

What's the real root cause of cheating?

1. It might be a confidence issue. Sometimes, we call this “self efficacy” — a person’s belief in their own abilities to do what they intend to do. Why do students use AI to cheat — or copy each other’s work, or use other means to cheat?

Sometimes, it’s because they just don’t think they can do it. In essence, they’re saying, “I don’t think I can do this. I’m just not confident enough in myself to do what it takes to complete this assignment. So why should I even try? If I try and I can’t do it, what does that say about me, about myself?”

This one has nothing to do with AI.

The bigger question to answer might be, “How can we build this student’s confidence so they think they can? So they know they can?”

2. It might be an execution issue. They think they can do it. They just don’t know how to do it. I’ve seen this happen with big projects. The student has the ability. They just can’t see the path — the steps ahead of them to reach success.

In essence, they’re saying, “This is a big project. I’m looking at this blank screen and the blinking cursor and I just don’t know where to start.”

This one has nothing to do with AI.

The bigger question to answer might be, “What’s a plan you can follow where you know the steps to take — and how to find your way in case you lose it again?”

3. It might be a time issue. Students are busy. Some just don't have enough time in the day, with practice and homework and church and clubs and family obligations and sleep and, well, just being a kid. Others have tough outside-of-school situations where they're working to support their families. Then, there are those that are just really bad at managing their time. So, when they run out of time to do the work the right way, they find less honest ways to get it done in the short amount of time left.

This one has nothing to do with AI.

The bigger question to answer might be, "Why don't you have the time to complete the work — and how can we adjust this situation in a fair, responsible way so you can show what you know?"

4. It might be a relevance issue.

In essence, the student is saying, "Why am I even doing this? This doesn't even relate to my life. Why should I care -- about this assignment, or about this class, or about school?"

When the student asks this question, it might be unearthing much deeper problems for this student than the way they're using AI to turn in work. The warning bells are ringing loudly, and this student needs help.

Or, it could be something much harder to deal with for us as educators.

It could be that we are irrelevant. That our lesson — our unit — our project — our class is irrelevant. We might be the problem — and it's up to us to change for the sake of our students.

This one has nothing to do with AI either.

AI is an issue. It's going to change things in schools. It'll change the way we do classwork.

It's going to change the world. It already has.

But many times, AI is not THE issue. When students cheat — or do something we'd label as “cheating” — many times, it's a cry for help. It's a warning sign that shows us that something isn't right. That something needs to change.

We can try to eliminate the AI, but that's like knocking the head off a dandelion. It'll grow back.

Our best bet is to do the hard work of identifying the real root cause — and doing whatever we can to fix it.