

## **Student Perceptions of Plagiarism Avoidance Competencies: An Action Research Case Study**

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*Abstract: Student plagiarism in higher education is widespread and presents a growing concern for faculty and administrators who are intent on upholding academic integrity. However, a myopic view of plagiarism as a purely ethical issue is misguided. It is not always simply a deliberate attempt to deceive. Through the involvement of students in an introductory MBA course, this case study uses an action research approach to explore student perceptions of the challenges of avoiding plagiarism in academic writing, the appropriateness of plagiarism penalties, and the value of corrective feedback on penalty-free writing assignments. It also offers a practical example of how discipline-based faculty can incorporate plagiarism education into their curriculum.*

**Keywords:** plagiarism, corrective feedback, academic writing, action research, CRASP model.

### **Introduction**

Research points to the lack of student knowledge and skills as significant contributors to the overall problem of plagiarism in higher education (Newton, Wright, & Newton, 2014; Voelker, Love, & Pentina, 2012; Blum, 2009; Brown, Dickson, Humphreys, McQuillan, & Smears, 2008). It appears that intentional offenders represent only a small portion of students guilty of plagiarism (Youmans, 2011; Brown et al., 2008). A larger portion of offenders appears to be the students who lack the academic writing competencies and information literacy (IL) skills necessary to avoid it (Iyer-O'Sullivan, 2013; Heckler, Forde, & Bryan, 2013; Holt, 2012). In fact, one university study indicated that more than 50% of the faculty had doubts about whether offenders are actually aware that they plagiarizing (Singh & Bennington, 2012). As a result, untrained students may find themselves as unwitting offenders and subject to the penalties designed to punish those guilty of unethical behavior.

Plagiarism is a dichotomous issue, dividing intentional and inadvertent offences. Consequently, the reliance on reactive measures alone cannot alleviate the issue as a whole. Instead, a comprehensive approach focused on instruction may serve to more adequately reduce plagiarism in the higher education classroom. In order to accomplish such a feat, faculty and administration across all disciplines should begin by evaluating existing practices.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by the CRASP model (see Table 1), a meta-theoretical model of teaching and learning, located in the non-positivist paradigm (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). In contrast to positivism, which is grounded in the use of empirical data to test the relationships among variables, the non-positivist perspective offers that valuable information regarding variables and the strength of their relationships can come from analysis of interviews or other qualitative techniques (Ashworth, 1997). The CRASP model integrates theory and practice through action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; 1993). Zuber-Skerritt (1992) provided that:

My research and that of others suggest that it is not a question of knowing the ideal state of good teaching practice (and of following prescriptions of good practice, but that the problem is one of changing and improving the current practice of teaching in particular areas (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p. 5).

Table 1

### *The Case in Relation to the CRASP Model*

<b>C</b>	Critical attitude	Critique of the status quo in practice and context.
<b>R</b>	Research into teaching	Identifying and solving problems in the curriculum and student learning through a spiral of action research cycles (plan-act-observe-reflect).
<b>A</b>	Accountability	Intrinsic and extrinsic: Justify the academic value of practice and publishing the theories and practices of the work and situation.
<b>S</b>	Self-evaluation	Self-reflection and self-evaluation as part of the teachers' research into their own teaching, inviting students and others to provide critical comments.
<b>P</b>	Professionalism	Professional development through action research; professionalism encompassing the above four requirements.

*Note:* CRASP model reproduced from "Professional Development in Higher Education: A theoretical framework for Action Research," by O. Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p. 21. Reprinted with permission.

## Literature Review

### *The Frequency of Inadvertent Plagiarism*

A great deal of the data regarding the frequency of plagiarism are derived from student self-reports (Saana., Ablordeppey, Mensah, & Karikari, 2016; He, Liu, Yang, Li, & Doss, 2016; International Center for Academic Integrity, 2015; Eret & Ok, 2014; Fish & Hura, 2013; Sentleg & King, 2012). Donald McCabe's survey of more than 65,700 undergraduate and 9,250 graduate students spanning from 2001 to 2005 (as cited in Plagiarism.org, 2014), provided the following self-report statistics:

- 36% of undergraduate and 24% of graduate students reported “paraphrasing/copying few sentences from Internet source without footnoting it.”
- 38% of undergraduate and 25% of graduate students reported “paraphrasing/copying few sentences from written source without footnoting it.”
- 14% of undergraduate and 4% of graduate students reported copying materials “almost word for word from a written source without citation.”

While those numbers are alarming, the true extent of the problem of inadvertent plagiarism is difficult to discern. Some faculty may neither address nor report instances of plagiarism by their students (Bennington & Singh, 2012; Singh & Bennington, 2013). In addition, a recent study indicated that a majority of faculty considered it important to handle student plagiarism without the involvement of university administration (Bennington & Singh, 2012).

### *Plagiarism Prevention through Pedagogy*

There is evidence that faculty may expect students to develop academic writing and information literacy skills on their own, without the aid of any systematic instruction (Weiner, 2014; McGuiness, 2006). However, findings suggest that a successful plagiarism reduction strategy should include a move toward prevention through educational instruction (Newton, Wright, & Newton, 2014; Brown et al., 2008; Lampert, 2004; Hurlbert, Savidge, & Laudenslager, 2003). "There is an apparent gap between the IL skills that faculty want their students to have and those that they actively support and develop" (DaCosta, 2010, p. 218).

Research has shown that incorporating writing and referencing instruction and feedback into higher education curriculum can result in a dramatic improvement in students' referencing and citation skills (Purcell & Barrell, 2014; Fallahi et al., 2006). Newton, Wright, and Newton's (2014) research showed that a even a 30-minute, single-session training program that targeted plagiarism, patch-writing, and paraphrasing resulted

in increased confidence and referencing skills in a group of first year undergraduate students.

An additional study on the efficacy of multimedia referencing and anti-plagiarism lectures, which were designed to help undergraduate students' performance in written assessments, was shown to produce no statistically significant improvement in students' knowledge of plagiarism (Brown et al., 2008). More than 88% of the students participating in this study indicated a need for referencing skills. However, 36% of them indicated a perceived lack of ability to learn the skills without in-person classroom instruction.

### *Feedback as Instruction*

Effective feedback has been shown to improve the overall quality of student writing (Gulley, 2012). However, research on the influence of feedback on plagiarism is scant. The majority of students in a recent study agreed that anti-plagiarism instruction was important in preparing them for assignments, but some of the students suggested that reflecting on feedback might be more valuable for their learning.

Icy (2014) called for the need of innovative feedback approaches to improve student writing skills and provided a collection of current best practices:

- 1) Balanced feedback on content, organization, language, mechanics, style and genre.
- 2) Provide feedback at different stages of the writing process.
- 3) Direct feedback at selected patterns of errors rather than pointing out each.
- 4) Indirect feedback (resist the temptation to provide all of the answers).
- 5) Individualized feedback based on students' needs.
- 6) Use a variety of feedback sources
- 7) Peer feedback
- 8) Clear, specific and constructive written commentary.
- 9) Teacher-student conferencing. Baleghizadeh & Gordani (2012) found that verbal corrective feedback through student-teacher conference provided better results when compared the written feedback in college writing assignments.
- 10) Feedback without scores.

### *Research Questions*

- What are student's perceptions of their greatest challenges to avoiding plagiarism?
- What is students' perceived value of written feedback in penalty-free assignments in increasing their understanding of plagiarism?
- Do students feel they are receiving adequate plagiarism instruction?
- What do students think about the existing penalties for plagiarism?

## **Method**

Because the overarching goal of the study is to drive pedagogy in an effort to increase the student competencies necessary to avoid inadvertent plagiarism, the action research approach was determined to be appropriate. The Institute for the Study of Inquiry in Education defined the method as "a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for

those taking the action" (Sagor, 2000, p. 3). Sagor (2000) described the approach as a method used to help educators become more effective in the development of their students through their "actions."

The sample consisted of 11 (7 male, 4 female) students in an introductory MBA course at a private southeastern university. Participation in the research was voluntary with no promise of compensation in any form. All of the students in the class agreed to participate. Each was provided with an informed consent to participate in the research.

The students completed the Plagiarism Attitude Scale (PAS) survey in class. The PAS is an open-source tool available on the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) website. It is a 12-item survey designed to explore students' understanding and perceptions of plagiarism.

Following the survey, and prior to the first assignment, students were provided with classroom instruction. The 2-hour instruction included a discussion about what constitutes plagiarism, basic referencing and citation guidelines, and information synthesis supported through the use of specific examples. In addition, students were instructed how to access online library and writing resources.

Following the instruction, students were told that no penalties for plagiarism would be assessed on the first primary writing assignment and that extensive written feedback would be provided along with the opportunity for a faculty-student conference. The students were then provided the opportunity to revise their work based on the feedback received and resubmit for full credit.

After the feedback was provided and the corrections were submitted, the students were contacted by phone outside of class in order to complete the semi-structured interview. A total of 11 interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. The interview questions focused on student challenges in academic writing, previous plagiarism instruction, perceptions of the fairness of penalties for plagiarism, and the perceptions of the value of feedback in penalty-free assignments. Students were assured anonymity and encouraged to provide honest responses. The researcher took notes during the interview.

In an attempt to glean a depth of knowledge from a small purposive sample, the data analysis in this case study used a qualitative approach. Responses to the interview and survey questions were compared and contrasted in order to explore student perceptions of plagiarism and the value of penalty-free feedback. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) provided that in qualitative action research, the evaluator becomes the conduit for the voices of the students.

## **Results**

### *Student Challenges in Avoiding Plagiarism*

In the pre-instruction survey, 10 of the 11 students indicated that they had a good understanding of what constituted plagiarism and what did not. Interestingly, the class discussion and the findings from the interviews indicated that was not the case for many. There were misconceptions about what constituted originality and when citations were required and among the students. From the interviews, several common challenges to avoiding plagiarism emerged.

*Understanding When to Cite.* With regard to plagiarism, students indicated that understanding when to cite information was their major challenge in academic writing. They struggled with the concept of citing ideas, theories and concepts, as opposed to direct quotes. Many students were unaware that thoughts and concepts taken from another required a citation, even when paraphrased. One student indicated that "It's not the subject matter - we go to other places to get it. The problem comes with citing and not knowing about citations." Adding support to this idea, another student said, "I try to use original thoughts, but how many words do I have to change before it's considered to be my own work?"

Several students discussed the idea that a lack of uniform faculty standards added to their confusion about the appropriate use of citations. One student indicated that the challenge came from "Understanding what needs to be cited because standards are different for every professor. There's a grey area."

*Information Synthesis.* Students also found information synthesis to be their major challenge. Several of the students said that undertaking an analysis of unfamiliar topics was difficult and several mentioned that the literature review process in particular was particularly challenging. One student said "identifying what parts are important and narrowing them down" presented the most difficulty; another cited "going through so much information and putting it in your own words" as a challenge.

*Formatting Citations and References.* The mechanics of the American Psychological Association (APA) style of formatting was also reported to be a major challenge for many of the students. In addition to expressing a lack of understanding regarding the proper formatting of citations and references, several expressed a desire to uphold ethical values, but indicated that they did not have a firm grasp of how to cite information correctly. When asked about plagiarism in general, one of the students provided that "For me, it's never intentional, it's just understanding the correct way to cite." Another student said "I always have a fear of [unintentional plagiarism] even though I think I'm doing the right thing. I don't really think any of us go into it with the intention of cheating."

### *Previous Instruction*

Overall, these graduate-level students indicated a lack of previous formal plagiarism instruction. When asked to discuss any previous plagiarism or academic writing instruction, most indicated that previous instruction had been brief. One student shared that "[Previous Instruction] has been very limited and boilerplate-plagiarism is bad, but your class is the first time we discussed it in depth."

Many students indicated that they were informed about the existence of the honor code and instructed to avoid plagiarism, but reported that previous academic writing instruction had been inadequate or non-existent. One student responded that "Everyone assumes we know this and I'm not sure where it falls short." Another student added "[Avoiding plagiarism] was stressed, but I had to figure it out on my own."

### *Students' Perceptions of Existing Plagiarism Penalties*

Based on the PAS survey responses, the majority of students did not agree that the penalties for plagiarism in college should be light for those "just learning the ropes." Surprisingly, all of the students indicated a need for strict penalties for those guilty of intentional plagiarism. However, based on the interview responses, the students were divided with regard to their perceptions of the appropriateness of existing plagiarism penalties.

While all of the students indicated a need for penalties and most thought that existing penalties were fair, many of them expressed the need for leniency in cases of inadvertent plagiarism. One student said "It's a pretty serious offense, but they should look at it case by case. Sometimes penalties can be too high. A lot of times, it is not intentional." In support of this view, another student added "Penalties are too extreme. Like me - I don't always know the right way. I would investigate before punishing and give everyone a fair chance. Sometimes it seems like a witch hunt."

#### *Perceived Value of Penalty-Free Written Feedback*

Although, student outcomes were not measured for the study, the students overwhelmingly indicated that receiving detailed written feedback on a penalty-free assignment was valuable in helping them to understand and avoid future instances of plagiarism. "Not too many instructors give such detailed feedback" said one student, who indicated that she had been out of school for many years. Another student added that "[It] was completely helpful. Being able to learn from your mistakes before you're penalized is important. The feedback was pretty positive and you made sure I understood the format of citations." Adding to the idea that students may mistakenly think they have a good knowledge of plagiarism, one student said "The feedback was helpful. I found out I was doing it wrong all along."

#### *Perceptions of Instructional Need*

When asked if there were specific areas of academic writing in which they felt they needed additional instruction, the answer was unanimous - yes. Students indicated that learning when and how to use citations and references was their greatest need. "If I don't know how to cite it, I just don't use it - referencing and citing is still fuzzy" said one student. Several of the students indicated that they believed the feedback would help them to avoid plagiarism in future assignments.

A close second was the perceived need for information synthesis instruction. Students admitted that they still did not have a firm grasp on how to provide an analysis of academic journal articles. One student said "I have difficulty reading full journal articles and finding the things I'm looking for." Another student added "A literature review is different. Reading scholarly journals is not as easy as putting in a Google search and finding what you need."

#### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

A limitation of the study is that with such a small sample, major generalizations from the findings cannot be made. In addition, participants represented only one class within one

university. Future research might employ a quantitative methodology using a larger and more diverse sample.

Another limitation is that the study is based on students' perceptions and does not provide any evidence of student learning performance. "While students' attitudes and opinions are important, other forms of evidence need to be presented in order to conclude whether learning has actually improved" (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Future research measuring students' learning outcomes in response to written feedback would be beneficial.

Finally, the teacher as a researcher may have influenced students' responses regarding the value of written feedback. Future research might employ alternative data collection methods. Research focused on plagiarism reduction outcomes based on the type of feedback provided (i.e. written vs. verbal) or the timing of the feedback could also be valuable.

### *Implications for Teaching*

The research presented indicated that overall, the students in this study viewed academic writing, citing/referencing, information synthesis, APA formatting, and grammar as areas that presented the greatest challenges. Although the students indicated that extensive written feedback on written assignments was helpful, students also overwhelmingly indicated a need for further academic writing instruction.

The need for increased student writing and referencing competencies is apparent. Integrating both plagiarism and academic writing instruction, into every class, regardless of the discipline or level, presents a viable pedagogical strategy. Faculty should be encouraged to utilize a variety of approaches in order to develop these competencies.

In addition, utilizing feedback specifically targeting the challenging areas appears to be useful in helping students to develop academic writing competencies and avoid inadvertent plagiarism. Teachers should be encouraged to experimenting with a variety of feedback strategies. By developing a greater awareness of the specific challenges faced by students, faculty can more effectively address them.



## **Appendices**

*Appendix A:* Plagiarism Attitude Scale

*Appendix B:* Interview Questions

## Appendix A: Plagiarism Attitude Scale

### Directions

This is an attitude scale, which measures how you feel about plagiarism. It is *not* a test with right and wrong answers. Please consider your honest opinions regarding the items and record your responses. Do *not* place your name on this scale. Your instructor may give you further instructions.

1. Sometimes I feel tempted to plagiarize because so many other students are doing it.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

2. I believe I know accurately what constitutes plagiarism and what does not.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

3. Plagiarism is as bad as stealing the final exam ahead of time and memorizing the answers.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. If my roommate gives me permission to use his or her paper for one of my classes, I don't think there is anything wrong with doing that.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. Plagiarism is justified if the professor assigns too much work in the course.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

6. The punishment for plagiarism in college should be light because we are young people just learning the ropes.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. If a student buys or downloads free a whole research paper and turns it in unchanged with his or her name as the author, the student should be expelled from the university.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

- Strongly Disagree

8. Plagiarism is against my ethical values.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. Because plagiarism involves taking another person's words and not his or her materials goods, plagiarism is no big deal.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. It's okay to use something you have written in the past to fulfill a new assignment because you can't plagiarize yourself.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. If I lend a paper to another student to look at, and then that student turns it in as his or her own and is caught, I should not be punished also.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

12. If students caught plagiarizing received a special grade for cheating (such as XF) on their permanent transcript, that policy would deter many from plagiarizing.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

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Available on the Purdue.edu OWL website as open access instruments available for public use from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/929/>

### **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

- 1) Think about plagiarism in particular and tell me what you think are your greatest challenges when it comes to academic writing?
- 2) Tell me about any previous instruction you've had on plagiarism, referencing, academic writing and information synthesis?
- 3) How do you feel about the penalties for plagiarism? What would you recommend?

- 4) Did you find that the ability to turn in specific writing assignments without fear of penalty was beneficial? Why?
- 5) Tell me about the feedback you received.
- 6) Did the feedback help increase your understanding of plagiarism, referencing, and information synthesis? How?
- 7) In what areas of academic writing do you feel you need additional instruction?

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