Cheating in the Cyberworld: Ideas for discouragement and prevention

Background:

At traditional universities, online courses are not the "norm". In fact, the discussants for this presentation single handedly taught 6% of all of the online classes offered in the spring of 2005. Although online courses have been around for many years, traditional, predominately non-commuter universities are just beginning to offer blended and fully online courses.

However, the time has now come for even the most traditional of universities to realize the demand and potential for online technologies as a part of a traditional undergraduate or graduate educational program. According to a recent study by The Sloan Consortium, 2.3 million students took an online course in 2004. Even students who are locally based are demanding online courses with the flexibility to fit in with individual schedules (Pope, J., 2006, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20060113/ap_on_hi_te/on_campus_online).

One of the largest issues facing online or those who teach a traditional course but utilize online technologies (e.g. online exams) is the issue of "academic dishonesty". Academic dishonesty can include various issues of cheating such as plagiarism, sharing answers on electronically administered exams, and students not doing their own work. Although these are issues that plague ALL educational environments, online courses are often cited as somehow "inferior" because of the lack of ability to prevent academically dishonest behaviors.

The Intervention

Following a rash of both on campus and online academic dishonesty policy breeches, members of the faculty of a medium-sized, Southeaster university decided to put their heads together. They came up with policies to discourage students from engaging in dishonest behavior and also assessments that made it tougher for students to cheat.

The prevention of academic dishonesty begins with policies. Our university has a straightforward policy on what constitutes academic dishonesty, the consequences of violating the policy and procedures to be followed regarding a suspected violation. That became the base for our ideas and policies.

However, having a clear policy isn't necessarily enough. With the plethora of information available online at a student's fingertips, it is important to explain the definition of plagiarism and precisely what it means to cite sources and use your own words. Something that is second nature to us as academics is virtually foreign to many students of today's generation. They believe that if it is online, it is "free" to use.

Some students also believe that they cannot or will not be caught because no one can "see" them cheating. The next part of the policy issue is to explain to students how they can be "seen" and why it is not to their advantage to attempt any form of cheating. Sites
such as "turnitin.com" or even something as simple as typing a key phrase into a search engine can catch suspected plagiarism.

When assessing student performance online, many course management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard keep track of all manner of statistics. If students are aware that you can see how long it took for them to take the test, how long it took per item, the time at which they completed each item, etc., they might be less likely to cheat with a friend. We also discovered that a test bank with randomized questioning and limiting the ability to revisit test items helped discourage cheating.

Finally, it is important to create other assignments in addition to more traditional tests to provide another method of validating whether or not a student has completed his or her own work. It is this last component that will be the most major focus of the discussion. I plan to discuss the use of case studies, project series' and discussions (among other ideas) in the roundtable discussion. It is my hope that other educators can learn from the policies, procedures and projects that we have implemented in classes to help curb the problem of academic dishonesty. Through interactive discourse, we will also be able to share ideas for the prevention of academically dishonest behaviors from other individuals and institutions as well.