

STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ACADEMIC HONESTY IN THE NEW NORMAL: A BASIS FOR THE ADOPTION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY IN MODULAR DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract.

This research explores students' perceptions towards academic honesty. It provides the answers and analyses to the question as to how do students' view academic honesty in Modular Distant Learning. It employed a descriptive quantitative and qualitative data collection method through structured interviews, focus groups, and applied themes through frequency and percentage count utilized among 30 students in Bulihan Integrated National High School. All collected data were transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted. The study revealed that the new learning modality has its own merits, most of the student-respondents were dissatisfied with MDL due to the limited guidance of the teachers. To address this difficulty, students resorted to some academic misconduct like (1) plagiarism; (2) soliciting answers from their classmates; and (3) collusion or the unauthorised collaboration by two or more students in the production and submission of tasks. These are the students' survival strategies of these times. In the new normal, academic honesty was perceived as non-existent. Corollary to this, it surfaced in the FGD that the students preferred to be assisted in the MDL through the following interventions: limited face-to-face sessions, flexibility with deadlines, and structured synchronous online sessions. Given this intervention, the researcher recommends that schools formulate their own academic integrity policy in MDL.

Keywords: *academic honesty, academic integrity, modular learning delivery*

Introduction

The advent of COVID-19 in the last quarter of 2019 precipitated the so-called "new normal." The absence of traditional "face-to-face" learning and the emergence of distance learning as a new learning delivery modality have raised concerns about academic honesty. Cheating, for example, has been considered a serious problem in the academe. Chiesl (2009, as

cited in McGee, 2013) has underscored that common reasons as to why students cheat include fear of failure, desire for better grades, pressure from parents to do well etc. In the face of limited interaction, it may be difficult if not impossible for teachers to determine or appraise student performance in remote learning.

Academic integrity is regarded as cornerstone of the learning process (Bretag et al., 2014; Harp & Taietz, 1966, as cited in Parnther, 2016). According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, Integrity is described as the “quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness” (Webster, n.d.). It is a fundamental component of a student’s moral character. But the prevalence of all forms of academic misconduct makes its implementation a critical challenge among schools. The International Center for Academic Integrity (2012) considers honesty as an indispensable foundation of teaching, learning, research, and service, and a necessary prerequisite for the full realization of trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Irrespective of the learning delivery modality, students are expected to avoid any type of academic dishonesty. The seriousness of academic dishonesty is supported by Wangaard and Stephens (2011) who asserted that cheating, in general, violates core values of trust and fairness.

To ensure assessment and feedback continuity, DepEd issued D.O. 031, 2020, or the Interim Guidelines for Assessment and Grading in Light of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan, to provide guidance on the assessment of student learning and on the grading scheme to be used. It instructed teachers to be reasonably lenient and considerate towards the learners during these times. Despite the said leniency, the Policy Statement of the aforementioned mandate is clear about its stand towards integrity. It stresses that teachers, school leaders, and parents must commit to uphold the integrity of learning and instruction in the context of distance education.

The purpose of this study was to determine how students perceive academic honesty in the new learning modality. The study examined the challenges and difficulties encountered by the students in remote learning. Also, the study presented the students’ most preferred intervention or assistance from the school and their teachers. This research undertaking will explore ways to (1) assist and support students’ performance in Modular Distance Learning; and to (2) advocate academic integrity policy in MDL.

Strategy/Intervention

Expecting academic honesty from the students is unrealistic if they are not being guided and supported by their teachers. The school intervention program included (1) limited face to face sessions; (2) extended deadlines; (3) structured synchronous online session; (4) unstructured guidance via call or through social media; and (5) home visitation. After the assistance given, the academic integrity policy was conceptualized.

Orientations were conducted to explain to the students what constitutes cheating in modular distance learning (MDL). It is in this manner that an awareness towards academic dishonesty in distance learning is raised. In a particular study, it is observed that institutions that promote and enforce honor codes have lower rates of academic dishonesty (Gibson, Blackwell, Greenwood, Mobley, & Blackwell, 2006, as cited in McGee, 2013).

Research Questions

This study sought to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are students' general perceptions towards academic honesty in modular distance learning?
2. How is academic misconduct committed in the new normal?
3. How can the school and the teachers assist the learners in the modular distance learning?

Scope and Limitations

This study was conducted in Bulihan Integrated National High School in the Division of Cavite Province for the school year 2020-2021. The student-respondents are from Grade 9 and Grade 10 levels.

The foci of this study were (a) the students' general perceptions towards academic honesty in modular distance learning (MDL) among the junior high school students, the basis of this will be the policy statement of DO No. 31, s. 2020, or the Interim Guidelines for Assessment and Grading in Light of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan; and (b) the students' most preferred interventions and assistance for modular distance learning (MDL).

Although this study revealed the student's most preferred interventions from their teachers in MDL, there are no intervention results incorporated in this research undertaking. As a perception study, it primarily aimed at analyzing the perceptions of students about academic honesty in the new normal. It attempted to explain the various challenges and difficulties as regards the impact of MDL on the students.

Another important consideration noted by the researchers is the prevalence of many forms of academic dishonesty in the new normal. These include but not limited to (1) plagiarism or copying content without citation; (2) soliciting answers from their classmates through various social media platforms; and (3) collusion and complicity which happens when more than one student contributes to a piece of work that is submitted as the work of an individual.

Methodology

Research Design

The study examined the perceptions of academic dishonesty in modular distance learning (MDL). The study used a qualitative design using structured interviews and focus groups to explore students' perceptions towards academic honesty and types of academic dishonesty occurring in modular distance learning (MDL). All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted.

Sampling Procedure

The sample group is consisted of 30 junior high school students. Among these participants, 19 identified themselves as males and 11 females. This study employed purposive sampling in identifying the participants.

Data Analysis

All collected data were transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted. A large amount of verbal data through interviews and focus groups was analyzed through a qualitative content analysis. According to Schreier (2012, as cited in Kääriäinen, M., Elo, S., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H., 2014), qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data

All the responses gathered through focus groups and structured interviews were extracted and explained accordingly. Consequently, these responses were coded and categorized as emerging themes of this research work. For better understanding, the results were divided and presented under the following themes:

Theme 1: Importance of Academic Honesty

Theme 2: Challenges and Difficulties Encountered in MDL

Theme 3: Academic Misconduct as a Survival Strategy

Theme 4: Interventions Preferred by the Students

Frequency and percentages were used to tally on the following: (1) student-respondents' demographic profiling; and (2) in their responses in the structured interviews and focus groups.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 provides the data on the categories of the student-respondents interviewed according to sex, age, and year level. Based on these factors, this study was participated predominantly by Grade 9 male students with ages between 15-18.

Table 1. Profile of the students of respondents (n=30).

		f	%
Sex	Male	19	63.33
	Female	11	36.66
Age	15-18	23	76.66
	19-Above	7	23.33
Grade Level	Grade 10	13	43.33
	Grade 9	17	56.66

Thematic Responses of the Respondents

Guided by motive questions laid during structured interviews and focus groups, the responses of the junior high school students were tallied accordingly.

Theme 1: Importance of Academic Honesty

Table 2 shows the responses of the junior high school students when asked about their general views towards the essence of academic honesty in one's studies. It can be gleaned that the top reasons include foundation of success and an essential component of independent learning garnering both 33.33 percent.

Honesty viewed as a foundation of success is associated with Aristotle (2004, as cited in Molina & Wells, 2017). In his concept of ethics, a virtuous person is someone who has ideal character traits e.g. honesty and are essential to living a life of excellence.

Table 2. JHS students' responses on the importance of academic honesty (n=30).

Motive Question: In general, why is academic honesty important to one's scholastic work?			
Responses		f	%
(1) It is a foundation of one's success.		10	33.33
(2) It is a moral obligation.		7	23.33
(3) It is an essential component of self-trust and self-confidence.		3	10.00
(4) It is necessary for independent learning.		10	33.33

When asked whether academic honesty is still being practiced in the "new normal," majority of the respondents negatively perceived it. Only 4 out of 30 or 13.33 percent believes that students can still remain honest in MDL. This is understandable considering that it is common for students to misbehave in the absence of a teacher, and this is especially true for distance learning. Table 2.1 summarizes these responses.

These perceptions that cheating occurs more often in distance learning has been studied by King, Guyette, & Piotrowski (2009, as cited in Peterson, 2019), in which they found that 73.8% of students surveyed felt that it was easier to cheat in distance learning Table 2.1 summarizes these responses.

Table 2.1. JHS students' perceptions towards academic honesty in MDL (n=30).

Motive Question: Do you think academic honesty is still observed in the new normal?			
Responses		f	%
(1) Yes, I believe that academic honesty is still practised today.		4	13.33
(2) No, academic honesty is non-existent in this new learning modality.		26	86.66

Theme 2: Challenges and Difficulties Encountered in MDL

Table 3 reveals the students biggest struggles in MDL. The data points out that understanding and analyzing concepts is their greatest difficulty. We can surmise that this 73.33 percent is the direct result of little to no direct teacher guidance and supervision.

The same observation was also supported by Atchley et al (2013, as cited in Paul & Jefferson, 2019) claiming that distance learning can lack feedback for both students and instructors.

Table 3. JHS students' challenges and difficulties encountered in MDL (n=30).

Motive Question: Could you identify some pressing concerns you encountered in MDL?			
Responses		f	%
(1) Difficulty understanding and analyzing concepts without the support of the teacher.		22	73.33
(2) Overreliance on Google or online data for answers.		18	60.00
(3) Financial constraints, especially that logging on the Internet everyday requires certain costs.		8	26.66
(4) External and internal distractions, like family issues and peer pressure.		7	23.33

Theme 3: Academic Misconduct as a Survival Strategy

As survival strategies, many students resort to various forms of academic dishonesty or misconduct. Table 4 ranked the top three (3) forms of academic dishonesty in MDL namely, complicity or collusion, soliciting answers, and plagiarism. Collusion is committed when inappropriate or unauthorised collaboration by two or more students in the production and submission of tasks. Soliciting answers means to use any form of communication to obtain answers from various sources. And plagiarism is simply a copy and paste of online content act without citation.

Among these, collusion appears to be the most frequent choice of students for both online and classroom cheating according to Stuber-McEwen, Wisely & Hoggatt (2009, as cited in McGee, 2013). In distance learning modality, this can take place by exchanging information through the use of a more sophisticated technology.

Table 4. JHS students' academic misconducts committed in MDL (n=30).

Motive Question: As a survival strategy, what forms of academic misconduct have you committed in MDL?			
Responses		f	%
(1) Getting someone else to do answer my modules.		15	50.00
(2) Copying online content without citing sources		18	60.00
(3) Soliciting answers from various sources such as classmates and friends		12	40.00

Theme 4: Interventions Preferred by the Students

When asked about their most preferred intervention or assistance, the data shows in Table 5 that half of the respondents, 50.00 percent, opted limited face-to-face and home visitation as the least preferred with 3.33 percent.

The face-to-face instruction has numerous benefits not found in distance learning according to Xu and Jaggars (2016, as cited by Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Traditional learning is

extremely dynamic and allows for immediate teacher response and more flexible content delivery.

Table 5. JHS students' preferred interventions or assistance from teachers (n=30).

Motive Question: What is your most preferred assistance/support from your teachers?			
	Responses	f	%
(1)	Home visitation.	1	3.33
(2)	Unstructured guidance via calls or through social media at least once a week.	2	6.66
(3)	Structured synchronous sessions, like online meetings.	3	10.00
(4)	Flexibility with deadlines, like in submission of modules and performance tasks.	13	43.33
(5)	Limited face-to-face sessions.	15	50.00

Despite this overwhelming preference for limited face-face, the school remained adherent of DepEd Order 012, series 2020, or otherwise known as *Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 in Light of the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency*. This is an uncompromising instruction that there shall be no face-to-face instruction until students are safe. Instead, the school opted other forms of assistance such as flexibility with deadlines, like in submission of modules and performance tasks, unstructured guidance via calls or through social media at least once a week and home visitation.

Conclusion

The advent of COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes to education. The rapid shift to distance learning created opportunities for academic misconduct. This study has concluded that modular distance learning has negatively impacted JHS learners as manifested by their perceptions towards academic honesty in the new normal with an overwhelming response among the respondents that academic honesty is no longer observed in the “new normal”.

This perception corroborated the various forms of academic misconduct committed by the student-respondents themselves. On a brighter note, students are willing to be helped through various interventions or assistance from the school and their teachers. As highlighted in the results, their preferences include limited (1) face-to-face sessions; (2) flexibility with deadlines; and (3) structured synchronous online sessions.

Recommendations

It is given that maintaining academic integrity is equally a challenge in both traditional and distance learning. But the Code of Ethics for Professional Teachers reminds us that it is expected of every teacher to possess not only professional competence but high moral values as well. Considering this mandate, teachers are expected to foster the culture of integrity among the learners.

The researchers recommends decreasing academic dishonesty in modular distance learning by raising awareness of the importance of being honest to our scholastic works through an *academic integrity policy*. This supports the policy statement of DO No. 31, s. 2020, or the Interim Guidelines for Assessment and Grading in Light of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan, where teachers, school leaders, and parents must commit to uphold the integrity of learning and instruction in the context of distance education.

This academic integrity policy is composed of three components namely, (1) *Anti-Plagiarism*, where students will be taught to properly cite sources; (2) *Honor Pledge*, a signed document where they certify that the submitted work is entirely their own; and (3) *Ethics-in-Action Self Quiz*, a quarterly self-reflection on whether their action violate any ethical values such as integrity, respect, fairness, or kindness.

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