

Honesty, Integrity, and Plagiarism: The Role of Student Values in Prevention

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Abstract

Campus plagiarism policies often focus on detection and punishment. One alternative is to foster student-centered cultures of honesty, for example through honor codes. Such an approach requires a shift in perceptions with respect to the problem, the institution, and students' own responsibilities within the learning environment.

Much has been noted about the growing problem of plagiarism on high school and college campuses. With statistics now indicating up to "80% admit[ing] to cheating at least once" (Clayton, 1999) and "54% acknowledge[ing] they had committed plagiarism using the internet" (Tyre, 2001), we are continually focusing our attention on ways to address the problem.

In reviewing the literature, we find that strategies for addressing the problem fall within two approaches: those that frame the problem punitively and those that seek to create student-centered cultures of honesty that reinforce the ethical nature of the problem. This paper discusses these approaches, with a particular focus on student perception and understanding with respect to the problem, the institution, and individual responsibilities within the learning environment.

Crime and Punishment

Punitive approaches focusing on effective detection and appropriate punishment are informed by the ways in which plagiarism is defined by

administrators, faculty, and students (Liddell and Fong, 2005), and these definitions can inform the extent to which plagiarism is perceived to constitute a problem within a given campus. At a minimum plagiarism is clearly defined as taking the ideas and writings of another and presenting them as one's own. Further, plagiarism is often defined specifically relative to citation, to the attribution of content to its source.

While there are some instances in which this aspect of citation is construed in benign terms, as a breach of etiquette, the problem seems more often to be defined as an act of stealing. From this perspective, the problem takes on ethical and moral dimensions, with an emphasis on the victim of the theft. At least one student defined plagiarism in these terms, as "practices [that] have a detrimental effect on other students, either directly or indirectly, and as such are particularly serious and reprehensible" (Ashworth and Bannister, 1997).

But such punitive approaches may in many ways ignore what is, in reality, a more complex issue. As Ashworth states:

Studies within this field characteristically measure student and/or staff perceptions of cheating through the use of attitude scales. . . What curbs the usefulness of studies of this nature is the presupposition that the meaning of cheating is relatively unequivocal, and comparable for the researchers and their subjects (teachers and students) who are all assumed to

know what cheating 'looks like.' This assumption of consensus does not deal with the question of precisely how cheating is conceived and understood within the student world. (Ashworth and Bannister, 1997)

Given this, many faculty realize that any one instance of plagiarism may be unintentional, with students generally honest but ignorant. Many students remain unfamiliar with what constitutes plagiarism, and being unfamiliar with the conventions of direct/indirect quoting and source citation, they unknowingly contribute to the problem.

Alternative Approaches

Deterrence Through Direct Instruction

One approach is to develop what we might call the *declarative* and *procedural* knowledge students have with respect to plagiarism. That is, we can focus on informing students on *what constitutes plagiarism* (declarative knowledge) and *the strategies for avoiding it* (procedural knowledge). Rather than focus on detection, the focus is on deterrence. Librarians in particular can play a significant role, particularly as the Internet gains prominence as a primary source of research for students. As Burke notes:

Librarians now have the chance to become trailblazers in educating students on the proper methods for conducting research in the current electronic environment. . . . Students do not understand the difference between these proprietary, authoritative research databases and the free-wheeling information found on the Internet. For this reason, more than ever, it is important for librarians to work with teaching faculty to strongly urge that they bring their classes to the library for instruction. (Burke, 2004)

Also central to this development of declarative and procedural knowledge is the English Department, under whose purview particular skills in paraphrasing, direct quotation, and citation often fall.

Honor and Ethics

But while policies such as these can be effective in helping students understand what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, it is also important that students understand *why* to avoid it. A focus on the ethical and moral issues seems straightforward, and many campuses do place a heavy emphasis on honesty. At the University of Texas, the administration "raise[s] the profile of integrity issues during orientation with skits, one 10-page handout on plagiarism, and a newsletter called the 'Integrity Herald' for faculty" (Clayton, 1999). Yet in many cases, there remains an emphasis on detection and punishment, even when framed initially as a matter of integrity. At Boston University, the dean of the school's College of Communications "wrote a letter to students urging them to protect their 'good name' by reviewing carefully the school's code of conduct," and accompanied this warning with a listing of "13 unnamed cases and the penalties – probation, suspension, and expulsion" (Clayton, 1999).

While a clear stance by administrators and faculty as to the school's plagiarism policy is certainly a good deterrent, such an approach can cause students to frame their understanding of the problem not from an internal ethical perspective, but rather from an external perspective – a concern for being caught and punished. In other words, as Ashworth states, students can be "very aware of the need to reference the source of material cited, [but] the positive reasons for adopting this practice – other than to avoid punishment – were not universally apparent" (Ashworth and Bannister, 1997).

Student-Centered Learning

Equally important to consider is that the motivation for students to cheat in the first place reflects what they view as the primary role of the institution relative to their own educational purposes. Tyre notes, students in one study indicated that one reason they cheated was the pressure to achieve top grades and test scores in order to avoid a competitive disadvantage in their chosen professional fields (Tyre, 2001). This focus on the grade reflects a particular view on education that cannot be ignored with respect to plagiarism. If, as Eison, et al, note, grade-oriented students view the classroom as a “crucible. . . which is endured as a necessary evil on the way to getting a degree or becoming certified in a profession,” (Eison, 1986, p. 54) it would seem that our biggest challenge as educators is not simply to define and articulate an institutional policy on plagiarism, but to help our students reposition the academic institution not simply as a vehicle toward their professional endeavors, but as what Lim, et al, define as an “environment for personal development. . .in the moral, cognitive, physical, social and aesthetic spheres” (Lim, 2002, p. 262). This shift becomes even more relevant when we consider the research showing that one’s tendency toward dishonesty in college is a predictor of one’s tendency toward unethical behavior in subsequent professional settings (Lim, 2002, p. 262).

To create learning environments that promote a stronger sense of intellectual curiosity and personal development, we might look to current perspectives in the teaching of English composition – an approach that emphasizes the process as much as the end-product as a means to foster higher levels of critical thinking. In this model, students spend time discussing readings and content questions before drafting an initial response to an essay prompt. Integral to this process approach is a step during which students review and respond to each other’s work, commenting on the effectiveness of various elements. The value of this process model, as it relates to this

discussion on plagiarism, is in its inherent development of student integrity and trust. The focus is on continuous improvement, and students become more vested in and responsible for the quality of their own work. In these student-centered, classrooms, students are given ownership over their own learning and this becomes compelling in any discussion on plagiarism. With ownership and responsibility over their learning, students are in a stronger position to take ownership over their intrinsic sense of ethics and integrity.

Student-Centered Cultures of Honesty

With this in mind, we might consider McCabe and Trevino, who explore how institutions can address the problem of plagiarism by creating an academic environment in which dishonesty is not only a punishable offense, but a socially unacceptable behavior. To create such an environment, universities and colleges have implemented honor codes – codes that place the responsibility and ownership of ethics into student hands. As McCabe found, as many institutions revamped their policies, the most effective curbs originated from the students themselves, who became involved in the process through campus activities (McCabe & Trevino, 2002, 37-41). Tyre quotes from a 1990 study by Donald McCabe, et al: “having students involved makes all the difference, because it’s their culture you’re trying to change” (Tyre, 2001).

Colleges implementing honor codes may establish student-run initiatives that are defined, voted on, and maintained by students, who often sit on “Honor Code Boards” responsible for ensuring that honor and honesty remain visible on campus through communications media such as websites and bulletin boards.

At the heart of the honor code approach is the establishment of a peer-to-peer value system in which students not only define the code of ethics, but also serve as the primary motivators for adhering to the code. As reported by McCabe, et al, in 2004, in a “landmark study of cheating

among college students in the early 1960s, sociologist William Bowers argued that ‘students are less apt to cheat as the campus wide climate of disapproval [of cheating] increases’” (McCabe & Trevino, 1997, p. 394). This peer pressure may take social forms, but what is critical is what McCabe calls a culture of integrity, in which students “do not necessarily have to monitor or report on their peers, but they do have to help create and sustain an environment where most students view cheating as socially unacceptable” (McCabe & Trevino, 2002, p. 37-41). Such strategies as honor pledges, peer reportage, unproctored examinations, and peer-run judiciaries/councils can be a means to accomplish this.

A shift to this system is not without its challenges. One important aspect of the peer disapproval system is that academic honor cannot be simply imposed from above, but is rather deeply tied to approval, and disapproval, by one’s peers (McCabe & Trevino, 2002, p. 37-41). But while we can be confident that students value the opinions of their peers, when it comes to peer deterrence and monitoring, some students can be reticent about imposing their own set of values on others, seeing the act of plagiarism as an individual choice that remains benign until it directly affects (negatively) another student. Indeed, in one study, only 1.7% of respondents were willing to report a friend whom they found cheating; the majority of respondents (82%) chose to ignore it (Lim, 2002, p. 261). A strong consideration in exploring an honor code is the idea that the current student ethic is one of peer loyalty, and it is within this context that students evaluate the practices of their peers.

With this in mind, while the shift toward student-defined cultures of integrity can de-center faculty out of traditional roles of authority, the role of educators (faculty, staff, and administrators) remains critical. As McCabe acknowledges, creating a culture of academic integrity requires a “commitment of all members of the campus community,” (McCabe & Trevino, 2002, p. 37-41) and

this commitment centers on our ability to create the environments in which students know what plagiarism is, know how to avoid it, but perhaps most importantly, understand what constitutes a true culture of trust, integrity, and honesty. Educators play a large role in guiding students through this discussion, allowing students to ask questions and explore the true complexity of the issue. To accomplish this, faculty and administrators must themselves have a strong sense of integrity and honesty.

The need for faculty, staff, and administration to buy in to creating such a culture cannot be understated, as student perception of official guidance is integral to creating an environment of trust. If, as one student comments, “cheating seems to be a low-key issue for the university [and] the regulations are sometimes vague, with responsibility for understanding placed on the student,” (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997, p. 187-204) this cultural shift will be difficult.

The implications for faculty, administrators, and staff are clear. We must have a clear commitment to creating a culture that incorporates clear and consistent communication of not only what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, but also what constitutes integrity and how to foster it. In this way, we shift our tone from one that is prohibitive to one that stresses more positive motivations. In this article we have explored a concept of collaborative learning that requires a fundamental shift in how we perceive the learning process. Considering the current competitive rhetoric reflected in student comments as to why they cheat, what might be necessary is a shift away from individualistic perspectives on achievement to a more collective view. In other words, it requires transferring adversarial, competitive academic relationships into cooperative ones.

Perhaps the greatest challenge and implication is the pedagogical shift required to relinquish punitive authority and shift the responsibility for

learning and academic integrity to students. From this perspective, we must have trust in our students, modeling the behavior of an academic community defined by mutual trust and free exchange of ideas. With this shift, honor codes can be effective in placing higher degrees of trust onto students while establishing academic honesty as an institutional priority. Given the potential relationship between academic dishonesty and parallel behavior later on in the professional disciplines, the benefit of creating such a culture may, as McCabe notes, extend well beyond a reduction in student cheating. It may garner a “lifelong benefit of learning the value of living in a community based on trust.”

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