burns and coaching youth sports teams—are disarming enough not only to charm but also to contribute to the impression that *Cheating Lessons* is “light” reading.

Lang can overdo the playfulness and make exaggerated claims. Early on he quotes a Harvard administrator complaining in 1928 about the problem of cheating among students, an example that’s meant to refute the assumption that “we are in the midst of a cheating epidemic, and that the problem is much worse now than it was in the idyllic past.” Lang adds that he hopes to convince us that “cheating and higher education in America have enjoyed a long and robust history together.” But it’s not as if 1928 is ancient history. Data about academic dishonesty since that time will not convince most readers that there were as many cheating students in the one-room schoolhouses of the nineteenth century, when fewer people had access to formal education, as there are today. Perhaps anticipating such criticism, Lang invites us to “hop in our time machine and leap across centuries” to

consider the cheating cultures of the ancient Greeks and of Imperial China “over the course of [a] fourteen-hundred-year history.” But surely the substantial data we have gathered on the twentieth- and twenty-first-century academy cannot be compared to the limited and circumstantial data garnered about these early cultures; surely “illicit communication” by “cell phones” is not comparable to the use of cheat sheets in nineteenth-century China. It seems preposterous to suggest that academic dishonesty

in contemporary America exists to the same extent it did centuries ago on different continents and among different peoples with different principles and priorities.

Nevertheless, even readers skeptical of Lang’s structuralist premise and apparent optimism will find much in *Cheating Lessons* to contemplate and to amuse. Unfortunately, however, even after having read the book I’m still not sure what I could have done differently to prevent my student from cheating.