



Russian Roulette

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ABSTRACT

This case study relates the ethical dilemma of a U.S. professor who taught an American M.B.A. class in Russia. Some Russian students cheated on the final examination. Their culture and academic background created an environment in which such cheating was acceptable behavior. The professor announced prior to the exam that American rules of academic integrity would be followed. When the cheating was discovered, the professor was faced with a decision that could have lasting consequences on the students, the university, and the value of the degree itself.

The objectives of the case are to stimulate discussion of transcultural ethics and to require the students to develop strategies for ethical decision-making.

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Professor O'Reilly felt a sense of dread as he read his fourth final exam. He had thirty-two exams to go, but knew this was the last one he would read, until his blood pressure lowered. The answers on the first exam were excellent. The student covered each major point in clear, concise English. The second was just as good, and also very well written, as was the third. The fourth was excellent also. Dr O'Reilly began to see patterns in context and style. A sinking realization gripped him. The Russian students' writing was far better than any work he had seen to date. He reached for the textbook that was used in this Corporate Finance course. After searching the chapters for relevant passages on each essay question, his suspicions were confirmed. Entire paragraphs were either written verbatim or thinly paraphrased. He leaned back, looked at the ceiling, and decided to wait for his adrenaline to subside before he considered his alternatives.

Background

Dr. O'Reilly is a full-time professor of Finance and Management at a university in the New York City area. Several years ago, at a business dinner, he was approached by the Dean of the Business Division at a neighboring college. The Dean asked him if he would be interested in teaching an M.B.A. course in Russia.

The Dean explained that his college had an arrangement with a college in Russia in which an American M.B.A. was offered in Moscow. The students all spoke English. The academic requirements and regulations in this fast-track program were identical to those in the states. The American college supplied professors for most of the courses.

The students were screened similarly to students seeking entrance to graduate school in the U.S.A. Undergraduate degrees, Graduate Record Exam scores, and business experience were



factors in the admission decision. This M.B.A. was desirable in Russia for several reasons. Funding for other professions was in short supply. A typical class was composed of doctors, engineers, and other professionals as well as traditional students. In addition, the Russian government was encouraging foreign educational programs to promote international competitiveness.

Dr. O'Reilly told the dean he was interested in the assignment. Teaching was Dr. O'Reilly's second career. He had been a commercial banker for twenty-five years. His fascination with college instruction began when he was asked to adjunct an Economics course. He thoroughly enjoyed working with the students and seemed to have a flair for instruction. Since he also enjoyed travel, the Russian trip was an exciting opportunity for him.

His first two-week course the prior year had been a success. The Russian students had been enthusiastic in their work and complimentary of the learning experience. The administrators of the college were excellent hosts. He wished the status of "professor" held the same weight in New York as it did in Moscow.

The American college had arranged for travel, hotel, and visa. The orientation was informal, consisting of conversations with the administrator, the dean, and two professors who had previously taught in the program. Most of the information was either routine academia or tourist tips. One item stood out. The instructors and the dean mentioned several times that academic integrity is viewed differently in Russia than in the United States. Plagiarism and cheating on exams was an issue the instructors had encountered regularly.

Russia in the year 2000 was still struggling to emerge from a socialist to a capitalist society. Education in the former U.S.S.R reflected the cooperative nature of socialism. Students were allowed, and sometimes encouraged, to help each succeed in the classroom. Dr. O'Reilly foresaw an ethical dilemma. His personal philosophy reflected that of his culture of individual responsibility. As a matter of integrity, he felt academic work should reflect a student's individual effort, unless otherwise cited. His experience in business taught him that integrity mattered a great deal in the world of commerce. As a lender and an analyst, he had seen too many firms fail or under-perform because of unethical practices.

Dr. O'Reilly's first class in Russia was successful. The students were highly motivated. Class participation was enthusiastic. As a group, he found their competencies and demeanor to be similar to their American counterparts. The college administrators were hospitable and supportive. Dr. O'Reilly developed a high regard for the college community in Russia.

The ethical issue, however, did not translate easily in the classroom. Dr. O'Reilly explained the precepts of academic integrity to the class, and the reasons for them. This was difficult logic for many Russian students to accept. The class responded with anecdotes that underscored the difficulties of commerce in a less-structured economy. They considered graft, extortion, and favoritism common obstacles a typical businessperson must overcome, or sometimes use. They weren't seeking virtue in their education, they were seeking wealth and security. Besides, the American standard of academic integrity contradicted the communist methodology of mutual cooperation in the classroom, a method that schools embraced when



these students were younger. They still didn't view "cooperation" during tests as a serious transgression. Two covert conversations during the final exam of the first class ended when Dr. O'Reilly walked to the offenders' desks and wrote "-10%" on the top of their papers.

The courses in the fast-track program run from Monday to Friday for two consecutive weeks. Professor O'Reilly planned the final exam for the last meeting date, a Friday. He was returning to New York the following day. The students requested that the test be given on the Monday following the last meeting instead of that last Friday evening. Their reasoning was sound. They wanted the extra two days to study the material, which they felt was extensive. They contended that they had been approved for this arrangement in other courses by the professors and the local college administration.

The next day Professor O'Reilly spoke to the program administrator. She confirmed that the practice of delaying the final had precedent. She and an assistant proctored the exams in these instances.

That evening, Dr. O'Reilly told an elated class that the exam would be held on Monday. The exam papers would be sent to him through FedEx. The exams didn't arrive in Dr. O'Reilly's office until a week after the exam date.

He sincerely wished that the university wasn't 5000 miles away. Eight students clearly copied from the book. Six possibly copied, and the remaining twenty-two seemed to be honestly taken. If he could speak to the class one more time about the importance of trust in business, he felt he would be able to impart a valuable lesson. But, of course, he couldn't. He was torn between his belief that academic integrity is a moral absolute and his realization that the class saw it through the eyes of a different culture. He had to be true to the students and himself, as well as all others who are stakeholders in this educational process – the universities, the businesspeople who rely on the quality of education, and other students who are held to standards.

If he determined that a student had been cheating, he had options. He could fail them in the course. He could fail them on the exam. He could recommend their dismissal from school. He could compose a new exam and have the university conduct it. He could ignore it as a cultural nuance.

Professor O'Reilly knew he needed to be fair to all the stakeholders. He accepted the responsibility to teach in a way that was equitable to all concerned. Yet the students had rights and entitlements based upon their heritage. Dr. O'Reilly felt that he had to find a way to minimize the damage and maximize the benefit as much as possible.

Case Notes

Case notes for this case may be obtained by qualified individuals directly from the author, C. Michael Drexel at Southampton College, Long Island University.