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The Loophole Generation

by Jennifer Summerville and John Fischetti

When we speak to colleagues across campus and across the country, almost everyone who teaches online tells the same stories. An increasing number of students spend considerable energy seeking, finding, and negotiating loopholes in online course assignments. While this behavior is not new or shocking, the anonymous, self-driven nature of online classes may exacerbate the tendency (Kennedy et al. 2000). Rather than the exception, this behavior is becoming the rule.

Social trends and changes in national education policy have combined with technology to influence today's students in ways that educators often do not understand. Some observers have called millennials (those born since 1980) the "helicopter generation," referring to the way many parents hover above even their adult children, involving themselves in the day-to-day business of learning and even intervening on their behalf. Where past students were largely on their own when handling academic issues, today it is common for a parent to e-mail administrators and professors for explanations about a child's poor performance in class (White 2005). This sort of intervention often moves the focus away from the student's performance to a negotiation among multiple parties about grades.

National education policy contributes to these trends with the recent emphasis on high-stakes testing in the K-12 public school environment (Goldberg 2005). High school teachers, in particular, complain about feeling pressured to teach to state-mandated tests. Enlarging the role of tests has had a chilling effect on the curriculum, as it has compelled educators to spend more time on test preparation and memorization at the expense of project-based learning, open-ended assignments, and inquiry-based instructional approaches. Most of our current college undergraduates were the best students in their high school classes, doing well at listening, taking notes, and passing multiple choice tests that primarily measure low-level knowledge. Trained to be good test takers, they frequently arrive in the college classroom unprepared to take charge of their own learning and to pursue knowledge as independent thinkers.

In what follows, we address some of the further factors—particularly related to information technology—that pose special challenges to online instructors as they face a new generation of students, and we outline some of the more typical behavior patterns that such instructors are likely to encounter in their work. We then provide some recommendations for how instructors can disrupt these behavior patterns while stressing the vital link between ethically responsible practice in the university and the similar expectations students will encounter in their professional careers.

The Loophole Generation

We coined the phrase *Loophole Generation* to describe a group of students whose approach to coursework is influenced by the ease of online communication, hovering parents, a limited sense of intellectual curiosity, and a lack of experience in solving problems imaginatively. These students spend their time (and their instructors' time) exploiting gaps in class policies or assignments—sometimes spending more time than would be necessary to complete a particular project in the first place. This behavior emerges from the conditions prevalent in K-12 education and is likely to manifest itself in the post-academic careers of loophole-seeking students as well (Lanier 2006).

While loophole seeking (or *loopholing*) is not a new phenomenon, the convergence of online technologies, the opportunities to "borrow" another's work, and the 24/7 reality of Web-based learning create additional

breeding ground for this behavior. Many students work on online course assignments very late in the night or very early in the morning, including when they are very tired or subject to various influences or distractions. The online medium also creates a sense of empowerment to demand certain privileges that a student would not ask for (or would ask for in a more professional manner) in face-to-face situations (Zimmerman and Milligan 2007). Because most online assignments can be completed from anywhere there is Internet access, the level of excuses has risen to include almost any reason why a student is unable to complete assignments as designed or in the required timeframe.

The research on online plagiarism and cyberbullying shows an increase in both behaviors. The increase in plagiarism is primarily due to the ease of access to online resources and casualness about cutting and pasting. As the plagiarism education Web site Plagiarism.org points out, "The Internet now makes it easy to find thousands of relevant sources in seconds, and in the space of a few minutes plagiarists can find, copy, and paste together an entire term paper or essay" (2007, ¶2). Gardiner (2001) writes, "I understand that the temptation of exchanging hours of research and writing for a few minutes of searching seems like a good deal as a deadline looms" (174). McCabe and Trevino (1996) reported that 15% of all students they studied had submitted a paper obtained in large part from a term paper mill or Web site, and 52% had copied a few sentences from a Web site without citing the source. Instant messaging, blogs, and online chats often appear to be anonymous, and a participant's sense of what is appropriate in those cyberspace interactions may differ from his or her view of suitable face-to-face encounters (Summerville & Fischetti 2005). As Patchin and Hinduja (2006) observe, "Although 'power' in traditional bullying might be physical (stature) or social (competency or popularity), online power may simply stem from proficiency" (152).

The Personalities

Four types of loophole-seeking strategies seem to be the most common.

The Excuse Maker is a classic type now enhanced by technology. Old howlers typified by "my dog ate my homework" have evolved into more plausible stories in an online environment without face-to-face encounters. Online teachers constantly hear pleas such as "the system was down," "I have a virus on my computer," or "I sent you the wrong attachment." Appeals to a family or personal crisis remain the most popular source of excuses for not completing assignments, and the technology that makes online education possible makes an ironic contribution to this class of loophole-seeking behavior. Students in online classes enjoy a flexible environment with nontraditional schedules, which should allow them to use time efficiently on assignments. This key advantage of online learning also creates greater possibilities for students to become distracted or preoccupied by the troubles of family, friends, or roommates, or by other factors in their lives.

The Bully is particularly problematic because of his or her potential to disrupt the work of other students. The bully can cast a pall over an entire class, often by combining negative comments with personal insults, threats, and harassment. Some bullies use derogatory or flippant language in discussions and postings that they would not use in live settings. Communications technology can enable this behavior, making students feel less pressure to moderate their self-presentation. Hostile interactions could derive in part from students who have anger management or substance abuse problems that are more freely expressed in the unstructured environment of the online class. After all, students can be online at any hour, in any mood, and under the influence of any drug or alcohol product (Summerville and Fischetti 2005).

The Cheater may use a wide variety of techniques used to avoid work. He or she may copy entire assignments from another classmate, submit work posted as examples by the professor as his or her own, contribute little to no work to group projects, have someone else help with an online test, or purchase an entire paper from an online retailer. These students are fully aware of what they are doing. Even with university honor codes and instructor-developed online codes of ethics, this behavior persists.

The Plagiarizer specializes in creating a mosaic of several sources and presenting the results as his or her own. Many such students have plagiarized their way through high school and basic studies courses in college, often without completing any project that consists of something other than borrowed information (Stengold 2004). The ease of access to an abundance of materials on the Web makes this easy to accomplish, and the emphasis on test-taking in K-12 education has influenced many students to seek answers rather than to explore questions. To the amazement of teachers, many of today's college students are not even aware of what constitutes an academic crime or what consequences can result from it. Plagiarism is so common that almost every class in our own department includes at least one persistent plagiarizer, in spite of online postings, class announcements, Web page reference support, and tales we share with students about the most recent person to receive an F and be removed from the program.

Suggestions for Eliminating Loopholing

What can educators do to minimize loopholing in online coursework? One immediate goal should be to make it more difficult to find and exploit loopholes in classes than it is to actually complete coursework. Crafting policies and designing assignments that thwart these strategies will help preserve the academic integrity of online courses and reacquaint students with the virtues of imaginative problem solving. Educators need to design coursework that rewards independent thought and squashes the idea that loopholing is a productive use of time.

First, instructors must outline clear expectations and governing policies in the course syllabus. One effective method for ensuring that students know the rules is to have them sign and return a course agreement at the very beginning of class ([Exhibit 1](#)). Such an agreement might include everything from the importance of having a reliable computer system at home or at school (though not at work) to an online code of conduct governing proper online behavior to create a safe online learning environment ([Exhibit 2](#)) (Summerville 2005). Functioning like an employee handbook, the agreement governs how the class operates and keeps everyone on the same page, thwarting the behavior of bullies, cheaters, and plagiarizers.

Instructors must also foreground the goal of closing loopholes when designing assignments and crafting assessments. The language used in a syllabus designed for an online class must be unambiguous. Excuse makers, for example, will find vague terms or point system glitches and create openings for appeals, demands, and grievances. Creating varied, novel, and authentic forms of assessment will help motivate students to see assignments differently (Christe 2003). Tying assessments to the career goals of students is one effective strategy. If students must create products that may be useful in a future workplace, they will have more of a stake in the outcome of their studies. Assigning projects that require individual interpretation of content unique to the course will make cheating more difficult. Acquiring answers to a multiple-choice exam or copying an entire essay to satisfy a general question can be easy to do, depending on how the exam is designed. It is inherently more difficult for students to complete a project with real applicability, such as an individual lesson plan or marketing strategy that uses details unique to the course.

Creating assignments that combine independent and group work is another effective way to manage student behavior in an online class. This approach provides opportunities to assess students in two different working situations and lets them practice both self-direction and collaboration. Assessment of group work should include peer-and-self reporting, which prompts students to reflect on the project and gives group members incentive to do their fair share ([Exhibit 3](#)). Students will encounter this style of collaboration when they enter the workforce. Connecting academic projects to their career expectations can effectively impress students with the concept of consequences for unacceptable behavior and, in particular, minimize or expose the bully.

This type of assessment is not always feasible, of course. Exams using multiple-choice, matching, or short-answer formats can be appropriate tools of assessment. Using exams in an online class, however, confronts teachers with the difficult challenge of thwarting cheaters. It is often not possible to expect students enrolled in an online class to travel to a proctored site for a test. Teachers must use other methods to secure

the integrity of an online exam. A test bank with randomized answers that change each semester can eliminate opportunities for outright cheating. Timing the exam while allowing an open-note environment is another good option. Students feel less pressure to cheat when they are allowed to use notes and are better able to analyze and synthesize information. This approach requires well-constructed, high-order questions so that content is assessed through interpreting, synthesizing, and analyzing rather than through recalling basic facts. It is also crucial to make sure that students understand the difference between open note, which may be allowed, and "open neighbor," which is not.

In addition, today's course management systems include a variety of tools that allow instructors to monitor the progress of students. If these tools are to be used, students should be informed that their interactions are recorded (Christe [2003](#)).

Making Connections Between Schoolwork and the Workplace

Teachers can educate students about the connections between ethical behavior in class and in the workplace, and they can strengthen these ties by adopting some common workplace rules in the classroom. A three strikes policy, for example, governs many workplaces. The first offense typically gets an oral warning. A written warning meets a second offense. On a third strike, the employee is generally dismissed. Many workplace offenses are identical to Loophole Generation course behaviors, such as tardiness, sending bullying e-mail, copying the work of others, and not contributing in a group effort. Instructors can emphasize that both ethical practices and negative habits can easily carry over to the workplace.

Teachers should use a similar procedural awareness and acceptance policy in their course delivery. The first acknowledgement is the student's signed agreement of the university's acceptable use policy, published as part of all official catalogues and signed off on by each student at the time an e-mail account is created. The second acknowledgement is student acceptance of the specific course rules or code of conduct. This formal act at the beginning of a class, which could be included in the course agreement, indicates that a student is aware of the university policies and specific course interpretations of those policies. The third acknowledgement specifies the actual violation and the teacher's response.

Teachers should converse with all colleagues about student ethics, since these issues are not unique to online learning. A faculty member who teaches traditional courses may have successful techniques for reducing plagiarism or responding to excuses. Departmental colleagues working in concert on these issues can create a culture that mentors students toward appropriate and informed attitudes about academic honesty.

There is push-back currently underway for policing all interactions and projects and in protecting students' privacy and freedom of speech rights. Web sources such as Turnitin.com are facing legal challenges that will likely lead to further clarification in the courts regarding how online tools can be used to safeguard academic integrity (Foster [2002](#)). This reality increases the need for teachers to develop assignments and assessments that are more cheat proof and to have a clear procedural awareness and acceptance policy.

Conclusion

Students who are apt to exploit loopholes are not generally successful in many of the careers for which they are going to school. We can teach students that doing their own work is rewarding and lead them by example, but students of the Loophole Generation who are so inclined will continue to find our unintended course and program loopholes. Through continued refinement of syllabi and stronger rubrics for assignments, we can better anticipate how the habits and personal motivations that guide the lives of our students might clash with deadlines for quality work. We can close many of the loopholes and help convince students who are tempted to exploit them that maybe, just maybe, finding loopholes in lieu of doing the work simply is not

worth the effort.

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