

Plagiarism: Whose Responsibility Is It Anyway? An Administrator's Choice to Teach Not Punish

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Abstract

This paper examines how plagiarism is viewed on college campuses and the resultant punitive consequences that follow. In this case, a college administrator must determine whether two graduate education students should be expelled as a consequence of having certain passages appearing from websites and journal articles without attribution in first two theses drafts. In assessing what contributed to this infraction, the college administrator determined that the students had never received direct instruction in plagiarism and how to avoid it. Working collaboratively with the referring faculty member, a 3-session instructional program was designed to teach how to paraphrase and use citations in tandem with an overcorrection procedure of positive practice coupled with restitution. The culminating session required each student to design a 5-lesson module on plagiarism and how to avoid it for their program peers. They also met with their faculty instructor to review the changes they had made in their drafts resulting in reinstatement in their research course. The entire process helped the academic program faculty recognize that the topic of plagiarism and skills necessary to avoid plagiarism required direct instruction at various points throughout the overall program to prevent students from encountering severe penalties.

Keywords

Academic Disintegrity, Direct Instruction, Program Assessment, Overcorrection, Positive Practice, Restitution

1. Introduction

No college administrator can reflect on his/her long career in education without remembering at least one situa-

tion involving student plagiarism. With the explosion of available information through the Internet, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for students to read Wikipedia entries, articles, blogs or twitter comments without at some point losing track of the sources where the information came from and over time thinking that these ideas may be original thoughts (Roig, 2001). Moreover, this generation of digital-savvy students, by virtue of their e-mail and text messaging penchants, has slowly eroded rules of grammar and form. As a consequence, college students today have difficulty understanding the rules of grammar, the requirements for style (MLA or APA), and the degree to which a formal research paper must paraphrase and cite in order to not represent the ideas of others as one's own.

The current paper examines how plagiarism is viewed on college campuses and the typical punitive approach that is followed, once plagiarism is identified. In the most severe consequence, plagiarism can result in a suspension or expulsion from an institution of higher education. While it is reasonable to attribute a percentage of plagiarism to students who may be unethical and disingenuous, other instances of plagiarism may be far more subtle and arise from a lack of understanding of how to paraphrase appropriately or use the required citation format. This statement reflects the thinking of Wilhoit (1994): "Even though there always will be dishonest students, most cases of plagiarism result from honest confusion over the standards of academic discourse and proper citation" (p. 161).

In the case study that will be presented in this paper, a college administrator must determine whether two graduate education students should be expelled as a consequence of having certain passages appear from websites and journal articles in a first draft of a master's level paper where they were not attributed properly. The referring instructor had used a commercial, anti-plagiarism software program to assess the work submitted and as a consequence, the software identified the % of match in the student work to websites and journals. Though this software could have been made available for student use, which would have precluded the plagiarism report, the process to enable students to gain access to the software was very time consuming and few students accessed this program.

2. The Presenting Problem

As the story unfolded, the two students submitted their first drafts to their instructor for review and discussion. Upon meeting with the instructor, each student was surprised to learn that their submission had in fact been viewed by the instructor as plagiarized and that they would need to see the college administrator to learn of the appropriate consequences for such infractions. The faculty member also referred the student to the university bulletin and the policy on plagiarism including the corresponding punitive actions.

Upon meeting with each of these students, the college administrator listened carefully to each student's response to the plagiarism charge. Surprisingly, both students had similar stories to tell; they felt that they were not properly prepared and did not know how to cite appropriately, especially from the web. Both students had completed all requirements but this last course to earn their Master's Degree and had in fact already passed comprehensive exams and had a gpa that was over 3.0. Neither student presented like someone who did not take the thesis seriously or who had previously not complied with rules and procedures.

In assessing this case, the college administrator needed to determine whether the major sequence had actually planned for and taught the necessary skills students required to be able to complete the literature review successfully without being at-risk for plagiarism. That is to say, learning how to paraphrase and discriminate what's important, how to weave the important elements into a coherent narrative, and finally attributing ideas via citations and use of direct quotes are significant skills that have to be taught in a structured way, with students receiving feedback on drafts. The absence of direct instruction to prevent plagiarism can negatively impact student performance and put them at risk for plagiarism (Wilhoit, 1994). Identifying where the plagiarism policy lives on the university website and the corresponding consequences simply teach what not to do. From an instructional perspective, students need to view appropriate models of academic writing with citations and practice the necessary skills to competently be able to attribute ideas to their sources.

3. Plagiarism Prevention: To Teach or Not to Teach

For students to understand how to avoid plagiarizing, a comprehensive instructional program that concretely teaches what plagiarism is and how to avoid it must be actively taught. From a departmental perspective, there needs to be some agreement about where this instruction should occur in a given program. In the case of the two

students who were referred to the college administrator for disciplinary action, both students maintained that they had not had adequate direct instruction about how to paraphrase or how to cite from varied sources. Ultimately, the college administrator's decision regarding what action(s) to take really rested on the central question, "To what extent did the students receive appropriate instruction that would prevent them from being at-risk for plagiarism?" Love and Simmons (1998) identified a range of internal factors (negative personal attitudes and lack of competency, fear and guilt) and external factors (grade, time, and task pressures) that contribute to and inhibit cheating and plagiarism in graduate education students. Such factors need to be considered when developing direct instruction around plagiarism prevention.

In the case of the two students presented, a review of the program indicated that while all faculty expected students to be compliant with the plagiarism policy, there was no direct instruction about plagiarism (Roig, 2001). In light of this, the college administrator felt that it would not be fair to hold students accountable if in fact they had not received adequate direct instruction. Hence the solution to this disciplinary situation was instruction-based. An intervention that would teach the needed information about what is considered plagiarism, practice some of the technical writing skills to prevent plagiarism, correct the errors in the initial paper submissions to the faculty member and repair the relationship between the students and that faculty member were what guided the college administrator's response.

In consultation with the faculty member, the need to find a solution that was more instructional than punitive was recognized. In framing the intervention, had the faculty member not endorsed the notion of developing an instructional response, this situation would have become more problematic. The outcome of the consultation with the faculty member resulted in the development of an instructionally-based procedure designed to help the target students to acquire and practice the necessary skills to complete the thesis requirements. Three, two-hour sessions comprised the intervention. The narrative which follows details the procedure developed and implemented by the college administrator.

4. The Intervention Procedure

The intervention procedure was developed using the behavioral technique of "overcorrection" as a model. "Overcorrection procedures have been shown to be effective methods at managing unwanted behaviors [Kazdin, 2001]" (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 2003: p. 335). This type of intervention includes behavioral correction combined with positive practice of the desired behavior. Hence the overcorrection procedure developed by the college administrator focused on helping the target students: 1) acknowledge "wrong doing;" 2) engage in a correction process; and 3) positively practice the appropriate behavior. According to Martella et al. (2003), the intervention procedure that was developed combined both "positive practice overcorrection" with "restitution overcorrection." (p. 336).

In the case of the target graduate education students, the first step involved identifying what was plagiarized in their original submissions and understanding why these portions of text met the criteria for plagiarism. The second step involved the direct instruction component of this procedure. First, the mechanics of citing using APA format were reviewed including use of direct quotes and use of citations. The specific mechanics of how to cite and/or use quotes was explored through the use of exemplars in source materials that each student had used for developing their first submissions to their professor. It was during this component that the college administrator discovered that the target students really did not know how to paraphrase very effectively. Using examples from an online source (The Online Writing Lab [OWL] at Purdue University), students positively practiced how to paraphrase after reading paragraphs of text. Once they could do this effectively, they practiced how information from their own schemas could shape their interpretation of these main ideas. This then provided opportunities to extend what they had read, helping to establish a particular perspective or position. In the third step, the two graduate education students were asked to develop a five lesson module for their peers on plagiarism prevention.

5. The Role of the Referring Faculty Member in the Overcorrection Process

The overcorrection procedure could not have been implemented without the consent of the referring faculty member. By permitting such an intervention to go forward, the faculty member enabled the college administrator to create an opportunity for the target students to "earn back the good graces" of their professor. Had the faculty member not been willing to support this process, it would have been far more difficult to substitute an

overcorrection procedure in lieu of a disciplinary intervention. In order for the target students to be able to re-engage in the work of the course, the college administrator arranged for the referring faculty member to join the target students at the last session. At this time, the students submitted their corrections of the original submissions which had been deemed plagiarized. Each student explained the process they undertook to make the necessary corrections to the original paper and why these changes had been made, demonstrating familiarity with the rules governing citations in APA format and how they had used paraphrasing to strengthen their submissions. The faculty member in turn was very approachable and willing to re-read and re-grade their submissions.

Once the “corrective part” of the session had been completed, the target students then presented their five lesson modules on plagiarism prevention and discussed the source of their ideas for this exercise. The faculty member found these modules quite well done and thought they could readily be used in class to help other students understand the pitfalls of plagiarism and how to prevent them. At the conclusion of the final session, the faculty member agreed to re-admit the students to class and to permit them to continue to work on their theses.

As the semester continued, the college administrator would follow-up with the faculty member, inquiring how the target students were doing. The answer each time was that the students were doing well and that they would satisfy the requirements for the thesis course. Several weeks post the final session, the college administrator and the faculty member met to consider the effectiveness of the intervention. The faculty member reported that the students’ successive submissions were appropriately presented and documented. The students were able to complete their theses and graduate with their advanced degrees. In the end, what could have been a totally aversive event for the students, their professor and the college administrator resulted in concrete learning for all!

6. Conclusion

The positive result for the students was an important outcome of this intervention. Previously held assumptions that all graduate students could demonstrate appropriate research and writing skills were directly challenged. The benefit beyond the direct impact for the students was what the administrator and faculty member learned with respect to how effectively research and writing skills were being taught in this program and the subsequent engagement of program faculty in this discussion. It became clear that courses offered at the entry level were being taught primarily by adjunct faculty and that there was considerable variability in how skills were taught, followed up, and evaluated. An action plan was developed that included a program meeting of all full-time and part-time faculty to discuss how the teaching of research skills and writing could be strengthened, where specific skills would be highlighted in the curriculum and what rubric would be used across all courses to evaluate writing. What was most positive about this overall experience was how a seeming act of plagiarism became the catalyst for responsible program review, discussion and ownership of student outcomes.

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