Combatting Plagiarism from a Transformational Viewpoint

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Abstract

Plagiarism is an increasing issue in higher education. The current research on plagiarism predominantly focuses on plagiarism engagement rates and reasons why students plagiarize. Many studies reveal that students plagiarize unintentionally. Unintentional plagiarism is a result of limited plagiarism understandings combined with inaccurate academic writing convention perceptions. Transformational teaching can be used as a tool to educate students on plagiarism. Through questioning plagiarism assumptions and perspectives, students reevaluate their beliefs. The primary goal of this paper is to outline practical strategies that educators can implement in their classes to transform student plagiarism perspectives, which in turn, may decrease the number of suspected plagiarism cases on campuses.

Keywords: plagiarism, unintentional plagiarism, transformative learning, higher education

Plagiarism Overview

Plagiarism, a form of academic misconduct, is a growing concern for college and university educators (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2010; Ford & Hughes, 2012). According to the literature, the number of students who engage in plagiarism in higher education is continuously rising. As a result, universities are dedicating time and resources to tackle the plagiarism phenomenon (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010). The research on plagiarism typically falls into one of two categories: student plagiarism engagement rates, which is usually done through self-reporting, as well as exploring reasons why students plagiarize (Dawkins, 2004; Gourlay & Deane, 2012; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Selwyn, 2008).

The concept of plagiarism in higher education dates back to the 1960s. Bowers (1964) was one of the first researchers to collect plagiarism data using university students as participants (Ballantine & McCourt Larres, 2010). Today, an abundance of plagiarism research is available, yet the number of college and university students who plagiarize increases each year. It has been suggested that the amount of plagiarism that occurs on campuses is at an all-time high (Bennett, 2005; Voelker, Love, & Pentina, 2012).

Plagiarism occurs in all disciplines: it is not discipline-specific (Holt, 2012). Business instructors, nursing instructors, psychology instructors, etc., all experience cases of student plagiarism. Further, plagiarism occurs in all years of study. Instructors who teach first-year, second-year, third-year, fourth-year, and graduate students all encounter plagiarism.

Plagiarism Engagement Rates

As mentioned earlier, the plagiarism rates across studies vary. Chuda, Navrat, Kovacova, and Humay (2012) had undergraduate students self-report their engagement in plagiarism. They found that 33% admitted to plagiarism. Cochran, Chamlin, Wood and Sellers (1999), who also had students self-report their engagement, found 19% reported to have had plagiarize at least once within the previous year. Ellery (2008) found 26% of participants submitted an assignment that contained plagiarism. Although

some researchers credit the Internet with the rising amount of plagiarism, Selwyn (2008) found that this may not be the case. In this study, 61.9% of participants admitted to plagiarizing using material found online, and 61.9% of participants admitted to plagiarizing using material found offline. As demonstrated above, the self-reporting rate across studies vary.

Some studies examine particular plagiarism behaviours. For example, Bennett (2005), who examined specific plagiarism behaviours, found that "25% of participants submitted an assignment in which the entire piece was plagiarized" (p. 150). Trushell, Byrne, and Simpson (2012) found that 17% of participants created false research to use in an essay. Unlike studies that look at overall plagiarism engagement rates, Bennett (2005) and Trushell et al. (2012) investigated what students exactly do that constitutes plagiarism. Although studies like these provide richer information regarding student plagiarism behaviours, the method of self-reporting is employed. Self-reporting is problematic for a number of reasons.

The method of self-reporting is questionable, even more so when participants self-report on engaging in dishonest behaviours (Kier, 2014; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002, p. 378; Youmans, 2011). Students may under-report their engagement in plagiarism (Culwin, 2006; Thurmond, 2010). One of the major limitations of utilizing self-reporting to collect engagement in plagiarism data is that students may not understand what plagiarism entails. If they are asked to report their overall engagement in plagiarism, they may unintentionally self-report inaccurate numbers. This questions the reliability of self-reporting (Power, 2009). If students do not understand what plagiarism is, how can they provide their engagement in it? Some studies do provide plagiarism definitions for participants, but this does not guarantee that students understand the definition or all of the behaviours that comprise the given definition. Also, studies follow different plagiarism definitions, so comparing rates of plagiarism across studies is difficult (Bennett, 2005).

Reasons Why Students Engage in Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a relevant and important issue in post-secondary education. Plagiarism takes different forms. Some types of plagiarism include copying someone's text and passing it off as one's own to purchasing work or hiring someone to write an assignment (Stolley, Brizee & Paiz, 2013). Although research suggests that the plagiarism rate tends to increase each year and that students engage in a range of behaviours that all violate academic misconduct, the question, *Why do students plagiarize?* needs to be discussed.

There are a number of students who commit plagiarism with no intent to do so. Plagiarism can occur as a result of poor understanding, especially for first-year students. These students may engage in it the most as the literature suggests that this cohort of students holds the lowest knowledge of how to avoid it (Flint, Clegg, & Macdonald, 2006). Some of these students believe that using content of research studies without providing appropriate citations and references is acceptable. International students, in particular, have a greater likelihood of engaging in unintentional behavior due to cultural differences and plagiarism perceptions. Anyanwu's (2004) study on plagiarism utilized case studies with students who submitted assignments that contained plagiarism. Anyanwu (2004) found that international students were unaware that what they did in their assignments was considered plagiarism. Cultural differences result in international students having a difficult time in "their new academic environment" (Chen & Ullen, 2011, p. 209). Writing practices in one culture can be very different from another, and if plagiarism is acceptable in an international student's home country, it is unreasonable to expect them to learn another country's proper citing/referencing practices without being educated on it. International and domestic students, although differing in plagiarism engagement rates, both have a limited awareness about academic writing conventions.

Some students are aware that what they do constitutes plagiarism. This, however, does not stop them from turning in plagiarized work. Some studies reveal that students may plagiarize as a result of pressure to gain satisfying grades, especially for students on scholarships, as well as their rigorous academic schedules (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997). Other researchers believe that students may

plagiarize because of "ineffective institutional deterrents and condoning teachers" (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992). It is suggested that a high probability of being caught for plagiarism greatly reduces the number of plagiarism cases (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001). However, some students who are accused of potential plagiarism have misunderstandings of specific plagiarism behaviours (e.g., referencing confusion, how to paraphrase, etc.) (Anyanwu, 2004).

  Although schools may have plagiarism policies and regulations in place, many students continue to submit papers that contain plagiarism and/or improper citations. In fact, plagiarism among students has proven to be a full-blown epidemic (Devlin, 2006). Many studies indicate that a misunderstanding of plagiarism, which often has serious consequences, is a common excuse offered by students who are accused of it (Devlin & Gray, 2007; East, 2010; Flint et al., 2006; Power, 2009). For example, in one study, undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students' understanding of plagiarism was examined. The results demonstrated that first-year psychology students scored the lowest in knowledge regarding how to avoid plagiarism (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, & Payne 2010). If students are not properly educated on the correct documentation styles, it becomes questionable as to whether or not they should be held accountable if they have these types of errors in their submitted work. Clearly, students need awareness in term of academic writing styles as well as practical strategies on how to avoid plagiarism. It is suggested that providing such education may be the best way to reduce plagiarism instances (Evering & Moorman, 2012). This paper provides ways to utilize the transformative teaching and learning theory in order to help students develop a better understanding of the issue of plagiarism.

Current Plagiarism Education

  As demonstrated above, plagiarism is a growing concern in post-secondary education and much of the literature demonstrates that students plagiarize as a result of not fully understanding what plagiarism is, particularly, which behaviours constitute plagiarism. The single best way to tackle the plagiarism phenomenon may be by providing students with plagiarism education (Chuda et al. 2010). If students are aware of what plagiarism is, as well as, how to properly cite/reference their work, they may be less likely to engage in it. Although several schools pay large subscription fees to plagiarism detection software, such as Turnitin.com, it needs to be questioned what benefits students receive from submitting their work to such sites. Student plagiarism may be detected through these types of software, but it does not prevent plagiarism (Marshall, Taylor, Hothersall, & Perez-Martin, 2011). Using such software has been compared to "putting a Band-Aid on a bruise" (Evering & Moorman, 2012, p. 38). A proactive approach, instead of a detection approach, should be utilized (Evering & Moorman, 2012; Owens & White, 2013).

  The number of educators who provide their courses with plagiarism education is limited (Evering & Moorman, 2012). Few instructors do more than refer their class to the course outline/syllabus to obtain plagiarism information in the first week of classes. Anderman and Murdock (2007) share that students who have developed skills to avoid plagiarism are less likely to plagiarize. A common misconception is that students who enter post-secondary education have the practice and knowledge needed to avoid plagiarism (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010). Many students who enter college/university are unaware of plagiarism behaviours, and through education, such as in-class activities or online plagiarism tutorials, students can practice citing/referencing skills which can decrease the number of plagiarized assignments submitted.

  So far, this paper has provided a literature review highlighting the key themes present in the plagiarism literature. An overview of plagiarism, plagiarism engagement rates in higher education, reasons for student engagement in plagiarism, and a discussion on plagiarism education were provided. The next section will discuss transformative teaching and learning theory, and strategies that educators can use with their students to help combat plagiarism, from a transformative framework, will be outlined.

Transformative Teaching and Learning

The concept of transformational learning emerged in 1981 by Jack Mezirow (1991). It has been referred to by other titles in the literature. For example, Elizabeth Kasl notes in her reflections at a recent Transformative Learning Conference (2006) that "currently there are three different concepts that have become muddied: learning, transformation, and pedagogical practices" (p. 148). Transformative learning can be defined as learning that reinforces students' educational processes, especially learning experiences which shape students and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner's subsequent experiences (Clark, 1993). The core of this process is to provide a student with enough capacity to move from simple to far more sophisticated ideas and capabilities, rather than a predefined set of knowledge and skills. Specific teaching strategies and methods of classroom management are designed in order to facilitate a developmental nature of teaching.

Transformative Teaching and Learning theory implies the three-dimensional process of "perspective transformation" (Clark, 1993, p. 48). These three dimensions are the following: psychological (concerning the change of self-perception), convictional (the change within the system of personal values and believes), and behavioral (changing the habits or behaviors) (Clark, 2006, pp. 48-49). Such teaching methodology encourages students to reflect, reevaluate, and reconsider some notions and issues on the deep level. With the key elements of active learning, persistence and collaboration promoted through transformational learning (Fuglei, 2014), it involves taking care of students' attitudes and perceptions, focusing on their inner thoughts and feelings, thus raising the level of their self-awareness. Transformative teaching helps to trace and develop students' apprehension and analysis capacities and bring forth some insights connected to their studying. As this theory appeals to the students' consciousness, it definitely succeeds at helping to reduce plagiarism. While the students can reflect critically on their own self, actions, beliefs and values, they come to understand the unethical aspect of plagiarism and the primary reasons why it is wrong to plagiarize (Mezirow, 1997).

Specific teaching strategies can lead to transformative education, which includes a set of pedagogical practices that are designed to enable students to experience transformative learning. These strategies and methods of classroom management are designed in order to facilitate a developmental nature of teaching. The major peculiarity of transformative learning is that it provides for the expansion of consciousness, rather than provides one with a specific set of facts and skills (Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012).

Transformational Teaching Strategies

This section will address some transformational teaching strategies that educators can use in their classrooms with students, regardless of the class size, to help combat plagiarism. These strategies have the most meaning for students when used in the first week or so of classes.

1. *Instructor as plagiarist.* In this activity, students are asked to anonymously write a response to a question—usually a question that pertains to the course content. The instructor then collects the responses and provides an answer to the class plagiarizing student responses. A class discussion takes place. As the instructor reads his or her answer, the students start to notice that the instructor is using their answer as his or her own. This allows the students to experience how an author feels when their work was used within them receiving credit. For large class sizes, a handful of responses to save on time can be done.

2. *Student case studies*. This quick, interactive activity allows students to put themselves in the role of the instructor, which addresses plagiarism behaviours and consequences for behaviours. Instructors create brief plagiarism synopses and have students work with a partner to discuss the consequence for each case. A class discussion takes place. This activity gets students thinking about behaviours that violate academic misconduct, it

allows them to interact with classmates and consider others' perceptions, and it gets them thinking about the importance of why plagiarism should be avoided.

Case Study Example: Tina's Statistics professor assigned the class a lab in which each student has to create five statistic questions based on the class material and provide the answers. The professor teaches four different sections of the statistics course. There is a Facebook group in which some students have posted their assignments for students in other sections to see. The professor is unaware of this Facebook group. Tina is on her school's volleyball team and is vice president of the student council. She is a full-time student, and statistics is her least favourite course. Tina completes her assignment. Before submitting it, she looks at the questions from peers on the Facebook group. She feels the questions posted are much stronger than most of hers. She decides to borrow two questions posted by students on the Facebook page and use three of her own. One student informs the instructor that students are posting questions on the Facebook group. Her instructor reads the Facebook group before marking any of the assignments. He notices Tina copied two questions posted on the Facebook group page (Colella, 2016).

Case Study Discussion Questions (works best if students discuss the questions with a pair and then as a class).
1. *What could Tina have done differently to avoid plagiarism?*
2. *How should the instructor handle Tina's plagiarism?*
3. *What should the instructor do regarding the Facebook group?*
4. *Should anyone else be punished for plagiarism?*

3. *Encourage reflective learners:* Provide ongoing reflection sheets to students as they begin their writing assignment. This can be especially helpful in the draft phase. Students can include information about their sources, assign due dates for different parts of the essay, etc. The on-going reflection can also include questions that encourage students to consider the overall goal of the assignment. Reflective learners consider their perceptions about topics and may alter them when faced with new information. These reflections, given by transformational educators, help students reconsider their ways of thinking and provide a means for students to re-evaluate and assimilate new knowledge into their pre-existing schemas.
4. *Discussion of future consequences:* Instructors should initiate discussion during class, where students would be able to share their perception of plagiarism, as well as the aspect of morality and ethics within it. Raise the question on how such an action like plagiarism could impact their behavior in long term. Introducing studies and research that indicted the relation between plagiarism/cheating and committing deviant behavior in work place. In this kind of discussion students will be aware that plagiarism during school life may unconsciously make them more acceptable to unethical behavior in the future.

Plagiarism, Students, and Transformative Learning

As demonstrated throughout the literature, transformative teaching facilitates a learning environment that challenges students and encourages students to think critically. These ideas contradict how students are educated on plagiarism. Plagiarism education is presented in a passive format, and in turn, this type of education limits students' development of critical

thinking, particularly on the topic of plagiarism. When plagiarism education is presented in a passive format, student productivity and creativity are reduced (Dey & Sobhan, 2006). This may impact the overall educational experience and self-growth of students.

Transformative teaching utilizes a fresh approach to learning and teaching which centers on the purpose to create self-awareness, self-motivation and independent learners (Kegan, 2000; Stevens Long et al., 2012). Transformative teaching uses a range of diverse methods and activities, which can raise plagiarism awareness among students.

Understanding the phenomenon of plagiarism may come to students through class discussions, where students share their perceptions of plagiarism and how morality and ethics is encompassed within plagiarism behaviours (particularly, academic fraud). Transformational teachers should guide their students through such discussions by a means of facilitation and modeling, including elements of analysis, synthesis, connection and interpretation (Fuglei, 2014).

Transformational teaching, with respect to plagiarism, can provide students learning experiences that will allow them to grasp the concept of plagiarism and avoid it in future assignment submissions. If plagiarism is not discussed, it is unlikely that students will view it as important. If students do not view abstaining from plagiarism as essential, why would they refrain from engaging in it? Most higher education instructors inform their students, typically on the first day of class, to look at the course outline for the plagiarism policy and information. Seldom do instructors arrange in-class plagiarism activities that allow their classes to work with plagiarism material. Failing to model plagiarism as an important aspect of higher education will lead to students thinking that it is not a priority. If it was a priority, the instructor would spend time addressing it. The instructors who do provide in-class activities are going one step further, but one cannot conclude that the activities will have positive impacts on students. Unless the activities have a transformational design, students' viewpoints about plagiarism will not change.

As it was already mentioned, active learning via transformative approach lead to increase of students' responsibility for the outcomes of the learning process. Increasing student responsibility can be reached in multiple ways as discussed above, such as negotiating the problems, contents and design of the course with students. Getting their critique included and emphasizing the impact of plagiarism for real-life performance, would help them rethink their assumption on plagiarism.

Overall, adopting transformational strategies for plagiarism instruction will allow students to consider what plagiarism entails and how it can be avoided. Unless students experience it, which can be done through the strategies discussed above, their understanding of it will remain limited.

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