Guidelines for Working Together

Working together is common to all professions. It is important to exchange ideas and learn from your colleagues and peers. In the academic environment, the emphasis is on learning. A by-product of the academic environment is that the instructors have the responsibility of judging how well students have learned what they are supposed to learn. This results in grading individual assignments. The grading is based on the assumption that the work on a submitted assignment represents the individual student’s efforts. There are group assignments, of course, but let’s stick with individual assignments, which is all that is required for this course.

How do you separate the benefits of working together and exchanging information from the requirement to do your own work? It is not that hard. I suggest a couple of basic guidelines.

1) If you copy a part of a solution from a group that you are working with and do not understand the reason for the step you are copying, you are not doing your own work. You should be able to understand and defend each step of a solution.

2) If you are blindly copying work from a group or individual without thinking of the reasons for the steps in the solutions, you are not doing your own work.

Let’s consider a couple of scenarios that are somewhat common. Students are working together and discussing the solution by writing on a white board or paper. All students are involved to some extent, asking questions and offering suggestions. Finally, the board or paper contains a solution that the group agrees is the correct solution. They all copy the contents to their assignment. This is blind copying. Each of the students needs to rewrite the individually without looking at the common solution. This reinforces the reasoning for each of the steps in the solution and aids the learning process. It also offers a second individual check on the solution. The most common evidence in a plagiarism case is the copying of irrational errors.

A modified version of this occurs between two students. Student A, who might even be a tutor, has worked the problem. Student B asks for help on the problem. Student A explains how to solve the problem. Student B thinks the explanation is good and that s/he understands the reasoning, and so copies the solution. Both students are in violation of ethical conduct. Student A has given the entire answer and allowed Student B to copy the work. Student B has not done the work individually. Student A should not show the entire solution to Student B, but talk Student B through the problem, rewriting the solution if necessary. In the case of seeing the entire solution, the problem can be greatly helped if Student B checks his/her understanding of the solution by reworking the solution from scratch. In this case, Student B reinforces his/her understanding and has generated original work.

The pressures to copy others’ work can be great. There are time deadlines. It may seem that there is not enough time to rework the solution on your own. You may not have done well on previous homeworks or tests and need every point you can get. None of these reasons is grounds for
copying. If you don’t understand the solution, you don’t deserve credit for turning in a solution you didn’t create yourself. If you didn’t leave enough time to solve the problem, then you have to take the consequences, even if the lack of time was not entirely your fault. If there are legitimate reasons that you didn’t have time, e.g., illness, death in the family, etc., just tell the instructor. This falls under the “late assignment” policy on the course syllabus.

Finally, the few points you may get for turning in copied work, is not worth the risk of getting caught and going before the Student Conduct Board. Instructors in ECE are encouraged to turn in cheaters, since an academic integrity violation that is on record will affect the outcome of a second or third offense. If the instructor doesn’t turn in students, the instructors in subsequent class have no way of knowing if an incident in their class is “really” the first.

I hope these guidelines give the directions you need for understanding the ethical boundaries of collaboration. Peer learning is a powerful concept and is encouraged. If you have any questions, please ask your instructors for a detailed opinion on the matter.

Good luck,

HJT