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# Interview with a Cyber-Student: A Look Behind Online Cheating

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## **Abstract**

This case study offers insights into the motivation and experiences of a cyber-student, an individual who completes all or portions of an online class for the registered student. The cyber-student shares information on the inner-workings of online companies specializing in matching cyber-students with potential clients. A portrait of both a cyber-student and his/her typical client is revealed.

## **Introduction**

Will the meteoric growth in online learning technologies and offerings cause college instructors to struggle with student cheating as they do in traditional classrooms? Are online instructors even aware of the many ways in which their students might engage in academic dishonesty? This case study presents unique perspectives from a “cyber-student.” For the purpose of this study, a cyber-student is defined as an individual who completes work in an online class for monetary gain.

Hal (name has been changed to protect the subject’s anonymity) has a part-time job as a full-time student, but not as himself. Hal is a cyber-student, one of the many enterprising individuals who pose as enrolled students in the online classroom. Through an online interview process, Hal provided some surprising insights into the world of the cyber-student. A cyber-student is an individual who completes all or portions of an online course for the registered student.

This researcher was originally given Hal’s contact information from a mutual acquaintance. After receiving IRB approval, a list of questions was emailed to Hal. Hal responded quickly and in detail. Two sets of follow-up questions and answers were exchanged. To further protect his anonymity, Hal did not wish to engage in phone conversations.

Hal got started on the cyber-student path in what he described as the typical fashion – writing papers for fellow students in high school and college. After graduating from college and working full-time for a number of years, Hal was burdened with a large amount of student loan and credit card debt. In an effort to earn extra cash, Hal thought once again of making extra money as a “student.” Thinking there had to be a company that matched individuals like Hal with students needing or wanting assistance with assignments, Hal did an internet search and found several companies doing just that. He applied to work for a few of these companies and was hired.

## **Academic Dishonesty**

Academic dishonesty and/or cheating can be defined as, “a transgression against academic integrity which entails taking an unfair advantage that results in a misrepresentation of a student’s ability and grasp of knowledge. In the current online context, this includes obtaining inappropriate assistance with from an online source or adjutant, plagiarism, and false self-representation,” (King, Guyette,

Jr., & Piotrowski, 2009, p 4). Any student using a cyber-student to complete his/her online coursework would certainly have falsely represented himself/herself and could be accused of cheating. Over the years, studies have shown that a significant number of college students admit to cheating (Craig & Dalton, 2014; Brown & Emmett, 2001; Michaels & Meithe, 1989; Rozycki, 2006; Whitley, 1998). With technological advances and the meteoric rise in online course offerings, opportunities for cheating may be increasing as well. Scholars have predicted higher levels of cheating in the online educational format due to beliefs held by students and faculty that cheating will be easier in online environments (Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas, & Davis, 2000).

### **Cheating in Online and Traditional Classes**

Studies have shown contrasting results when reporting differences in the prevalence of cheating in online and traditional courses. Researchers have shown that students are more likely to cheat in an online course environment. For instance, researchers at the University of West Florida found that students believed it was easier to cheat in online classes and that cheating was more prevalent in online classes (King, Guyette, Jr., & Piotrowski, 2009). In an earlier study, online students were found to have self-reported cheating behaviors more often than students in traditional lecture classes (Lanier, 2006). Due to lack of information or interest, students may not even realize they plagiarize when taking information from the internet (Jones, 2011).

Conversely, research studies have shown that the online format has not necessarily allowed for an increase in the amount of academic dishonesty behaviors. When looking at differences in academic dishonesty in traditional and online classrooms, researchers at the University of Florida found that the majority of students in their study felt that cheating was not more prevalent in their online courses than in their traditional classrooms (Black, Greaser, & Dawson, 2008). In a 2006 study on academic dishonesty and the online course environment, researchers were surprised to find that there was no quantitative difference in cheating for students in online or traditional classes (Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006). These researchers had predicted that students in an online course would have cheated more than students in a traditional classroom due to the lack of interaction and visual monitoring of the instructor.

There are a handful of studies showing that students cheated more in traditional classes than in online courses. Marshall University researchers found that rates of students self-reporting cheating was slightly higher in traditional classrooms than in online classes (Watson & Sottile, 2010).

### **Cheaters for Hire**

Cyber-students form a niche market in online cheating. Unlike the days before the internet, where a student who wished to have someone complete his/her work would have to seek that individual out somewhere near campus, the availability of online cheating options grows along with the greater access to online information. There have been studies and news articles published on the topic of students who buy essays from others and the many websites making essays easily available, which is an issue mostly found in traditional classrooms (CBC, 2014; Taylor, 2014). Very few studies have looked into cyber-students, or individuals who are paid to impersonate a student in an online course or for entrance examinations. (Farisi, 2013; Ravasco, 2012; Vilchez & Thirunarayanan, 2011). The frequency of the use of cyber-students is unclear. In their 2013 study, Aaron and Roche found that 12% of students in their study thought that other students bought essays and only 3% thought that students would pay someone to take an exam. It is doubtful that the prevalence of cheating is so low.

### **Companies and Compensation**

Working for multiple companies, Hal is able to choose his assignments selectively. One of his

employers forwards course information to Hal directly and takes care of all student communication; Hal never has direct contact with students through this website. Another website allows students to post their assignments and potential cyber-students bid for each assignment. Hal reports that he will occasionally win a bid and then complete the posted assignment. At another website, Hal communicates with students directly regarding their needs.

As Hal was motivated to go into this work for financial gain, he explained that the practice of completing assignments and/or online courses for college students can be quite lucrative. Clients, as Hal referred to them, requesting full online course completion usually pay weekly, when the course work is completed. His compensation averages \$80 per week for undergraduate course work and \$85-\$95 per week for graduate courses. Ironically, Hal does not have a graduate degree but regularly completes graduate courses for clients. If books or materials are required for a course, the client must either send the books to Hal or provide reimbursement for purchasing books and materials. Hal reported that most of these web companies guarantee at least a “C” grade, with a full refund given if a “C” or better grade is not achieved by the cyber-student. Personally, Hal has never scored lower than a “B” and usually receives “A” grades in the courses he takes.

The online world of the cyber-student is actually quite small and interconnected, according to Hal. Many of the cyber-students work for multiple websites and often refer clients to one another. For example, Hal is known for his work in History and the Social Sciences. If a client asks Hal for assistance with Finance or Math, Hal will refer the client to another cyber-student whose skills and abilities better meet the specific academic needs of the client. Conversely, fellow cyber-students refer clients to Hal on a regular basis.

Hal specifically mentioned that neither he nor his colleagues work with what he referred to as, “the paper mills outsourced to India.” He does not communicate with them nor accept client referrals from them. Hal indicated that papers and courses completed by these “paper mills” are very obviously not written by a native English speaker.

Online cyber-student companies could be called a growth industry. Hal shared that he turns away more business than he accepts; the volume is large and increasing. Hal typically is taking 16-18 classes at a time and will not take on any more work than he can realistically manage. In an article about online cheating, Dante (2006) interviewed an individual completing coursework for college students who reported that he would earn over \$65,000 in 2010 and that his company did not have enough employees to handle the increasing demand for its services.

### **Typical Clients**

Who are the typical clients for cyber-students? In his essay sharing his life as a “shadow scholar,” Ed Dante reported that his clients fell into three distinct categories (2010). Dante shared that his clients were students for whom English is not their first language, students who were very unprepared for college-level work, and wealthy students who did not want to do the work themselves (2010). By design or by accident, online course environments happen to attract a large number of students with time constraints and pressures such as multiple jobs and family responsibilities. Due to these outside pressures, the online students with multiple responsibilities may also be inclined to cheat (Rowe, 2004; Sterngold, 2004).

The client who most often uses Hal’s services is a, “blue collar working individual who is holding down two jobs, has a kid, and wants more than anything to get his/her degree.” This over-committed student can certainly be found on every college campus – online or traditional. Another common client is an individual working on a graduate degree in the hopes of advancing his/her career. The third type of client Hal identified is an individual who is recently deployed overseas and does not want to lose course credit or time towards degree attainment.

Hal indicated that a small majority, estimated at 54%, of his clients are male. Hal also noted that his female clients share that they utilize his services due to competing priorities in their lives. The most common theme Hal has noticed with his female clients is that they are care-givers as well as students; Hal's female clients are balancing the responsibilities of college students while taking care of elderly parents or small children.

### **Reducing Online Cheating**

For educators and administrators, combating online cheating presents unique challenges. In the case of the cyber-student, educators may have difficulty confirming the true identities of their online students (Rowe, 2004). An instructor may recognize differences in writing styles and quality of work if a student is hiring someone to take exams or write papers, but these methods would be ineffective in identifying a cyber-student completing an entire online class. A cyber-student's work would be consistent throughout the course. Methods of accurately identifying online students require further attention by online educators, scholars and perhaps even technicians.

Many experts in the area of academic honesty suggest beginning with educating students about the academic integrity policies and consequences of the institution. A number of researchers have found that involving an experiential learning activity about academic honesty and plagiarism (quizzes, Q&A games, making citation examples) are much more effective deterrents than a written reminder about policy (Craig & Dalton, 2014; Ravasco, 2012; Jones, 2011). Having online students verify their identities prior to exams or assessments may help to reduce the amount of cheating on tests (Moten Jr., Fitterer, Brazier, Leonard, & Brown, 2013).

As an online instructor, this researcher finds having a large test bank and the ability to randomize test questions is a good way to keep students from collaborating on online tests; no two students in an online class have the same test questions nor are the questions in the same order. This online teaching method does require a time-limit on tests if it is used for the purpose of reducing collusion. For written assignments, there are now several software packages available to institutions and instructors which can flag information potentially taken from another online source. As an instructor, the software is effective, but burdensome as it identifies correctly cited quotes as well as plagiarized passages.

### **Consequences and Future Plans**

When asked if he could foresee any negative consequences for taking online classes for others, Hal merely replied, "It'd be bad if I got caught." Hal's identity has never been questioned by an online instructor or fellow student. Hal shared that one of his greatest struggles is appearing to be an incoming "C" student who shows improvement throughout the course. According to Hal, he occasionally has students, who have not done well in their previous courses, request that Hal appear to be a struggling student who improves throughout the semester.

Hal does not plan to be a cyber-student for much longer. His goal is to continue just until his debts are paid, which he predicts to be within the next year or two. He shared that the workload he has taken on is exhausting and could not be maintained indefinitely. He did say that after paying off his debt and taking a little break, it might be fun to take just one or two courses at a time.

### **Conclusion**

This case study represents the story of one cyber-student. From the online interviews, Hal indicated that there are many other cyber-students earning a living by assisting online students in cheating. It is this researcher's opinion that the first defense for online instructors is awareness of the problem, admitting that I myself may have taught cyber-students without my knowledge. The online cheating and cyber-student issue will not be solved by instructors alone. This researcher recommends that

online instructors work closely with their colleagues in Information Technology to take advantage of the current technological mechanisms already in place to combat cheating in online courses.

Future research on online cheating and cyber-students would be very helpful, although difficult to complete. For obvious financial reasons, cyber-students will wish to remain hidden in cyberspace. It would be very interesting to learn about the motivations of the registered students who utilize cyber-students. However, students who do cheat in online courses or use the services of cyber-students may not be as open and honest about their behavior if taking part in a study about online cheating. This might be the reason for the conflicting outcomes of studies done previously on online cheating. The possibility of confounding results should not deter further research on the topic.

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