Breaking the Rules: A Case Study of the Ethical Negations Between Policy and Practice

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Policy, digital platform, practice, ethos, surveillance

Introduction

As the world has become increasingly more digitized in the last decade, the technological and social boundaries of learning practices within the field of academia have far exceeded their capacities. Knowledge making practices have shifted from mechanical technologies to online platforms as an everyday source of writing to learn. These digital platforms engage with users through intended self-regulation of use guided by the platform's policies. The connection between policy and practice has been previously observed, however, there is an overlook concerning how the repurposing of a platform for personal practices despite policy does or does not compromise the ethics of the user. By surveilling how everyday users of digital platforms interact with the policies constituting their practices, new insight on the ethical consistency of academic integrity can be observed.

Grace is a nineteen-year-old sophomore at the College of Charleston majoring in exercise science. She manipulates both mechanical and digital learning platforms through her studying practices as her main source of knowledge-making writing. Examining the social, personal and technological tendencies of Grace's practices within the digital platforms she engages with will reveal how her motives and means acclimate to the confinements of policy, and if this inflicts any inconsistencies between practice and ethos.

Literature Review

Educational Platforms Conductive to Learning

Understanding the roles of students within platforms as "they understand both the reach and the impact of networking. They understand circulation of messages—from a Facebook group to high school and college teachers to a site that rivals encyclopedias in comprehensiveness and exceeds them in timeliness and that offers opportunities for all of us literally to make knowledge" (Yancey 6) explains why learning practices have migrated from mechanical tools such as pencil and paper to digital networks, such as social media sites. The role of being an active participant online has become apparent in the lives of college students as they adapt digital platforms for educational purposes, such as learning and studying. Adolescents are attracted to the informality of educational digital platforms while facilitating learning experiences that may cumbersome, time-consuming, or unachievable if not for its digitalization (Albert 2015). Digital platforms provide a place for creators and recipients to interact with writing online, allowing social media sites to act as digital platforms which curate the social contribution and collaboration of knowledge. The exchange of knowledge between users through online interactions in platforms demonstrates how writing throughout the 21st century has shifted from "digitized and expanded" to being "socialized and networked" (Yancey 5). Albert (2015) also examines digital platforms as social communities structed by constructive principles of learning, such as "learning and creating knowledge through inquiry, experience, social interaction, and reflection." This conceptualization of participatory learning constitutes how the digitalization of platforms have restructured the traditional methods of acquiring, obtaining and distributing knowledge within a demographic of "students who inhabit an online 'space'" (Albert 2015).

Digital platforms have ventured into the educational sphere, which offers insight into the ways that students have altered traditional practices of learning based on self-regulation concerning the policies implicated by the platform of use. Yancey and Albert distinguish the ways in which students migrate the digitality of social platforms to promote individual learning objectives.

Policies of Platforms

With the emergence of a platform as resourceful as social media comes the need for a social and legal infrastructure. Policies, implemented by the individual sites through community guidelines or code of conduct agreements, aim to regulate the interactions between the creators, their content, and its users. Platform policies govern users through negotiating, developing, and ensuring the implementation of standards (Wahyuningtyas 2019). These policies act as contracts for what is and is not allowed while engaging within a platform which require user compliance, which is why such policies are often seen as user terms of service agreements. (Meese & Hagedorn, 2019) propose that without the presence of specific policies from platforms, users are shaping and creating practices around content sharing.

Being that such practices of informal learning occur outside the realm of a traditional classroom, the ways in which users engage with them is left up to self-regulation within the platform's policies. The above literature provides an examination of these practices but fails to follow the moral implications pertaining upon application of policy. While a range of platforms provide ample opportunities for users to communicate with their audiences, often in the service of learning, policies mandate the boundaries between use and misuse of the messages they allow users to convey.

Methods

To understand the investigative process of this study, the translation of policy from platform into practice is focused on two research questions:

How do platforms attempt to regulate and influence users' practices through policies?

How do users negotiate the policies of digital platforms to meet their purposes?

In particular, this study considered the platforms and policies of learning, especially focusing on how college students make use of platforms and how--if at all--those policies shape the kinds of students they aim to become.

Two separate in-person interviews were conducted with the participant, the first of which surveyed a generalization of individual practices of learning, while the second surveilled those practices in regard to the regulations framing a specific digital platform followed by a stimulated self-reflection into the ethical compromises of such practices.

Grace was selected as the subject of this study due to her reliance on informal and collaborative studying methods as learning practices. Another significant feature for her participation is the fact that Grace is fluent within the digital literacies of social media.

In this section, I first trace the ways in which Grace interprets Quizlet's policies as guidelines for user-engagement within the platform. This is followed by an evaluation of the specific motivations that permit college students from self-regulating their practices on Quizlet, and what ethical implications arise from such policy negotiations.

Note. Grace disclosed off the record that she utilizes Quizlet's 'study set' feature as her method of practice. Study sets act as a digital replica of index cards, which are used as a common study technique for students. Study sets are the platform's source of communication as a social media platform, as users can engage with sets made by other users if published.

Grace's Personal Practices

Throughout the course of this study, Grace was enrolled in seventeen institutional credit hours dispersed across five courses. Her class schedule features a variation of her institution's general education requirements and courses specific to her major. In the initial interview Grace stated that her most laborious class is Anatomy & Physiology (A&P), which includes two separate components: a lecture and a laboratory.

When asked how she studies for this class, Grace stated the following habits:

> I write things out from the PowerPoints in my notebook outside of class, that way I can reread my notes when I go back to study. I try to study a little bit of the information each day after class. I first go over the new stuff, then review my [notes] from the day before. Then I'll start to learn the next bit [of information]. I'm constantly introducing new information while reviewing what I've already learned.

Evidence of a patterned social and collaborative informal learning process emerged when describing her general practices of studying. This pattern is also observable within the use of digital platforms as social learning tools:

> Me and some kids in my [A&P] class formed a study group on our own because we think it helps to study with each other. We'll either quiz each other [on course material] or review our notes together in case someone missed something from the lecture. Meeting with the study group is really helpful too because if someone doesn't understand something, we'll try to teach them it or help them understand [the material] better.

Noting that the majority of her time and effort is designated to studying within her discipline, Grace discusses how her other classes are far less strenuous compared to A&P:

> Sociology and Music Appreciation aren't that hard, and barley require any homework. Both professors post study guides that are really straight-forward so I don't have to start studying until a few days before [a test]. I like taking online classes because there are less classes I have to physically go to, which gives me more time to focus on my important classes. Music Appreciation is online so it's a lot easier than the others because I can do the work on my own time.

Quizlet As A Platform for Learning and Copying

Practices of digital learning have become Grace's primary method for learning within her discipline. She recalls occasionally using Quizlet as a method for studying in high school, however, she noted that it became significantly more resourceful within her college courses, which require extensive self-regulated learning outside of the classroom.

> I use [Quizlet] all the time for studying. Sometimes my professor will make study sets on Quizlet and post the link so we can use them to study, but if not then I usually make my

> own. That way I can use the app on my phone or my computer to study if I have free time and don't have my [textbook or notes] with me.

The secondary interview exclusively sought out the consideration of the platform's policies. A discussion on policy was simulated to identity Grace's perspective towards those governing her institution and Quizlet usership through self-reported practices:

> I use Quizlet a lot for my Spanish homework because some of it is really repetitive and it's just busy-work or extra practice. I can search questions from my homework and find a Quizlet that already has all the answers which saves me a lot of time. I feel like I know everyone in my class does it sometimes too because it's easier, especially if you're in a rush. Sometimes I'm studying all day and all night for a big Anatomy test or something else that's more important, so if I have a short [audio] assignment and don't have time to listen to it then I'm going to look up the answers. I wouldn't do it on stud that matters because like I need to learn [the material] and do [the assignment] for myself.

Breaking the Rules

In the following excerpt Grace traces the prevalence of policy-negligence among students based on personal customs.

Regarding the terms and agreements or codes of conduct of a social media Grace noted that she never reads the privacy policies of any online platform before use, mentioning that she did not recall if Quizlet required her agreement to their policies when creating her account. When asked why she thought digital platforms would include these policies, she reported that they're important for enforcing the role of Quizlet as a tool for learning and educating, rather than for cheating or providing shortcuts on schoolwork. Grace asserted that users, specifically those being students, pay no mind to abide by the policies of a platform before or during their practices.

Grace indicated that she, as well as the generality of her peers, value the honor code of their institution to a greater extent than they do to a platform's. Although she reportedly fails to consider her college's policies while actively using Quizlet, Grace justified her practices as violation of conduct by claiming:

> I mean I feel like if teachers assign take-home test or quizzes, they know that we're going to use our notes. So, I wouldn't feel bad because it's not that bad. Literally everyone does it. I follow the biggest things they care about like cheating in class or on a final exam.

She expressed that her institution's policies are more consequential due to the threat of punishment, which is why she feels more responsibility towards obeying them. Grace rationalized this claim when asked if she valued Quizlet's honor code or the College of Charleston's more when devising her digital practices:

> Definitely my school's because I could get kicked out or I could fail. But Quizlet is like what are they going to do, you know?

She opposed that she would openly and willingly admit to a professor that she utilized a digital resource for completion of an assignment, unless they specifically asked so. Grace concluded by affirming that the responsibility of monitoring the practices of platform usership lies within the users themselves, since:

> It would be impossible for Quizlet to know every quiz or test, and anyone can upload the answers. Quizlet would just think that its homework or studying material.

As a continuation of the interview, individual clauses of Quizlet's "Honor Code" were articulated into yes-or-no questions. Grace agreed that posting answers to a previously taken test and searching Quizlet for answers then using them to cheat on an assignment were violations of the platform's policy. She also supported the "bottom line" featured in Quizlet's Honor Code, which states that if your practices would upset your professor, then you should not continue them. However, when asked if she would report a study set that violated the platform's honor code, she disagreed.

Self-Reflection

In consideration of the preceding examination of policy-abiding practices, the interview concluded with a review of student ethics and motives. Grace reported that she did not feel any of her personal practices were violations of the platforms honor code, since she was not the one who published the answers or material. She explained that since she only used Quizlet for completing low-level homework assignments, she is not as responsible for the violation as the user who shared the answers.

> If someone else creates the [study set] or posts the answers then I use them for my homework, I feel less bad since I just used what was already out there, instead of being the one who made it.

Grace admitted that she would continue to use practices that violate the honor code of the platform if permitted, despite her acknowledgement that such continuation would ultimately compromise her academic integrity. She conveyed that completing an online assessment without the use of digital resources would make her feel good about the efforts she put in, she was asked if she would feel the same if she did use an online tool for additional help:

> No, not 100 percent. I would feel like I relied on something else to help me because I didn't know the information on my own.

> Grace rationalized this change in moral implications by claiming that students would rather receive a good grade for an assignment by allocating digital resources as means of cheating, even if it meant infringing upon their academic integrity. She added that students knowingly violate the honor code within their practices since receiving a good grade is more important than their moral obligations to the platform and their institution.

Quizlet's Honor Code

It is Quizlet's mission to support better educational opportunities, habits, and values for all learners. The misuse of our platform to develop bad habits, such as cheating or cutting corners on assignments and tests, is disheartening and incompatible with the values of our company and our community. Our team works hard to uphold academic integrity on our platform, and we are continuously adding features to ensure Quizlet supports learning everywhere. We expect all Quizlet users to follow our Community Guidelines and agree to our Honor Code before creating or studying content on our platform.

For Students

It's simple: don't cheat or help others do so. Quizlet is meant for learning — active test banks, exam questions with answers, or other confidential course content is not to be posted on Quizlet. If you are validly studying past tests (for a cumulative final, for example), please be aware that this material may still be in circulation and in use by teachers other than your own, and make sure to keep these sets private.

Additionally, it is **your responsibility** to be aware of and uphold your specific teacher or institution's policies regarding posting or sharing course material online; please review your classes' or school's own academic integrity policy before posting any content publicly on Quizlet.

Violating Quizlet's Honor Code includes (but is not limited to):

- Posting the answers to a test you just took and sharing them with others
- Searching Quizlet for answers and using them to cheat on a take-home test or assessment
- Using Quizlet on your phone to copy answers during an in-class test

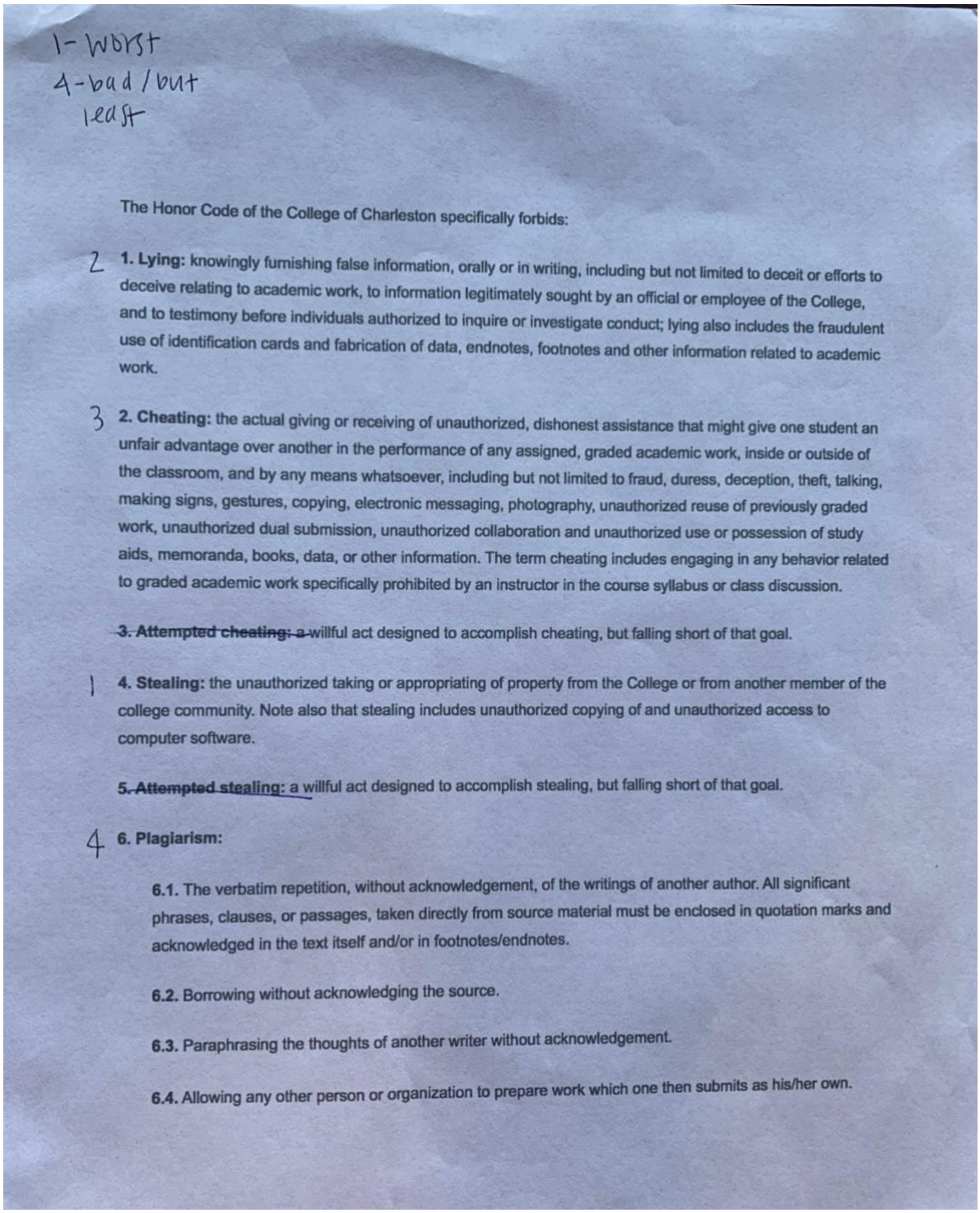
The bottom line: If your teacher or professor would be unhappy with you using Quizlet in a specific way, then you probably shouldn't be doing it.

Reporting Honor Code Violations

If you have found active test questions and answers on Quizlet that are in violation of this Honor Code, submit a report to us and we will address the issue promptly.

If you have any additional questions, please contact us at trust@quizlet.com.

(Figure 1.) Quizlet's Honor Code.



1- worst
4- bad / but least

The Honor Code of the College of Charleston specifically forbids:

2 **1. Lying:** knowingly furnishing false information, orally or in writing, including but not limited to deceit or efforts to deceive relating to academic work, to information legitimately sought by an official or employee of the College, and to testimony before individuals authorized to inquire or investigate conduct; lying also includes the fraudulent use of identification cards and fabrication of data, endnotes, footnotes and other information related to academic work.

3 **2. Cheating:** the actual giving or receiving of unauthorized, dishonest assistance that might give one student an unfair advantage over another in the performance of any assigned, graded academic work, inside or outside of the classroom, and by any means whatsoever, including but not limited to fraud, duress, deception, theft, talking, making signs, gestures, copying, electronic messaging, photography, unauthorized reuse of previously graded work, unauthorized dual submission, unauthorized collaboration and unauthorized use or possession of study aids, memoranda, books, data, or other information. The term cheating includes engaging in any behavior related to graded academic work specifically prohibited by an instructor in the course syllabus or class discussion.

~~**3. Attempted cheating: a**~~ willful act designed to accomplish cheating, but falling short of that goal.

1 **4. Stealing:** the unauthorized taking or appropriating of property from the College or from another member of the college community. Note also that stealing includes unauthorized copying of and unauthorized access to computer software.

~~**5. Attempted stealing:**~~ a willful act designed to accomplish stealing, but falling short of that goal.

4 **6. Plagiarism:**

6.1. The verbatim repetition, without acknowledgement, of the writings of another author. All significant phrases, clauses, or passages, taken directly from source material must be enclosed in quotation marks and acknowledged in the text itself and/or in footnotes/endnotes.

6.2. Borrowing without acknowledging the source.

6.3. Paraphrasing the thoughts of another writer without acknowledgement.

6.4. Allowing any other person or organization to prepare work which one then submits as his/her own.

(Figure 2.) The College of Charleston's Honor Code ranked by Grace due to the severity of the violation.

Discussion

Through the surveillance and analysis of data collected from Grace's interviews, the specific practices that digital platform users perform can be explicitly tied to personal motivations over

policy procedures. Furthermore, the data evidently concludes that although there are observable ethical implications emerging from such policy violation, students see the digitality of platforms as means for negotiating their academic and usership integrity.

When asked if she considered particular practices as violations of Quizlet's policy, Grace agreed that such habits abused the platform's intended use. However, when later asked if she would continue to use such practices, now knowing that they are direct infractions of policy, Grace admitted that she would.

This highlights the prescience of ethical bargaining that platform users face when interacting with policy and their practices, however, the specific motivations for compromising one's sense of integrity is yet to be construed.

Grace revealed that the motivations prompting students to rely on a platform such as Quizlet for cutting corners on schoolwork are themed as autonomous justifications. That being said, a student's willingness to cheat depends if it will further benefit them personally, and to what extent it would. As interpreted by Grace, students tend to value receiving a passing grade by cheating over their integrity to not do so.

A prime consideration of how this ethical negation comes to be may be that the platform as a digital resource allows students to distance themselves from their degree of involvement. Grace noted that she feels less responsible for violating the platform's policy and using it to cheat if she was not the one who published the material, indicating that there is a correlation between integrity and involvement. If a student discovered an already published study set that contains the questions and answers to their online assignment, they do not view using such as direct noncompliance of policy. This suggests that the digitality of platforms allows users to disassociate themselves from their actions behind the mask of usership and anonymity.

Grace was asked to rank which clauses of her college's honor code were most significant to her. As seen in Figure 2., cheating scored second to last, which may convey the ubiquity of neglection towards this conduct by students. This correlates with Grace's statement that she follows the clauses deemed most important to the honor code.

Conclusion

As an investigation into the ways that users, specifically college students, reference the policies governing digital platforms throughout their practices was conducted in order to analyze any ethical implications that may arise.

Through the tracing of Grace's individual practices within a platform such as Quizlet, a pattern of social learning became observable, as did the ways such digital collaboration invites the negotiation of integrity. The data collected from the study's interviews reveals that students disassociate themselves with material and information they find readily available online since they were not the one to publish it. The most concerning limitation of this study was the representation of an entire demographic based on one individual sample. A more proportional sampling of participants and their responses to the interview questions would allow for more inclusive data regarding platform practices and relevance to policy.

This opens the doorway to similar ethical negotiations, such as debating if using content accessible on a platform to cheat or cut corners on coursework makes them as morally liable.

This study illuminated the ways in which students adapt their practices based on the nature of the given assignment when determining the use of digital resources. For instance, a student allocates the use of Quizlet when completing an online take-home test since the assignment merits less value to their grade, professor or self, since it was allowed to be taken in an unauthorized environment.

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