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If It's Wrong, It's Wrong; and More Talk Won't Make It Right

by

David J. Cherrington and J. Owen Cherrington

We find the moral relativism underlying postmodernism quite disturbing when it comes to discussions of truth and honesty. The following experience illustrates the benefit of a clear, universal standard regarding cheating.

While I was collecting the final exams in a large classroom, a student told me she observed the student in front of her looking at note cards during the exam. When this student submitted his final exam, I asked him to step into the hall where I told him I would not accept his exam without knowing what was on the note cards he had been using. He willingly retrieved them from his backpack and told me that I could plainly see that they were not of much value during the exam because he had not accurately anticipated which questions I would ask. As I reviewed the cards, I discovered that he was mostly right; only one of them contained relevant information.

While I was looking at the cards, the student made an interesting response, "You can see they didn't help me much so you shouldn't take off any points."

I finished looking through the cards and paused before I told him, "It's not just a question of taking off points, it's a question of whether I'll even score your exam."

He immediately told me that I couldn't fail him on the exam because he might not have enough points to pass the class and he needed this course to graduate. He explained that this was his last exam in his last semester before graduation. I told him I wanted to think about it.

He met me in my office and we had a long discussion as he tried to justify his behavior. He said he prepared the note cards to help him study and he had not planned to use them during the exam. He claimed that the cards had not provided any help since only one of the cards contained relevant information and he had remembered that information anyway. He also argued that the information was worthless because the leadership theory it described was not worth knowing and should not have been part of the exam. Before he was through he had challenged this question, discredited the entire exam, and even dismissed the value of giving final exams. He was not belligerent, but he was very eloquent and persistent in his defense. He adamantly maintained that I should not penalize either his score on this exam or his grade in the class. He left my office unhappy that I didn't know what I planned to do.

The next morning I found a note from him asking about my decision. His note said he still thought he should receive full points and he reminded me that the course outline had not specifically stated that students were not allowed to bring note cards into the final exam. If I still considered it cheating he said he wanted to meet with me to discuss it. And if I still disagreed with him he had other suggestions that ranged from deducting a few points on just one question to reducing his course grade by one grade point. I tried to contact him and left a phone message that said "If it's wrong, it's wrong and more discussion won't make it right."

The next time I heard from him was ten days later. He had returned in the middle of the Christmas vacation from his in-law's home because he was so disturbed about his situation. I told him that I had failed him in the class, although I did not tell him that I had conferred with the Honor Code office and learned that he had been accused of cheating in another class and plagiarizing a paper. He demonstrated a change of attitude. He acknowledged that using note cards in an exam was cheating and I was pleased that he did not blame me for his failing grade.

He asked what he could do and I offered to help him repeat the course if he would write me four brief essays in answer to questions about what is cheating, why it is wrong, and how it affects our moral character. He did so, and we had long discussions after each one. By the time he repeated the course, he had a much different attitude about right and wrong and he thanked me for taking a stand. He said that not being able to graduate in December had cost him a good job at a bank. But he admitted that his casual attitudes about cheating and honesty would have made working in a bank disastrous for him. Several months later I received a short note from him saying that he was working for a financial services company and that he had already used the lesson he learned in a board meeting: "If it's wrong, it's wrong and more discussion won't make it right." Unfortunately, he didn't elaborate on the situation.

A postmodern approach to handling this situation would not have produced the kind of moral development for this student that was initiated by a dichotomous standard of right versus wrong. Postmodern theorists claim that all theory is socially constructed and they reject the belief that rational thinking or the scientific method can lead to valid knowledge. Accordingly, there are many sources of knowledge, and claims to knowledge are seen as partial, fragmented, and incomplete. This position rejects the idea that there is universal truth or general knowledge. The implications, then, are that dichotomous discussions of right and wrong, good and bad, and moral versus immoral are viewed as naive dualism and reductionism that should be replaced with a more enlightened acceptance of ambivalence, paradox, and heterogeneity.

A disturbing implication of postmodernism is how disagreements with it are squelched and even demeaned. For example, a recent article advocating a postmodern feminist approach for teaching human sexuality stated "A keystone of a feminist postmodern perspective is the rejection of a unitary truth or knowledge," (*Family Relations*, vol. 50, 2001: 23-33). Thus, people who claim that something is true or that there are universal standards of morality are criticized for being judgmental and dogmatic. This article specifically states that those participating in these discussions should refrain from judgmental comments and disapproving body language. Ironically, those who believe in universal morality are prevented from expressing their views for the sake of preserving openness of expression.

Our experiences in helping people who have been involved in dishonest behavior does not square with this postmodern approach. When people have taken things that do not belong to them, said things they know are not true, or obtained unauthorized help on an exam, we have learned from experience that applying universal standards to their behavior have been far better in helping them recognize their mistake and internalize higher moral standards.

A discussion with this student deconstructing the meaning of cheating and plagiarizing would

have detracted from the central issue here which involved a student doing what he knew he should not have done. Justifying note cards because they are not prohibited by a course outline, questioning the relevance of leadership, and challenging the value of exams are issues that draw attention away from the real issue here – did the student cheat on the exam? This is a moral issue and being nonjudgmental is not helpful.

This is not to say that there are no moral issues in this situation that need to be discussed. The severity of punishment and whether the person should suffer future consequences, and if so, for how long, are important moral issues that require consideration and may lead to disagreement. But these are issues that should not detract from a basic recognition that cheating is unacceptable and wrong. If it's wrong, it's wrong; and more talk won't make it right.