

THINK ON THESE THINGS

It was one of those physics mid-sem exams. It was time to turn in the paper, but I was still racking my brains with some of the multiple-choice questions. In the commotion when many are turning in their papers, I hear a voice from behind me, my friend's. He wants an answer to one of the questions. I refuse. He insists. I still continue thinking on my problem.

About ten years later, in a different IIT...

I hand out question papers at a quiz, to about 30 students. Within a minute, I see one student peeping into his neighbour's paper. I decide to look the other way to see if he continues. That had a different effect. By the end of 45 min, I had detected about half of the students peeping into each other's papers. As I collect the papers I ask "How many of you thought it was joint work?" The reply I got was, "It didn't help to do joint work". Perhaps it didn't for that exam, but that was besides the point.

It is surprising to me sometimes. Sometimes it is sad. As to how copying is something even acceptable among so many students. Of course not everyone copies, and not all the time. But even among those who do not copy, many do not mind in helping copy. And many of the rest find the dishonesty acceptable.

Though I have been aware of it since my B.Tech days, incidents such as the one above in the past year have prompted me to think more consciously on academic dishonesty. So why do so many students attempt dishonesty?

If the students who copy are trying to break the evaluation system, can something be wrong in the evaluation system? At a philosophical level, evaluation systems are never desirable. In fact, many philosophers who have thought about education criticize evaluations in general. Evaluations in general create competition and "pressure". And pressure does contribute to the reason, at least for some who would not otherwise copy. I have had students tell me "I had not worked on the assignment until the last day, and I was tempted (to copy)".

But then, even under pressure, why should someone get what one has not put in the effort for? Certainly, some of their colleagues have put in that effort. And isn't it the case that even with a poor GPA, a student from IIT is guaranteed a secure life anyway? Of course, I am not implying that one should not put in effort if life is secure anyway, or that one should copy if life were not so secure. But my point here – isn't it that there is hardly any justification in this context for attempting to get more than what one deserves?

It is one thing to look at this dishonesty from a purist point of view. Another perspective might be to not look at things in terms of absolutes, and judge the acceptability of something based on its implications. So what are the implications of widespread academic dishonesty?

This I think is easy to see in terms of parallels in other situations. What are the implications of someone trying to beat, say, the road traffic system? Given enough number of people who want to do this, we'll have something like the Kanpur city traffic at our hands. If too many people want to take short-cuts, the system suffers. To give a more serious parallel, take the government system. What happens when too many people try to beat the system through taking or giving bribery? Given enough number of people who do this, we'll have a country that is struggling for decades to develop. Aren't we seeing this so plainly? Isn't it that most people would rank corruption among the top reasons for why India is being pulled back.

Short-cuts and attempts to beat the system lead to the collapse of the system. A small crack in a building

may not matter, but given enough small cracks, it will crumble. Haven't we already seen so many indications of this in the education system? We have an increasing number of exam scams, cases of exam impersonations, cut-and-paste reports/theses/code (thanks to the Internet), etc. Why, its even possible to get certificates and degrees for little effort, and next to zero learning.

Would you be comfortable entrusting your own life, or that of your loved ones, to a doctor who has earned his or her degree by beating the system? Or entrusting buildings, bridges, dams, computer systems, transportation systems, etc. to engineers whose degrees are not well earned?

Isn't the education system of a country crucial to protect? And shouldn't we be doing this to the fullest extent within the controlled confines of our campus?

So what should be done? Should the students who copy be policed? Stricter invigilation, harsher punishments, no assignments or take-home exams, etc? I don't think policing can be a solution. Policing is necessary to a certain extent in any system. But that is to catch exceptions. And too much policing will have other effects. It will end up in a cat-and-mouse game. It would become an intellectual challenge to copy, more than to answer the exam. I have got to witness some quite amazing attempts in exam invigilations – attempts to copy right under the noses of a dozen invigilators.

Policing and punishing are not always good or complete solutions. If they are the only ways to approach a problem, that would make the system live up to Pink Floyd's opinion of schools and education. It leaves a bad taste, and would only further increase the faculty-student divide (police and policed). To the contrary, I think that the solution in part requires decreasing the divide, with roles for both faculty and students.

I have tried to communicate with the students in this respect. In the courses I taught, I had assignments and take-home exams as part of the evaluation. While giving them, I specifically even mentioned in class – "I know you can cheat, but I trust you to be honest to yourself". Sadly, in the rat-race for grades, things like "trust" and "face-to-face obligation" had little value. Sure enough, I caught several cases of copying.

But talking with these students and others has been quite an experience. Some had the fear of “what is going to happen” and of losing grades. But there were also those who realized what they did when they came to talk to me. I felt that this realization was something quite different from what just a penalty or grade reduction would have achieved. In fact, many who I talked to were fearless and candid in saying things for what they were – something for everyone including me to learn from. It takes quite a bit of reflection and analysis of one's actions to be that candid. When we have such students amongst us, I think we should be able to do better than just a policing-based solution.

So I think part of the solution lies in communication with the students, face-to-face, in such situations – instead of simply handing a zero. This is for individual faculty to do (perhaps some already do).

From the students' side, the root of this issue has to be addressed. The problem currently is the overwhelming acceptance of copying and dishonesty. Few think of it as a problem, even those who do so are under peer-pressure. It is part of the culture, not to be questioned. It is in fact extreme – there is fear of losing friendship if you *do not* help in copying! The few who feel strongly against copying are mostly silent because of this.

Shouldn't it be the opposite? Shouldn't it be part of the culture to not copy? Shouldn't there be fear of losing friendship if someone is dishonest? Of course, changing something which is part of the culture is neither easy, nor can it be quick. It requires concerted effort and constant pressure from those who are concerned.

It is up to the collective wisdom of the students to think on these things. Think on the implications of what they do. And whether it adds to the general chaos in the education system in society, or sets standards to live up to. And change passive concerns to concerted action. That way we'll have more S. K. Dubey's working against disorder, rather than people who silently add to the chaos.

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Title of article with due apologies to J. Krishnamurthy

P.S. If you wish to do something active on this issue (probably building on what procedures exist), or just wish to share your thoughts, please contact me – I would be more than happy (braman@iitk).