

Taking the High Road: Eliminating Disclosure of Exam Content

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It takes a lot of work to do the right thing. It's even harder to change culture.

Trying to find out what questions are on exams, telling classmates the questions on exams taken, memorizing questions on exams that you don't know so you can warn others, schemes for groups of people to collaborate on memorizing test questions, electronic transmission of test questions....does this sound like our profession?

This behavior, cheating on exams, is actually universal. A Google search on "board exam cheating" brings up 85,000 hits. The behavior described in the last paragraph was reported over the past several years among nurses, doctors, physical therapists, high school SAT test takers, accountants, firefighters, and sadly, even the U. S. Army and the Naval Academy. Reports come from all over the globe. Cheating exists in every culture in which a board exam is administered.

In his 2003 article, "A Nation of Cheaters", Kirk Hansen, writing for the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, states that cheating is the American way of life, from Enron officials doctoring the books, to the 25% of Americans that believe it is acceptable to cheat on their taxes. Hansen points out that cheating has become accepted that it is simply a given. He states that we are hard pressed, perhaps even shocked, to discover that we are doing it.

Hansen presents a number of very compelling reasons why people cheat. In examining these reasons, and understanding them, he gives us a framework to choose to change the culture of cheating. His first two reasons reflect human character flaws and the strategies of a self-centered person who chooses to pursue their goals through cheating. These people cheat to get ahead, even if they don't qualify, and secondly they cheat because they are lazy. It is the job of our educational system to create the mechanisms to stop the advance of people who act in such a manner. Surely, people who get into a medical profession through cheating their way through will continue to operate in their profession with same callous disregard, only this time, their patients may suffer as a result.

Hansen goes on to described what he calls new reasons for cheating:

1. People cheat because they simply cannot get everything done that needs to be done.
2. People are afraid of the embarrassment of failure. In addition, the internalized pressure of the student do well is further complicated by the pressure on school officials in our field to have a high pass rate, for accreditation reviews and for the prospective student who wants to know the pass rate when considering which school to attend.
3. People cheat because everyone else is doing it. For instance, peer group pressure to reveal forbidden material and help out fellow students is a strong motivating factor just as is a well-meaning teacher who wants know the content of test questions to improve his or her delivery of critical material. These factors are considerably more compelling in the moment than upholding a confidentiality statement.

4. People cheat to resist new systems of unfair accountability. People feel justified in “beating” a system that they see as unfair, and perceive as having power or money that they don’t have. In our field, the end goal of graduating qualified and quality practitioners may be overshadowed by a desire to “stick it” to the NCCAOM as an institution.

How is this relevant to our profession, to the education of AOM practitioners, and particularly to educators? Tolerating cheating and promoting strategies of beating the system is a choice. As members of the profession, we can choose to promote our professional ethics or not. And given that we stick pointy metal objects in people, there exists a real potential for harming the public when people who cheat gain entrance to the profession.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in education. Students, in their anxiety over their boards, pressure their teachers to to give them the exact content of the exams. Teachers are expected to teach to the exams. Students who have taken exams often approach teachers to let them know the content they believe was missed, or that they feel other students need to know. Teachers, reacting to pressure and wanting feedback, may even approach their students to ask if certain material was on the test.

How do we address the problem, and even more importantly, do we want to address the problem? We must ask ourselves, in Hansen’s words, “Have we lost our fundamental commitment to integrity and fair play?”

As an NCCAOM Diplomate or Candidate, you have already demonstrated your commitment to integrity by signing a *Non-Disclosure and Confidentiality Agreement*. Your behavior with regard to promotion or prevention of cheating is subsequently a choice you make. Every communication, written, oral or electronic that you have with a student, fellow classmate, teacher, administrator or colleague reflects the commitment you made to the NCCAOM and to the profession you serve.

Aside from the ethical impact on our profession, there is a very real economic cost in our renewal and certification fees. Each and every question costs about \$1500 to develop. The NCCAOM will vigorously and relentlessly take steps to protect the integrity of their exams and when cheating is uncovered in any and every instance all questions that were or might have been compromised are retired and a new set of questions are developed to take their place. Cheating costs all of us in more ways than one. On the other side are the benefits of promoting integrity. As a practitioner, the respect I receive is directly linked to the unquestioned integrity of the board exams. This is true across all healthcare practices and, if we want to be taken seriously, we need to take the integrity of our boards seriously.

Here are some common scenarios that may be encountered in an educational environment, along with suggested actions which will protect the integrity of the exam.

Students talking to students

Student A, who just took an exam, is approached by Student B who has not yet taken it. “I heard that there was a whole lot about Lung pathologies, says Student B.

Student A cannot reveal any content material, even to confirm or deny a statement by another student. Student A can say, “ It was pretty much like the content outline they

publish, and anyway, I had to sign a non disclosure, so I can't tell you about the content. If you study by the outline, you'll be fine."

What else can students say?

- You can talk about your process for preparing for the exam.
- You can talk about review resources that are available. The NCCAOM now has practice tests on line.
- You can point out the content outline and bibliography on the NCCAOM website. You may talk about reference material that you found particularly helpful in a global sense.
- You put your credentials in jeopardy by violating the Confidentiality Agreement when you talk about content. Candidates have been and will continue to be disciplined for revealing test content.

Teachers talking to students

Student A, who has just taken the exam, approaches Teacher B. Student A says, "I had questions on Topic "X"..." and appears to be ready to tell the teacher what the questions on Topic "X" were so that the teacher can cover that material with other students.

Teacher B must interrupt Student A, "Hold on a minute. I can see that you genuinely want to help other students, but if you reveal the exact content on the exam, that's cheating and it puts my certification in jeopardy." The teacher can guide the student by saying, "Please do not reveal any question content to me or anyone else. What I can hear about are areas on the exam content outline that were well covered in my class, and areas that I should consider covering more fully. Shall we look at the outline together?"

Student A, who has just taken the exam, approaches Teacher B. Student A says, "I had some weird questions, and there were no right answers. What would be the right answer to...?"

Again, Teacher B needs to interrupt Student A with the same opening line as in the example above. This time, the student feels that the test has been somehow unfair, and the student's motivation may be reveal content to confirm the unfairness. Teacher B needs to re-direct the student by saying, "What you should do is write a letter to the testing department of the NCCAOM. Make sure that you direct the letter to the Test Development Department and mark your correspondence as confidential. Do not copy anyone outside the testing department on your email. It won't help you to check with me or other students to see if you are right, and you are exposing them to cheating if you talk about a particular question. The NCCAOM will take your feedback seriously."

What else can Teachers say?

- As a teacher, it is best that you avoid any conversation with students about exam content. You should never ask, nor allow students to have a conversation about or reveal exam content in your class. You should report any student who insists on doing so.
- You do have expertise in creating valid exam questions for your own class. You can help students understand how you develop a valid question. For instance, you may tell them that they need to know the classifications of points so well that they can answer a question about a point when the point is referenced by its

classification instead of its name. “ ‘What is a function of the xi-cleft of the “X” channel?’ is a legitimate question, and you should be able to answer questions that combine different aspects of knowledge” is an appropriate comment.

- Be familiar with the content outline of the NCCAOM exams, found on the NCCAOM website. You cannot say, “‘X’ color of the tongue indicates ‘Y’ pattern was a question on my national exam.” You might say, “Differentiating the color of the tongue is such an important skill, it is considered basic knowledge for you to be able to enter the profession. Let’s review what the different colors indicate.”
- Be familiar with source material for the exams. A bibliography for exam content is available on the NCCAOM website. Use these or similar sources for relevant classes, and you can be assured that you are exposing your students to the same content from which exam questions are developed. Do not concern your self with actual questions.
- Endeavor to teach to ever increasing level of ability. You cannot have access to information about the exact content of exam questions that students are either passing or failing, even if your desire is to use that feedback to improve your teaching. Since your goal is improvement, use the content outlines and bibliographies to constantly review and improve your subject matter.
- Test with appropriate rigor. The new format of NCCAOM exams is adaptive testing. A student who is being successful in the exam will be exposed to more and more difficult questions. You can help them by making sure that the test questions in your class have appropriate depth and call for appropriate levels of analysis and critical thinking.

Administrators talking to students

Student A, who has just taken the exam, is talking to Student B. You, the Dean, walk past them as Student A says, “There were a lot of questions on ‘Topic X.’ I had one that asked ‘Y’ (revealing specific content).”

Student A has violated the *Non-Disclosure and Confidentiality Agreement*. They are cheating, even if Student B has also taken their exam. They both would be subject to reporting and disciplinary action.

As a school official, you must realize that you perpetuate cheating if you ignore it. The culture of your school begins and ends with the behavior you model.

If you do not have a published Honor Code, you need to create one and include it in your student handbook. You should include in your Honor Code a section on violating professional ethics as part of your policies for which a student may be disciplined. Together with your Board, legal counsel and other policy making bodies within your institution, develop and then follow the exact steps that you will implement in documenting and disciplining students who violate the Honor Code.

What else can Administrators do?

Administrators must be proactive in addressing the reasons people cheat and creating a culture in which cheating is recognized for what it is and made unacceptable. Rather than delineate what administrators can say, I will present a list of action items:

- If your school operates by “cutting corners” or in an unethical manner, take a good look at why you do this and what message you are sending to your students about professional behavior.
- Create an Honor Code and enforce it.
- Be completely familiar with the NCCAOM Handbook, especially pp 22-25 which describe the *Non-Disclosure and Confidentiality Agreement*, procedures encountered in taking the exam, and how a student may appeal a question for content or the scoring of their exam.
- Cover the subject of what constitutes cheating at your faculty meetings. Include information to guide faculty on how to talk and how not to talk about NCCAOM exam content.
- Create a review course for the NCCAOM exam. You may elect to have a very limited or a comprehensive review course. At the very least, you can cover how a student applies, what study sources they might use, what library sources you have to help them, and a general strategy to organize the material for study. You may elect to review didactic information for the test in a more extensive manner. In any review, you should explicitly talk about the *Non-Disclosure and Confidentiality Agreement* and be clear about what constitutes cheating and that cheating is not tolerated in your institution. If you allow a private vendor to hold such a review with your students, review that vendor’s delivery and make sure they do not encourage cheating by revealing exam content.

While cheating may be common in American culture, there are circumstances where a non-tolerance policy is appropriate. It is not only appropriate but essential when it involves public safety. We must call each other to accountability.

Even if it’s hard, do the right thing.

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