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Contract cheating: a new challenge for academic honesty?

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Abstract 'Contract cheating' has recently emerged as a form of academic dishonesty. It involves students contracting out their coursework to writers in order to submit the purchased assignments as their own work, usually via the internet. This form of cheating involves epistemic and ethical problems that are continuous with older forms of cheating, but which it also casts in a new form. It is a concern to educators because it is very difficult to detect, because it is arguably more fraudulent than some other forms of plagiarism, and because it appears to be connected to a range of systemic problems within modern higher education. This paper provides an overview of the information and literature thus far available on the topic, including its definition, the problems it involves, its causal factors, and the ways in which educators might respond. We argue that while contract cheating is a concern, some of the suggested responses are themselves problematic, and that best practice responses to the issue should avoid moral panic and remain focussed on supporting honest students and good academic practice.

Keywords Ethics · Academic honesty · Plagiarism · Contract cheating

Contract cheating has recently emerged as a form of academic dishonesty, where students contract out their coursework to writers or workers, usually found via the internet, in order to submit the purchased assignments as their own work. While the prevalence of contract cheating is unknown, some of the available information is alarming, and detecting contract cheats is difficult. In addition, the phenomenon of contract cheating highlights a number of systemic issues within higher education, challenging academics to consider the ways we might contribute to the environment in which such practices emerge and proliferate. As such, it is timely to discuss what educators can do about this problem, what its effects might be, and why students may be tempted to resort to it. As we aim to show below, however, it is also important to avoid overreactions to this issue which may be counterproductive.

The aims of this paper are to provide an overview of the available literature relating to contract cheating, to point out some of the pedagogical and ethical issues it raises, and to provide some recommendations for how higher education institutions can best respond. In "Definition and Overview" we examine definitions of contract cheating and how it is located in relation to other forms of academic dishonesty. We also provide an overview of what is

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known about the extent of the practice in different locations and across disciplines, its status in terms of legalities and university rules, and the quality of the work obtained via various methods of contract cheating. In "Problems of Contract Cheating", we discuss some features of contract cheating which suggest that it may be both more difficult to deal with, and more academically problematic than other forms of plagiarism, and outline some of the reasons that contract cheating should be of concern to educators, including its possible consequences and the ethical issues it raises.

Thus far the literature on contract cheating has focused primarily on computing assignments, and on responding to the phenomenon with increased detection measures. This is discussed in "Detection". We argue that such measures can never hope to catch all contract cheaters, and that in any case a focus on detection may be counterproductive and contain elements of moral panic. In "Causes of Contract Cheating" we discuss the causes of contract cheating to further our understanding of the trend and how it relates to other forms of academic dishonesty. In "Prevention and Deterrence", we discuss some prevention and deterrence measures. These measures are adapted from the plagiarism literature, and while they are currently untested for contract cheating, we consider this approach more promising than a focus on detection, given its ineliminable difficulties. The final section provides some recommendations for dealing with contract cheating. We argue that such measures should focus on reducing the appeal of contract cheating.

Definition and Overview

The term "contract cheating" was coined by Lancaster and Clarke (2006) in a study of students using websites such as RentACoder.com (now vWorker.com), to contract out their university assignments. RentACoder/vWorker is an auction-style website that allows potential employers to advertise specific tasks, then workers, most of whom are freelance computer coders, bid to undertake these tasks and the employer selects a candidate. Lancaster and Clarke (2006) defined contract cheating as "the process of offering the process of completing an assignment for a student out to tender." Lancaster and Clarke located the practice within a broader trend for using 'non-originality agencies'; that is "commercial companies that produce assignment solutions to order for students that match a provided specification" (2006). It thus referred specifically to the use of internet auction sites as the method of contracting out coursework.

While contract cheating of this kind was first noticed in the area of computer coding, it can take place in any discipline, and at any level. And while the technological aspects of contract cheating might be new, the phenomenon is not. Custom-essay writing companies, which also produce original work to the specifications provided for students to submit as their own, for payment, have existed for many years and have recently proliferated as online businesses (Gallant 2008: 21; 25). Ed Dante, employed as a writer for one such company, writes:

> I've written toward a master's degree in cognitive psychology, a Ph.D. in sociology, and a handful of postgraduate credits in international diplomacy. I've worked on bachelor's degrees in hospitality, business administration, and accounting. I've written for courses in history, cinema, labor relations, pharmacology, theology, sports management, maritime security, airline services, sustainability, municipal budgeting, marketing, philosophy, ethics, Eastern religion, postmodern architecture, anthropology, literature, and public administration. I've attended three dozen online universities. I've completed 12 graduate theses of 50 pages or more. (Dante 2010a)

While contract cheating is often seen as plagiarism, James S. Page (2004) offers a useful distinction between 'pseudepigraphy' and plagiarism. The former is the practice of ascribing the work of one author to another, while the latter involves copying all or part of a work (2004: 429). This location of such cheating practices helps to reveal several of its features. For instance, pseudepigraphic practices involve a different sort of deception to plagiarism via copying—that is, *mis*attribution rather than lack of attribution—and it is generally produced by one author on the student's behalf. It also links the practice more directly to some older pseudepigraphic forms of cheating, such as having a friend or classmate write your work for you (for a fee or otherwise), or buying pre-written or custom-written essays from companies set up for this purpose. Contract cheating is a form of *cyber*-pseudepigraphy, that is, the practice of obtaining the work of another via the internet in order to present it as one's own. Since this includes buying pre-written work which may have been submitted to universities before, such as through essay mills, cyber-pseudepigraphy includes more than contract cheating on Lancaster and Clarke's original definition. Contract cheating is, strictly speaking, a form of pseudepigraphy, although it will likely continue to be treated and labelled as a form of plagiarism, broadly construed as presenting another's work as one's own. Since both are issues of academic dishonesty, institutions will probably address them together, so not much hangs on the terminology.

Reflecting the similarities between the original intension of the term 'contract cheating' and other forms of academic dishonesty, the term has evolved to encompass a cluster of related practices. In a 2007 paper Clarke and Lancaster define contract cheating as "submitting original work that has been produced for you for academic credit, without acknowledgement of the original source" (2007a: 343). This definition includes not only auction sites and buying work from custom-essay writing companies, but also the use of 'homework help' and other discussion websites, where students can post questions to other users and receive answers from them. These answers are generated in response to their question and so are original. Thus the term here refers to practices where a student obtains original material for their assignment, generated on request through the internet, but the work need not be paid for, nor undertaken via a contract. A 2009 presentation by Lancaster and Clarke also includes contracting work through social networking sites, and what they call 'liveware' approaches (i.e. having friends or fellow students do the work) as contract cheating. Lancaster and Clarke speak throughout of contract cheating as one form of plagiarism, defined as presenting another's work as one's own. Their definitions emphasise the features of originality and personalised design of the work submitted.

Here we will use 'contract cheating' to refer to a range of these related practices, but will also try to note the some more of differences between them, later in this section. We will distinguish contract cheating from what we will call 'classic plagiarism', that is copying part or a whole of a work without attribution, with or without paraphrasing; and from cyber-plagiarism, that is copying part or whole of a work from websites without attribution, with or without paraphrasing. We aim to focus on issues that arise specifically with regard to custom writing, rather than copying, and to stress the continuity of these practices with older forms of academic dishonesty.

Given how recently these practices have emerged, there is little literature dedicated to them as yet. Lancaster and Clarke have undertaken a number of studies on contract cheating (2006, 2007a) with detailed work on auction sites in particular, and they also provide several discussions of the topic (2007b, 2008, 2009). Their studies have focused primarily on computing assignments. There is a small amount of literature by other authors on the topic (Page 2004; Jenkins and Helmore 2006; Mahmood 2009). A number of small or informal experiments in contract cheating have been undertaken by journalists reporting on the trend

(Shepherd 2008; Cybercheats making a small fortune 2006), academics (Oppenheim 2005), and 'market researchers' giving advice to students on the best methods and websites (e.g. Stevenson 2001). Some recent studies on plagiarism more generally have gathered information on contract cheating practices, and student attitudes towards them (Sisti 2007; Devlin and Gray 2007). These provide useful information on the practices at issue here in contrast to other kinds of academic dishonesty. Further information comes from several articles by, and interviews with, writers working for custom essay companies (Dante 2010a, b; Mamatas 2008; Witherspoon 1995).

While the extent of the practice is unknown and would be very difficult to discover, the growth of the supply side of the practice, as seen in the proliferation of custom essay websites, indicates it may be widespread (Page 2004: 431). Several sources have observed that custom essay companies 'flyer' students at larger universities in the USA and UK, and advertise in the student press (Bornstein 2007: 105; Shepherd and Tobin 2007). Lancaster and Clarke's initial (2006) study of RentACoder.com found that 12.3% of requests for work on this website were for assignments, and there are many other similar auction sites in use.[1] Surveys undertaken by Donald McCabe through the Centre for Academic Integrity at Duke University found that 7% of undergraduate respondents had turned in work written by another within the previous year, and 3% had turned in a paper bought from an essay mill (the survey did not distinguish between contract cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty in the way we have here) (McCabe 2005: 6).

Lancaster and Clarke's studies indicate that the majority of requests for contract assignments come from the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia (2006). This may be an artefact of their focus on Anglophone websites, although Mahmood (2009) also notes a loose correlation between requesting location and typical rates of internet use for that location. Most users had posted between two and seven assessments, suggesting repeat use within a course of study.[2] Requests were primarily for assessments for undergraduate and for lower level units, but there were also some higher level assessments, including postgraduate work.

Legally speaking, not much can be done to address the supply side of this trend. Auction sites are legitimate businesses which happen to be open to abuse, and sites differ in the extent to which they may discourage (or indeed encourage) such misuse. Lancaster and Clarke report having had some particular bid requests removed from these websites on the basis that the assessment specifications given by the student poster on the site violated the copyright of the lecturer who had set the assessment (2009). Some custom essay companies, such as Oxbridge Essays and Elizabeth Hall Associates, claim merely to provide 'model answers' for use in guiding and inspiring the student, rather than supplying them with work to submit, and even require their customers to sign a form verifying that they will not submit the product as delivered. Despite the weakness and transparency of these claims, it would be difficult to prove the supply of such 'exemplar' essays involved legal infringement. Since these companies also guarantee confidentiality to their customers and that they will not publish the work in any other location, and since a virtual enterprise might have no particular geographical home, there would be practical difficulties in pursuing legal action.

Contract cheating will clearly be unacceptable in terms of a university's rules, since it is a form of academic dishonesty. However, few universities have thus far provided explicit rules

[1] A list of sites associated with contract cheating can be downloaded from http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/events/displayevent.php?id=182. RentACoder.com, now called Vworker.com, has since become more vigilant in removing such posts (Lancaster and Clarke 2009).

[2] Some users had also posted large numbers of assignments from different institutions, which Clarke and Lancaster considered likely to be companies acting as middle men.

or guidelines for students on this particular form of academic dishonesty. Oxford University recently made it an explicit offense to use (or to work for) a custom essay company, but this appears to be the exception rather than the norm (Shepherd and Tobin 2007).

There are some differences between the various practices included here as contract cheating. The significance of these differences for evaluating the practices is not entirely clear given that knowledge of the practices is still in development, but it is worth noting some potential implications. For example, as noted above, some internet auction sites used by students for contract cheating are legitimate businesses facilitating work contracts between businesses and freelancers, while custom essay writing companies are entirely devoted to helping students cheat (Jenkins and Helmore 2006: 124). This specialisation may indicate higher quality from custom-essay companies in general, since authors taking this kind of work through auction sites may not have the same interests in retaining students as repeat customers as do custom-essay companies. Many custom-essay companies guarantee their essays will not trigger plagiarism detection software, for instance, while several of the informal studies of contract cheating through auction sites produced work that turned out to be mainly copied from a third source, and/or was poorly and insufficiently referenced (Shepherd 2008; Oppenheim 2005).

Another difference is the location and background of the authors involved. Several sources suggest that offers to complete work posted on auction sites not infrequently came from India, the Philippines, and other places where currency exchange rates allow work to be offered cheaply (Lancaster and Clarke 2006; Shepherd 2008; Daily Mail 2006). In contrast most custom essay companies are located in the UK, Canada, and the USA, and are accordingly likely to be more expensive for student customers. An effect of this geographic difference is that work from custom essay companies may be more likely to use language in ways that meet the university's expectations. Indeed, Mamatas (2008) notes that some authors working at his custom essay company had previously taken the courses for which they were now selling work. In general then, work from custom essay companies may be yet harder to detect than work from auction sites.

The quality of custom-bought work using these different methods may also tend to vary across disciplines. Some studies of humanities and law essays obtained through auction sites suggested the quality was likely to be low (Shepherd 2008; Levinson 2005), although these were informal studies with very small sample sizes. However, Jenkins and Helmore's (2006) study found the overall quality of computing assignments obtained through auction sites to be high. Dante (2010a) provides us with an outline of his less than academically desirable research practices: he would focus on gleaning quick summaries of a topic from Wikipedia, Google searching, and Google previews and, being paid by the page, became an expert in stretching material. Mamatas (2008) similarly states the need for custom-essay authors *not* to engage too deeply with the assessments they write. However, while it is likely that custom-essay writers may not produce work of the highest standard, it may well be of a higher standard than the work students would have written for themselves. The work is produced by experienced authors and the apparent rate of repeat clients (Dante 2010a) suggests an acceptable standard.

Problems of Contract Cheating

As we saw above, contract cheating differs from classic or cyber-plagiarism in that it generates an original piece of work, it involves a different kind of deception, and the piece has a single author. These features have a number of practical and conceptual implications.

That the work is original means contract cheating is very hard to detect. Plagiarism software will not detect it, and even in cases where a marker is suspicious that the work was not produced by the student, it is very hard to prove that they obtained the work by finance rather than effort. This near impossibility may also discourage markers from following up on any suspicions they might have (Mahmood 2009: 94). The author of the work colludes in the deception.[3] Mahmood points out that it is partly because of the author's collusion that contract cheating is so hard to detect: it means work will typically not be made available elsewhere (2009: 93). That the work produced for contract cheaters will have a single author adds to detection difficulties, since single-author work will be less likely to include traditional 'plagiarism tells' such as sudden changes in topic or style. That the work is produced for the student to their specifications again contributes to the difficulty of detection, since it will be more likely to address the given assessment task directly than would a copied source or a pre-written essay.

The form of deception involved in contract cheating arguably makes it *more* fraudulent than other forms of plagiarism (Page 2004: 430). Classic and cyber-plagiarism sometimes occur when students are unaware of how properly to reference and quote (Lofstrom 2011: 3). They can occur unintentionally if a student makes mistakes while note-taking, references carelessly, or even unconsciously borrows ideas they have previously read (Page 2004: 431).[4] Classic and cyber-plagiarism also often involve small parts of a piece of work being copied and interwoven with the students' own work, or parts from different sources being interwoven with each other. This seems to involve at least some effort on the part of the student (Page 2004: 430)—and, perhaps, some learning too. It is arguable that this kind of plagiarism is blurrily defined, given the fine line between paraphrasing another's idea without attribution and just writing derivatively, and that an over-reliance on the work of others could potentially be part of a process in which a student comes to 'find their own voice'. Contract cheating has none of these potentially excusing or redeeming features.

The ethical problems of contract cheating differ from those of plagiarism. The wrongness of plagiarism among students involves (at least) two issues with the act of plagiarising. First, plagiarism involves a form of intellectual theft: the plagiarist uses the ideas of another without proper recognition. The term is from the Latin *plagiarius*, meaning kidnapper, seducer or plunderer (Online Etymology Dictionary 2011)—the plagiarist commits a kind of theft against the originator of the words or ideas used. Secondly, plagiarism involves a kind of fraud, which is committed against the reader or marker of the work: representing the words or ideas as though they were the author's own. In contract cheating, since the real author colludes with the cheater, the 'theft' aspect of the action is removed. However, the fraudulent aspect of the act is strengthened, due to the lack of any of the above redeeming or excusing features, which apply to most cases of plagiarism.

The main practical and ethical problems raised in the literature on contract cheating thus far have been with regard to its consequences. Students engaging in contract cheating gain marks and qualifications that have not been earned, and so may be less competent than they should be upon entering the workforce. Some writers have worried that contract cheating

[3] It is possible that this does not always apply to contract cheating through auction sites, if the student disguises what they want the work for and the assignment is something of potential commercial value. However Jenkins and Helmore's study suggests that students rarely need to disguise their intentions (Jenkins and Helmore 2006).

[4] Roig (cited in Sisti 2007: 218) labels this 'crypomnesia': "the unconscious appropriation of another author's work by a plagiarist who thinks the work they are producing is original".

could result in a devaluation of university degrees in general (Lancaster and Clarke 2006, 2009; Mahmood 2009). We think that this is likely an overstatement. Fake degrees and the opportunity to pay for coursework have existed for many years, and even if contract cheating is increasing, this does not imply that rates of cheating themselves are increasing. Gallant's (2008) historical overview of cheating rates and practices in higher education describes similar overreactions and moral panics in response to previous changes in cheating trends. Discussions in both popular media and in academic literature of the rise of the 'term paper industry' in the 1960s and 70s, for instance, are quite reminiscent of current discussions about contract cheating (see Gallant 2008: 21–22; 28; Time Magazine 1971). We argue below that educators should avoid such moral panics, as they tend to encourage responses to cheating practices that are unhelpful or counterproductive.

Nonetheless contract cheating is not a victimless crime (Lancaster and Clarke 2009) and its effects go beyond dishonest students, their classmates and teachers. 'Victims' of the fraudulent aspect of contract cheating might include employers who hire graduates who have not worked for their degrees, the clients or customers of nurses, lawyers, or educators who may be less competent than they should be, and honest students who have to compete with contract cheaters. As with other forms of fraud, contract cheating involves the cheater gaining some advantage through their dishonesty, placing others at a disadvantage. In this regard Page (2004: 431–2) argues that these forms of cheating involve issues of justice and fairness, and that universities have an obligation both to other students and to wider society to ensure the integrity of the degrees they confer, as a matter of justice. Although there is no theft involved in contract cheating, it is arguable that contract cheating involves exploitation of writers like Dante, whose academic work is not recognised and who are used as a means to an end.

Some authors have also linked contract cheating to lack of character education in modern institutions, or have posited some general change in the ethical orientation of today's students (Faucher and Caves 2009; Abilock 2009). Again, we think this is unlikely and it exemplifies moral panic about features of student behaviour that are probably not new at all. Rather they are now being diverted into a new kind of practice. Nonetheless as argued above contract cheating is more fraudulent than some other forms of academic dishonesty, and what is new about contract cheating does connect to changes in the role of higher education in modern society, and perhaps changes in how people view the status of a written work. In connection with this it is worth recognising that contract cheating involves not only ethical problems, but epistemic problems. Most obviously, students who engage in it do not learn. But contract cheating also involves epistemic vices, or misunderstandings about the nature of study or intellectual enterprise more broadly. It involves treating a piece of academic work as a commodity, rather than as an exercise calling for formalised intellectual engagement. We return to this in "Causes of Contract Cheating".

Detection

For the most part, the literature thus far on contract cheating has responded with a focus on developing detection measures. One long-term suggestion is the development of new kinds of detection devices, such as style analyses, with students' work to be run through such a program in addition to software that finds copying (Lancaster and Clarke 2009). Lancaster and Clarke also provide a detailed six-stage model for the detection of contract cheating, recognising the need for some formalised response on the part of educators (2007a: "Prevention and Deterrence"). The six stages are:

1. Publication: that is, publication of a set assessment to a searchable internet location, by the academic setting it to students.
2. Collection: a 'detective' collects bid requests posted on auction sites and records them in a database.
3. Identification: the detective identifies bid requests as being contract cheating.
4. Attribution: the detective uncovers who has set the assessment.
5. Notification: the detective notifies the relevant academic or tutor.
6. Investigation: the academic collects resources to process the academic dishonesty case locally. (Clarke and Lancaster 2007a: "Prevention and Deterrence")

Some related suggestions from Lancaster and Clarke are to institute a central database of set assessments, to which academics could submit their set assessments, to make the attribution stage easier for the 'detective'. The collection stage could also be automated with development of the appropriate programming (2007a). Other suggestions relating to detection include making markers more aware of the issue, and of possible 'tells', such as drawing on sources or techniques that are beyond the students' current level of learning or previous standard (Mahmood 2009) or, in humanities essays, the use of unfamiliar idioms.

However, none of these suggestions are going to deal with all forms of contract cheating, and it is likely they will also encourage contract cheats to find ways to avoid detection. Trying to deal with this issue through detection seems a losing battle (Dante 2010a).[5] Lancaster and Clarke do recognise the limitations of detection-based responses to contract cheating. They also provide a number of other suggestions which can be considered prevention or deterrence measures (2006, 2009). We discuss some of these other suggestions in "Prevention and Deterrence".

The limitations of attempts to address the problem through detection also point to the importance of considering why there is such demand for these services. Townley and Parsell (2004: 275–6), in recognising the impossibility of the task of catching all cheats, also discuss the potentially deleterious effects on teaching of focusing on detecting cheats. Such a focus tends to undermine the intellectual community required for good teaching and learning, and replace what should be a teacher–student relationship with a kind of police–criminal relationship (see also Howard 2001; Perry 2011). It can generate a culture of distrust which not only undermines learning but can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as students live down to apparent expectations. Thus it is important to explore the reasons that students might decide to cheat in these ways.

Causes of Contract Cheating

A number of reasons that students might turn to contract cheating have been suggested in the literature. Many of these suggestions are largely speculative, exploratory or anecdotal, and given the small amount of research that has addressed contract cheating this is unsurprising. It is worth briefly reviewing some empirical information on reasons for cheating and plagiarism more generally, to add weight to these speculations. Studies of rates of and reasons for cheating tend to rely on surveys (e.g. McCabe 2005; Malgwi and Rakovski 2009; Sisti 2007), and more recently on qualitative studies using focus groups (e.g. Devlin and

[5] Similar points apply to attempting to address the issue via the supply side, i.e. through having contract cheating requests removed from websites or attempting some kind of legal action against companies.

Gray 2007; Hayes and Introna 2005; Gullifer and Tyson 2010).[6] Some studies have also examined how students understand plagiarism and referencing, recognising that confusion in these regards is a factor in many plagiarism cases (e.g. Lofstrom 2011). These methods rely on self-reporting or reporting of students' perception of their peers' reasons for cheating. The reasons students plagiarise include a range of pressures on and features of individual students, but also a range of contextual factors arising from either institutional arrangements, or from particular courses or staff.

Devlin and Gray's (2007) study on plagiarism recruited 56 students from a Melbourne university, and held eight 1-hour focus group discussions (as well as one individual interview). The discussions were held as semi-structured interviews, and students were asked about plagiarism among their peers rather than their own practices in order to increase the validity of the study. Qualitative analysis of the discussion transcripts resulted in eight main reasons that students plagiarise:

1. Inadequate admission criteria;
2. Poor understanding of plagiarism;
3. Poor academic skills;
4. Teaching/learning issues;
5. Laziness/convenience;
6. Pride in plagiarizing;
7. Pressures;
8. Education costs. (Devlin and Gray 2007: 182)

A similar list of causal factors drawn from the literature on plagiarism is given by Gullifer and Tyson (2010: 465):

> time to complete tasks (poor time management), perceived disjuncture between award (grade) and effort required, too much work to complete over too many subjects, pressure to do well, perceptions that students will not get caught, anomie, motivation, and individual factors (age, grade point average, gender, personality type).

Malgwi and Rakovski (2009: 210) provide the following list of the kinds of pressures on individual students that are correlated with a decision to plagiarise:

> failing the course; loss of financial aid; fear of parents cutting financial and other support; risk of being dropped from Dean's list; and avoidance of embarrassment. Other popular reasons are the desire to impress friends or peers; high grade for grad school; the desire to land a good paying job; to be competitive with others; dependence by family members; competition on job market; and the risk of losing a job.

Other possibly important factors include students not seeing any value in an assessment task (Gullifer and Tyson 2010: 476); and students' perception of their teachers, including whether they care about the assignment, and whether they are likely to punish any detected plagiarism (Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre: 227).[7]

Many of the causal factors listed above, such as pressures to succeed, convenience or poor academic skills, could motivate contract cheating just as easily as plagiarism. Other

[6] For a detailed overview of recent studies investigating a range of questions relating to plagiarism, see Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre (2010: 217–219).

[7] Many academics have reported they are reticent to report some cases or suspected cases, either because the procedures are very time-consuming, or because they perceive the formal procedures to result in penalties that are out of proportion (Edgren and Walters 2006: 57). Conveying the message to students that academics do care about academic honesty is one reason to use at least some detection measures.

factors like confusion over what constitutes plagiarism may seem irrelevant to contract cheating, but it is important to recognise that such factors can feed into student attitudes in ways that could encourage contract cheating practices. Gullifer and Tyson's (2010) focus group study at a regional Australian university pointed to the roles of confusion, fear, and resentment among students surrounding plagiarism. The study utilised seven semi-structured group discussions of between 3 and 9 students each. While students were able to point to some clear cases of plagiarism, such as verbatim copying, most were confused about greyer areas, and evidenced more general confusion about good paraphrasing, what counts as common knowledge, what requires a citation, what counts as originality, and the purposes of citation practices (2010: 470–1). The confusion was not helped by students being given access to plagiarism policies, and was exacerbated by different understandings of what constitutes plagiarism, and how serious various offenses were, amongst faculty (2010: 466). In addition, most students expressed fear of unintentional plagiarism along with a misperception that it would be treated in the same way as intentional plagiarism (2010: 471–2). This led to students altering their writing practices in quite unhelpful ways, such as becoming reticent to even attempt any originality, and to resentment among the students that their efforts were so diverted (2010: 475–6). A lack of communication to students of the purposes of academic writing and citing practices may feed into misunderstandings and attitudes that could encourage students to disengage from their academic work, as we discuss further below.

To begin our more exploratory and speculative discussion with an obvious point, then, one reason students may engage in contract cheating is ease: the growth of technologies, internet fora, and companies which make it easier to do. It is also possible that contract cheating is increasingly chosen as an alternative to classic or cyber-plagiarism. While the internet provides many sources for plagiarists to copy, lately the growth in use of plagiarism detection software, search engines, and the amount of published material accessible on the internet, has also made plagiarism via copying easier to detect. Students who may in the past have been tempted to plagiarise may now find it easier simply to buy a custom-essay online.

A number of authors have suggested that increases in contract cheating result from increasing pressure on students (Dante 2010a, b; Page 2004; Lancaster and Clarke 2009). Most students (or their families) have invested a good deal of money in being able to study at university level, and failing a unit can be expensive if the student needs to re-sit the unit in order to pass their degree (Faucher and Caves 2009: 38). Pressure to attain good grades in their studies comes from the many ways grades are linked to such things as students' capacity to pursue further educational opportunities after an initial degree, retaining their visas for some overseas students, and of course job opportunities.

Systemic changes in modern higher education can increase pressures on students, but they can also change the nature of their experience of higher education such that incentives or opportunities for contract cheating are increased. Increases in enrolments, class sizes, and online education (Page 2004: 432), the large and growing workloads of many academics, the growth of anonymous marking, and the casualisation of academic teaching, all contribute to the difficulty of tutors and lecturers knowing all their students personally, or being able to see their academic development over time. While all these features may make it harder to spot changes in the quality of a student's work, it is important to realise that they also tend to change students' experience of higher education in ways that could encourage students to engage in contract cheating. If students feel they are anonymous numbers in an education machine, they are less likely to be enculturated into the academic community, and more likely to become disillusioned with higher education and its objects (see Dante 2010a).

The above two proposed causal factors might assume that *all* forms of cheating are on the rise (and this appears to have been assumed by some in the literature). Some authors have

suggested that student attitudes to cheating more generally have changed, such that all forms of cheating can seem more acceptable. Abilock notes that students often perceive cheating to be rife or usual among their peers, and some students may feel they need to cheat to compete (2009: 13). Witte reports that some students view cheating as a kind of game-playing, a game of wits with their teachers (2008). Faucher and Caves discuss student perceptions that willingness to cheat as itself necessary for success, not just at university but in the workplace in later life (2009: 37). There is some empirical evidence that cheating itself may have increased, most notably McCabe's much-cited studies (2005; see also McCabe and Trevino 1996; McCabe et al 2004). However given the difficulties of research into this area, which rely on self-reporting and are studying a very large target population, whether there is really any increase is difficult to discern. Gallant provides an historical overview of academic dishonesty in North America and questions this interpretation of McCabe's results within a longer timespan (2008: 13). While we shall not attempt here to deal with whether cheating itself is rising, it is important to avoid reacting to these issues with a moral panic, as Gallant argues. The trend for contract cheating is not best explained with reference to some sort of contemporary moral decline.[8] Nonetheless, these factors of pressures on students and systemic changes in higher education may also interact with causal factors more specific to contract cheating.

For instance, increases in the phenomenon may reflect broader changes to the population of students in higher education, if particular demographic groups are more susceptible to the temptation of contract cheating. According to Dante (2010a) and Mamatas (2008), custom-essay companies are often used by those who lack confidence in their written English skills, a group which includes overseas students. The trend may be linked then to the internationalisation of higher education, exacerbated by absent or inadequate language instruction and support for these students (Dante 2010a). Internationalisation also involves an increasing proportion of students from different cultures and education systems, who may therefore not be familiar with the sorts of assessment tasks that they are expected to complete (Mamatas 2008).

Another possible cause is the changing way that higher education is perceived in society, such as the commodification of higher education (Page 2004: 430). Factors to do with funding, fee-paying arrangements, and how degrees are viewed in the job market may encourage the view that the purpose of higher education is to obtain the relevant piece of paper needed for the student's goals, rather than learning for its own sake: a degree is increasingly a means to an end (Clarke and Lancaster 2006; Page 2004: 430). This perception again could potentially encourage any form of cheating—but it is specifically relevant to contract cheating, which involves a kind of disconnection from one's submitted work. Similarly, Page connects changes in cheating practices to the lack of character education in modern universities—not in the sense that there has been a contemporary moral decline, but in the sense that the focus in higher education is typically on outcomes, rather than engagement with an educational process to produce those outcomes (Page 2004: 430–2; Dante 2010a). Some practices of higher education institutions do encourage students to see the point of their study as the attaining of grades, again encouraging students to view their relationship to their submitted work in a disconnected manner. Dante (2010a) cites the focus at his own institution on grades, competition, and the threat of failure—as well as having to work within a formulaic system which provided him with no way to engage with the material as he wished to—as his reason for become disillusioned with higher education before becoming a custom essay writer.

[8] Statements linking a perceived rise in cheating to lack of character education may also commit the attribution error: attributing to character what really results from the situation. See Ross (1977).

Commodification and a focus on credentialism thus suggest that a rise in contract cheating could reflect changes in the way that students view their relationship to their work. Ritter examines changes in the modern notion of authorship, such that modern forms of cheating involve “dissociation from both process and product, both the act of writing and the value of the written product itself” (2006: 26). That is, it is not just having a degree but written work itself that is increasingly considered a commodity. A student blogger, justifying his use of custom essay sites, demonstrates this attitude very clearly: “You are free to get an outside help [sic] and delegate your writing assignments to professional writers same as if [sic] you would get your watches fixed or car repaired [sic] by third party experts” (Halford 2007). Similarly, a study by Murray (cited in Sisti 2007: 219) elicited the following justification of contract cheating: “If I buy this paper it’s my property, and I am turning in my property to the professor”.[9]

Changes in the way students view their work may also be exacerbated by the way that universities attempt to deal with these problems. Above we mentioned the potential creation of a culture of distrust as a danger of focusing on detection techniques (Townley and Parsell 2004). It has become commonplace to scan all essay submissions through Turnitin or other software, and for students to be given plagiarism talks and academic honesty declarations to sign when submitting assignments. While these measures are in place for good reasons, there are indications that students can resent this assumption of untrustworthiness, and it is plausible to think that for some students, an assumption of untrustworthiness is a self-fulfilling prophecy (see also Perry 2011; Hayes and Introna 2005). Townley and Parsell argue that the use of Turnitin, insofar as it represents a company that profits from its database of submitted work, displays the same epistemic vice and misunderstanding of the nature of the activity as does the practice of plagiarism: both turn knowledge seeking into a commodity (2004: 276–7). That a culture of distrust may in some respects be embedded in higher education is also shown by the way that citation methods are often taught: as a way to keep oneself safe from losing marks or being taken for a plagiarist, rather than as part of the thinking process (Abilock 2009: 13; see also Lofstrom 2011; Gullifer and Tyson 2010).

These causal factors in contract cheating do provide some other ways of thinking about how it can best be addressed, given the problems with a focus on detection noted above. In the following section we overview prevention and deterrence measures, some of which respond to the causes discussed here.

Prevention and Deterrence

Most of the prevention or deterrence measures suggested in response to contract cheating are drawn from methods of preventing classic and cyber-plagiarism, and their effectiveness in preventing contract cheating is not known. Deterrence measures for plagiarism, such as communicating the universities’ detection techniques to students, are worthwhile in conveying that the university does care about academic honesty. Although as noted above this can be problematic in terms of interfering with trust relationships, as these methods become standard this feature is reduced.[10] Deterrence of contract cheating is somewhat more

[9] In addition to viewing written work as a commodity, a range of other changes to our notion of authorship have been discussed in the plagiarism literature, and are potentially relevant to contract cheating. See Abilock (2009) for discussion of group versus individual authorship; Sigthorsson (2005) on alterations to our assumptions about how sources attain authority; and Townley and Parsell (2004) for discussion of changes to our ideas about intellectual ownership.

[10] See Dahl (2007) on the positives and negatives of plagiarism detection software from student perspectives.

difficult. Deterrence measures that have been suggested include greater use of exams rather than essays or take-home assignments, and viva voce oral examinations to back up assignments (Lancaster and Clarke 2009). While this would perhaps be very effective it will not be possible to substitute exams for written assignments in many contexts, particularly in the humanities, and the time-consuming nature of viva voce examinations could also make them impractical.

Prevention measures aim to design assessments such that the opportunity or motivation to cheat will be reduced. One recommendation made in regards to both contract cheating and other forms of plagiarism is to avoid using the same assessments from year to year, which can encourage students to go looking for a stock answer (Mahmood 2009: 95). Regarding contract cheating more specifically, re-using assessments can appear lazy or uncaring to students, or contribute to their viewing themselves as anonymous numbers going through a system, and so encourage them to respond in the corresponding manner (Lancaster and Clarke 2007b: 344). The main point of this suggestion with regard to contract cheating rather than classic or cyber-plagiarism, then, is to convey to students that their teachers do care about the assignment task. Similarly, educators can engage in other practices that convey their care, such as increasing how much feedback they provide on assessments (Faucher and Caves 2009: 40).

More specific ways of designing assessments in order to lessen either the desire or possibility to engage in contract cheating have also been suggested. Some suggest that assessments be ‘personalised’ (Mahmood 2009: 95).[11] This refers to setting assessment tasks or questions in such a way that a student needs to make a decision in order to address the assessment task. For instance, instead of setting “Compare Hobbes’ and Rousseau’s understanding of altruism in relation to the social contract”, one might set “Choose two social contract theorists and compare their understanding of altruism in relation to the social contract”. Or one might ask students to relate the unit material to a recent issue or text. With reference to classic or cyber-plagiarism, this technique is meant to make it harder for the student to find specific sources on the topic from which to copy. A secondary intention though is to give students more flexibility in deciding what to write about, thus allowing them more ways to make the prospect of completing the assignment themselves personally satisfying. Thus it may address the cause of some contract cheating, that students may not consider their assessments of value.

Another suggestion is to set assignments in stages. This may prevent some contract cheating via pragmatic considerations: it means assessments are more frequent, reducing the lead-time students have to outsource work (Mahmood 2009: 95). It can also mean the student meets with their marker at regular intervals with different drafts, or even drafts written in class, so that progress can be seen. Sequential assessment also aims to respond to another reason students might decide to cheat, as it means the process is assessed, rather than just the product (Lancaster and Clarke 2009). It aims to make students engage in the process of planning, researching, and writing a piece of work (and this may also fulfill other teaching aims). Thus it also responds to another reason for student cheating, that students may not know how to undertake some research tasks, by breaking the process down for them.

These measures are proposed in the plagiarism literature as prevention measures, reducing the opportunities that students have to plagiarise. From the above discussion we can say

[11] ‘Personalising’ assignments also sometimes refers to setting different assignments to either smaller groups of students or even to individual students (Lancaster and Clarke 2007b). Personalising assessment in that sense is intended to make detection easier.

that with regard to contract cheating they are more likely to be discouragement measures than prevention measures. That is, they cannot entirely remove the opportunity to engage in contract cheating, but they may reduce the motivation to do so. While these measures may well discourage some contract cheating, however, they will not eliminate it. Dante (2010a) reports having completed such sequential assessments for repeat customers, and it would be just as easy to engage a contract writer to complete a personalised assessment as any other.[12] Furthermore there are other teaching aims to consider when designing assessments, and discouraging academic dishonesty should not take priority over all other aims in assessment design. Dealing with cases of academic dishonesty is already very time-consuming for staff, diverting teaching resources towards dishonest students and away from those students who are there to learn. It may be the case, as Page has argued, that universities have an obligation to prevent cheaters. But allowing the possibility that some proportion of students will cheat to take precedence over consideration of what and how students will learn from the assessment would certainly raise other issues of justice and fairness.

Some more general measures to discourage contract cheating include formulating clearer policies in the interests of transparency for students. Since the practice is relatively new, the academic honesty or academic misconduct policies of many universities may not be explicit with regard to this practice. Educators can also do more to promote awareness and discussion amongst students about the practice and why it is problematic. This might be in the form of ethics modules taken as part of professional degrees (and many degrees include some such unit already), or it may be embedded into other units (Lancaster and Clarke 2009). Again, these measures will not eliminate the problem. Dante (2010a) reports having completed work for students on such ethics modules, and Mamatas (2008) even reports having written essays on the ethical problems of custom-essay companies—using his own company as an example, and providing its web address as a reference. Indeed for students who do not see a value in studying ethics, having compulsory ethics classes as part of other degrees could even encourage the perception in students that their university is forcing them to undertake pointless busywork, and so be counterproductive. Likewise, a focus on discussing cheating can also be counterproductive in the sense of interfering with a culture of trust.

Although none of these measures will decisively address the problem, and some may be too time-consuming to be justifiable, many of them are worth consideration, and some may also discourage students from other forms of academic dishonesty or fulfill other teaching aims. Given the above discussion, we think it important that prevention and deterrence measures are designed in ways consistent with supporting the intellectual community, supporting trusting relationships between students and teachers, and supporting students' study skills. We also think that it is important to focus on the positive aspects of the learning environment, and make sure that the time and resources of academics are not excessively diverted to those students who decide to cheat, rather than those students who are actually there to learn. In line with an approach to the problem with these focuses there are two more prevention measures worth considering: honour codes, and the 'pastoral care' model.

Honour codes have been shown to be quite effective in high schools (McCabe and Trevino 1993), and in some studies at university level (Konheim-Kalkstein et al. 2008). Honour codes aim to encourage trustworthiness in students by assuming that they are trustworthy, thus addressing, and reversing, the issue of distrust as a self-fulfilling prophecy discussed above. The problem with an honour code, of course, is that it is open to abuse. It

[12] See both Dante (2010a) and Mamatas (2008) on writing personalised university admission essays.

removes some of the deterrents, and could come across as the faculty not really caring about cheating.[13] Secondly, the pastoral care model, seen at some small private universities, involves students meeting regularly with an academic advisor, and aims to better include students within an academic community. This measure also aims to develop trust by showing care for students, although it is possible that too much care could become 'hand-holding' of a form that disables responsibility. This measure would also be a very time-consuming one.

Recommendations

In this section we make recommendations regarding three areas, suggested by the above discussion. First, we would argue against responding to a rise in contract cheating by focusing on increased detection techniques. This focus will merely have the effect of encouraging contract cheaters to find ways of bypassing detection techniques as they develop. While studies of contract cheating have successfully identified and tracked down contract cheaters, it is not difficult for cheaters to bypass these techniques by using non-searchable internet locations or finding ways to disguise their identity in any electronic trails they do leave. In addition, detection of cheats diverts significant amounts of educators' time and energy, which we believe would be better spent focusing on helping honest students and developing teaching practices that are less likely to encourage cheating.

To some extent the current responses to contract cheating are, we think, overreactions with an element of 'moral panic'. It is likely that some proportion of students has always, and will always find ways to cheat. While certainly as educators we should attempt to minimise these practices, we think it is worth recognising that we will need to accept some level of its occurrence. Attempting to deter students from cheating (that is giving them reasons not to cheat, even if they have some desire to) is also worthwhile in that it conveys to students that we care about their producing their own work. But focusing more on discouragement—that is giving them reasons not to *want* to cheat—is also important. There will always be students who will find ways to avoid doing their own work, but there will always be students who want to learn and to think for themselves, and as educators we can encourage this, rather than focusing on the negative side of the issue. In light of the problems of interfering with trust and a good learning environment, more research into the reasons that students may decide *not* to cheat would also be useful, to supplement the research into reasons students do cheat.

Our second recommendation is that, while as argued above some of the assessment design recommendations are not practical in terms of their time-demands on educators, personalised or sequential assessments as discouragement measures for contract cheating are worth considering. As argued above preventing cheating should not trump other considerations in designing assessments, but with regard to some teaching contexts these measures will also fulfill other teaching aims. Whether these techniques are used should be considered in the context of each particular course of study. Further study of the effectiveness of these measures would also be valuable.

Thirdly, some increased education about the need for skills and competence, not just the formal qualification, might also help students to be motivated to learn rather than just pass. Emphasising intrinsic rewards, such as how the writing process can be part of the thinking

[13] For more information on honour code efficacy see McCabe (2001, 2005); McCabe and Trevino (1993). For some investigation of student perspectives on honour codes see Malgwi and Rakovski (2009).

process and the importance of figuring out their own thinking, and extrinsic rewards such as how the skills they learn will be necessary for future work where they will not succeed unless they are competent, might help to build a culture of learning, and undercut the idea of assignment tasks as purchasable products. This kind of approach can benefit students who want to do their own work by making its relevance and importance explicit, and might also persuade some students tempted by contract cheating that it is not in their interests.

Finally, in making these and other decisions relating to preventing contract cheating, questions of balance and resource allocation should be kept in mind. A main problem with many of the suggested responses described above is that they require teaching staff to undertake time intensive interventions. Decisions about how to deal with cheating can also be decisions about which students will take up the most of the time and resources of educators. Diverting less of these resources to cheats, and more to supporting honest students and better study skills, would both support better practice overall, and potentially encourage more honesty in students and support the skills they need to honestly carry out their work.

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