

ETHICAL DILEMMA

Copying Homework

Gabby and Emma have been friends for a long time and are now in the same school. They are extremely busy with lots of activities such as music, dance and sport. This is on top of all their schoolwork. They both love writing and are good at it. One day late in the year they have a test scheduled in English. On top of that they have to complete a worksheet before they can take the test. It is just a simple worksheet, but it must be submitted for a grade. Gabby is annoyed that she has to take time away from studying for the test, but it only takes her thirty minutes to complete the assignment. Emma, however, studies for the test all evening and forgets to do the worksheet. It just slips her mind.

The next day, Emma realizes that she has forgotten to complete the homework. She knows that getting a zero on an assignment will effect to her overall grade and the teacher does not accept late homework. She decides to ask Gabby if she can copy her answers to the worksheet. Gabby wants to help her friend but has a few concerns. First and foremost, she could get in a great deal of trouble for letting Emma copy her work—after all, it’s considered cheating. In the eyes of many people, including the school, cheating is always wrong, no matter how small of an assignment it is. Gabby is also frustrated because she took the time to complete the worksheet while Emma did not. It seems unfair that Emma had the extra time to study but will still receive full credit as Gabby. It is not only unfair to Gabby, but to all of the students in the class who did the homework on their own.

At the same time, it just a worksheet—what some students might call “busy work.” It doesn’t seem the same as copying an essay, and the benefits Emma will receive if Gabby lets her copy the worksheet seems to far outweigh the rule being broken. Perhaps more importantly, Gabby wants to help her friend. She certainly doesn’t want to see Emma’s grade damaged over a silly worksheet. If Gabby says no, she knows that it will really hurt her friendship with Emma.

Study Questions

- (1) Would it be morally permissible for Gabby to allow Emma to copy the worksheet? Why or why not?
- (2) Does the fact that Gabby and Emma are good friends influence the ethical analysis of whether or not copying would be morally permissible? Explain.
- (3) Is it ever morally permissible to break rules in order to help a friend? If so, what must the conditions be?

This case was adapted from the 2013/14 Ethics Bowl –For more information about the NHSE visit <http://nhseb.unc.edu>.

Students from Bentley School in California competing in an Ethics Olympiad heat with students in Australia.

<http://www.ethicsolympiad.org>

