

Academic Honesty Activity

CSCI 241

Most quarters, at least few students are caught cheating. The usual excuse when confronted is some variation of “I didn’t know that wasn’t allowed.” Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between behavior that is valid and honest from behavior that is academically dishonest.

At the end of this exercise, you should be able to differentiate academic dishonesty from valid academic exploration. The following are examples of things that have actually happened. Yes, the names have been changed. Read the five scenarios and answer the questions at the end with your team.

Acknowledgement: This activity is adapted from materials developed by Aran Clauson.

Thomas

The problem seemed straight forward enough, but Thomas could not get his program to pass the test cases. He tried rereading the textbook and reviewed his notes from the last few weeks of class. In frustration, he made random changes to the code hoping to stumble upon a workable solution. Without success, Thomas turned to the Internet.

A Google search led to Wikipedia and a short, but complicated solution to the core problem. Thomas did not cut-and-past code from Wikipedia; it was pseudo-code anyway. He reproduced the algorithm and his solution started passing the tests. He did not understand the Wikipedia solution. He commented the portions of the code that he developed on his own. He left the other parts undocumented and submitted the assignment.

Cecilia

The assignment had been going well so far. Cecilia had started with plenty of time and was keeping up with the suggested timeline, but over the weekend she came down with a stomach flu and couldn’t get anything done on Sunday, when she usually fits a lot of her schoolwork in around her work schedule. After having to scramble to catch up with work for other classes, it was the day of the deadline, and she was still wrestling with the same bug she’d been working on five days prior: nothing she tried was getting the test cases to pass. Cecilia no longer had time to get help from the tutors, TA, or instructor, so she turned to ChatGPT to help her find the bug.

She pasted the method spec, her current code, and the error message into ChatGPT and asked for debugging help; in her prompt, she clearly asked ChatGPT to avoid writing code. The ChatGPT response pointed out that her approach had a conceptual flaw, and highlighted the line in her code that needed to be corrected. Cecilia made a change to the line in question, and worked out an example on paper with the corrected code vs. her code to solidify her understanding of the algorithm. When asked about external resources or collaborations on the survey associated with the assignment, she wrote "I used ChatGPT to help me identify a bug in <methodName>".

Tim and Rachel

Tim and Rachel are both working on an assignment in the lab. Tim has been struggling with a bug—nothing he changes seems to have any effect on the assertion error he’s getting from one of the test cases. He asks Rachel if she has any ideas; Rachel takes a look at the error message and says “Oh, I had an error like that yesterday, and it was because I wasn’t creating a deep copy of the input before each run of the algorithm. Have you checked that?”

Tim looks and discovers that this is exactly the problem - he fixes it and moves on with the rest of the assignment. Tim forgets about this brief interaction, and does not mention it in the survey.

Tucker and Andy

Tucker and his roommate Andy are both taking the same CS class. Andy started working on the assignment a week before the deadline, but Tucker had been extremely busy with midterms and a project in his other classes. The night before the assignment is due, Tucker is struggling with a particularly tricky method. Andy offers to help by explaining his approach.

Andy tries to explain the steps out loud, but Tucker is still struggling to fully understand. Andy opens up his code so he can point at the different steps while explaining it again. With this explanation, the solution finally “clicks” for Tucker. Tucker immediately writes up his own version of the method; it passes all the test cases and he moves on to the next part of the assignment. The method he wrote is not a direct copy of Andy’s code—some of his choices of variable names are different, and he’s written his own comments to show that he understands the code he’s written.

Marshall

Marshall and Anne are not exactly friends. They are polite to each other since they sit next to each other in the back of the classroom every day. Otherwise, they never see each other on campus.

The class was a loosely structured discussion around a core problem to the current project. In an attempt to focus the discussion, the teacher asked how the program’s performance could be improved if it is already CPU-bound. The answer was obvious to Anne: concurrency. She said this out loud, but her answer went unnoticed. Marshall parroted her answer loudly enough to be noticed. The teacher confirmed his answer and the discussion moved forward.

Questions

1. Order the scenarios by severity; you may give a partial order (i.e., there can be ties in your ordering).
2. Which of the scenarios would you consider to be violations of academic honesty? Which should I report?
3. What simple guidelines, if followed, would prevent these situations?