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PLAGIARISM: MOVING FROM PUNITIVE TO PROACTIVE APPROACHES

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Plagiarism continues to be an issue in postsecondary contexts. This paper discusses how educators can take a proactive stance to prevent plagiarism and cultivate students' sense of honour and academic integrity, rather than focusing on punitive consequences after plagiarism has already occurred. Strategies include assessment design, formative feedback, and academic integrity education. Recommendations for educators are included.

Keywords: higher education; plagiarism; academic integrity; academic misconduct; academic dishonesty

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Despite decades of efforts to counter academic dishonesty in higher education, plagiarism remains a pressing issue (Altbach, 2015; Colella-Sandercock & Alahmadi, 2015; Leonard, Schwieder, Buhler, Beaubien Bennett, & Royster, 2015). The Internet provides more opportunities than ever for students to plagiarize, due to the ease of computer cut-and-paste features (Hodgkinson, Curtis, MacAlister, & Farrell, 2016; Ison, 2015). The Internet age has also led to complexities in defining precisely what counts as plagiarism. Traditional definitions refer to the theft of others' text or ideas (Eaton, 2017; Colella-Sandercock & Alahmadi, 2015).

Research shows that up to 85% of undergraduate students have cheated (Colella-Sandercock & Alahmadi, 2015; Dee & Jacob, 2012; Groark, Oblinger, & Choa, 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 2016).

The reasons students cheat are complex and numerous. They include both individual and contextual factors (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Individual reasons include low performance, time management, and laziness (McCabe et al., 2001). Contextual reasons for plagiarism include peer pressure; the perception that the consequences will be minimal; and the perception that instructors do not care, will not notice, or will not report it (Ellery, 2008; Groark et al., 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 2016; McCabe et al., 2001).

For the past few decades, a shift has been happening among scholars, policy makers, and classroom educators to focus on proactive approaches to prevent plagiarism, as opposed to developing harsher penalties for those who commit it (McCabe et al., 2001).

This paper draws from a study being conducted at a school of education in a Canadian postsecondary institution. At the time of writing, the study is in the data collection phase, and results have not yet emerged. This paper is based on the literature review that informed the study, with a specific focus on proactive approaches to plagiarism that can be used instead of more traditional punitive practices. The first author of this paper is an academic staff member, which will become relevant when she discusses practices she has incorporated into her teaching practice in higher education. The second and third authors are student research assistants.

It is noteworthy that plagiarism exists at various levels of education and professional practice (i.e., K-12, higher education, and the professoriate), and each has its own robust body of literature. Our study is deeply and narrowly focused on the context of higher education and, to be more precise, how educators in post-secondary contexts understand and address plagiarism in their teaching practice.

A number of approaches have been proposed in the literature to address plagiarism proactively, including the development of proactive institutional policies and honour codes. The literature also

suggests that educators can take a proactive approach in their professional practice to help students develop a sense of academic integrity, which has been shown to lower incidences of plagiarism (McCabe et al., 2001). One innovative practice is to develop a learning culture that focuses on academic integrity, rather than punishing cheating after it has been discovered (Chew, Ding, & Rowell, 2013; Groark et al., 2001). This paper examines how *educators* (as opposed to policy makers, for example) can cultivate productive approaches to preventing plagiarism using three proactive strategies. These include assessment design, formative feedback, and academic integrity education.

ASSESSMENT DESIGN

Modifications to assessment design can play a role in preventing plagiarism. A shift from high-stakes summative assessment to lower-stakes formative assessment practices is suggested to decrease incidents of plagiarism (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006). Offering feedback specifically focused on building research helps to cut down on citation errors, improve paraphrasing, and reduce overreliance on a single source (Davis & Carroll, 2009; Ellery, 2008; Volkov, Volkov, & Tedford, 2011). Designing assessment so that a significant portion of the grade depends on thoroughly documenting the research process has also been shown to assist in reducing instances of plagiarism (Walden & Peacock, 2006). Awareness of varied assessment strategies as part of a holistic approach to teaching and learning can assist in increasing student understanding and preventing incidents of plagiarism.

The first author has endeavoured to design assessments that include a reflective component, requiring students to reflect and comment upon their learning process, as well as the outcome of their work. She has observed that when students are asked to reflect on their learning they demonstrate deeper awareness of their learning as a *process*, with an increased sense of

accomplishment and pride in their learning *products* (e.g. final papers) (Hodgkinson, Curtis, MacAlister & Farrell, 2016).

FORMATIVE FEEDBACK

Formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009) is one strategy to promote academic integrity, particularly when students arrive at university without significant previous writing experience (Pecorari, 2015). Formative feedback can take the form of in-class writing exercises, peer-to-peer feedback, or instructor review of draft work. As with other approaches to formative feedback, the focus is on helping students learn and improve their work. Formative assessment focuses on the process of learning, rather than identifying deficiencies in completed work (Morrissette, 2011). Ideally, formative feedback provides students with opportunities to build their competencies overall, rather than merely perform better on one particular task or assignment. The first author incorporates formative feedback into coursework through peer review, in-class writing time, and written feedback of students' work in progress.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY EDUCATION

Instructors may assume that plagiarism is intentional, but it can also occur because students simply do not know what the protocols are or what is expected of them (Park, 2003). Institutions have begun to implement academic integrity education programs that include tutorials, websites, and workshops to help students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it (Dee & Jacob, 2012; Hodgkinson et al., 2016; Stagg, Kimmins, & Pavlovski, 2013). These institutional approaches to academic integrity education also aim to eliminate the possibility of students claiming ignorance as their reason for plagiarizing.

Individual instructors can also play a role in academic integrity education by engaging students in conversations about how to cite and reference their work according to discipline-specific standards

(e.g., APA, MLA, etc.) and coaching students through the process as they build their citing and referencing skills. The first author engages in open and candid conversations about how to cite and reference work using APA standards, why it is important, and how excellence in referencing showcases a post-secondary student's developing mastery of this key skill. In addition, she has students develop work plans for large projects that include a time-management component. These plans are designed to engage students more fully in the process of learning throughout the learning task.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Individual educators can create opportunities for students to develop confidence in their writing and create a personal ethic of integrity in their academic work. There are numerous strategies instructors can use to take a proactive approach to plagiarism. This paper outlines four strategies supported by the literature.

Initiate and facilitate candid conversations about plagiarism

Instead of merely pointing out mandatory clauses in course outlines and referring students to an institutional website, instructors can take the lead in starting conversations to help students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it (Colella-Sandercock & Alahmadi, 2015; Leonard et al., 2015).

Teach students skills to build their competence with citing and referencing

Instructors can explicitly teach how to reference sources properly, offering explicit instruction about not only the technical details of *how* to reference, but also *why* referencing is important. Teaching students to think about the authors of the sources they cite as human beings who deserve acknowledgement for the work they have created facilitates a deeper understanding of why

referencing is an important element of academic work (Colella-Sandercock & Alahmadi, 2015; Leonard et al., 2015).

Create opportunities for formative feedback as part of the learning process

Whether formative feedback is offered as an in-class activity or provided on draft writing, students benefit from assessment of their work without worrying about their grade. Instructors can incorporate formative feedback into their course design and lesson plans to create opportunities for students to focus on the process of learning and development of their skills. Black and Wiliam (2009) suggested five concrete formative assessment activities: (a) sharing success criteria with learners, (b) classroom questioning, (c) comment-only marking, (e) peer and self-assessment, and (f) formative use of summative tests (p. 6). Intentionally creating opportunities for formative assessment can help students focus on learning as a process rather than merely a product.

Design assessments to include both formative and summative feedback

Instructors can design assessments to include "formative interactions" (Black & William, 2009, p. 6). These include peer and instructor review of drafts, as well as oral feedback and consultations. The first author of this paper has adapted the rubrics she uses for coursework to include the submission of drafts and consideration of peer and instructor feedback in order to emphasize their importance.

CONCLUSIONS

Plagiarism is a complex issue with no single solution. A combination of institutional and instructional strategies can serve to help students understand why it is important to develop a personal sense of honour in their work, what academic integrity means, and, perhaps most importantly, how to develop it.

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