

Students and educators agree that collaboration is great for learning, but the ‘rules’ seem to change when it comes to assessment. Findings from a survey of 14,086 university students showed that students are often unclear about when and how they can collaborate, and under what circumstances collaboration might be seen as cheating.

*The only form of cheating I have engaged in ... is the cheating where you have an out-of-class study group but *gradually*, discussion of the content shades from abstract discussion of issues into swapping specific tips to get a specific question done, or specific solutions to tricky problems (Student 869, non-cheating group).*

The point at which collaboration crosses a line is not a clear one – for students or educators. Courses are usually designed so that assignments are closely related to weekly content – so when does a conversation about content turn into a conversation about assessment, and at what point does a conversation about assessment become inappropriate? Students are often told they can collaborate when *preparing for* an assignment, but must *write* their assignment on their own. So if an assignment is in a student’s *own words*, does that mean no cheating has occurred?

*Cheating is very ambiguous. For instance, if friends asked for my assignments from the past so as **to use it as a guide for their assignment**, I would not consider that cheating. Nor would I consider it cheating if a group of people **worked together on individual assignments**, so as to help each other. I study engineering, and **we are taught to work together** (Student 342, non-cheating group).*

*The most prominent form of cheating ... is collaboration on individual assignments. Almost EVERYONE will collaborate with peers. In many ways it is good to work together, when studying and revising it is very helpful. When completing assignments **it can be unfair** (Student 32, non-cheating group).*

While educators recognise the importance of collaboration, employers and the public expect that universities award grades that accurately reflect the abilities of *individuals*. Educators need to have confidence that the marks they give a student fairly reflect that student’s knowledge and skills. If they don’t, the public is at risk from engineers, scientists, accountants, nurses, designers, etc. who are not competent to practice. The challenge for students is that the desire to help friends can sometimes conflict with responsible approaches to learning.

Not all cheating is deliberate. Lack of awareness or care can lead to breaches of academic integrity, so it is useful for students to know the criteria that educators use to judge assignments. Educators will be concerned about the integrity of an assignment if:

- it misrepresents a student’s abilities
- they cannot assess a student’s abilities based on the work submitted
- a student has somehow gained an unfair advantage over others in the course

On the following page are 10 scenarios. They have been placed on a continuum with appropriate collaboration at one end, and cheating or ‘collusion’ at the other. Consider where the behaviours cross a line into cheating, and how each scenario might be viewed differently, using the alternative circumstances shown on the right. This activity is intended to generate discussion rather than provide a hard and fast ‘correct’ answer.

References

- Bretag, T., Harper, R., Burton, M., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Saddiqui, S., Rozenberg, P & van Haeringen, K. (2018). Contract cheating: A survey of Australian university students, *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-20
- Harper, R., Bretag, T., Ellis, C., Newton, P., Rozenberg, P., Saddiqui, S., & van Haeringen, K. (2018). Contract cheating: a survey of Australian university staff. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-17.

Further resources available at www.cheatingandassessment.edu.au/
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1.	A student is struggling with an assignment and visits his university's Learning Advisors for help. They explain how to improve his draft to better meet the assignment requirements.	<p style="text-align: center;">Collaboration?</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Cheating?</p>	What if the student asked a parent instead? Or perhaps another student in the course?
2.	Three students collaborate on research for an assignment. They share the readings they find, but analyse and write their assignments individually.		What if 40% of the assignment marks were for research, e.g. finding and retrieving a range of relevant readings?
3.	Four students in a study group have done individual research for their assignments. At their weekly meeting they discuss their research, key ideas, and arguments. They then write their papers individually.		What if two of the students hand up similar assignments?
4.	Five students are working on their group assignment. They divide the assignment into five equal parts and each complete one. One student collates the work and submits it on behalf of the group.		Is this collaboration? What if the task instructions required all students to contribute to each part?
5.	Three students are working on their group assignment and decide to divide it into three equal parts. Two students struggle, so one student does most of the work.		Is equal contribution important in group work? Is this cheating, or just unfair?
6.	Three students email their assignment drafts to one another. They all then revise their own drafts to include ideas they hadn't previously considered, taking care not to copy each other's ideas word for word.		Would it be different if some ideas <i>had</i> been copied word for word?
7.	A student shares their assignment from a previous semester with a friend now enrolled in the same course. The student is sure that her friend will not plagiarise it, but only use it as a guide.		What if her friend does plagiarise it, or submits it as her own? What if the student uploaded it to a file-sharing site so lots of students could use it?
8.	Eight students gather in the Library to complete an online quiz together which is worth 10% of their grade. They share all their answers and only get one wrong.		Would it be different if the quiz was worth more? Do you think educators expect students to do these tasks together?
9.	A student is searching a file-sharing site for assignment examples. The topic has not changed since last year, and he finds 6 assignments from previous students. He takes ideas from each, using a thesaurus tool to change the words.		Is it partly the educator's fault for not changing the topic?
10.	A student is working on a large assignment and pays a professional assignment writer to complete parts of it for him. He knows that businesses regularly outsource work, so as long as he pays a fair price, he believes the work belongs to him and he can submit it as his own.		Does the work belong to him? Would it be worse if he had outsourced the whole assignment? What if he hadn't paid money for it?