



# Ethics in a Digital Age

Beyond honor codes and punishment:  
Inspiring ethical behavior when  
it's so easy to cheat

**C**trl a, ctrl c, ctrl v. It has never been easier. That's the reason both students and teachers give for committing the deadly (and obvious) sin of cheating. The pressure of making the grade, the need to do some mundane task now to get ahead later, the expediency of looking good without much effort, the shortcutting of learning to have fun—all sidestep the thinking and engagement we ultimately hold dear in education. The reasons are not so different from 30 years ago. So why does it happen more often now? Is the demon of technology to blame yet again for what ails us? How does being digital change the playing field for those who would deceive?

Yes, it is deception. "The intent to create a false belief" is how Ken Goodman, ethicist from the University of Miami, defines it. But is this always wrong? "Of course not," he goes on, "as long as the cards are all face up." We delight in imposters as long as there is no identity theft. We call it entertainment when a millionaire bachelor turns out to be a wage earner. We routinely bluff in card games, but come clean in the end. Goodman muses, "The psychology behind deception is complex."

What is the litmus test? When is deception

justifiable, if ever? When is it blameworthy? Is it a question of unfairness to others who play it straight, to myself, to the institutions that support me? Does the expediency of the moment override my goals for myself and for my society over time?

## **Making the Moral Argument**

It turns out we usually know what is right, says Randy Cohen, who writes the ethics column every week for *The New York Times Magazine*. "Most of my readers know what is right, they just don't know why," he says. "I make the moral argument for them. I don't tell them what to do, but rather explain why it makes sense to do what they already feel is right."

Ethical questions are about right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. They matter because what we do affects us individually, affects our community, and can even affect people we do not know or see. The global community Marshall McLuhan wrote about some 35 years ago looms large through our computer screens. Our planet is wrapped with a digital web of consciousness that makes our reach exceed our grasp of how what we do matters. Ethical decisions are often based on effects we see, but

increasingly there are effects that occur as the result of a chain of events or accumulation of actions that are not plainly visible to us. They have moved not only beyond our view but beyond our conception.

In one weekly column, Cohen responded to a question from a high school student. She had “borrowed” her older brother’s college library password to do a term paper. “Isn’t it really okay?” she reasoned, “No one was hurt, her brother said it was okay, he was paying a lot of money for his college privileges.” No, Cohen responded, it is not okay. The privilege is the brother’s alone to use—not his to distribute. Imagine if everyone did it: It could slow down or block other college students’ use of the library. It could change the way colleges make library materials available; they could start to charge every time materials are accessed. It could change what high schools expect in term papers and how they are graded; they could ban outside sources to ensure equal access, or require outside sources that would disadvantage some students. Ultimately, this high school student’s actions could be the moth wing flutter that results in a tsunami on the other side of the planet. It could affect a lot of people.

### **The Quality of our Interactions**

The choice to not learn seems qualitatively different than some other forms of deception—sharing answers via text messaging, copying borrowed software, finding a password or hacking into a system to change a grade, and sharing copyrighted music or films. In cases like these, there seems to be a more conscious intent to harm, to limit or enhance someone else’s work. Is it one step beyond trying to deceive someone about *my* ability? If I “borrow” someone’s words or her song and she doesn’t know it, does it hurt *her*? What if she never finds out? Is it blameworthy? If we care about the quality of our interactions and the ownership of work, the answer has to be yes.

So digital *is* different. Clearly, using her brother’s ID to try to walk into the library would be more difficult, more intimidating, and perhaps make the student consider more ethical alternatives. But the anonymity and privacy of accessing those vast collections from your desktop seems different, almost okay. My desktop is a universe I control, so what appears there, where I go from there, what I cut and paste there—all somehow seem more part of a legitimate entitlement, especially in a democracy where we prize the free flow of information. At Hoover High School in Hoover, Ala., librarian Ann Marie Pipkin finds,

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do students  
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assignments?*

“Students think if they get it off the Internet, it is all free. We talk about scanning, what is free, and what isn’t. It is our mission to give them a different idea.”

Complex indeed! Because we not only prize access to information, but attribute a great deal of the success of our society to how we reward creativity. Our intellectual property rights are designed to encourage, reward, and protect ideas. Students understand this tension in surprising ways. As Miami eleventh-grader Alejandra put it, “I want to develop my own ideas, so why would I copy someone else’s? I don’t want someone stealing *my* ideas.”

### **Restoring the Confidence to Learn**

If it is inherently more interesting to think than to copy, why do students plagiarize, buy term papers, and shortcut assignments? In these situations, the student’s intent is to deceive the teacher about his or her ability—to appear to have learned something, to take credit for writing not his or her own. But the reasons are more complicated than “not being interested in learning.” Fred Matter, a science teacher from Barbara Goleman High School in Miami, Fla., sees some students who lack the confidence to learn, others who do not know how to learn or write, and still others who are simply more interested in other activities and want to save time. His solution: Make them care enough to *want* to think about the topic because it affects them.

In 1967, Marshall McLuhan wrote in *The Medium is the Massage*, “Youth instinctively understands the present environment—the electric drama. It lives mythically and in depth.” Thirty years later, Nicholas Negroponte, chairman of the MIT Media Lab, described the digital di-

vide as less economically driven than a generation gap in how we operate in the world. Have we been slow to create schools that are immersive, interactive, and nurture the development of students’ sense of their place in a world more virtual than physical?

For students to care about learning, the tasks have to be relevant, challenging, and interesting. Doug Johnson, Mankato, Minn., school district media director and author of *Learning Right from Wrong in the Digital Age*, sees this as the crux of the matter. “If we only ask students to regurgitate information, copying makes sense. Teachers need to make sure assignments are worthwhile and explain why they have value. Students are in survival mode, so they need to see how the assignment affects them, their families, and their neighborhoods. Why is this worth knowing or doing?” When teachers and students can answer this question, they both value original thinking. When learning is valued, cheating is irrelevant.

## What We Value

*Being Digital* is different. In his 1996 book by that name, Nicholas Negroponte reminds us that bits are different than atoms, and they change how we view ourselves and our world. Being digital instead of analog both increases and diminishes our isolation, connects and disconnects us from each other, and gives us more access and less understanding. To manage, we move into valuing the knowledge held in a sort of trust, by the bits. Digital captures what we know, feel, and think with

words, pictures, graphics, sound, and video that are all in one form. Once we see “digital” as a medium holding what we value, we are more respectful of its creators while enjoying access. Negroponte writes:

*The methodical movement of recorded music as pieces of plastic, like the slow human handling of most information in the form of books, magazines, newspapers, and videocassettes, is about to become the instantaneous and inexpensive transfer of electronic data that move at the speed of light. In this form, the information can become universally accessible. Thomas Jefferson advanced the concept of libraries and the right to check out a book free of charge. But this great forefather never considered the likelihood that 20 million people might access a digital library electronically and withdraw its content at no cost.*

This issue of the public trust of intellectual property is what worries Cohen the most. “There is a

movement away from civic virtue and connectedness and a shift towards individual rectitude; a shift from an understanding that we are members of a community to the lone individual’s moral character,” he says. “At its core is application of the marketplace to civic life. Our essential relationship with each other is as commodities—buyer and seller.” “Free” libraries are symbolic of an interdependence that balances open access and the protection of intellectual property. This nexus has shaped civil society as both a goal and a solution to meet the needs of the individual, and at the same time create a fair and just society that supports honorable behavior.

Do students get pushed toward digital piracy, fraud, and deception out of convenience, grade

pressure, and isolation? Could these small and large deceptions be signaling the desperate need to shift away from the industrial model of school and toward communities of learning locally and globally? Students, like all citizens, may require the context of community for knowing what to do *and* why it is right. It seems that students who are part of learning communities are clear about their obligations to others because they feel the benefits from the interdependence. Cohen suggests an interesting analogy; if you put a rookie cop in a corrupt precinct, what kind of cop do you think he will be? And if you put him in an honest precinct? Community matters.

## How Schools Respond

*I have not given or received aid on this exam, signed \_\_\_\_\_.*

Interestingly enough, teachers’ responses to deception reflect the tension we have been exploring. When a student uses his computer to cheat, is it an individual moral failing, or a choice that reflects the culture of the classroom and perhaps even society as a whole? A warrant like the one above makes the discussion legalistic. Requiring students to sign contracts makes a deception premeditated and intentional.

Being clear about consequences is important, teachers say. Martha Adams, who teaches at St. Brendan High School in Miami, Fla., tells students she expects them to do their own work as a form of self-respect. If there is any suspicion of cheating, a student’s paper is collected and the grade is automatically a zero. “In 28 years of teaching, I have never had to give a zero. I trust my students and they live up to it, regardless of where they come from.” Teachers who focus on developing honorable behavior say they do so because they feel it is more effective than becoming a cop. At North Broward Prep in Coconut Creek, Fla., all members of the school community—teachers, students, staff, and parents—sign an honor code. Teacher Bruce Pachter uses this to discuss “the value of the student-teacher relationship and his high level of trust in the students.”

And there *are* consequences to deter all forms of deception. Students who plagiarize must rewrite. Those who buy term papers must do twice the work. Other teachers have different rules for more serious offenses. Share your work; share your grade. Hack the system; get expelled. They ask students to sign acceptable-use policies which appear on screens when they log in, and to make photocopies or provide the Web site addresses of the sources they cite. Teachers make up different versions of tests, put dividers between students, and ask them to put

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all materials (digital and print) in the back of the room during tests. These strategies reduce the temptation but seem more like temporary props for an outmoded system of teaching and learning.

Other teachers emphasize the reasons and, as Cohen does for his readers, make arguments for their students to do what they know is right. In Miami, Fla., Miami Carol City High School teacher Luis Sanchez tells his students, "If you cheat, it prevents the discovery of any learning problems, attention problems, and possible health or home issues." And, "What if your doctor, mechanic, or airline pilot cheated you? You would lose more than a grade." These teachers reiterate the values and the arguments for acting on them. Some hold regular debates on ethical issues as part of how they develop a sense of responsibility and community in the classroom.

Beyond enforcing the rules are those strategies that make authors, artists, and multimedia producers out of students. Original work reveals students' thinking as well as what they have learned from others. When assignments ask students to invent, create, synthesize, or evaluate, assessment does not invite, nor require, dividers. Learning is not evaluated with multiple-choice answers that can be sent via cell phones.

In classrooms where students collaborate to learn, discuss what they know and think, and ask their own questions, students help each other in appropriate ways. They have many more opportunities to learn, so they are better prepared to show what they know on tests, in papers, and in presentations.

### A Civil Digital Society

*"The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur."*

—Alfred North Whitehead in *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan, 1967)

Is the individual solely responsible for cheating? It would seem not. In schools and classrooms where the emphasis is on knowledge-building, deception is both undesirable and difficult. The emphasis is on learning and creation, not on getting assignments finished or looking good when you aren't.

How does a school community engender a code of conduct? They can begin by looking at the areas of greatest concern. "If a prohibition, like downloading music, makes criminals out of children and otherwise law-abiding citizens, perhaps it needs to be reexamined," suggests Cohen. If students are routinely playing games on school computers, checking e-mail, and downloading software or images without permission, it's time to examine library use, the schedule, the relevance and interest of assignments, and the ethical use of school property. The "problems" can be indicators of the need for a culture change.

At Hoover High, students create a video yearbook that they publish and sell themselves. In Martha Adams' classroom at St. Brendan's, students form environmental-health companies and create slideshow presentations, videos, and proposals with full text and Web citations. Students are authors and producers. They know their original thinking is valued. In turn, they value the thinking of others, and credit it. They know the difference between right and wrong, even in a digital age, because the digital tools of that global community are theirs to use. These students are connecting the bits to have a voice in the digital community.

To determine what is blameworthy in the digital age, it seems to be time to change our lenses; to understand that individuals both reflect and invent their social interactions, and that our responsibility to "turn all our cards face up" does not change, even as the milieu does. The technologies we create cause us to reinvent ourselves. They create opportunities for rule-making as well as rule-breaking. And in a democracy, they provoke discussion about what we value. One would hope that as emerging technologies become ubiquitous, teachers and students will create policies, practices, and cultures to support a civil society in which we know how to "be digital" with freedom and integrity. <

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### Resources

**Anderson, James G. and Kenneth W. Goodman.** *Ethics and Information Technology*. 1st Edition. New York: Springer-Verlag New York, Incorporated, 2002.

**Cable in the Classroom.** *Digital Ethics*. Web site. [www.ciconline.org/Enrichment/MediaLiteracy/DigitalEthics](http://www.ciconline.org/Enrichment/MediaLiteracy/DigitalEthics) Web resources and information on teaching and practicing ethical behavior in the digital age.

**Cohen, Randy.** *The Good, The Bad & The Difference: How to Tell Right From Wrong in Everyday Situations*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

**Davis, H.D. and Kenneth W. Goodman.** *Environmental Health Ethics*. Miami: University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, 2003.

**Johnson, Doug.** *Learning Right from Wrong in the Digital Age: An Ethics Guide for Parents, Teachers, Librarians, and Others Who Care about Computer-Using Young People*. Worthington, OH: Linworth Publishing, 2003.

**McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore.** *The Medium is the Massage*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press Inc., 2000.

**Negroponte, Nicholas.** *Being Digital*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.