WHITE PAPER
Plagiarism in a Digital World:
Why Students Plagiarise

This is Part 3 in the "Plagiarism in a Digital World" series. This five-part series investigates the definition, frequency, causes, consequences and institutional responses to incidents of plagiarism.

INTRODUCTION

When dealing with plagiarism in an academic setting, it is important to distinguish between plagiarism that is intentional and plagiarism that is not. The question of intent points not only to the reasons why plagiarism may have occurred but also serves as a valuable guide for determining an educationally-appropriate and adequate response. Whereas intentional plagiarism may warrant disciplinary actions, inadvertent plagiarism can create an opening to foster greater student understanding and learning.

INTENTIONAL PLAGIARISM

In an academic context, students who knowingly plagiarise break ethical codes of conduct established by their educational system or institution. These acts fall under the category of "academic misconduct" and are typically dealt with through disciplinary actions that may include failing grades, expulsion, and even degree loss.

Though the details of the story that students may tell will vary, intentional plagiarism is marked by very clear-cut actions that include:

The wholesale copying of another's work or writing;

• Purchasing papers or hiring the services of an academic ghostwriter and then claiming authorship for that work;

• Claiming authorship for work that is not one's own;

• Purposefully copying significant portions of another's work without proper attribution;

• Changing or intentionally providing incomplete citation or source information.

What drives this motivation to cheat is a focus on outcomes before process. Students who resort to intentional plagiarism are typically responding to the pressure to succeed or its corollary, the pressure to not fail.

More specifically, students who intentionally plagiarise may be driven by one or more of the following clusters of motivations:

• Fear of failure / Lack of confidence / Pressure to succeed;

• Laziness / Focus on other priorities;

• Procrastination / Time pressures;

• Lack of understanding / Lack of ability;

• Lack of interest / Lack of engagement with course or subject.

Beyond the motivating factors that begin with the student, institutional practices may also contribute to intentional plagiarism. For example, educational systems or institutions that do little to enforce academic penalties for students caught plagiarising create the perception that plagiarism is not a serious issue. In addition, instructors who create assignments that are too generic (not specific to their course or class) also contribute to the problem by fostering an environment where intentional plagiarism becomes easier for students to commit.

Ultimately, to paraphrase an old adage, "cheaters only cheat themselves." In the case of intentional plagiarism, students are cheating themselves of the opportunity to learn. Worse, students who cheat do damage to the reputations of their institutions and the attendant value of the degrees conferred.

UNINTENTIONAL PLAGIARISM

For a m ajority of students, plagiarism happens as a consequence of not fully understanding how academic conventions work and of also not knowing how to conduct appropriate and effective research. There may be cultural differences at play as well. In terms of responding to these types of plagiarism then, additional consideration needs to be made to the circumstances surrounding plagiarism.

The Internet and Plagiarism

According to many accounts and available data, there is a clear-cut connection between access to information online and the rates of student plagiarism. A 2010 survey of 43,000 high school students in the U.S. by the Josephson Institute Center for Youth Ethics found that one out of every three students admitted to using the Internet to plagiarise information for an assignment,[1] and this "cut and paste culture" does not stop with the U.S., as the previous paper in this series demonstrates. From the standpoint of academic misconduct, this data serves to underscore the severity of the problem that educational institutions face. From the standpoint of student understanding, however, the data also speaks arguably to the cultural conditions that support student plagiarism.

Academic Conventions

For instances of plagiarism that involve online or web-based content, students may be confronted with navigating a distinction between their everyday, online habits and the academic conventions they are asked to follow. In today's "sharing economy" for example, students have grown accustomed to the frictionless sharing of personal, interesting, useful, and engaging information via social media. In addition, many educators ask that students engage in collaborative or group/project-based work that necessitates the free flow sharing of ideas and information. In this context, students are not readily going to understand how to use information appropriately and then how to cite and source that information properly.

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[1] For full survey findings, see http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/2010/installment02_report-card_honesty-integrity.html

Now, more than ever, students need to be guided on and taught the definition of plagiarism. This would include teaching students:

- What constitutes plagiarism, including specific examples?

- What disciplinary actions befall those who are caught plagiarising?

- How to cite and use source material appropriately (and reasons why students are expected to do so).

- How copyright and intellectual property works and what constitutes "common knowledge"?

- How to conduct appropriate research online, especially how to identify legitimate versus illegitimate sources for information.

Aside from the need to understand what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, students who unintentionally plagiarise may likely also be contending with issues in skills development.

Skills Development

Students who are new to an academic institution or course, particularly if they are coming from vastly different educational systems or schools, may encounter difficulties because they lack the skills necessary to be successful in a different or new academic environment. For example, students who transition from a secondary education that is lacking in research-based assignments to a higher education program that requires research-based work may not know how to properly incorporate the ideas and words of other authors into their written work.

Plagiarism that happens in this context represents a lack of student understanding, this could include:

- **How to incorporate outside source information into their papers**.
  This involves students learning when and how to quote information, when and how to paraphrase, how to paraphrase effectively, and the importance of providing proper acknowledgement of their sources;

- **Not understanding how to gather, organize, and take notes effectively as they conduct heir research;**

- **Unawareness of the specific academic conventions that apply at the institution or at the course level**
  (especially important for students who may come from other cultures where rules and conventions for citations differ);

- **Misunderstanding the assignment, essay topic, or subject matter;**

- **Doing collaborative work and not understanding what it means to produce work or complete an assignment on their own.**

CONCLUSION

In sum, an effective approach to addressing unintentional student plagiarism needs to address the multiple layers of cultural differences that students bring when they enter a new academic institution or even a new course and the skills gap which may exist.

As educators, we are faced with contending with the influence of digital culture (and lifestyles), prior academic practices carried over from previous institutions, and the nuances of distinct cultural differences that inform and shape student behaviour. The best way to address these differences, particularly in the context of looking to stem intentional or unintentional plagiarism, is to acknowledge these differences and to provide students with the clear-cut guidance and instructions they will need to be successful.

For more information or additional resources to help in this effort, please refer to the other white papers in this series. Plagiarism.org also has some useful information written for a student audience.

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