

Plagiarism in the Digital Age: What High School Students Say

On November 3, 2009, Kathy Lehman, Librarian at Thomas Dale High School in Chester Virginia and her students participated in a roundtable discussion. The conversation was about the attitude of students today towards academic integrity and plagiarism when completing homework, taking tests and writing papers. Here is Kathy's summary and analysis of the student perspective.



Kathy Lehman is a high school library-media specialist at the front lines of the plagiarism issue. She gathered a group of students to get their perspective on the reasons for cheating and the impact of digital technology.

1. High school students need these discussions to help them talk through their perception of what constitutes cheating.

To many, sharing homework is not cheating but helping a friend. Loyalty is to their peers. They see the assignment as work given them by the teacher not as reinforcement of their learning. They don't see both parties in the give and take of information as cheating. They are not thinking down the road that those who chronically are not completing their homework will be the losers in the future. They are only thinking in the present.

2. During tests, students are grateful for strict classroom management.

It takes the pressure off them when a friend asks them to share answers. They can reply, sorry, I have to use a cover sheet or my test will be a zero. Students like teachers to walk the aisles and spot check to be sure students cannot pull out contraband cell phones and text each other for answers. Students know which teachers monitor and which teachers sit behind their desks for the duration of the test. Students who study the material and prepare for tests resent those who cheat but they accept that it is common practice in spite of the official ban on cell phones in classrooms.

- 3. Turnitin.com is the main deterrent to plagiarism in our school.** Students are very aware of the availability of papers for sale online and the ease of copying and pasting large tracks of text from the internet directly into their papers. Every student named it as the reason students do not purchase papers online.
- 4. English teachers were praised for requiring students to pace their way through major research projects.** There are due dates for turning in note cards, source cards, thesis statements and rough drafts before the final paper. I was pleased that students feel Mrs. Donovan, my partner librarian; their English teachers and I do a good job teaching them how to use print and online resources and how to cite their sources in correct MLA format.
- 5. Unfortunately many students procrastinate.** When teachers do not pace them through the projects and students do not allow time to take advantage of what we teach them to get their work finished properly, they resort to online short cuts which would not pass an "originality report" if the teacher does not require the paper to be submitted through Turnitin. Students justify their behavior by saying they have so many outside activities i.e.: sports, jobs, family responsibilities and social engagements. They need to do whatever it takes this "one" time to get the paper in on time. These students do not feel guilty "taking" a paper from the internet or a friend and turning it in as their own. They just want to get the assignment behind them.

6. After these discussions in class, online and in the roundtable, I believe these students are able to view cheating through different eyes. They understand how one might view cheating on school work in the same light as cheating on a person or stealing from a merchant. As a teacher, I understand the importance for strict classroom management during testing, step by step pacing during the research process and the investment in online software to check the originality of student work. All staff must be consistent using the software to keep the database of papers current in a school community.



High school students gathered to discuss their many challenges and temptations to cheat, especially in the age of ubiquitous Internet access and associated "cut-and-paste plagiarism."

7. Best practices have not changed — the technology has. All this is a reminder to students and teachers. Students have always procrastinated and looked to their peers to get help with their school work. Teachers have always worked to stay one step ahead of their students. Now they use cell phones and the internet. As educators we need to be vigilant in the classroom and subscribe to online software that can track past submissions and monitor online sources. If we do not, our students will not be motivated to research and write original papers and gain the critical thinking skills they will need to be successful in the 21st century.