

Encouraging Academic Honesty through Active Plagiarism Instruction and Prevention

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There comes a time in every teacher's career when they question their students' academic honesty. It may be a wandering eye during an exam, a suspicious cell phone call, or a feeling of déjà vu when reading a paper. Sometimes the signs are subtle and create a sense of uncertainty; at other times they are blatant attempts to submit the work of another as one's own. I recently faced an incident of the latter variety in one of my classes. A student submitted an answer to a take-home essay question that was copied word-for-word from the instructor's manual, including the "etc." at the end of the response. As my anger subsided, the dread of confrontation took over. I did my best to put emotions aside and use problem solving skills to develop a plan for handling this difficult situation. I began by speaking to colleagues in the English department and consulting resources compiled by my college's librarians (see Kickels, 2006). I met with the Vice President of Student Affairs, the academic officer charged with adjudicating violations of the academic honesty policy. I re-read posts on plagiarism on the Society for Teachers of Psychology discussion list, PsychTeacher, and read numerous articles on the subject. My research not only contributed to a successful resolution of this case; it also provided me with a variety of tools for preventing, detecting, and punishing plagiarism in my classes.

"Not in My Classroom"

Admitting that there is a problem is the first step towards remediation. Of course, teachers of psychology are aware of the existence of plagiarism. Ease of access to online term papers and information suggests that plagiarism is not only a problem, but is on the rise. A "Google" search of the term produced millions of hits on the topic with links to academic institutions, professional journals, and the popular press. A recent search of the PsychTeacher database identified 230 posts with "plagiarism" in the subject line. Internet detection services, such as turnitin.com, are flourishing. Why would I suggest that teachers are in denial?

Denial of the existence of plagiarism is not the problem; denial of its existence in your classroom is the problem. Data collected through a web-based survey addressing the academic honesty of over 40,000 students representing 68 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada reveal that, "...51 percent [of students reporting] have acknowledged at least one incident of serious cheating on written work... [and] four out of every five students who reported they had cheated on a written assignment acknowledged that they had engaged in some form of Internet-related cheating" (McCabe, 2005, p. 29). Conversely, a survey of faculty members in eight departments of Auburn University found that faculty members estimate a lower percentage of plagiarism nationwide (29%), and even lower estimates within their own departments (18%) and

classrooms (11%) (Liddell & Fong, 2005). A study conducted on my campus reported similar results. Of 173 faculty members responding to a question that asked how often they thought plagiarism occurred in their classes, 27% responded “rarely,” 46% responded “occasionally,” and 23% responded “often” (Zoomerang, 2005). Hard, Conway, and Moran (2006) compared students’ self report of their own academic honesty with their estimates of peer behavior and faculty estimates of student dishonesty. Faculty estimates, as in prior research, were significantly lower than both students’ self report and peer estimates. Additionally, Hard et al. identified a significant positive correlation between faculty estimates of student dishonesty and faculty intervention efforts.

These findings suggest that teachers’ denial and/or underestimating the incidence of plagiarism and other acts of academic dishonesty may result in a lack of prevention and intervention strategies in their classes. Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley, and Washburn (1998) identified several additional consequences of faculty denial of academic dishonesty in their classrooms and subsequent inaction, including: a lack of equality in awarding grades, the creation of a perception that dishonesty is acceptable, the lowering of student morale, and the reduction of the value of our degrees.

A Call to Action

The evidence is compelling; denial is not an option. It is our duty as teachers of psychology to do something. But, what? I am a teacher; not a disciplinarian. Research suggests that teaching is what is needed to prevent plagiarism in your classes (Barry, 2006; Landau, Druen, & Arcuri, 2002).

Good teaching begins with a clarification of terminology and an operational definition. Submitting the work of another as one’s own is not at issue here. Students and teachers alike know that this is plagiarism. It is intentional theft and deception and should be punished accordingly. However, the more subtle, unintentional forms of plagiarism may not be as easy to operationalize. At a workshop presented at the 13th Annual Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology, Drew Appleby and I (Puccio & Appleby, 2006) posed several scenarios adapted from Lathrop and Foss (2000) to the students and teachers in attendance. Everyone agreed that downloading a paper and submitting it as your own without making any changes or turning in a paper written by someone else was plagiarism. Other scenarios, however, did not result in the participants’ unanimity. Scenarios such as paraphrasing by changing some of the words but not the basic sentence structure of the original, using direct quotes with a citation but without quotation marks, and reading someone else’s paper and using some of their ideas, resulted in a spirited discussion.

A review of your institution’s academic honesty policy is a good place to begin the development of your operational definition of plagiarism. The discipline’s position on plagiarism is presented in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001) is stating:

“Psychologists do not claim the words or ideas of another as their own: they give credit where credit is due. Quotation marks should be used to indicate the exact words of another. Each time you paraphrase another author (i.e., summarize a passage or rearrange the order of a sentence and change some of the words) you will need to credit the source in the text.” (p. 349)

An assessment device, the plagiarism knowledge survey (PKS) developed by Miguel Roig (1997) may also be useful in developing your operational definition of plagiarism and in providing specific examples of what is and is not considered plagiarism for your students. It includes several examples of paraphrased statements, some of which are

considered plagiarism and others that are correct. Once clarified, make your operational definition of plagiarism public by including it in your syllabus and in assignment instructions.

Research findings suggest that merely informing students about plagiarism does not necessarily yield the desired result; explicit instruction is needed to achieve significant reductions in unintentional plagiarism (Barry, 2006; Landau et al., 2002; Roig, 1997). Giving students feedback on their responses to the PKS and providing examples of plagiarized work along with definitions of plagiarism resulted in significantly higher PKS post-test scores (Landau et al., 2002). Barry (2006) went a step further and incorporated graded paraphrasing practice into her lifespan development course. During a six week period, students were given paragraph length quotes from prominent developmental theorists and were required to both paraphrase the quotes and to provide an appropriate APA style citation. Students were required to complete one paraphrase per week, which was graded according to established criteria. Students participating in this activity scored higher than controls on a post-test assessing their understanding of plagiarism.

In addition to education, plagiarism can be prevented by designing unique, course specific assignments that cannot be easily attained from Internet paper mills; by breaking writing assignments into smaller components submitted throughout the term; and by asking students to submit copies of the materials used in their papers (Sterngold, 2004).

We Are All Responsible

Plagiarism instruction and prevention is the responsibility of all teachers regardless of discipline (McCabe, 2005). Get involved in academic honesty initiatives on your campus. Discuss plagiarism prevention with your colleagues, including your campus' librarians who are often experts on the topic. Visit websites devoted to academic honesty and plagiarism such as The Center for Academic Integrity at <http://www.academicintegrity.org/> or Central Queensland University's Assessment in Higher Education: Plagiarism website at <http://ahe.cqu.edu.au/plagiarism.htm> for additional resources and suggestions. Finally, report all cases of intentional, blatant plagiarism to the appropriate office on your campus (White, 2005). Campus wide vigilance minimizes multiple offenses and sends the message to our students that academic dishonesty is a serious offense that will not be ignored.

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