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Why do students cheat in examinations?

By Dr. Amin Rehmani



High stake examinations are conducted in a number of countries to gauge students' mastery over subject knowledge. Examinations are considered by students, parents and schools as important milestones in achieving their respective goals and as the sole determinants in seeking jobs or admissions in higher institutions of learning. The focus, therefore, mainly remains on achieving higher grades or marks. Students remain under tremendous pressure from their parents and schools to do well in examinations. Peer pressure is also felt for fear of being ridiculed in case of failure or low grades. Fear of failing and not being able to get admissions in colleges or universities looms over students at secondary and higher secondary (SSC and HSSC) levels. Suicides in some cases have also been reported in Pakistan, India and other countries due mostly to failure. These, therefore could be some of the reasons why many students resort to cheating to get through the examinations.

Cheating in examinations, course work and assignments, what is called academic dishonesty, is common in many countries around the globe. Reasons for such behaviour may vary from one culture and context to another depending on educational system, nature of examinations and the purpose for which the examinations are taken.

In Pakistani educational culture, cheating is unfortunately rampant, especially in high stake examinations at SSC/HSSC levels. Just like the previous year, various instances of cheating during examination of different boards have been reported this year as well both in print and the electronic media including actual footage from different cities. There have been reported incidences that a whole mafia is working behind the cheating business. This year some persons with arms barged into an examination centre and threatened the administration and examiners and forcefully demanded that certain students be allowed to cheat to finish their papers. Answers to whole question paper, commonly known as *pharras* are imported into the examination halls under the very nose of the exam centre supervisors and invigilators who sometimes have been found to be party to this business.

The society in general and parents in particular seem to be the ones who contribute towards the erosion of values of honesty, integrity and sincerity, proudly valued in our society of the yesteryears.

Why do students resort to cheating is a question educationists, teachers, parents and policy makers need to ponder over. There could be several root causes social, cultural, psychological and educational. One of the main root causes is certainly related to approaches to teaching, learning and assessment adopted by educational institutions and boards of secondary education. What goes on in classrooms in most public and some so called private English medium schools in the country is well documented. More emphasis is placed on the completion of the course which the school administrations would like teachers to follow rigorously. Again, this is mostly based on covering the textbooks from cover to cover and dictation of notes with rote learning and regurgitation of facts. Teaching and learning thus get reduced to preparing students for examinations rather than what they actually can learn and do.

Educational research in Pakistan shows that most classes adopt frontal teaching with passive approaches to learning in which students are hardly engaged actively. Teachers teach to test and students do the `busy work` of memorising everything that is taught. There is little emphasis on the students` ability to think, understand and reflect upon their learning. When students are not able to make sense and meaning of what they learn, it is likely that they would adopt surface approaches to learning rather than deep ones that require higher order thinking and reflection. Students become rather victim of diploma disease, that is, to get the certificate by using any means rather than being educated and becoming learned persons.

The board examinations in our country generally demand bookish knowledge and hardly any understanding and application of it. Learning thus becomes isolated rather than integrated. Students have little option but to memorise. Those whose memories are sharp enough may do well in examinations and others who are either weak at memorisation or are not serious to do the preparation may resort to cheating as their careers depend on passing the examinations. This is not to deny a category of students, who really work hard and try to understand what they have learnt rather than rote learn and reproduce.

Educational research on learning suggests that if students are encouraged to learn with understanding and are able to apply their knowledge, it is likely that they would be able to retain their learning for a longer period. Emphasis on conceptual understanding and logical reasoning is important for developing critical thinking in students. But this would happen when an examination system values such learning. Unless the examination system becomes prudent and imaginative enough, it is unlikely that teaching and learning in the classrooms will change and the students will be able to articulate their understanding of content knowledge and to construct their responses rather than reproduce.

Two reports published in a leading local newspaper late last year about the results of candidates taking entry tests at NED and Dawood College of Engineering, Karachi showed that a large percentage of `A` and A-1 graders of public examination boards in Sindh failed these basic admission tests which demanded logical reasoning and critical thinking. The two reports also

evidently suggested that students from the Aga Khan University Examination Board (AKU-EB) and A-Levels performed at a rate much higher than their counterparts.

These two examination systems with their imaginative assessment patterns ask challenging questions that demand understanding and application of knowledge instead of rote learned chapters. Students appearing through these exam boards know well that they have to demonstrate their conceptual knowledge and understanding in the examinations.

Although, no examination board in our socio-cultural context can claim 100 per cent cheating-free environment but it is worth mentioning that these two systems through their zero tolerance for cheating and malpractice have been able to minimise these instances to a great extent.

It is unfortunate that many other local boards around the country have taken little or no steps to control the ever increasing levels of cheating and malpractice at different tiers of an examination system resulting in apparently high grades. On the contrary, relatively less percentage as a result of much challenging and brain stimulating examinations is the true reflection of the actual ability of a student and holds far more weight than the rote learned chapters of bookish knowledge.

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