The New Skills Issue

21st Century Competencies

Leaving the Tower to Read Rapunzel

Beyond Emoticons

Nurturing Ethical Collaboration

Skilled by Nature

Plus: Q&A with Sir Ken Robinson
Secondary schools have prioritized the importance of classroom collaboration as a 21st-century skill. Group activities allow students to learn from each other by pooling a range of skills to create work that is — at its best — stronger than any single student could create alone. These activities also encourage students to develop important inter- and intrapersonal skills that will help as they transition to both college and the workplace. With so much to gain for students, the classroom, and the community, it is not surprising to see this form of pedagogy used extensively in schools around the country.

BY ALEXIS BROOKE REDDING, CARRIE JAMES, AND HOWARD GARDNER

ILLUSTRATION BY LARA HARWOOD
While the benefits of student collaboration are clear, however, it is a mistake to assume that this approach is always helpful in achieving positive educational outcomes. As we have seen in schools from New York’s Stuyvesant High School to Harvard College, compromised collaboration — or cheating — can just as easily occur. In these, and many other instances, student action undermines the educational goals of the school community. In a 2012 study, the Josephson Institute of Ethics found that 51 percent of high school students admit to cheating on a test while 74 percent copied their friends’ homework. This reality, when we think about collaboration in the classroom, we cannot simply think about how to get students to work together productively. We must equally focus on the goal of guiding students to work together ethically. To do so, we need to understand three aspects of student behavior that undergird the current cheating epidemic: (i) pressures that tempt students toward cheating; (ii) community-wide cheating that becomes part of the ethos of a school community; and (iii) unreflective digital collaboration.

Here we offer some suggestions for how schools can address this pervasive problem.

COMPETING PRESSURES

The growing pressure to achieve at any cost, particularly for students who are focused on selective college admissions, can trump any inclination to follow the rules and complete work ethically. Despite frequent assumptions to the contrary, high-achieving students actually appear to cheat at the highest rates. Some estimates put the self-reported rate of cheating among students with an A average at 80 percent. In studies conducted by Who’s Who of American High School Students, students explained that their actions were “no big deal” and frequently justified their decision to cheat by the overwhelming pressure to achieve.

In the Josephson Institute of Ethics study in which 51 percent of high school students admitted to cheating, 55 percent also admitted to lying. Paradoxically, of this group of more than 23,000 teens from around the country, 93 percent reported being satisfied with their own ethical character. Findings like these suggest that students who cheat often do so with little concern over these ethical lapses. Instead, they are likely to preserve their positive sense of self by justifying their actions — claiming the course was not interest-

ing, the teacher was being unfair, or the pressure to achieve was simply too great. These kinds of neutralizing attitudes allow students to preserve their belief that they are ethical actors or “good kids” by reducing cognitive dissonance. These types of rationalizations are powerful methods of protecting one’s sense of self in the face of unethical behavior.

A CHEATING ETHOS

In June 2012, students at the highly selective Stuyvesant High School were caught cheating in a scandal that made headlines; more than 70 students “collaborated” on the state-wide Regents Exam using cell phone cameras smuggled into test rooms. Students agreed to share answers in subjects in which they excelled in exchange for answers in disciplines in which they were weaker. The goal of the exchange was to ensure that all of the students performed at a high level across these subject-specific tests, regardless of their actual abilities. In many respects, we should not have been surprised by events at Stuyvesant High School. In his 2004 book, The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead, David Callahan had already taken a closer look at Stuyvesant and uncovered a culture in which unethical collaboration was the norm. In particular, Callahan found that students regularly shared answers with each other and even coordinated schedules so that stronger students would take earlier periods of a class and pass off test answers to the weaker students taking the same tests later in the day. This practice had become so ingrained in the school culture that it was jokingly referred to as “the law of rising test scores.”

This pattern of unethical collaboration — a form of reciprocal altruism — actually has negative performance consequences for some of the participants. Indeed, the kinds of arrangements students made often meant that those offering answers did worse than the weaker students receiving them. Yet the pressure to excel in every class meant that this kind of tradeoff was perceived as being “worth it” to the range of students because it ensured they would get help in other areas of the curriculum when they needed it.

The Stuyvesant case sheds light on a phenomenon previously unacknowledged in the cheating literature — students willing to sacrifice aspects of their own performance to bolster that of their peers. This goes against many popular assumptions about students being hyper-competitive in a high-achievement environment. This collaborative effort at cheating aside, however, what is clear is that an overemphasis on grades and achievement “seems to breed dishonesty.”

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This attitude is best summed up by
a student in an 2010 editorial in The Stuyvesant Spectator, the student newspaper: "We as a student body are considered to be some of the 'best and the brightest' in New York City, if not the nation, and yet, often our high grades reflect not our hard work and academic aptitude, but rather our willingness to cheat, lie, and game the system."

DIGITAL COLLABORATION

Digital and web-based technologies provide new opportunities for collaboration, both in and out of school. Most relevant to our discussion here are digital tools for collective knowledge construction and sharing. Coauthorship is supported by wikis and collaborative platforms such as Google docs. Open encyclopedias such as Wikipedia allow for collaborative knowledge building. Text messaging, online chat, and discussion forums are further venues for sharing information and exchanging ideas. While these contexts and tools can be (and often are) used in ethical ways, there is abundant evidence that some students leverage them for illicit purposes.

Cell phone cameras were instrumental in the collaborative cheating scheme that unfolded at Stuyvesant High School. A 2009 Common Sense Media survey exploring “high-tech cheating” among teens found that 25 percent admit to using text messaging to share answers during tests and 17 percent report taking pictures of test questions to share with friends who will take the same test later. Other forms of digital plagiarism such as using cell phones to look at stored notes or online information sources during a test — were also reported. More recent studies show that “copy-and-paste plagiarism” is relatively common.

Young people’s attitudes about digital content are a crucial dimension of this problem. Indeed, data show that nearly 40 percent of college students surveyed consider digital plagiarism “either not cheating at all or just trivial cheating.” Such casual attitudes arguably contribute to the use of digital media for unethical collaboration.

Youths’ attitudes — and ethical blind spots — about the ethical dimensions of digital property and collaboration are informed by a variety of factors. Peer norms loom large here. But adults play an important role, too. If parents, teachers, and schools are not engaging youth in discussions about the ethical dimensions and dilemmas that surface around digital content and collaboration, then perhaps it’s unsurprising that youth falter. Indeed, data shows that school-based conversations about citation of sources and cheating tend to emphasize negative consequences for lapses over discussion of ethical principles underlying attribution. And, of course, the pressures to succeed only compound the problem.

COMBATTING THE CHEATING EPIDEMIC

To counter both dishonest actions and tremendous achievement pressures that can make cheating appear a viable option, it is imperative that we think critically about what “ethical collaboration” looks like. Beyond this, we need to target the apparent gap that exists between knowing what is the right thing to do and actually doing it. By helping students develop the skill of taking ethical action, we can equip them with the strategies they need so that they can behave appropriately in even the most high-pressured situations.

To teach the skill of collaborating for the 21st century, we need to account for the pressures facing students and acknowledge the tools that help them do dishonest work. In a 2013 article, one of us (Howard) outlined three steps for addressing threats to ethical behavior in a community: (1) vertical support; (2) horizontal support; and (3) wake-up calls. The three equally apply to the question of addressing unethical collaboration in school.

Vertical Support

The role of a mentor or moral exemplar is a powerful deterrent to cheating in schools. It is important to have adults who not only explicitly state why cheating is wrong but who also live those messages by prioritizing genuine learning over the mark on a report card. Leaders in any educational community need to take a strong, clear stand about what is and is not acceptable and why. In high school, this means having explicit guidelines about ethical behavior and enforcing rules when a violation has occurred. Too often, rules about cheating are clear but actual enforcement is not. Practices may differ from teacher to teacher or punishments may be unpredictable and even unjustly doled out. Any signs of deviation from school policy undermine it subtly but conclusively.
Further, to create vertical supports that encourage ethical student behavior, discussions about why cheating is wrong need to be much more than talking points that are highlighted in one assembly a year or posted on a classroom wall. These need to be a living, breathing part of the curriculum where mentors offer frequent opportunities to discuss, reflect on, and take ethical actions. Students need to see what the long-term consequences are for a culture that condones cheating and the consequences for the moral fabric of their community. They should also be asked about the practical implications of living in society that does not actively combat cheating — for example, would they want to be operated on by a surgeon who had cheated in medical school or drive over a bridge designed by engineers who had falsified their credentials?

**Horizontal Support**

The role of the peer group is key in the life of any adolescent. When it comes to cheating in high school, our challenge is to encourage students to band together to work toward an ethical community — instead of the lamentable pattern seen at schools such as Stuyvesant, where students work together for the opposite purposes. Making all students fully and equally accountable to the rules is key. It is also important to create alignment between teachers' expectations and students' understanding of boundaries in order to encourage good collaboration. In cases of deliberate cheating, students should ultimately face consequences, and these penalties should be transparent and consistently enforced. Knowing that faculty will take action when unethical behavior occurs is equally important in creating a scenario in which the long-term costs for cheating far outweigh the potential short-term gains. It may also empower bystanders who witness cheating among their peers by giving them both the confidence and language they need to speak up.

For schools with an honor code, students should have a stake in the process by holding seats on the honor council, helping revise the rules annually, and sharing new and evolving concerns with faculty. Even in schools without an honor council, student voices should be considered when creating and revising school conduct rules. The students, after all, are the best informed about the kinds of cheating that are occurring in the school environment and also play a key role in genuinely transforming the culture.

The challenge with horizontal support is also its biggest strength — students don't want to hurt their own standing by behaving ethically when they see those around them behaving in a compromised way that simultaneously gives them an edge. If we create a culture in which students do not benefit from colluding, but in which we recognize genuine academic effort, we can de-incentivize this kind of collaborative cheating. Donald McCabe and colleagues, in their 2012 book *Cheating in College*, report that high school students are not actually comfortable with their cheating behaviors — they see these transgressions as a necessary course of action to survive — and students believe they will stop cheating as soon as they get to college. We need to move that timeline forward and to give students the tools to put an end to cheating promptly and permanently.

**Wake-up Calls**

Both horizontal and vertical supports can foster opportunities to have candid conversations about group norms and even debate scenarios in which the "right" answer is not always clear. This helps students not only to develop their own ethical muscles but to do so in the context of the community in which they live and learn. When speaking of wake-up calls, we refer to events that capture the attention of the community: they can be cases of cheating, or, more positively, cases in which students behave with exemplary integrity. Ideally, these wake-up calls should involve all stakeholders — students, teachers, administrators, and parents; including parents is key because creating a community in which norms of student behavior differ from what students learn at home will inevitably undermine the gains made in school. We recall a situation in which a parent berated an adolescent publicly for cheating. The adolescent responded, "Well, when I brought home a paper with a B+, you said, 'I don't want to see anything but A's!'" In cases like this, students may feel torn between the achievement thresholds set in their homes and the ethical boundaries established at school.

The best way to approach these wake-up calls is to convene a "commons" — a space where ethical issues can be discussed and debated candidly and where tacit assumptions can be challenged. With all four stakeholder groups participating in a commons, a school community can develop a
shared view about ethical collaboration in which students, educators, and parents not only speak the same language but are on the same page. An ideal way to facilitate the kinds of rich discussions that help counter real challenges to embedded notions of success and shared definitions of ethical work is to have these diverse groups work through vignettes as mixed teams.

The Good Project — an ensemble of research projects designed to understand and promote ethics, excellence, and engagement — offers a Good Work Toolkit where these kinds of activities can be found. Since 2007, educators around the globe have used this collection of activities and vignettes, which offer nuanced ethical challenges that are prime resources for facilitating rich discussion. Allowing all members of the community to grapple with problems that occur in the gray areas — where what is right and wrong is seldom black and white — will foster the kind of dialogue that genuinely promotes the development of ethical reasoning skills and encourage the scaffolding necessary to grapple with real-world dilemmas when they do arise. With its combination of group activities and opportunities for personal reflection on individual values, schools can start a dialogue to help to address the issues with the competing pressures, cheating ethos, and digital collaborations described above.

As noted, these wake-up calls arise organically when an ethical issue arises in the community. But it is prudent to be preemptive as well. The toolkit approach establishes patterns of communication and norms for navigating these challenges in advance. Members of the community have the opportunity to practice these skills throughout the year so that they have a shared language to use when issues do arise.

Taking action to promote an ethical community is not easy and there is no quick fix. Similarly, creating a commons is not a panacea. We are challenging deeply rooted problems that exist in society at large as well as in our schools and we are contending with attitudes that, lamentably, have become ingrained over decades. However, taking these actions is an important first step toward resisting the disturbing trends we’ve seen in schools. Using the Good Work Toolkit within your school community is one promising way to begin the candid conversations, personal reflections, and group norm setting that is needed to leverage change. Ultimately, these actions — among others — can help create the kind of classrooms and schools where ethical collaboration takes place and students can genuinely thrive. In time, if there are enough students who can walk the ethical talk, the entire society will ultimately benefit.

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Notes
18. McCabe et al., 2012.
20. Our research has been generously supported by the Argosy Foundation and the Endeavor Foundation.