

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The impact of a journal club intervention on student perceptions and behaviours regarding academic dishonesty

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Abstract

Background: There has been an increase in academic dishonesty among nursing students. Reasons for this increase are due in part to greater demands on nursing students and ready availability of technology that facilitates these behaviours. The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in a journal club would impact nursing students' perceptions and behaviours regarding academic dishonesty. This issue needs attention because it impacts professional integrity.

Methods: Researchers used a mixed-methods design. Seventy-nine nursing students from a baccalaureate program in the Midwestern United States participated in a journal club activity designed to stimulate conversation about academic dishonesty. Students were tested pre- and post-intervention. Transcripts of class discussion and written responses to case study questions were analyzed for identification of themes.

Results: An unexpected finding was that reports of dishonesty increased after participation in the journal club intervention. The most common form described was copying the work of peers. Participants noted that both strong and weak students engage in academic dishonesty, and they believe that there are times when this behaviour is acceptable. They described the influence of personal circumstances and pressure to succeed on fostering the decision to engage in academic dishonesty. Participants described feeling frustrated and angry when they witnessed academic dishonesty among peers, but said they would not report a friend. Results suggest implications for faculties. Most participants believed faculties should clearly describe penalties for academic dishonesty and should strictly adhere to these penalties, although some believed that consequences should vary depending on the severity and number of episodes. Participants also identified actions faculties could implement to deter academic dishonesty.

Conclusions: Students are under considerable pressure to succeed, which could lead to academic dishonesty; journal clubs could raise awareness of this issue. Educators cannot assume that students have the same definition of academic dishonesty as faculties; it is recommended that faculties state explicitly what acts are considered dishonest. Consequences for academic dishonesty should be clearly described verbally and in writing, and faculties should strictly adhere to stated penalties. Additionally, students have a role in promoting honesty in the classroom.

Key words

Nursing student, Academic dishonesty, Journal club

1 Literature review

Academic dishonesty, in which students break established rules to engage in cheating behaviours^[1], is a growing problem in the United States^[2-6], and around the world^[1]. College students have admitted to participating in a variety of unethical behaviours, including plagiarism, sharing work, obtaining test questions prior to exams, cheating on examinations^[1-3, 6-9], falsifying research^[1], and threatening faculties who administer tests^[1, 3].

The nursing profession is founded on ethical principles and codes of acceptable behaviour guide nurses worldwide^[1, 6, 7]. In spite of nursing's reputation as a highly ethical profession, numerous studies have demonstrated that nursing students do not differ from other students in academic integrity^[1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11]. While most student nurses believe that academic dishonesty is wrong, some do not perceive sharing work, obtaining test questions before the exam, and plagiarizing as unethical^[1, 6]. Conway-Klaassen and Keil^[3] reported that some students perceived sharing work with others as a helping behaviour, and therefore ethical.

Integrity and ethical behaviour are crucial to nursing and the provision of excellent patient care^[6, 7]. Since academic dishonesty often precedes unethical behaviour in clinical practice^[4, 11, 12], dishonest nursing students jeopardize the safety of patients. They may enter the profession lacking adequate knowledge, and they may be more likely to commit unethical or illegal acts while caring for patients^[4, 6-8, 11, 12]. In the clinical arena, students have reported violating patient confidentiality, lying about giving medications and treatments, failing to report errors^[6, 13], and performing procedures they did not know how to do^[9].

1.1 Factors that influence academic dishonesty among nursing students

Several factors may encourage academic dishonesty. Personal characteristics of students, such as perfectionism, risk-taking, low self-confidence, poor impulse control, and poor study skills may predispose some to engage in dishonest acts^[1, 9]. Some researchers have asserted that technology facilitates academic dishonesty^[1, 10], while others have not found this to be the case^[7].

Most students believe academic dishonesty to be morally wrong^[14], and nursing students recognize that it jeopardizes patient care^[9, 14], yet they justify cheating in a variety of ways. They have cited extenuating circumstances, such as high workloads, unreasonable faculties demands, and time pressures that induce them to engage in academic dishonesty^[14]. Students have been expected to master increasingly difficult subject matter as the volume and complexity of nursing knowledge increases^[1, 10, 11, 15, 16]. McCabe^[8] reported that students in accelerated programs were more likely to engage in cheating, and suggested this may be due to increased time pressure or decreased time for socialization into the profession.

Ethical values may be ignored as students face increasing competition and pressure to succeed^[1, 10, 14]. O'Rourke et al.^[14] reported that students justified cheating by charging that peers who cheat gain unfair advantage. Students who believe that they must succeed may see academic dishonesty as crucial to achieving their goals^[15, 16]. Nursing students have reported sabotaging peers in an effort to remain competitive^[9]. In a study by Woith et al.^[9], nursing students reported deliberately giving peers incorrect information so they would score poorly on an examination. These students believed academic competition fostered an environment conducive to academic dishonesty^[9].

In a study involving students from a variety of academic disciplines, O'Rourke et al.^[4] reported that 88% of students had directly observed cheating in the preceding semester, and that those who witnessed cheating were more likely to engage in subsequent academic dishonesty. Students found cheating to be less objectionable when they believed peers were engaging in the practice^[14]. Conversely, Conway-Klaassen and Keil^[3] found that clinical laboratory students were likely to report peers' cheating because they believed that the behaviour would ultimately endanger patients.

1.2 Faculty responsibility

Socialization into the profession and its ethical standards begins in nursing school ^[1]. Since academic integrity is foundational to socializing nursing students into the profession, the faculty is responsible for ensuring that high ethical standards are maintained ^[6, 7]. Faculties who ignore academic dishonesty or fail to enforce ethics policies negatively impact all students. Dishonest students have reported that the negative consequences of being caught are strong incentives not to engage in dishonest behaviour ^[3]. Honest students protest that they cannot remain competitive in an atmosphere where academic dishonesty is the norm ^[3].

Educators have used a variety of techniques to promote academic integrity, including developing and prominently displaying ethical codes of conduct ^[1, 3], engaging in explicit discussions of academic dishonesty ^[3], and emphasizing proper citation of resources ^[1]. Instructors have endorsed use of multiple test forms and multiple proctors to mitigate cheating during examinations ^[2, 8, 10, 11]. Student nurses have asserted that some assignments seem pointless ^[9]; in light of the increasing complexity of nursing knowledge, faculties must ensure that assignments are realistic and important to the learning process ^[11].

Journal clubs have traditionally been used in nursing to promote evidence based practice, but they have also been used as a unique strategy to strengthen relationships ^[9, 17, 18]. Woith et al. ^[9] recommended using journal clubs, in which students review nursing literature and discuss related issues, to raise students' awareness of the implications of academic dishonesty. Jenkins et al. (in press) found that participation in a journal club emphasizing civility changed students' behaviour. Students reported they were more accepting, less judgmental, and more helpful after participating in the journal club intervention ^[18].

1.3 Purpose and research questions

There has been an increase in academic dishonesty among nursing students. Reasons for this increase are due in part to greater demands on nursing students and ready availability of technology that facilitates academic dishonesty. Because of concerns about academic dishonesty expressed by our students during exit interviews, and the findings of a subsequent pilot study ^[18], we conducted this mixed methods study to explore students' perceptions of academic dishonesty. This is a crucial issue which impacts professional integrity. The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in a journal club would impact nursing students' perceptions and behaviours regarding academic dishonesty. This project expands on a previous study and further tests the impact of a journal club on a larger group of students.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do nursing students participate in academic dishonesty?
2. What factors influence academic dishonesty among nursing students?
3. How do nursing students respond to academic dishonesty?
4. Does participation in a journal club intervention change nursing students' perceptions and behaviours regarding academic dishonesty?

2 Methods

2.1 Design, sample and setting

Our study employed an exploratory, mixed methods design. We used G*Power to compute a power analysis. This analysis identified a sample size of 34 as necessary to achieve a power of .80 and an effect size of .50. A convenience sample of 79 nursing students from a baccalaureate program in the Midwestern United States participated in a journal club intervention

designed to stimulate conversation about academic dishonesty. Only senior nursing students enrolled in the college were included in the study. Seventy-five participants were females and four were males, with an average age of 23 years. One female was Asian; all other participants were Caucasian.

2.2 Instrument

The Nurses' Intervention for Civility Education Questionnaire (NICE-Q)^[17] was administered pre- and post-intervention. The NICE-Q was developed based on findings of a qualitative, pilot study conducted by the researchers. The researchers devised this instrument to measure civility and academic integrity. The NICE-Q pre-test and post-test differ only in the addition of one open-ended question on the post-test asking participants to describe how their behaviour changed following the journal club intervention. The NICE-Q consists of six quantitative subscales, five related to civility, and one to academic integrity. Only findings from the academic integrity sub-scale are reported here. The academic integrity subscale consisted of five four-point Likert-type items with a pretest reliability of .80, and a post-test reliability of .75. Content validity was established by having three nurse scholars with expertise in academic integrity review the NICE-Q.

In this study, participants were asked to describe their experiences with academic dishonesty among their classmates during the previous semester of their nursing program. Specifically, they were asked to quantify how often they:

- Observed academic dishonesty in the classroom.
- Observed academic dishonesty outside the classroom.
- Observed academic dishonesty in the nursing computer lab.
- Observed nursing students turning in work that was not their own.
- Participated in academic dishonesty themselves.

The response choices were scored as follows: never = 1, 1-3 times a semester = 2, 4-6 times a semester = 3, and more than 6 times a semester = 4. In addition to the quantitative questions, the NICE-Q also contained two open-ended questions in which students were asked to provide descriptions of academic dishonesty. Furthermore, students participated in a case study and class discussion of academic dishonesty, and these responses were included in the data analysis.

2.3 Human subjects protection

We obtained approval from the university's institutional review board to conduct the study in a nursing leadership course. Participants were informed that the researchers were not responsible for teaching the course, and that their grades would not be impacted by refusal to participate. The researchers explained that participation was voluntary, and that students could leave the study at any time. Since students were being asked to disclose sensitive information in an open discussion format, special attention was devoted to the risks of the study. Students were instructed to keep shared information confidential. They were also informed that the study results would not identify individual students. All participants provided written informed consent.

2.4 Procedure

Senior nursing students in a capstone leadership course were recruited to participate in the study. This course was chosen because the journal club topics were congruent with course content. Potential participants were invited during the first class session to enroll in the study. All students (n=79) opted to participate, gave informed consent, and completed the NICE-Q pre-test. Participants attended six 50-minute journal club sessions that were held during regularly scheduled leadership classes. At the completion of the journal club intervention, students completed the NICE-Q post-test. The focus of the journal clubs was civility and academic integrity.

In the session on academic dishonesty, reported here, students were asked to prepare by reading at least one of four research articles on academic integrity that were made available to them on the course website. A class discussion of the articles was conducted during the first 15 minutes of class. Students were then divided into small groups to complete a case study describing a nursing student who resorted to academic dishonesty. They were allowed 20 minutes to complete this activity. The final 15 minutes of class were spent on a discussion of the case study. Field notes were kept on classroom discussion and copies of the written responses to case studies were collected at the end of the session.

2.5 Data analysis

Transcripts of class discussions on selected research articles which pertain to academic integrity and written responses to questions based on a case study were manually analyzed for identification of themes. Consensus was achieved through an iterative process. We used SPSS version 18 to explore frequencies and conduct paired samples *t*-test on the academic integrity subscale of the NICE-Q. Significance level was set at .05.

3 Results

Do nursing students participate in academic dishonesty?

Participants reported observing and engaging in a variety of dishonest behaviours. The most common behaviour described was copying the work of peers; all students in this study reported having done this at least once. Students also reported helping each other with on-line quizzes, completing individual assignments as a group, turning in photocopies of others' work, and signing class rosters for absent peers. Participants described some forms of academic dishonesty as more egregious than others; for example, cheating on exams occurred less often, but was perceived as more serious than cheating on homework. They acknowledged that helping others cheat was dishonest.

What factors influence nursing students to engage in academic dishonesty?

Participants were in agreement that both strong and weak students engage in academic dishonesty, and that there are times when this behaviour is acceptable. *"I wouldn't want to cheat, but if I didn't get a chance to study, I would be tempted."* They described the influence of personal circumstances on fostering the decision to engage in academic dishonesty, *"stress can change the circumstances and affect your decision making;"* and *"the more desperate ... the situation, the more creative and more rash decisions one will make to get what they want ..."* *"Pressure for success and perfection"* was also cited as an inducement to engage in academic dishonesty. There is *"pressure to get what you need to make your family proud."* Participants noted that *"failure is looked down upon in society."*

Participants did not view themselves or their behaviour as different from students in other majors. *"You still want to get an A and have a social life."* They stated that nursing is a difficult, rigorous major with high academic expectations. One participant noted that competition for entrance into the nursing program is high, and students work hard to be selected for admission. She continued, *"No one tells us the competition can stop once we are accepted into the program."* Participants believed that early in the program, when taking general education courses, students may engage in academic dishonesty more readily because they don't see the relevance of the course. They believed that this behaviour decreases as they get closer to graduation because they have shifted focus from grades to preparing for the licensure exam.

How do nursing students respond to academic dishonesty?

Participants described feeling frustrated and angry when they witnessed academic dishonesty among peers. *"I got mad; it's not fair to me."* They described how they responded when they saw peers engaging in academic dishonesty. *"One student was Googling answers during a test and I told the professor to have everyone put phones away."* Several participants would not report a friend for cheating on a major assignment or exam, although some would report a repeat offense. *"If it was the first time ... I probably wouldn't say anything, but if it kept happening, I'd let her know that I'd have"*

to [report it].” “I would ... tell her how disappointed I was and that I thought it was unacceptable. I would also tell the professor to be more aware during exams.” Conversely, some participants were reluctant to become involved. For example, one stated, “I would probably not do anything. Cheating is her poor choice and she will have consequences eventually. I don’t want to be involved.” Another said, “I wouldn’t say anything. I wouldn’t want to get involved. She is only hurting herself.”

Most participants believed that faculties should clearly describe penalties for academic dishonesty in the course syllabus and should adhere strictly to these penalties. There was disagreement about the best approach to managing academic dishonesty. Some participants believed, “Assignments should be handled less severely than cheating on an exam. Fail them for the exam.” However, other participants believed that faculties should “find out the reason why they cheated and base punishment on severity or number of times cheating occurred.” Participants also identified actions that could be implemented to deter academic dishonesty. These suggestions included using different versions of the exam, having more than one proctor circulate the room, and providing students with pencils so they could not place crib sheets in pens.

Does participation in a journal club intervention change students’ perceptions and behaviours regarding academic dishonesty?

Reports of dishonesty on the academic integrity sub-scale of the NICE-Q increased after participation in the journal club intervention (pre-test M = 8.94, SD = 3.38; post-test M = 9.38, SD = 3.06). A paired samples t-test of scale means did not demonstrate significance ($t(1, 65) = -.245, p = .218$). Participants reported seeing an increase in academic dishonesty in the following settings: classroom (from 70% to 85%); computer lab (from 35% to 43%); and outside the classroom (from 67% to 79%). Reports of seeing others turn in work that was not their own increased from 56% to 66%. Reported participation in academic dishonesty increased from 19% to 35% following the intervention. Before the intervention, no students admitted to cheating on examinations, but post-intervention, two students acknowledged that they had done so. After the intervention, twice as many students admitted to cheating on computer quizzes, and eight times as many said they cheated on homework. In the pre-test, 54 students did not respond when asked to identify in which types of academic dishonesty they had engaged; in the post-test 26 did not respond to the question.

4 Discussion

There has been an increase in academic dishonesty among nursing students. Students who engage in academic dishonesty may lack requisite knowledge to deliver safe and effective patient care, and risk becoming accustomed to using shortcuts in their clinical practice. The rationale for conducting this study was to determine if participation in a journal club would impact nursing students’ perceptions and behaviours regarding academic dishonesty.

Despite the nursing profession’s reputation for trustworthiness, students who participated in this study observed and engaged in a wide variety of academic dishonesty. These findings coincide with those of other researchers who have asserted that nursing students are as likely to engage in academic dishonesty as students in other majors ^[1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11]. Participants cited circumstances such as time pressure, pressure to succeed, and the desire to have a social life as important reasons for their academic dishonesty. They also offered suggestions for managing academic dishonesty.

One novel finding is that students did not believe it was their responsibility to prevent academic dishonesty; they asserted faculties are responsible for mitigating academic dishonesty. Educators should emphasize the ethical implications of academic dishonesty and students’ responsibility to maintain an atmosphere that supports integrity.

In this study, students linked academic dishonesty to the potential for negative patient outcomes, which supports results of a study by Woith et al. ^[9], where participants emphasized the clinical implications of academic dishonesty. This finding also demonstrates that students are aware of the potential for harm to patients by nurses who either lack knowledge due to

academic dishonesty or are accustomed to taking inappropriate shortcuts. Researchers who wish to replicate this study might consider emphasizing discussion on the clinical implications of academic dishonesty.

Finally, we found that the journal club intervention impacted students' perceptions of academic integrity. Reports of academic dishonesty increased following the journal club intervention, although this finding did not rise to the level of significance. The increase in reports of dishonesty was unexpected. One possible explanation is that the intervention raised awareness of academic dishonesty, including highlighting acts that students may not have initially perceived as dishonest. Raising awareness of academic dishonesty may help students understand and adhere to ethical standards. Faculties may wish to utilize journal clubs to promote academic integrity.

There are limitations to this study. The study was conducted at one school of nursing, using a convenience sample of senior nursing students, and therefore has limited generalizability. The NICE-Q was developed by the researchers for this study, and has not been extensively tested. Furthermore, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the students may have minimized their participation in cheating behaviours. Finally, we did not control for the impact that journal club content related to civility may have had on responses related to academic integrity.

5 Conclusions

The findings of this study can help educators improve practice. First, educators cannot assume that students have the same definition of academic dishonesty as faculties, therefore faculties should state explicitly in the course syllabus, and verbally in the classroom, which acts are considered to be dishonest. When academic dishonesty occurs, faculties should strictly adhere to the stated penalties. Secondly, when academic dishonesty occurs, faculties should strictly adhere to the stated penalties. Thirdly, faculties should help students understand that there is a role for students in promoting honesty in the classroom. Finally, this journal club intervention raised awareness and increased self-reports of academic dishonesty, therefore journal clubs may be a useful strategy to further explore this issue with students. Educators could expand upon the journal club concept and increase its' impact by including more content related to academic integrity, and offering the intervention earlier in the program of study.

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