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TECHNOLOGY

What a Controversy Over an App Tells Us About How Students Learn Now

By Emma Kerr | MAY 15, 2018

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David Kozlowski, contributor, Getty Images

Texas Christian University last week suspended a dozen students on suspicion of cheating with the help of a crowdsourced learning app.

When Texas Christian University recently suspended a dozen students for using Quizlet, an online flashcard-style study resource, to cheat on an exam, the ensuing legal fight highlighted broader issues about learning in a world inundated with accessible digitized information — and how many professors may not be keeping up.

While students may have kept and shared paper copies of old exams in the past, the world has changed. The digitization of learning materials, the standardization of curriculum through online providers, and the wide reach of apps like Quizlet expand the potential for academic dishonesty — even the unintentional kind. Quizlet boasts 30 million active users around the world. Search the name of a specific course and it's very possible you'll find a nearly exact replica of your study guide and old test materials.

Many students reviewing material have no knowledge of who put it there, how it was obtained, or whether the questions they are reviewing are active test questions. For example, many of the suspended TCU students said they were unaware the materials

they had reviewed online were active test questions, and they even alleged that TCU-employed tutors had directed them to the site.

Letty Martinez, the students' lawyer, defended the students' use of Quizlet by saying that the episode showed that universities had to "adapt to changes in technology" and that professors needed to change their tests. TCU reversed its punishments earlier this week.

Quizlet says that its goal is to help students learn and that it provides internal tools aimed at detecting test material. But the company says it relies heavily on users to submit removal requests if they come across such material. Laura Oppenheimer, director of marketing at Quizlet, said in a statement, "The misuse of our platform to develop bad habits, such as cheating or cutting corners on assignments, is disappointing." Students also frequent other online sharing resources, like Brainly and the more ubiquitous Google Docs.

The increasing popularity of widely used online resources that rely on crowdsourcing raises questions about what learning looks like for students today, and poses challenges to instructors.

Robin DeRosa, an interdisciplinary-studies professor at Plymouth State University, used to motivate her students to learn math by warning them that they wouldn't always have a calculator available. But with smart phones in their pockets now, students rarely encounter such constraints. Blaming students or Quizlet itself is misguided, DeRosa said.

"To suggest this is somehow tied to this particular app is problematic," she said. "It's not Quizlet that allows students to go out and find answers to any fact-based question; it's the internet that allows them to do that easily. Students have taken the technology and used it for what the technology is able to do."

And so, pedagogy must change, she said. In most disciplines, DeRosa said it may no longer be useful for students to memorize lists or regurgitate facts.

Homogenized Experiences

Some instructors continue to see their role as disseminators of content, said Natasha Jankowski, director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. For these professors, information should be "locked in a briefcase under my arm," she said.

"It's about authentic demonstrations that are externally facing so students can be part of this data-rich environment," she said, "and about how we're helping each other collectively to move us from a 'gotcha' assessment to creating a developmental learning experience. It's a different teaching-learning mentality."

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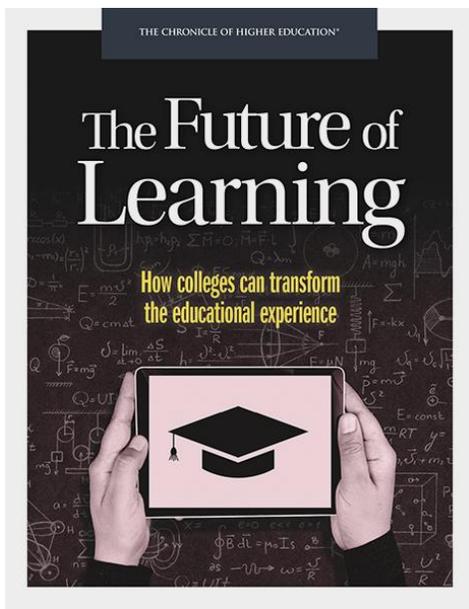
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Mass digitization and licensing of course material pose an additional problem, one that affects a broad swath of institutions and disciplines. Lee Skallerup Bessette, an instructional-technology specialist at the University of Mary Washington, said the use of widely distributed digital materials creates a homogenized academic experience that students are ready to take advantage of.

"How many thousands of students have access to that Pearson material and then upload that to Quizlet?" Bessette asked. "Say you have your Bio 101 textbook that plugs right into Blackboard or Canvas. Yes, we've always used the same textbooks, but now we're using the same slides, the same bank of questions, the same test questions, all of which exist in a digital format. And students know that."

Through social media, apps like Quizlet, and their own personal connections, students can connect to other students hundreds of miles away who are providing one another with test questions and answers. Everything is just a screenshot away.

This digitization and widespread availability of materials exacerbates the negative consequences of professors who recycle and reuse test questions instead of creating new ones each semester. Jacinta Yanders, a Ph.D. candidate in the English department at Ohio State University, said the Quizlet situation reminded her of an opinion she'd seen online: "If students can Google the answers to your questions, then your questions are crap." While Yanders wouldn't necessarily go that far, she does think the episode at TCU is a useful reminder for professors to pay close attention to the quality and purpose of their test questions.

"There are times when students do need to know factual information, fundamental knowledge from a given field, etc.," she said in an email. "But how do we assess their understanding of that knowledge? If the answer is a multiple choice and/or fill-in-the-blank exam, how much does it matter that students can recall that knowledge offhand?"

Many students may use apps like Quizlet to cut corners because they are under increasing pressures or working at jobs while they are enrolled full-time. Some of them may simply be taking the easiest route. Bessette said the growth of Quizlet-style online

resources signals a larger change. Instead of learning material essential for everyday life or a future career, she said, students have their eyes trained on obtaining a degree as a means to success.

"It's a deeper philosophical question than, 'Should we ban Quizlet?' It's, 'Are they invested in their own learning?' They're not getting an education, they're getting a degree," she said. "When students are quasi-cheating by using these apps, all they are thinking about is the grade."

Correction (5/16/2018, 10:40 a.m.): This article originally misspelled Robin DeRosa's surname as "Derosa." The article has been updated to correct that.

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