

Unpacking Academic Misconduct Dr. Eric Da Silva

Podagogies: A Learning and Teaching Podcast

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[Music]

Chelsea Jones:

Welcome to Podagogies, a learning and teaching podcast. I'm Chelsea Jones.

Curtis Maloley:

And I'm Curtis Maloley. We're recording from our homes in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Treaty 13 Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and also the Dish With One Spoon Territory.

Chelsea Jones:

Today we're asking the question, why do some students cheat? What does cheating look like in 21st century education, especially as so many educators are teaching remotely during the pandemic? Academic misconduct is hardly a black and white issue and here to discuss why is Dr. Eric Da Silva, an assistant professor in the Department of Physics at X University. Dr. Da Silva is the chair of the university's designated decision maker committee and hundreds of cases of academic misconduct cross his desk each year. He assesses every one of them. Welcome, Eric.

Eric Da Silva:

Oh, thanks for having me.

Curtis Maloley:

Eric, you've been part of so many discussions with students about academic misconduct, what have you learned about some of the predominant reasons that it occurs?

Eric Da Silva:

Well, I have had the opportunity to look at a lot of cases and one of the main reasons that I even like to get involved in terms of my service. The university is part of my job with the AIO is to get that opportunity to really try to understand why students are cheating or committing any form of misconduct according to our policy. And to try to use that to do our best to prevent cheating, not so much in the sense of getting numbers down because I think it's important off the bat, at least when I discuss academic misconduct matters, we're not assuming that people are cheaters or cheating. The numbers are actually quite low in terms of students that actually do commit misconduct. But it's always interesting to have an understanding as to why. When we get that opportunity, either in a facilitated discussion when we're still in the investigative phase of cases, etc, or even afterwards if they're my own students, you know, what, what happened, like what

actually caused you to do something like this, something that has can have very big impacts on their lives and, and their academics. Usually comes down to a few categories, you know, matters that relate to language, you know, not really having that experience in writing in English properly, or even for native English speakers, it can become an issue of not having experienced doing academic writing, etc. In that case, you know, plagiarism, which is a very big type of misconduct that we see can happen even inadvertently. Students, of course, may not have experience at all with regards to certain citation mechanisms and styles. Therefore, they can get caught up in what's seen as plagiarism as well. But in other cases, a lot of what I've been seeing and hearing from students comes down to, you know, matters of really discerning their career paths and their paths in their lives. A lot of students particularly in their first year seem to come in with a very concrete idea in their heads that, you know, the field that they got into has to be the field they're stuck with for the rest of their lives. There may be parental matters with regards to being sort of I wouldn't say forced, but pushed into certain areas, like they have to become doctors, they have to become engineers. And in those cases, there's the pressure I find with students to really exceed expectations in their own abilities to get the highest grades possible. But in conjunction with that, trying to minimize the amount of time that is required on tasks that they feel are that they feel are trivial. Some courses, for example, in my field in the sciences, you know, it's not uncommon to see a student who may believe that, hey, you know, this is a very simple problem. Why do I have to do it? It's just a cord going this way, in that way, I know how to do this, why am I going to waste my time, you know, writing this exam, get someone else to do it. I can spend my time doing something better, whatever it is, and not really seeing the value of what they're being asked to do in a class with regards to their assessments. And with the online learning and online assessments. That's obviously been a big one. I think everyone would agree. I don't have the exact statistics. But, you know, contract cheating has been a big problem.

Chelsea Jones:

I wanted to ask more about that. I actually think it's really interesting to think about what is happening with cheating right now. Like, what does it look like right now? And because you see so many cases each year, I wonder if you can sort of pull back the curtain for us? What is contract cheating? And what are these sort of new 21st century forms of academic misconduct that are happening?

Eric Da Silva:

I don't think they're very new. I think it's just that we're seeing more of it. I'm interested in trying to understand why students do this. So I actually spent some time scrubbing Reddit and these discord servers and this stuff, trying to just understand what's going on behind the scenes. It's actually quite scary what's out there. I mean, if we think about students not being in the classroom anymore, and just being in front of their computers, issues of their identity starts to become an issue. I mean, that's always been an issue with exams, even in person. Realistically, what is stopping someone from having their cousin go in and write their exam for them. When we were in person, it's the whole purpose of checking IDs, all of this type of stuff. So these things have always happened. But nowadays, you're behind your computer and effectively, there are services out there, where students can simply pass on their credentials and pay for

someone to sit and write their exams for them. So that is one form of contract cheating, where there are people out there who will, for money, sit through an online exam and write it as if they were the student. And these people are professional exam takers, they are very good at what they do, they are very good in the discipline, and you can catch it. It becomes difficult to do so in some cases, to detect that this has happened in order to investigate and actually start looking at IPs and figuring out you know, what, what exactly happened during an exam. The other form which I've just been myself blown away are websites like unemployedprofessor.com, which I couldn't believe exists, but it does. And it's, it's more of a situation where you're effectively paying someone in this case, people with doctorates, the whole concept of an unemployed professor who is vetted by the company, and you effectively just pay and they will do your assignments for you. And this goes to the level of having dissertations written. In that sense, it's a big problem. I think we can all agree, it's not something that is new, per se. I'm sure that you know, people throughout the ages have paid and had people write their assessments for them, especially those that they hand in that they have the opportunity to work on overtime. But it just seems like it's much more readily available now and much more streamlined and commercialized. It's a big issue. And one of the big problems I think, with designing online assessments comes down to trying to vet these things out. I mean, services like Chegg.com, I don't want to be naming too many names, but you know, they exist, you know. You can post a question, and you'll have a professional give you an answer within a few minutes. And now it's out there for everybody to see. So it's not only isolated cases of cheating, where you may have one student bring in some notes, or whatever it is, you know, have someone being given an answer that's readily available to the whole class. In that case, you now have someone that's facilitated cheating for potentially hundreds of students, and it becomes a very big problem. In those types of cases.

Chelsea Jones:

I find this really fascinating, because, you know, I hear you saying that it's not necessarily new. It's just more readily available, and may be coming in different forms. But when I was a student, maybe I didn't know about these things, or maybe they just weren't as readily available. And now I wonder how do students and instructors navigate this? If instructors would do well to be aware of it, to be proactive about it? What does that mean for how they plan their teaching? And for students, I wonder what it means, if you get caught up in that world? How can you unravel yourself and get out of it?

Eric Da Silva:

Yeah, that's a good question. It's a complicated question. So one of the first things I sort of mentioned here was that when you start to talk to students about why they commit misconduct, I wouldn't say all the time, but a lot of the time, it comes down to seeing assessments as being redundant and not necessarily worth their time. You have to also think about it from the instructor's point of view, someone who's evaluating students. One of the ways that you can detect this is to look at work over time. When you start to see huge differences in quality, huge differences in syntax and language, I mean, I've seen cases where you will see differences and this might seem silly, but it can trigger an investigation is, you know, using American versus UK spelling, I mean, as things are going along over time. And it's not a concrete way to know that

it's happened, but it certainly will flag that there may be something wrong. A big one is usually seeing that a student is doing very poorly, and all of a sudden is writing, you know, Nobel worthy papers all of a sudden. These are all things that will trigger a suspicion, right, and then usually investigation happens. So that's where the double edged sword comes in on this, like you have students that don't see value in a lot of smaller assessments. That small number, like I said, are more likely to maybe want to reach out and have someone else do it for them because they don't see the value. The flip end of this is if you don't have enough assessments, when you have this contract cheating, specifically, in the case of assignments, it's harder to detect if you don't have this trend of work to look at. It's really the only way. It's a very hard thing to detect. Because frankly, you know, if you have a class of say 100 students, there's no real way to know what the quality of their work is at any point in time.

Curtis Maloley:

Even as you're saying that I think I've always been rankled a little bit by the kind of emphasis on detection when we talk about academic misconduct at the university. And I certainly know I remember, like, when I first started teaching, I was afraid that I had to, you know, be on guard to detect what was happening. I've really come around to try to think about it from the point of view of prevention, and you were speaking of education earlier, you know, you touched on a few really important things here. The first is that, you know, often academic misconduct happens when students place a low value on what they're learning, or they don't see the purpose of the assessment. Also, if they have low expectations for success, if they don't feel like they're going to be successful, whether it's that they lack a skill, or they don't quite understand what the assignment is asking of them. So there's all these different things going on. I think something that interests me, and I'd love to get your thoughts on is ways that we can then with this in mind, build intrinsic motivation in learners that can be creating assessments that they see as valuable. So sure, that's true. But I wonder also, what are your thoughts on how we might be able to involve students in the process of evaluations so that they can understand why they're being evaluated and the significance of the evaluation for their learning. So I'm thinking of things like working with students to develop marking criteria, engaging students in a peer review process where they can measure where they stand in context with their peers, or even using self assessment if there's if there's really clear criteria, and the student has a chance to look at their work and, you know, offer commentary to the instructor. Do you have any thoughts about this about ways that we might involve students in evaluation?

Eric Da Silva:

That's a very good question and I think where it becomes complicated is that there are disciplines where I don't think that would be very easy to introduce in terms of having students involved in their, their marking criteria, etc. One thing that I have seen work quite well, and just so you're aware, I've been at X university as a student, even for many years, before joining as faculty. So I've even seen this from the student perspective. Generally, at least within the sciences, I mean, first year classes are usually quite large. And it becomes very difficult to implement, you know, peer review, and that sort of self assessment, etc. in a traditional sense. It's hard to do just simply because of the number of students. But certainly with smaller courses, it certainly works quite well. Have students peer review each other, self assessment,

assessment of their partners, etc. However, you know, there's also the downside that that can, again, just what I've seen, be used ineffectively in the sense that that whole process isn't viewed by the student as really a serious process, that it's one that can be used just in fleet grades, or whatever it is. It has to be done with care. What I do think is a great way at least again, within the sciences, to start to involve students in their learning and assessments, to really get more of a practical lab based type of assessment going on. And what I mean by that is to really sit back and start to think about ways larger projects can be done over a term in which there is a lot of control from the student's point of view on what they're going to be doing, how they're going to be doing it. But also within the realm of putting in boundaries, where the very basics of what the course is trying to teach is covered and shown to be evaluated. As an example, I mean, I'm teaching a very large first year physics class this semester. And I'm not doing this from an evaluation point of view. But from an engagement point of view. What certainly is working is you know, introducing something as simple as the concept of a Rube Goldberg machine. You know, I just showed a little video of not to age myself, but for those who remember the 1980s Pee-Wee Herman's big adventure, the breakfast machine, right? The first opening scene where he has this crazy machine going to crack an egg and make a breakfast he doesn't even eat. You're showing them that sort of concept. A Rube Goldberg Machine by its nature, it requires knowledge of the entire course that I'm teaching, but to work more individually and to gain that engagement and interest and that they can now work and design one slowly throughout the term. That has to be individualized because there's building permutations of what you can make. You can also put in boundaries in what has to be shown in that project, which is the minimum of what we're trying to teach in the course. So of course, you have to show conservation of energy, you have to show you understand basic mechanical systems, you have to show that you understand different forms of energy. So these are things you can outline that you can be clear about, that still gives flexibility for students to sort of pick and choose what they want to do and engage them, right? It's just an interesting, silly thing to do, but it really can work. Now practically doing that is what becomes a little bit more challenging, right? When you have 1000s or 1000 plus students, it's a little bit more difficult. But yeah, I definitely agreed going back to your first sort of question, comment there. Self evaluation, being involved in that evaluation process certainly works, I think. But I find that it usually works better for students that are a little bit further along in their educational path of, you know, discerning where they want to be and are a little bit more serious about the course. I'm not seeing that younger students are not serious, but they're seeing the value in doing that type of exercise. And for larger classes, I've always felt that there's room right to start introducing ways of evaluating that are very unique to the student, but really covering the material in a creative way, allowing them to be creative, and allowing them to just inherently be involved in their own assessment, right, because they're deciding what to do, and still showing the basics of what you're trying to evaluate in the course.

Curtis Maloley:

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I love that idea, especially when I think of the sciences, you know, the way a lab works or something like that. And if the lab is structured in such a way, where the student needs to replicate a process that's already there for them, it can be very different than a lab that gets the students to try to think through what the lab process might look like before the

proper process or the kind of standard process is introduced to them. Have you ever experimented with any, like different ways of doing labs?

Eric Da Silva:

Going back to what you just stated there, yeah, I mean, the difficulty with this type of an approach is that finding exercises that ensure that the student is getting the core competencies down, like you can't have a random project where, you know, they're not learning how to do the basics that they need to learn how to do, for sure is difficult. But yes, I have. When I was in my undergraduate here at X University, I was a teaching assistant for an upper level Chemistry course and that is actually the exact model that this instructor used. And it worked out incredibly well, in the sense that the whole laboratory component just had clearly outlined that, you know, these are the core competencies that you need. You can come in and do so and learn how to do this whenever you like but the evaluation itself is a project that you're going to design that you're going to have approved, that you're going to have the guidance from a TA to accomplish, and then you present etc, at the end. And it worked out very well. It worked out very well in the sense that you know, students got engaged. Students actually seemed excited about the work that they were doing. They were able to pick something they were interested in to actually get through, through the course with a lot of interest. I found that time that really helped students discern whether or not that was the area for them. When you're actually asked to design something of that scope, I mean, you really have to sit there and see if this is... it's the first experience of really getting into say that industry. So it really allows students to feel and think about whether that area was for them in the first place. Going back to that whole idea of seeing exercises being redundant and not of value, I mean, all of these exercises we designed are designed for that ultimately, like, that's your career path, right? This is the area you like. To not do them is just a shame. So it's getting them to get through that phase of learning as well and discerning their paths is also key here when designing these different types of assessment models, for sure.

Chelsea Jones:

What you're saying about discernment is really interesting and the idea that discernment can be something sort of baked into the dismantling of academic misconduct on the whole. And just picking up on that a little bit. I mean, we've been talking about ways that teachers and students can sort of take up strategies to resist academic misconduct or to, you know, to sort of get around it in the first place. I also want to sort of zoom out and think about the university as a whole. Universities are notoriously competitive, very individualized, and not always supportive of people who have those language and time barriers that you mentioned earlier. So the university is kind of like a boiling pot for academic misconduct already. So how do we go about supporting students who are in such a place when it comes to academic misconduct?

Eric Da Silva:

A place like X University, in fact, I would say that it is incredibly rich in resources for students with any type of necessary accommodation or any type of need that they may have. We have those available at the university. I think the problem becomes students not being aware that they exist first of all. I always felt that it's a bit of a shame that you know, when you see a student

getting caught plagiarizing, and it's an honest like, you know, they just didn't know. They still plagiarized but the fact that they never even knew that these types of supports even existed at the university. So I think that there needs to be more of a, I wouldn't say advertisement, but you know, a clearer discussion with students about what's readily available at the university for them, and why those services are there. That is really what I think everyone hopes is that if something like this happens, that they get the help they need, so that it doesn't happen again. Some students have a hard time not being the best that they were top of their class, their high school, there may not be so anymore. These types of things definitely happen. And students, at least to me, have communicated that that's something that they feel. And from all of that, I think, again, it comes down to, you know, that feeling of not having the ability to really do these assessments. I use that word discernment, because it's really using those feelings to guide your path in your life and your career. But also having I think, in first, you're really having that concept in your head that you're not stuck in that program. That you know, there are ways that you can move around. There's nothing wrong with that and that's frankly, encouraged to a large degree, like why have someone study for years to be an accountant, if they hate being an accountant, and they knew that from day one. That's where motivation lacks and things start to happen.

Chelsea Jones:

And what about trust? Where do trusting students come into this conversation?

Eric Da Silva:

That's one of the first things I want to do, I think I mentioned in the podcast is like, you know, I don't think anyone really goes in with a suspicion that people are going to cheat. Like I said, it's a very small number of students that commit misconduct, of course. But I mean, I think that it's more just a means of when you're designing assessments, etc. to try to avoid the big things like you know, just outright cheating, or whatever it is, but going in with that concept, that mentality that everyone's a cheater. I really, I've never met anyone that has that mentality. It's really a matter of, you know, it pops up here and there. Yeah. So of course, there has to be trust there. There has to be. And the trust is certainly there. It's a hard thing when we're talking directly about misconduct because it sounds like this is, I think, a bigger thing.

Curtis Maloley:

Yeah. And I was, it came up from earlier, I guess I was trying to get this because it's when I said that I sometimes get rankled by the kind of catching cheaters mentality. And I know, obviously, like we have a duty in our courses to ensure academic integrity but when I put myself in the shoes of students, and if I'm a student and I feel like my professor is preoccupied with, you know, trying to catch cheaters, and is always talking about cheating and misconduct, and at the same time, maybe I have peers that have discovered Chegg, or one of these other these other services that have become widespread, and you know, maybe I think, well, geez, like, it's almost adversarial, right? Like it can set up an adversarial relationship. And so to that question of trust, yeah, I wonder if on some level, like one of the keys here is, is really trying to think about how we establish trust with students and how we communicate our hopes and our goals for them to be successful in our courses? I don't know. Do I sound naive as I'm saying this? Do you think that's an important part of this process?

Eric Da Silva:

It's naive, I think that we all have a responsibility to ensure that our assessments are being done in an ethical way so that there's integrity when we're doing our assessments for sure. But I think there's only so much that you can police, right? I mean, they're like, I don't like to look at misconduct on a spectrum. But realistically, I think we can, right? Like, there's sort of the, the matters of plagiarism, for example, you know, I like to look out for that, and I think a lot of instructors do and it doesn't come down to a fact of trying to, you know, like put a student in jail or something, it's a matter of looking out for those issues. And for the learning experience as much as anything I mean, if a student is having an issue with citation if they're having an issue with I don't know, I'm not a journalist, but imagine journalism students, taking notes and not paraphrasing properly. These are things that the students can take and learn from and better themselves. And I don't see a problem with it, it's not in that sense policing, right? It's really looking out for what is misconduct but really giving the student the opportunity to learn and to better themselves and their careers. Now what I think we do have to police is just making things like easy for just gross, you know, cheating, like you know, having someone write the exam for you, have someone you know, use something like Chegg. I mean, I think we can agree that those are very different things that we have to look out for and they both serve different purposes, really, because it is an educational experience for the students, for sure. But we also do have to maintain such that our assessments are done with integrity, right? So, you know, there is a benefit to some degree in making sure that instructors are looking for cases in which there's the possibility of misconduct occurring, because it can also be unintentional, right? That's the reality of some forms of plagiarism, etc. And again, the whole point of the policy that we have at the university, it's educational in spirit, right? So there's no benefit in not looking for it or assuming that it doesn't happen because it does happen. It's not necessarily happening because it's malicious in nature. And it's part of the learning experience for students as well. Again, a very small number, I want to be clear, because we are talking misconduct. So it's easy for this to sound like it's every single student on the face of the planet that's, you know, out there to do this. But you know, that small number often need help, right? So that's the whole point. Yeah.

Chelsea Jones:

Yeah. And I hear what you're saying about it being sort of a small number of students. And I really appreciate you speaking with us today. Because I think in many ways it's a delicate, and also complex topic. And you've pointed out all these contours to what academic conduct or academic misconduct actually is and how it emerges and how it's, you know, it's somewhere between the individual and the structural. And there's a lot going on here. And so I just want to thank you so much for joining us today, Eric.

Eric Da Silva:

Well, no problem. My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Curtis Maloley:

And we also want to take a second to thank the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching for funding this podcast and a really big thank you to some of the folks behind the scenes today who are producing this episode, our production support specialist Chloe Hazard, and instructional technologist Sally Goldberg Powell. You can listen to Podagogies on Spotify, iTunes and SoundCloud, and we hope you'll consider subscribing and joining our ongoing conversation.