

Dr. Maritime

If you do an internet search for the words “cheating epidemic” you will come up with 534 hits. This is a common phrase used in the media to describe the increase of academic dishonesty that seems to have come along, in part, with new technologies. Cheating Epidemic.

The word epidemic is what interests me. I am teaching a senior elective on Disease in Literature this year and we have just finished discussing the ways disease is often used as a metaphor, as in drug epidemic, violence epidemic, any pervasive problem becomes linked to the concept of disease.

And then, for some reason, the war metaphor becomes attached to that – as in “we must wage a war against the drug epidemic in this country.”

I’m not sure if a battle cry has already been raised against the cheating epidemic in this country, but I want to step back and think about this word choice for a moment. Does this metaphor of cheating as a disease work and can cheating be eradicated through figurative “war”?

Is cheating like a disease? I think not – let me begin by suggesting that dishonesty is not a disease, but a symptom. What is a symptom? Symptoms deliver messages about root causes. So if cheating is a symptom, then what is the problem – what is the disease? What causes cheating?

I don’t think this is an easy question and the answer may not be the same for all people. As we work toward truly accepting and living by an honor code, we will need to do a lot of talking – so I don’t think we are going to “win a war against dishonesty,” but that we will come to a greater understanding about how our community functions.

Asia Camp

Cheating now a days seems to have become a habit. I mean, the reasons that we give for cheating *do* make it sound as if it is a contagious disease that we get from our environment around us, when in fact, cheating is just a *symptom* of a larger issue.

Earlier this week, I went around campus and took a survey on why people cheat, and believe me, some of the answers I received are great!

For example:

“I cheat cause I don’t have the time for homework”

“I cheat cause I’m just lazy”

“If the assignment is stupid, why do it myself”

“Everyone else does it, so why should I spend the time working when I could just cheat too?”

“If there’s a short cut – why take the long road?”

“I’m not going to get in trouble for it”

or my personal favorite-

“You know, honestly, I just love the feeling of knowing that I *could* get into trouble”

Cheating *is* an issue; however, the greater issues are the reasons we give to justify why we cheat. Many of us cheat because we are afraid of failure, and others do it to get ahead in life, or to “succeed” at something. But what is *true* success? Is it winning a marathon because you took the subway instead of running, or is it rigging the card game in your favor so that you win every single time you play?

Dr. Maritime

Notice that in Asia’s list of reasons for why people resort to academic dishonesty, everyone has some explanation; no one ever simply says, “I cheat because I am inherently a bad person.”

We all like to feel as if we have succeeded at something, yet if we only ever take shortcuts and easy ways out, we don’t get the chance to succeed. It is as if we assume from the outset that we can’t do it, and so refuse even to try.

Now some of you may be thinking that it all depends on the definition of success. For instance, if your definition of success is getting a good grade, it doesn’t matter how you get it. Okay, but what happens after you cheat your way to A’s? Is that it? Have you reached Nirvana?

Most likely not; more likely you now want something else – say to get into the college of your choice. So let’s say you make up a plethora of activities for your applications and have somebody else write your essays, and you get into the school of your dreams? Are you now completely satisfied?

Well no, because now you probably want to get all As in college, because that is how you measure your success. Remember though that you never did any real work in high school, so now you have to cheat again to get through college – this is sort of like Macbeth, “in blood/ stepped in so far that . . .returning were as tedious as go o’er” (3.4.168-170) – once he kills Duncan, he keeps killing because he can’t imagine any way out. Cheating leads to more cheating.

So you finish college and graduate with a slew of A’s. NOW are you happy? Again, probably not, because now you need to be dishonest on your resume so you can get a job, so you can buy a lot of things to keep filling up this desire, this emptiness, that you have created in your life. (Obviously this example is a little extreme.)

But if you are only ever focused on the external indicators of success rather than what Asia calls “true” success, you will always be left wanting more – in the words of Peggy Lee, you will always wonder if “that’s all there is to the fire?” – isn’t there more to life? (If you don’t know this great song, come by and I will play it for you.)

When my step-son Hugh was six years old, he loved to play this board game called “Sorry.” Now as far as I can tell this game has very little to do with actually being sorry.

In fact, the whole point of the game appears to be as ruthless as possible to your competitors while saying “sorry” as sarcastically as you can. Now Hugh was a “sorry” pro; he won almost every game he played. His secret? He cheated. After rounding up a group of suckers from amongst his brothers, he would return to the game and before everyone arrived, he would rig the deck of cards. By counting the number of players and ordering the entire deck so he always got the good cards, Hugh insured that he would always win.

It didn't take long for Hugh to discover some negative effects of cheating – soon his brothers all refused to play because the game itself became meaningless. The older boys didn't care so much about winning as playing a good game. Luckily, now Hugh is 8, and is beginning to appreciate the value of **playing** more than the fleeting, relatively empty satisfaction of cheating his way to victory.

Cheating to achieve a goal presumes that the end point is all that matters. Unfortunately, education involves a degree of assessment that is dependent on grades. And while grades certainly matter, if you lose sight of all else, of everything you did on the way to the final grade, then you have truly failed. Education is all that challenging, character building, sometimes exhausting but more often wonderful stuff that happens on the way to the final evaluation.

Asia Camp

The same thing goes for life too; what is the point of going through life if we cheat our way out of everything? It *is* ok not to succeed at everything. In fact, it is actually our failure that we learn the most from.

Now I know, being a student myself, that it is so much harder to sit for countless number of hours, memorizing the dreadful list of vocabulary words that you probably aren't going to know next week anyway, than it is to just glance over at your neighbor's paper; as you sit right on top of them in the cramped corner of Mr. Crowell's classroom. Yes, it is hard, very hard and tempting, but there's something about the honorable feeling you get when you're standing on the first place podium after running your little heart out in the marathon, or that feeling of dignity and pride after walking across the stage on graduation day. In the end, the true honor is knowing that you have accomplished something in an honest way!

Dr. Maritime

And now, we present to you the new Nichols Honor Code. Asia -- the envelope please.

Asia Camp: I pledge to treat all members of our school community with respect and fairness.

Dr. Maritime: I pledge to respect and foster the ideas of diversity in our school.

Asia Camp: I pledge to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty.

Dr. Maritime: I pledge to show respect and restraint while attempting to resolve conflicts.

Asia Camp: I pledge to respect the property of others.

Dr. Maritime: I pledge to value myself as a member of the Nichols community and hold myself up to the ethical expectations of the school.

Asia Camp: And the winner? We will all benefit as we strive toward these goals.

Dr. Maritime: We look forward to having many conversations with all of you throughout the school year as we work toward making this honor code an integral part of our community.

Thank you.