

Seneca Update

By Russell Pangborn

There is a great story about a couple of students who missed an important exam. Instead of studying properly for this and then writing the exam at the scheduled time, they went on a trip to see a concert. The next day they needed to – if you will pardon the pun – “face the music”. Both of them required a really good excuse. So, they told the professor that on the way to write the exam their car had gotten a flat tire. The teacher was very sympathetic and allowed them to write a makeup exam. (I’m getting chills here—it can take me a whole day to write up a good exam and this person was writing up an additional one.)

On the day of this exam, the two students were taken into separate rooms and given this specially written alternate exam. As they wrote, the students grew very confident because there were a bunch of easy small questions that added up to about 10 % of the total exam. It would have been fun to see their faces when they turned to the final page. There was a heavily loaded question worth 90% of the total marks. It was only two words: “Which Tire?”

That story is so good it has taken up a life of its own. I just googled a couple of pertinent keywords and came up with a version that insisted the two students were blowing off their final exam to get in a couple of extra ski runs. I’m sure people have heard other versions where a football game or something else was the reason for missing this important test. I did learn something from it though. Let me tell you about that and some other incidents that have occurred during my teaching career. Who knows, if some of you like them they may also take on a life of their own.

I remembered this “tire” story during a difficult situation that involved cheating on a test. Students have learned the best strategy to deal with a teacher’s suspicions is to repeatedly deny any involvement in wrongdoing. I can be 90% sure that something fishy was happening during my test. It is difficult to be 100% sure.

One time in a large room I noticed a couple of students whispering to each other. Their scheme was to wait until I put my head down to answer a different student’s question about the test. My strategy was to start to listen to the student’s question and then look up suddenly in mid conversation. I felt a bit rude doing this to the questioner, but am amazed how most deceptive whisperers usually relax and go into intense communication mode because they think I am occupied. (I hope none of my students are reading this.) In this instance, I apologized to the student who had asked me to clear up something written on the exam. After getting my “visual evidence” and making eye contact with the talking students to let them know I was aware a conversation was going on, he was asked to repeat his question again. At this time, it was my opinion cheating between two students had happened. Unfortunately these two “academic felons” would probably deny, deny, deny. Accusing someone of “test fraud” is not a pleasant experience. The usual excuse is to say “I was asking for an eraser”, or “I wanted to know when the exam is over”, or “I needed a pencil”, etc.

Then I remembered that great story. So this was my plan. I got each student to go to sit in front of me after the exam was over and asked them not to talk out loud. I then asked them to write down what their conversation was about during the exam. They knew it would be hard to come up with the same false story. So they admitted to the cheating.

Another time there was a big exam in the cafeteria it took some undercover work to expose some students trading answers. A teacher had asked me to drop by allowing him a fifteen minute break during his exam. Now, at one time teachers dressed a little differently than the students. I usually wore a tie my first ten years. Gradually we have started to dress more like the students. Also, we have students of all age groups at the college. My appearance at this time must have blended in with the crowd. About an hour into the exam, I walked in and nodded to my colleague. Rather than pace around, my



decision was to sit down and start doing a crossword. Two students sitting beside me thought they had just hit the jackpot. They couldn’t contain their glee as they quickly swapped answers for about 10 minutes.

At that time most students knew me because I was one of two student coordinators. If you hadn’t been in my class, you probably had seen me for a timetable change. I was a little taken aback, but let them hang themselves. When the teacher returned I explained the situation and pointed out the offenders. He was really happy. Probably because like me, he had found it difficult to make some charges stick. At the end of the exam he pulled the students aside and let them know he had evidence that they were cheating. Their denials suddenly got weaker when he told them, “The person who sat down beside you during the exam wasn’t a student—he was a teacher!”

In 20 years of teaching I have experienced a few original attempts at getting a higher mark on a test. Here is one try I never could have predicted. A student visited me in my office and asked to see his recorded marks for a previous test and an assignment. He had a mark of 45% for the test. I had over 150 students at the time so I did not remember marking that test a month ago. He told me that the mark must have been entered incorrectly. He had achieved a mark of 83%. I was apologetic to have made such a mistake. My advice to him was to bring in the original test with the higher mark and that would allow me to fix the mistaken entry. He said this would not be a problem. A couple of weeks later he returned carrying the test. It was marked and the final total was 83%. There was only one problem: **It wasn’t marked in my hand writing!** ➡



That took a lot of guts. But the end result was unfortunate. He was kicked out for a semester for cheating on a test.

My hand writing is abysmal—especially when marking. My wish sometimes is that there was a way of typing my comments or marks on an existing test instead of subjecting my students to a series of chicken scrawls. I must admit to being a little envious of the penmanship this person had used to mark his own test.

Of course his first reaction was to deny. Lighting up my **Sherlock Holmes** pipe, I remembered giving out a blank copy of the test to another instructor. A quick phone call revealed he had lost it from the top of his desk and was too embarrassed to ask me for another copy. This office area was shared by several instructors and there could be many students in this room at any one time. Of course when a panel heard the case they just had to compare the handwriting. Thankfully nobody on the appeals committee made a recommendation for me to undergo an intensive calligraphy course. The student's strategy probably was to take another marked test that had gotten 83% and duplicate it with his name on it. That ruse had taken a lot of effort.

Here is one time there was some suspicion but I couldn't close the case. I had two students who were married. They had taken a couple of classes with me. In all the tests and exams the husband would consistently get between 80 and 90 while the wife would squeak by with 60 or less. In this particular class she was getting a lot less than 60 in her tests. Doing poorly on the last test could sink her semester. I marked that last test and handed it back. As I was reviewing the marks on my spreadsheet I suddenly came to a realization. Her semester was saved by getting 85 on the final test. Her husband had gotten a 58. It became apparent to me that they could have signed their partners name on the test. It certainly looked like he had taken one for the future of the family. I didn't have the tests to refer to when the thought struck me and did not want to request them back. My consolation was there should not be much worry of this tactic catching on. It is not often someone will take a lower mark to help out a fellow student.

There are a lot more stories—like the time a student handed me a disk for an online exam with the programs perfectly done. So perfect that they included extensive comments. How good are all your programmers in your company at providing comments. Even if they are, they probably wouldn't take the time to do this on a time restricted exam. He eventually confessed.

Some of my future students might be reading this issue. This magazine is made available at the college. So it is prudent to keep back a few strategies and successful "prosecutions". Also, the readers of this column should be made aware that the majority of the students at Seneca get their marks the old fashioned way—through hard work and dedication.



Russell Pangborn is a professor at Seneca College, and a Director of TUG. He can be reached at russell.pangborn@senecac.on.ca.

