

## Your Cheatin' Heart: A New Spin on an Old Tactic

June 22, 2006

Now, I do not condone cheating in school, but my job is to have my students leave knowing more than they came in with. Some years ago, I taught sixth-grade English. I noticed that my students could not spell very well, and the literacy coach told me spelling tests were outdated and ineffective. Being a new teacher, I decided to give spelling tests anyway.

The first semester, I gave what would be considered normal spelling tests. The students got the words at the beginning of the week, we worked with them during the week, and then I would give a test in which I said the word, put it in a sentence, and said it again. I could see why the literacy coach thought this was ineffective. It was boring.

The second semester, I told the students they had to memorize the words, eighteen of them, each week. That semester, the spelling test consisted of me telling students to take out a piece of paper and write down the words, with no input from me. They got half credit for remembering the word, and half for spelling it correctly.

After a while, I would notice students trying to cheat. They had written a particularly difficult word somewhere so it was not visible to me, and then they would strain to try to see it and write it down. I knew that if I called them on it, something drastic and punitive would have to be done.

Then it hit me: If students were trying that hard to remember the word machine and how to spell it, they would never forget it as long as they lived. So I let them think I was stupid.

At the end of the semester, I had a massive spelling test in which I chose twenty-five of the 180 words they had worked on during the semester. They didn't know which words I would choose, so there was no way to cheat. I had two classes -- a high-level class and an average one. After the test, I tabulated the averages for each class. The high-level class got an average of 23.5 words correct. The other class averaged 22.5 words correct. Nobody scored less than twenty.

My students, who had come in reading at a third- or fourth-grade level, were mastering sixth-grade words. They were excited about what they had achieved. I never told them I knew what they were doing. They thought they were fooling me, but, really, they fooled themselves into learning. I just had to let them do it.

In the same way, I have had students try to cheat using their cell phones, but, after a while, it becomes a collaborative tool instead of a cheating device. They start asking each other pertinent questions that probe way beyond where they started. They teach each other. I just have to let them do it. That, to me, is what technology offers my classroom.

*Moderator's Note: Read Ron's posts about cell phones in school -- [Become a Ringleader: Teaching with Text Messaging \[1\]](#) and [A Pencil Is a Word Processor: Making the Case for Cell Phones in Class \[2\]](#).*

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