Educating Students About Plagiarism

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Overview

The American Psychological Association has listed effective writing skills as one of its learning goals for undergraduate psychology students (American Psychological Association, 2007). Given this directive, students in our department complete several writing assignments. Unfortunately, our department was struggling to manage the fact that each semester several students were committing plagiarism, and in each case the students said they did not know they had committed plagiarism.

Many students do not understand what plagiarism is (Roig, 1997), and students are more likely to plagiarize complex material than simple material (Roig, 1999). This is problematic, as our assignments generally require students to use primary research articles, which students often find to be difficult to understand.

To help contend with the problem we decided to create materials to educate students about plagiarism and had three goals for our materials. First, and most importantly, we realized that we had not been effectively communicating what constituted plagiarism and how to avoid it. Some faculty discussed plagiarism in class, but no faculty seemed to be showing students how to avoid plagiarism (e.g., providing examples of correct ways to summarize information). So, we specifically developed materials that would both explain what plagiarism was and help students learn how to avoid it. Second, students were not getting a consistent message about plagiarism. Different faculty had different lectures and assignments to educate students about plagiarism (if they had anything at all), and we realized students were getting different messages. We thought it would be best if students received a clear and consistent message no matter which class they were taking, and so we endeavored to create standard materials that all faculty would use. Third, if students did commit plagiarism, we wanted it to be unambiguous that they knew what they were doing.

We also created material to help faculty understand how to handle plagiarism if it occurs. In discussing plagiarism with our colleagues we realized that many faculty felt nervous handling plagiarism because they did not know what the proper procedure was or what to say to students.

Our department requires a two-semester sequence of classes, both of which contain writing assignments. The plagiarism materials are required for the first class in the sequence. Specifically, faculty use all the materials to educate students, and students must submit a signed contract [see section below] before they ever submit a writing assignment. After that class, faculty are not required to use these materials, but we strongly encourage faculty who give writing assignments to use them. However, all faculty are required to have the psychology department's definition of plagiarism in their syllabi.

We intend our materials to address the issue of educating students about what plagiarism is. Unfortunately a lack of knowledge about plagiarism is not the only reason students plagiarize (Landau & Marsh, 1997; Marsh, Landau, & Hicks, 1997). We know that educating students

about plagiarism will not eliminate plagiarism, but research shows that some plagiarism training has been effective at reducing plagiarism (Landau, Druen, & Arcuri, 2002; Walker, 2008).

Materials

Georgia State University Psychology Department Definition of Plagiarism

We found our university-wide definition of plagiarism did not effectively communicate what plagiarism in our department entailed. After multiple plagiarism cases, we identified two places where the university definition did not provide adequate guidance: copying and pasting and incorrect paraphrasing. With copying and pasting, we found that often students either put quotes around copied and pasted material or cited the material, but not both. With incorrect paraphrasing, we found that often students would change a few words in a sentence while retaining the original sentence structure. Or, they would use an author's highly original phrasing, even when the phrasing was not critical to communicate the information. We generated plagiarism documents that make it clear that both copying and pasting and incorrect paraphrasing defeat the purpose of demonstrating critical thinking about a source.

After broad discussion, faculty continued to have different opinions about two topics that, while not technically concerning plagiarism, are highly related to helping students achieve the goals of their writing assignment: (a) quoting as a way to avoid struggling with proper paraphrasing and (b) using APA style for their citation and reference formats.

Some faculty felt strongly that students quoted only as a way around trying to properly paraphrase. In other words, students could copy and paste, put the section in quotes with a citation, and it would not be plagiarizing. As the purpose of all our writing assignments is to teach students how to think critically about the material, allowing quotes undermines this purpose. Other faculty felt that sometimes quoting is appropriate, and they did not want to have a policy that unequivocally banned quoting. Although we ultimately chose not to say whether quoting is allowed or disallowed, we did decide to make it clear in the plagiarism document that the faculty member, not the student, decides whether quoting is appropriate.

As for whether students should use APA style, many faculty in our department submit to nonpsychology journals. Rather than bind all classes to using APA style, it seemed more appropriate to allow the instructor to choose what the citation style should be.

A note of caution: we suspect that other departments may find that their university-level definitions of plagiarism are similarly not specific enough. When developing a department-level definition, we encourage faculty to be careful not to create a definition that has conflicting rules with the university-level definition. This would have the unfortunate effect of making it harder to understand what plagiarism is.

Materials for Students

Plagiarism Lecture

We created a plagiarism lecture to teach students what plagiarism is, how to avoid it, and why plagiarism is bad. We tried to make the lecture straightforward and simple without inducing a lot of fear in students. The following slideshow outlines the lecture points.

Plagiarism.pptx

Plagiarism Worksheet

We specifically developed the worksheet "Recognizing Plagiarism" to show students how they can summarize information without plagiarizing. We also wanted students to have the experience of determining whether something illustrates plagiarism, because we hope that they will then be able to apply what they learn to avoiding plagiarism in their own writing.

This plagiarism exercise is simply meant to add to the pre-existing plagiarism exercises. Roig (1997) developed a plagiarism knowledge survey, and Landau et al. (2002) showed that students who completed it were less likely to engage in plagiarism. Walker (2008) provided instructions for a different exercise to train students to paraphrase correctly and showed that this training improves paraphrasing skills. We hope that having multiple exercises to combat plagiarism will allow faculty to choose which ones best suit their purposes, or perhaps to provide supplementary exercises to students who have trouble understanding plagiarism.

Recognizing Plagiarism.docx

Plagiarism Contract

We developed a document for students to sign to indicate that they are aware of what plagiarism is. The purpose of the contract is two-fold. First, we want students to understand how serious plagiarism is, and we felt a contract would effectively communicate this. Second, if students commit plagiarism, they would not be able to claim ignorance as to what plagiarism is.

We reproduce both our university and departmental policies in the contract because we expect students to know both. In our experience few students have ever read any of the plagiarism policies, and we use this opportunity to ensure that they do. We also have a space for instructor policies so instructors can clarify whether quoting is permitted and whether students should use APA style.

As part of completing the contract, students complete an on-line tutorial prepared by Indiana University https://www.indiana.edu/~istd/. We have been using this link for several semesters, have never had a problem with it, and have found it very helpful for students to spend more time thinking about plagiarism and engaging with the tutorial. Along with the tutorial,

Indiana University provides several links where students can find more information about plagiarism.

Plagiarism Contract.doc

Materials for Faculty

Academic Dishonesty Flowchart

At our university university-level and college-level instructions indicate how faculty should document plagiarism and what happens after documentation. Unfortunately we noted some gaps in the instructions (e.g., what do you do if you cannot meet with a student?), and some places where the instructions were unclear (e.g., if "the department" is supposed to forward material, who exactly has that responsibility – the chair, the instructor, someone else?). We developed this flowchart to clearly lay out the steps. The DUS is the Director of Undergraduate Studies and the course coordinator is the faculty member who oversees all sections of the course.

We recognize that our university's process is quite complex. Unfortunately, this chart reflects university-level policy, and not what we would like the process to be. We present this chart for four reasons: (1) We hope our chart can help other departments develop a chart appropriate for their own procedures. (2) Although we hope that other universities' policies are simpler, we suspect that there may be similar levels of complexity, and seeing this flowchart may help other faculty unravel complexities in their own university policies. (3) In developing this flowchart we realized that the university policy was not clear about what should happen if academic dishonesty occurs at the end of the semester (i.e., during a final or on a final paper), when there is little to no time to meet with the student before submitting grades. In our experience academic dishonesty most often occurs at the end of the semester, so we wanted our flowchart to clearly indicate what the procedure was then. We hope that seeing this in our flowchart will alert other departments to the need to be clear about what the procedure is at the end of the semester. (4) We think it is important for the chart to detail the entire procedure, rather than only what the faculty member does. Faculty should understand the whole process so they can explain it to students.

We do find the process to be complex, but we think it is useful for other faculty to see how complex the procedure can be. Rather than discouraging faculty from submitting academic dishonesty cases, we hope that our flowchart encourages faculty to address any confusion they have about their own procedures.

Academic Dishonesty flowchart for Psychology.pdf

Answers to Common Student Excuses for Plagiarism

   A common difficulty with documenting plagiarism is knowing what to say when meeting with the student. We developed this list to help faculty prepare for the meetings, both in terms of knowing what students might say, and having already-developed responses.

Answers to Common Student Excuses for Plagiarism.docx

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