Three Approaches to Cultivating Academic Honesty and Fighting Plagiarism

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Abstract

Academic honesty is a critical concept for students who are enrolled in university studies; however, many university students have at best a loose understanding of what academic honesty entails. Plagiarism comes in many forms, including verbatim plagiarism, patchworking, and self-plagiarism. Even those students who have some awareness of plagiarism may only recognize and avoid certain types. For this reason, many students unintentionally engage in plagiarism, jeopardizing their success at university. This paper will explain three approaches to developing students' knowledge and practice of academic honesty: specific uses of Turnitin.com, a test that discretely assesses students' ability to paraphrase and cite sources correctly, and a media-based term project. These approaches help develop students' understanding of the meaning of educational integrity, so they will be able to take their place in the wider academic conversation. The approaches range from the more traditional to projects involving new media and technology, providing varied exposure to key concepts. The content of this paper will be of interest to educators in diverse institutions, who will be able to adapt these approaches to meet their students' needs.

Keywords: Plagiarism; Academic Honesty; Media-Based Projects; Turnitin.com

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Introduction

University education provides many opportunities for students, not least of which is the opportunity to learn effective written communication. This opportunity, an "opportunity for students to hone both their capacity for original, critical insights and their ability to express these insights in the written word" (Dee & Jacob, 2012, p. 398), can be undermined by plagiarism, which is a relatively common practice in many student populations. For example, McCabe (2010) found that 58 percent of the 24,000 American high school students that he surveyed admitted to plagiarism; however, this behavior is certainly not limited to high school students, nor is it limited to the United States. Plagiarism is "a major educational problem and major social concern" in Thailand (Songsriwittaya et al., 2009, p. 9), as it is in many other countries. The prevalence of plagiarism and its potentially serious consequences create a need to address this issue.

This paper describes three ways in which students learn about plagiarism and academic honesty at the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics at Mahidol University International College in Salaya, Thailand. The Preparation Center offers courses in intensive English for academic purposes to students who wish to enter English-medium programs at the international college. The stated goal of the college is to provide its students with "quality liberal arts education" ("A liberal arts education in an Asian setting," 2012). Meaningful interaction between students and professors (as well as among students) is essential to a liberal arts education (Blaich, Bost, Chan, & Lynch, 2004), and such interaction is facilitated by clear communication. Students who do not learn to express themselves clearly will not be able to make the most of their liberal arts education. For this reason, academic honesty is emphasized in the Preparation Center's curriculum.

Merely punishing students who plagiarize is not a sufficient solution to the problem. Students plagiarize for many reasons, including ignorance of the meaning of plagiarism and the belief that plagiarism constitutes ethical behavior (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997). In addition to having a clear academic honesty code, teachers and institutions "should engage students in a complex understanding of what plagiarism is and why it's penalized in our institutions" (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002, p. 201). Cultivating such an understanding is the goal of the approaches to teaching about plagiarism that is presented in this paper. The paper begins by exploring various taxonomies of plagiarism. It then describes the approaches that an intensive English for academic purposes program at a Thai university has taken to addressing plagiarism and discusses these approaches through the lens of pertinent literature. Finally, it offers possibilities for further development.

Taxonomies of Plagiarism

Researchers have offered various taxonomies of plagiarism. A common taxonomy proposes four ways in which students plagiarize (for example Brandt, 2002; Howard, 2002; Park, 2003; Wilhoit; 1994). The first way involves stealing an entire essay from another source and asserting one's own authorship. Sources could include essay mills, essay-writing services, online content, or other students. The second way involves asserting authorship over work that was written for a specific assignment by another person, such as a student's relative — a practice that is sometimes called

ghostwriting. The third way involves copying sections verbatim from several source texts. In this case, students may provide correct citations and references but fail to paraphrase or quote the sources adequately. This practice is often called patchworking. The fourth way involves paraphrasing from source texts but neglecting to provide citations and references to acknowledge the authors whose ideas are being restated.

A second taxonomy of plagiarism has been developed by computer scientists aiming to create plagiarism-detection software (Alzahrani, Salim, & Abraham, 2012). While this taxonomy does not address certain aspects of plagiarism that are included in the taxonomy described above (e.g., it contains no mention of ghostwriting), its strength lies in its systematic approach to cataloguing the various ways in which individuals can copy or manipulate source text in an effort to illegitimately claim it as their own. This recent taxonomy "highlights differences between literal plagiarism and intelligent plagiarism, from the plagiarist's behavioral point of view" (Alzahrani et al., 2012, p. 133). Literal plagiarism, which is much easier to detect than intelligent plagiarism, involves submitting an exact copy of a text, a near copy of a text, or a restructured copy of a text. In a near copy, words would be either substituted, inserted, or deleted. Sentences could also be joined or split in an effort to avoid detection. Intelligent plagiarism, which is more sophisticated and thus more difficult to detect, can take three forms: text manipulation, translation, or idea adoption. Text manipulation involves the use of paraphrasing or summarizing. The plagiarist significantly changes the language of a text, but not the ideas. Even if the language of the text has been changed significantly, citations are still necessary in order to give the original author credit for his or her ideas and to avoid plagiarism. Translation is the second type of intelligent plagiarism. It includes both manual and automatic (e.g., Google Translate) methods. The plagiarist could either make use of translation, in which a text in another language is translated into English, or of back translation, in which a text in English is translated into a second language and back into English, greatly altering the language of the text. The final type of intelligent plagiarism is idea adoption, which could be considered the "most serious form of plagiarism" (Alzahrani et al., 2012, p. 135) as it involves the wholesale theft of ideas. Overall, this taxonomy is a useful overview of the behaviors, if not the motivations, that comprise plagiarism.

Turnitin, a company that provides an online plagiarism-detection service, has published a recent taxonomy of plagiarism. This taxonomy is based on a survey of 879 educators from various countries and on the analysis of thousands of papers submitted to their website (Turnitin, 2012, p. 3). The relatively informal names given to the various types of plagiarism were meant to make them more relevant and understandable to "the generation of students who are 'digital natives'" (Turnitin, 2012, p. 3). In order of perceived severity as measured by the survey, the ten types of plagiarism are as follows: Clone, CTRL-C, Mashup, Aggregator, Recycle, 404 Error, Find-Replace, Hybrid, Remix, and Re-Tweet. The three most common errors, which are also perceived as the most severe, are Clone, Mashup, and CTRL-C. Clone involves submitting someone else's work without making any changes. CTRL-C involves copying large portions of a single text. Mashup involves copying material verbatim from multiple sources without citing the sources. Four of the seven remaining types — Find-Replace, Hybrid, Remix, and Re-Tweet — describe variations on the same theme, i.e, verbatim plagiarism and use of text or ideas without attribution. The last three types of plagiarism differ substantially from the others.

Students engage in 404 Error when they cite nonexistent sources or cite existing sources inaccurately; in Recycle, or self-plagiarism, when they resubmit work that had already been submitted in a different class; and in Aggregator when they cite properly but do not include any original ideas. The Turnitin taxonomy is similar to the others in several regards, but it also introduces additional academic honesty issues specific to secondary and higher education. Each of the three taxonomies described has advantages, and each contains elements absent from the others. The first has the virtue of being relatively simple, the second comprehensively describes specific means of plagiarizing, and the third is designed to be understood by students. Only the first taxonomy mentions ghostwriting, only the second mentions translation, and only the third mentions self-plagiarism. These taxonomies complement each other in providing a more complete view of this complex issue.

Three Approaches to Reducing Plagiarism

Recognizing that plagiarism encompasses a wide range of behaviors and that many students enter the program with little understanding of what it means to plagiarize, the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics uses multiple approaches to raising students' awareness of this issue. These approaches attempt to respond to the many reasons that students engage in plagiarism, which include a misunderstanding of the goals of academic writing (Whitaker, 1985), lack of skill (Briggs, 2009), ease of finding texts to plagiarize on the Internet (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002), and ignorance (Ashworth et al., 1997; Dee & Jacob, 2012). The three approaches described below, along with a clear academic honesty policy, attempt to address these underlying reasons.

Turnitin.com

Turnitin.com is a web-based service that evaluates the originality of texts. When a text is submitted to Turnitin, the text is automatically checked against online resources and against all papers that have previously been submitted to Turnitin. Sections of the student text that match online texts or other student papers are highlighted. If the student text matches an online source, the teacher can view the online source text. If the student text matches a previously submitted paper, the instructor may request a copy of that paper. This request must be approved by the instructor to whom the paper was originally submitted. Turnitin can be used across the curriculum; however, it is particularly well-suited to language classes, as the site provides peer-editing and commenting functions. One disadvantage of Turnitin is that it requires an institutional subscription, meaning it will not be available to all educators.

At the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics, Turnitin is used for all major writing assessments, which include the term papers written by the intermediate and upper-intermediate students. These papers are completed over the course of nine weeks, and students submit an outline and drafts before submitting the final paper. Turnitin is used to check the outlines and drafts as well as the final product. This gives teachers a chance to provide formative feedback and discuss academic honesty with the students by reviewing their originality scores. These scores show the percentage of the students' submission that matches other texts. Students frequently misinterpret the originality scores in that they often assume that an acceptable term

paper would be almost completely original, but this is not necessarily the case. Citations, references, and properly-cited quotes can all legitimately match other texts. Discussing this idea using their papers as concrete examples can help students differentiate between legitimate borrowing and plagiarism.

Turnitin is effective in addressing several of the reasons why students plagiarize. Once students have seen the originality reports of their drafts and discussed them with their teacher, they cannot claim ignorance. Turnitin explicitly indicates which sections of the text are not original, and the teacher can explain academic honesty using the students' own papers as examples. He or she can also explain to students the goals of academic writing. These goals include the expression of original ideas supported by the use of source texts, as opposed to the accumulation of information. Additionally, Turnitin reduces the perceived ease of cheating. While it may be easy to copy texts from the Internet and submit them in lieu of original work, it is equally easy for teachers to detect such behavior using Turnitin. This will deter students from engaging in CTRL-C (Turnitin, 2012, p. 4) plagiarism, patchworking, and related practices.

Academic Honesty Test

While Turnitin is a useful tool in teaching students about academic honesty, it does not fully address all reasons why students plagiarize. Even with the best intentions, students may plagiarize because they do not have the necessary skills in paraphrasing or citing, especially in a second language. Also, they may not be able to distinguish common knowledge from proprietary ideas that must be cited. The Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics has developed a test to help students improve these skills. The test is given in the intermediate class approximately one month after the start of the term. It is relatively minor part of the students' overall assessment, but its inclusion in the curriculum motivates students to engage with this material.

The academic honesty test has two sections. In each, the students are given a text of approximately 400 words. In the first section, students are asked to determine whether each of a series of 10 sentences based on the given text are academically honest and correctly formatted. Common errors include omission of a citation for statements that are not common knowledge, incorrect formatting of the citation, inaccurate paraphrasing, and verbatim copying of the source text without quoting. In the second part of the test, students answer a further five questions about the second text. Each of the five consists of a sentence that contains an error related to academic honesty. Students are given a bank of choices from which they must identify the type of error. The choices include complete omission of a citation, a problem with the reporting phrase, incorrect transcription from the source text, an in-text citation error, and copying from the text (missing quotation marks). Once the students identify the error, they must rewrite the sentence to correct it. This test develops students' ability to identify and correct problems that relate to academic honesty.

Media-Based Assignments

Even students who understand academic honesty and plagiarism may cheat. They simply may not feel that plagiarism is wrong (Ashworth et al., 1997), perhaps because of their cultural understanding of ownership or individualism (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002). Another cause of cheating is that they find their assignments unfulfilling, that "the work does not invite or deserve creative energy" (Zwagerman, 2008, p. 696). In these cases, developing their knowledge and skills may not be effective in reducing plagiarism. This creates a need for a further approach to addressing plagiarism, a need which has been filled at the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics through the creation of media-based assignments that discourage plagiarism by their very structure.

An example of a media-based assignment is the term project that is the focus of the lower-intermediate class. This assignment is completed over the course of nine weeks. Each student is assigned a faculty advisor and a country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The students read news stories about that country and select a current event that they feel is interesting and worth sharing with their peers. They then write a 550-word text about their chosen event that synthesizes information from various news sources and relates that event to the Thai context. Once their texts have been approved by the faculty advisor, the students plan and record a 6-minute video about the event. The first three minutes present the findings of the students' research. After the overview, the students include two short interviews, neither of which can exceed 1.5 minutes. The faculty advisor watches the videos with the students and gives feedback. At the end of the term, the videos are shown to the class. The teachers select one video from each class to show to all of the lower-intermediate students, who vote to select the best video. The best video and runner-up receive awards, and the best video is shown at the student orientation the following term. This project discourages plagiarism in two primary ways. The students must appear in the video and conduct the interviews, activities that require direct personal involvement. Furthermore, the students choose the focus of their project and present it to an authentic audience, making the work more meaningful. The resulting motivation leads to an increase in engagement and a decrease in plagiarism.

Discussion

These three complementary approaches to cultivating students' academic honesty and discouraging plagiarism have been successful at the Preparation Center for Languages and Mathematics. Turnitin creates opportunities for formative feedback about academic honesty and deters many types of plagiarism. The academic honesty test serves to strengthen students' paraphrasing and citing skills as well as their understanding of when information is common knowledge. The media-based projects have been designed to require active participation, reward creativity, and stimulate motivation. Together, these approaches have significantly reduced the instances of most types of plagiarism in the program.

Despite the initial success of these approaches, there is still a need for further development. Turnitin cannot detect all types of plagiarism, most significantly the theft of ideas. Also, not all assignments that the students complete will be intrinsically

motivating. High school and university students sometimes need to write papers about topics that they find tedious. In addition, while preparing for the academic honesty test gives the students an introduction to the skills that they need to paraphrase and cite effectively, these skills need to be practiced. For this reason, the process of developing students' academic honesty should continue throughout their education.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced three approaches to cultivating students' knowledge of academic honesty and to discouraging plagiarism: the use of Turnitin, an academic honesty test, and a media-based project. Each of these three approaches teaches students about different types of plagiarism, and together they address many of the reasons why students plagiarize, including a lack of understanding of what plagiarism entails and a lack of the skills necessary to avoid it. By developing this knowledge and these skills, these approaches prepare students to take full advantage of their educational opportunities.

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