James Lang, associate professor of English at Assumption College and columnist for the Chronicle of Higher Education, has produced a text that should be required reading for any faculty member tired of the us-versus-them detective work of busting dishonest students. Lang, frustrated not only student cheating and plagiarism but also by the abundance of unrealistic advice on how to deal with it, set out to learn and write about when, how, and why student academic misconduct happens and what the best teachers are doing about it. What resulted, however, is not so much a book about cheating as it is a well-crafted series of recommendations for improved teaching practices that lead to greater learning gains. (Oh, and those teaching practices also happen to discourage academic dishonesty, to boot.) Most refreshingly, he manages to avoid the finger-pointing that characterizes so many discussions on this topic, whether blaming unethical students, helicopter parents, apathetic professors, or an overall breakdown of the social order. This compact text is presented in three parts: I) Building a Theory of Cheating, II) The (Nearly) Cheating-Free Classroom, and III) Speaking about...
Cheating. Part I provides an overview of a solid body of research about academic dishonesty suggesting that the amount of cheating by college students not only isn’t going up, but has not significantly changed over the past 50 years, at the very least. Actual rates are difficult to pin down – partly because few studies make distinctions between the student who cheats once and the serial offender, and partly because the research typically relies heavily on self-reporting. Regardless of this uncertainty, Lang argues that however frequently students are cheating, it’s too much.

The historical examples of dishonesty cited in this section provided a sense of context and although my responses swung between amusement and despair, it was a good reminder that where there are high-stakes exams focused on a single opportunity to prove competence, there will be someone cheating on them. For example, the schemes intended to circumvent the security measures on Chinese civil service exams (as far back as the 7th century) are only surprising for their persistence in the face of severe penalties for those caught. The relevance of these examples is even more obvious in the wake of recent news that more than 90 U.S. Air Force officers were implicated in a cheating scandal driven by exams described as “a monthly ordeal that would define their careers” (Sisk, 2014). This high-pressure environment, where scoring less than 100 percent on a single test damages long-term career opportunities, is a petri dish of toxic conditions unlikely to foster realistic assessment, let alone ethical behavior.

Lang ends Part I by introducing five contextual factors that influence cheating:
1. Focusing on performance rather than mastery
2. High stakes
3. Extrinsic motivation
4. Low self-efficacy
5. Peer Influence

He argues that since we have some control or influence over the first four, we should be exploring ways to work with these factors creatively and constructively to address problems of academic misconduct. (The fifth, peer influence, is trickier to sway and is discussed in Part III.) Rather than falling back on traditional methods that haven’t successfully curbed cheating (since at least the 7th century), the second section provides real-world strategies that take a new approach.
Part II, The (Nearly) Cheating-Free Classroom, offers guidance on structuring the learning environment to reduce cheating while, at the same time, increasing learning. While it sounds too good to be true, the ideas presented are backed up with research as well as examples of their application. The book’s value lies primarily in these four chapters, and although Lang does describe at least one case of an entirely re-structured course, he stresses time and again that even small changes can make a difference in how students tie their own learning progress to assessment “opportunities.” Ultimately, the instructional methods presented are sound, although not unique (many other books contain similar recommendations), but the two-pronged emphasis of increasing learning while discouraging cheating, as well as the detailed examples, raise this text above the norm.

Chapters focused on intrinsic motivation, learning for mastery, low-stakes assessment, and student self-efficacy present realistic ideas for helping students connect course content to things they care about and ways to build in multiple chances to demonstrate mastery. Lang hits it on the head when he writes, “Nothing says mastery – seriously, nothing at all – like telling a learner that they get to keep practicing and trying until they get it right” (p. 97). These strategies, firmly grounded in theories of self-regulation, are especially helpful with young students new to the relatively unstructured postsecondary environment or those who struggle with accurate self-assessment, for example.

The final section of the book, Speaking About Cheating, includes chapters with advice on developing a campus culture supportive of ethical behavior, explaining to students what you mean by “original work” (which is not always as easy as it sounds), and how to respond (institutionally and personally) when you suspect cheating has occurred. Here I wish that there had been a few more suggestions or examples offered to help instructors begin those difficult conversations with students, such as asking, “Could you tell me how you chose this topic?” or “What were the most useful resources you used in this project?” The dread of confronting a student suspected of dishonesty could be lessened (at least slightly) with the help of a few pre-scripted conversation starters. The book’s conclusion
summarizes the key points from the previous chapters and offers a warning for those hoping to rely on technology (for example, plagiarism detection software) to address problems of dishonesty rather than dealing with its causes. Lang ends by reminding us that paying attention to what research tells us about learning will also help us deal with cheating.

Overall, the writing has an easy-to-read conversational style, blessedly free of educational jargon or stilted academic prose, and occasional humor lightens the tone. I plan to recommend this book to several faculty who’ve expressed concern with academic integrity issues, as well as our campus committee charged with developing an honor code. (In fact, they might be relieved to know that Lang suggests not bothering to create one if there isn’t already a code in place.) In general, I have only two concerns, neither of which are serious. First, the emotional response that cheating provokes (especially for the “cheated on” teacher) isn’t mentioned until nearly the end of the book, in Chapter 10, “Responding to Cheating.” Unfortunately, much of the difficulty surrounding this issue can be a result of the anger (or hurt or indignation) we might feel as we ask ourselves, “Do they think I’m stupid? Do they think I don’t even care if they cheat?” Lang’s guidance is spot-on when he suggests we remind ourselves that students don’t cheat because they hate us or our class, or because they think we’re stupid, and they probably are not thinking about us at all, in fact, when they cross that line. However, these clouds of emotionally-charged defensiveness and blaming can pose such a barrier to addressing the problem constructively that discussing this right up front may have been a good idea. My second concern is that because this is “a book about cheating,” a considerable amount of excellent advice on assessment and lesson design won’t be discovered by those who aren’t looking specifically for recommendations about how to handle cheating, although those who are only looking for advice about cheating are likely to benefit even more than they might have expected.

Ultimately, one of the wisest recommendations Lang offers remains, “Give first-time violators the merciful response we all would like to receive in response to the dumb mistakes we make in our lives” (p. 224). With this
book in hand, maybe we’ll see fewer of those dumb mistakes and our detective work days will be over.

References


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Susan M. Zvacek completed her Ph.D. at Iowa State University and has been involved with higher education for more than twenty years. Currently, she is Associate Provost for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Denver. Her scholarly work has been primarily in the field of educational technology, with publications and presentations at national and international conferences on topics such as higher order thinking skills, distance education, and the assessment of learning using online tools. She is co-author of a popular textbook, *Teaching and Learning at a Distance* (now in its fifth edition) and *Blackboard for Dummies*. 
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