

A Case of Cheating?

by

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“I couldn’t stand it! I had to move. They were cheating. I study hard for this course to get my ‘A,’ and they were cheating! I had to get out of there.”

Professor Margaret Blake looked hard at the young woman in front of her as she quietly but intensely told of her dilemma.

Margaret had left her 24 students, as she often did, immersed in their daily physics quiz. A few moments after her return, Paula, one of her best and most mature students, abruptly rose from her chair among her teammates in Group #3 and moved to a corner of the room to complete her quiz. Later, while everyone was involved in a cooperative group project, Margaret took Paula aside in the classroom. “I couldn’t help but notice that you moved during the exam, why did you do that?” Paula’s impassioned response followed.

“I couldn’t stand it! I had to move. They were cheating. I study hard for this course to get my ‘A,’ and they were cheating! I had to get out of there.”

“Who was cheating?” asked the wary but puzzled Margaret.

“The two Asian students, when you were out of the room.”

“How did they do it?”

“Charles, the guy in the group next to us, writes his true and false and multiple choice answers in large letters on his exam paper and holds it up for Bill to see. We told them to stop, but they just kept doing it.”

“I wish you had told me sooner. Today is the last day of class and the last quiz. The situation won’t come up again. The final exam on Friday is arranged in a completely different way. You know we first have a practical, then move to another room. I won’t have people sitting in their groups so the opportunity to cheat shouldn’t arise. Well, I’m not sure what to do about it now, but you know that I am giving out the peer evaluation sheets today. Make sure you make your point when you write down your comments about your group.”

“Believe me, we will.”

Margaret watched Paula go back to her group and began thinking back to how this had all started.

She had noticed the two students when they first entered her class in Introductory Physics at Metropolitan College. They had come late to the first class. That wasn’t unusual, but the fact they were sporting bright green hair was difficult to ignore. Following her usual procedure for forming cooperative learning teams, Margaret split the friends into two different groups of five students. She would be using a version of cooperative learning called Team Learning and she was going to be forming groups by clustering different types of individuals together. She collected information from the students on small note cards at the beginning of the first class including data on their major, grade point average, courses in science and math, and year in school. With this in hand, Margaret mixed and matched the students to form heterogeneous groups. The two Asian students, who preferred to be called by their anglicized names, Charles and Bill, ended up in adjacent groups.

For most of the semester Margaret's class seemed to be going along as usual. The six groups of students struggled with the unusual format of the course for awhile, but that was par for the course. It took people several class periods to get used to the tempo of a class that had no formal lectures. After all, practically their entire schooling up to that point had involved someone lecturing to them.

Team Learning was different. There was no lecturing involved. Students had assigned readings for each class. At the beginning of class there was a period of time when they could ask questions. Afterwards, they had a 10- to 15-minute quiz, which they answered on bubble sheets to be machine scored. When everyone in a group finished, someone on the team would pick up the bubble sheets and bring them to the front of the room, leaning them against the blackboard. Then the representative of the group would pick up a blank bubble sheet for the group to take the quiz together.

There were differences in the time that the individuals finished their quizzes, so that some groups chatted quietly about their group quiz while nearby individuals in other groups were still at work. Occasionally, Margaret had concerns about individuals in the room listening in on the conversations of groups who had finished and were discussing their answers. In fact, she had on one occasion gently admonished Group #2 in which Charles was seated to speak more quietly so that the students in Group #3 would not overhear. Another time she suspected that Bill might be the one benefiting from this chatting because he was the nearest one to the conversation. Margaret remembered she had gone to the back of the room and stood next to the two groups to stop the flow of information. Aside from that, nothing unusual seemed to be going on during the quizzes. Students kept their eyes on their papers. In fact, she had never had an instance of cheating as far as she knew using Team Learning. She had always had faith that the group process would be a strong deterrent to cheating. People in groups tend to bring out good behavior in other individuals, she believed. "Perhaps I have been too lax," she mused.

As Margaret stood at the front of the room thinking through Paula's accusations, she saw the usual day's activities unfold. After the individual and group quizzes, the students ran their bubble sheets through the electronic scoring Scantron machine that Margaret wheeled into the class on a cart each day. They then gathered into their groups to consider the "correct" answers given by the key and to write appeals to particular questions that they challenged using the textbook as their reference. After this came a quick break and then a group project which reinforced the lesson of the day. Since this Wednesday was the last day of the semester before the final exam, Margaret held a review session during which the groups competed in answering questions.

To wind up the period, Margaret handed out the Peer Evaluation forms, reminding them that this was to be handled the same way as the practice forms handed out three weeks previously. At that time she had had private talks with several students who received scores lower than the expected average value of 10. Bill was one of these. His group had given him an average score of 9, and had written that he was not doing his share of the work. Margaret had told him of this problem and stressed that Bill should work to correct it. In Margaret's several years of using Team Learning and Peer Evaluation many students were able to improve their standing with their teammates, but others just didn't seem to adjust.

"Recall now that each of you has 40 points that you can distribute among the other members of your group. Since you have four teammates, this means that each would get 10 points if everyone in the group contributed equally. If on the other hand you think that someone is not pulling his weight, then you should rank them lower and other people higher. If you receive an average score of a 9, this means that you will receive only 90% of the points allotted for any group project. If everyone in the group ends up with a 10, all will receive 100% of the group points. Also remember that a person must receive an average score of at least

a 7 in order to pass the course. Naturally, I reserve the right to overrule the group if I think an injustice has been done, just like I mentioned in the syllabus.”

“Now please fill out the forms, but spread out in the room so that you are not next to anyone else. And remember to fill out the bottom of the form where you justify your scoring and tell how you would score yourself.”

The room fell quiet as the students started working on the forms. Soon the class was over, and the students filed out heading to lunch and then to their last laboratory. Margaret was not long following them, wheeling the cart back to her office for the last time. She was anxious to see what had been written on the Peer Evaluation sheets.

There it was, Paula had given Bill a 5. On the bottom of her form she had commented: “Bill is a hindrance. He never follows rules. He does not contribute, does not care and does not deserve a good grade. He has been cheating since class began, which explains his high individual score.”

Margaret rapidly flipped to the forms of the other members of the group. Mary had also given him a 7 and written: “I feel that Bill, even after the warning of the first Peer Evaluation, continues to do less than his share of work, is constantly tardy to class AND lab, and our group as a whole is sick of him cheating every day on his quizzes.”

John had even been more severe, giving Bill a 5, stating “Bill gets such a low rating because he is never prepared, he comes to lab whenever he feels like it, and he and his buddy cheat every single day. Did you happen to notice how bad Bill did on the quiz when you stood behind him? And he also changes his answers on the bubble sheet and pretends they were scored wrong. I HATE CHEATERS! AARRGH!” Moments later, Margaret confirmed that some of Bill’s marks had been altered.

Well, it looked like the entire group was fed up with Bill, thought Margaret, as she turned to the last evaluation of Group #3, that of Thomas Brown, an African American who had been performing poorly in his individual work. In fact, he was taking the course over again because he had failed Introductory Physics in the large lecture course which Margaret had taught the previous semester. Thomas’ practice Peer Evaluation three weeks ago had been low, too. However, since that time he had been trying much harder after Margaret had brought it to his attention and the group had been working with him outside of class. What would he say about Bill? Margaret inwardly recoiled as she saw the scores. Thomas had given Bill a 15! The next highest scores he gave were for Paula (10) and Mary (9), trailed by John (6). What was going on here?

To round out the group, Margaret was interested to see that Bill, the subject of the accusations, had given everyone a fairly routine set of scores, 10’s and 9’s. Nothing unusual here.

Turning to the other members of the class Margaret found nothing out of the ordinary. Surely, if a confrontation had disrupted the class at any time, she might expect to find some mention of it. But there was no suggestion of anything funny, until she hit Group #2’s forms and found that three out of the four students in Charles’ group had scored him low, giving him scores of 8, 8, 7 and 10.

Charles was clearly a strong student for he consistently received quiz grades in the nineties. Yet there were strong negative comments from his group members, one from the best student in the class, “Charles was frequently late to lab and did not follow along in lab and group discussion. He would sometimes cheat on quizzes.” Another comment by a strong student read, “Charles periodically cheated on quizzes after being asked to stop. He often did not come with any background research for the group projects. Irresponsible when it came to lab—late—and he improperly did the pendulum experiment. Does not pay attention and

does not seem to know what is going on.” And finally the remarks of Billie Jean, another student taking the physics course over again, followed along the same lines, “Charles would have gotten a higher score if he had not been cheating with his buddy in the other group a couple of times.”

That was it, thought Margaret. All of the evidence was in. There were no more classes ahead, just the final exam to be given in a couple of days. She hadn't seen the “cheating,” but six members of the class said they had.

Margaret had strong feelings about cheating. Science cannot afford people who cheat. If she was convinced they had cheated, what sanctions should she impose? Perhaps because of their background in another culture they did not consider helping one another as cheating. It was hard to believe that. Their teammates had told them to stop, and they had not done so. Their English skills were certainly excellent, without much trace of an accent, so they must have been in the American school system for a long while. It was unlikely that ignorance was an excuse.

Margaret knew she had a lot of options. She could fail Bill and Charles in the course, put a letter in their departmental file, or write a letter to the Dean, or even try to have them expelled. Then, again, virtually everyone has cheated at some time in their life, but they outgrow it. Perhaps this was their first offense, though that also seemed unlikely. She could speak to them, but what good would that do? And what about the other students, didn't she have an obligation to them?

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