Reporting Plagiarism in the Online Classroom

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Abstract

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty are phenomena that have a long history. With the advent of the Internet, and easily accessible information, there has been some debate on whether the rate of student plagiarism differs by modality. To understand the challenges of implementing a plagiarism protocol for online courses, the current study surveyed a group of online faculty. Specifically, how faculty approached instances of plagiarism and their perceptions of the current plagiarism protocol were examined. The findings indicated that there was variation in degree and timing of plagiarism reported by online faculty. Results also showed that online faculty members were more inclined to follow the protocol if plagiarism reports were easier to submit, took less time to submit, and/or the submission forms were integrated into the learning management system. In addition, participants indicated their desire to receive updated training on the plagiarism protocol, including the specific steps to submit plagiarism report documents. The study contributes to an understanding of difficulties inherent in implementing plagiarism policy, specifically in an online education context. Lastly, the current study indicates the importance of

making clear the theoretical approach to defining plagiarism policy, as well as the possible implications for implementation in practice.

Key Words: Online Teaching, Plagiarism, Academic Dishonesty, Faculty, Program Evaluation

Introduction

What Carroll and Appleton (2001) observed nearly 14 years ago still applies to plagiarism in our current digital age. Linguistic analysis, textual comparison, and simple Google searches are efficient ways to detect plagiarism. The important idea to consider is whether efficiency should be the primary focus of dealing with plagiarism in higher education. The problem here is that there is not necessarily consensus as to a definition of plagiarism (Vander Schaaf, 2005). Plagiarism has been defined in a variety of ways, including theft, deception, and misunderstanding (Sutherland-Smith, 2010; Vander Schaaf, 2005). Perhaps these three categories are good starting points for understanding the complexity of plagiarism in higher education.

Sutherland-Smith (2010) inquired as to the different approaches universities utilized to address plagiarism. The findings indicated that there is a gap in employing sustainable strategies to deal with plagiarism in higher education. The most often cited approach to dealing with plagiarism was in using a legal mentality (Sutherland-Smith, 2010). Such an approach is an efficient way of reporting plagiarism and is consistent with plagiarism as defined as theft or deception, but this approach does not address the idea of plagiarism as misunderstanding. As Evering and Moorman (2012) intimated, misunderstanding does not only mean poor citation. Misunderstanding can also mean differing cultural values, generational values, or merely lack of maturity (Evering & Moorman, 2012). Each of these kinds of misunderstanding can contribute to continued plagiarism.

In online education, an emphasis on plagiarism detection and remediation received an impetus from the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, which placed greater emphasis on ensuring that registered online students were indeed those same students enrolled and completing the coursework (as cited in McGee, 2013). One offshoot of this policy was, of course, to establish the origin of written work. One expedient way to determine this has been to use originality software such as Turnitin. According to a recent white paper, Turnitin is now utilized by more than 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States (Turnitin, 2014). In determining the legitimacy of submitted written work through text comparison, software programs such as Turnitin indeed serve this purpose well. In using such programs without well-defined coaching strategies, these programs can also serve to enforce legal definitions of plagiarism; plagiarism as theft of property.

Differences by Modality

Plagiarism takes place in both online and face-to-face classes. With the increasing availability of information that can be found online, some believe that plagiarism occurs more frequently in an online classroom (Ackerman & White, 2008; Gilmore, Strickland, Timmerman, Maher & Parsell, 2004; Logue, 2004). One reported reason for this is that psychological distance in the online learning environment makes plagiarism more appealing, due to feeling disconnected from instructors and the context of the learning environment (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Moten, Fitterer, Brazier, Leonard, & Brown, 2013). Moten et al. (2013) reported that online students may cheat because they do not have the same level of respect for their faculty than students do for faculty in face-to-face classes. Still, others report that there is really no difference in the incidences of plagiarism between online and traditional face-to-face classes (McGee, 2013; Black, Greaser, & Dawson, 2008; Evering & Moorman, 2012). For example, the higher reported incidences of plagiarism could be caused by the false perceptions of students and faculty members. Such false perceptions may be exacerbated by psychological distance in the online environment (Dietz-Uhler, 2011; Hancock, 2011; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). While there are opposing views to the incidences of plagiarism between the two modalities, it is clear that plagiarism remains a significant problem in higher education, but increased psychological distance felt by online learners does provide at least some justification for increased concern about plagiarism in the online learning context.

Faculty Approaches to Plagiarism

Different approaches have been used by higher education institutions to reduce incidences of plagiarism. McGee (2013) stated that prevention is best provided at the course level. Owens and White (2010)

employed several different methods to reduce incidences of plagiarism over a five year period. One of the most effective strategies was having the students perform a writing exercise using online feedback in combination with plagiarism detection software (Owens & White, 2010). This is the use of remediation in conjunction with textual comparison. When this strategy was combined with a writing mastery quiz, the incidences continued to decrease. In this strategy, remediation includes not only coaching but also formal assessment of comprehension and textual comparison. Another strategy for instructors to employ can be a short educational tutorial on plagiarism, which was found to reduce plagiarism incidences significantly (Dee & Jacob, 2012). One possible solution is to educate students on writing skills such as citing sources, paraphrasing, and ethical writing (Ison, 2012). In this regard, explaining the purpose of citing sources may be as important as providing exemplars for students to imitate.

With the ever increasing use of technology and the Internet, plagiarism is also a literacy issue (Evering & Moorman, 2012). This issue can be met with an increase in coaching students about the value and importance of creative and reflective writing (Evering & Moorman, 2012). More focus on academic expectations in regards to plagiarism is of importance (McGee, 2013; Evering & Moorman, 2012). As such, explicit instructions on ways to avoid plagiarism should be a part of the plagiarism conversation in the online classroom (Evering & Moorman, 2012).

Background and Purpose

This study focused on a plagiarism protocol used at a private Christian Southwestern United States university. This protocol requires online faculty members to post a plagiarism acknowledgment in all classes they teach. The protocol allows each online faculty member the discretion on where to post the acknowledgement in the learning management system. In the learning management system at this university, the three predominant locations for such announcements include a main discussion forum, a private forum, and a public announcement section. At this university, the students are required to rely on these forums for key information and for completing assigned material. The acknowledgment defines plagiarism, offers specific guidelines that include the use of Turnitin software, as well as resources, such as tutorials, and scenarios for real-world examples on how to avoid plagiarism. In effect, the acknowledgement provides the student with sufficient information and tools to ensure plagiarism is avoided, but even with such information and tools, student compliance at the very least would require having read the material and comprehended its utility. In this regard, faculty must be aware of the acknowledgement's implications in order to implement its oversight and remediation guidelines. Faculty are provided a guideline in addition to the acknowledgement that define plagiarism as either "blatant" or "accidental," and these guidelines include what faculty should do if they identify the lack of originality in their student's work. Faculty use the Turnitin tool as well as the faculty protocol to hold students accountable to the student code of conduct, while upholding academic integrity. Students were asked to post an acknowledgment that they had read and understand the policy. This acted as a contract between the student and instructor with the intent of decreasing plagiarism.

The plagiarism protocol defined blatant plagiarism as using previously submitted work, copy and pasting from an outside source without any attempt at citing the original source, or submitting purchased material for written assignments. For the purpose of the protocol, accidental plagiarism was defined as unintentionally utilizing the thoughts of another without giving credit to the original source. The accidental definition overlapped with the blatant definition of plagiarism in this protocol. The intent of this overlap was to provide the faculty member with the discretion to discern whether the plagiarism was intentional. In the case of blatant plagiarism, the faculty members were instructed to file a code of conduct report and to provide coaching to the student. In the case of accidental plagiarism, the faculty members were instructed to provide coaching and require the student to revise and resubmit the written assignment in question. In the first incident of blatant plagiarism, the instructors were required to submit a code of conduct report to the academic compliance committee. The instructors were only required to submit a code of conduct report if the first attempt at coaching did not deter the behavior.

After the plagiarism protocol had been implemented, inconsistencies were identified in online faculty managing and reporting plagiarism. While some instructors held students strictly accountable to the new protocol, others took a more relaxed approach that focused on remediation to the exclusion of reporting. In an evaluation of the plagiarism protocol, a survey was developed by the research team to explore online faculty perceptions of the policy and procedures.

Methodology

As part of a broader evaluation of a newly implemented plagiarism protocol, this study was undertaken to answer two research questions. The following were the two research questions for this study:

R1: For the sample of online faculty at a university in the Southwestern United States, how closely were faculty members following the piloted plagiarism protocol?

R2: For the sample of online faculty at a university in the Southwestern United States, what procedural reporting improvements might contribute to faculty more closely adhering to the piloted plagiarism protocol?

To answer these research questions, a 17 question survey was constructed using SurveyMonkey. The survey included 5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. The survey was constructed as an exploratory evaluation of the plagiarism protocol, and it resulted in two questions emerging as central to improving the overall protocol implementation.

The target population included all online full-time faculty members at a university in the Southwestern United States. As such, the survey was emailed to 179 online full-time faculty members. Since the researchers were comprised of both peers and supervisors of the online faculty members surveyed, identifying information such as gender and age were not collected. Of the invited participants, 102 responded, which is nearly a 57 % response rate. The survey included 17 questions, of which only questions 11 and 16 were used for analysis. Specifically, question 11 stated "Under what circumstances would you file a code of conduct?," and question 16 stated, "Is there anything you would recommend to improve the code of conduct process?." The plagiarism protocol stipulated under what circumstances online faculty members ought to file a code of conduct report to notify the academic compliance committee of possible plagiarism. By determining under what circumstances faculty filed a code of conduct report, the researchers could determine whether the online faculty members were following the plagiarism protocol.

Again, the two questions used in this analysis were open-ended. The research team followed an open coding strategy to analyze the responses by the participants to the two questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To accomplish this, the team members individually coded the text for each question and generated themes. To ensure consensus of coding methods, the research team engaged in inter-rater reliability. To ensure inter-rater reliability, each research team member presented their coded text and the themes that emerged from individual analysis. After each person presented, the group collapsed themes that overlapped and created new themes based upon the group consensus. The resulting themes for question 11 can be found in Table 1 and question 16 in Table 2. For Question 11, 17.8 % of respondents had either not filled out a plagiarism report and/or were recently hired, so they had limited experience with the protocol. These responses were excluded from Table 1. Also, for Question 16, 8.9 % of the respondents did not have an opinion on process improvement. As such, these responses were not included in Table 2.

Table 1.

Under what circumstances would you file a code of conduct report?

Themes	Examples	Theme %
Blatant	If a student blatantly uses information that is not their own in their work and do not even attempt to cite. Also for students who use papers that were submitted to other areas or written by others.	36.2
Faculty Emphasis on Coaching	When plagiarism occurs and student does not respond to counseling.	19.6
Second Occurrence	After the student has been coached, and points have been deducted, which I do on the first occurrence. On the second occurrence, the code of conduct is filed.	16.6

Turnitin Score over 20%	When there is more than 20% on the Turnitin report I file a code of conduct.	9.8

Table 2.

Is there anything you would recommend to improve the code of conduct process?

Themes	Examples	Theme %
No Changes Needed to Process	The process seems sound and appropriate.	39.2
Shorten Plagiarism Report and Integrate into LMS	Streamline the process. It takes way too long to file a plagiarism report. There are too many steps. There should be a simple process within the learning management system to file a report.	32.3
Training on how to Submit Plagiarism Report	I think the upcoming training will really help faculty understand the policies as well as become comfortable with reporting. Over-reporting is almost as big of a problem as not reporting.	19.6

Results and Discussion

To begin, this study examined the phenomenon of reporting plagiarism in an online classroom. The first questioned analyzed, Question 11, asked under what circumstances the online faculty members submitted a code of conduct report. In this open-ended question, one theme became more prominent than the others. Faculty stated that they reported plagiarism when students showed a blatant disregard of citing sources or when using information that was not their own, or submitting entire papers that were written by others (36.2%). While this appears to show that 36.2% of sampled online faculty members were reporting plagiarism in accord with the implemented protocol, it is unclear from the responses that the faculty members were aware of the standard definition of blatant plagiarism. For example, some reported that they automatically submitted a code of conduct report if a student failed to cite properly or use a proper reference page. Other respondents did not strictly adhere to this approach.

The next robust theme for reporting plagiarism was that faculty reported students only after appropriate coaching was provided and the student did not respond to the coaching (19.6%). This approach seemed to be used most often when students appeared to not have sufficient knowledge of citations and using a reference page. This approach to reporting plagiarism meets the issue reported by Evering and Moorman (2012) that students not only misunderstand how to cite, there may also be cultural and generational differences, as well as a lack of maturity. Coaching would provide students with the opportunity to learn and grow in the area of academic writing. Unfortunately, this approach does not strictly adhere to the plagiarism policy, as sometimes blatant plagiarism may occur but the faculty member would choose coaching instead of coaching and filing a code of conduct report.

Other faculty reported that if plagiarism happened a second time the incidence would be reported (16.6%). The first incidence would not receive a plagiarism report, but coaching and a deduction in points may be imposed. Others simply provided a warning to the student during the first occurrence of plagiarism, and generated the plagiarism report if the offense was repeated. This robust theme is related to the prior theme, but the focus was more on second offenses rather than coaching. Regardless, this theme also did not align well with the plagiarism protocol of filing a code of conduct report after the first blatant instance of plagiarism.

The final significant theme from Question 11 was the Turnitin originality report of 20% or higher (9.8%). In this theme, the originality score alone was the basis of the decision to file a plagiarism report. This reliance on the originality score has some flaws. Dee and Jacob (2012) reported that the Turnitin

originality report can sometimes provide false positives if formatting is incorrect. The authors stated that half of the papers that received a high originality report in their study were found to exclusively false positive results. Once again, this approach does not adhere to the plagiarism protocol. Presumably, it is possible for a student to blatantly plagiarize but have a score of 20% or below.

In the second survey question, Question 16, the respondents were asked for recommendations to improve the code of conduct reporting process. Again, this was delivered as an open-ended question to provide the opportunity for a wide variety of responses. The first robust theme to emerge from the responses was that no changes were needed to the current process (39.2%). While this indicates the plagiarism protocol was well received by faculty, it also indicates there may have been perceived room for improvement, as the majority of faculty perceived at least some flaws in the plagiarism reporting process.

The next robust theme was that the plagiarism reporting procedures should be streamlined, shortened, and/or integrated into the learning management system (32.3%). The plagiarism protocol requires faculty to submit the plagiarism report through a website that is not integrated with the learning management system. Faculty recommended that a link be provided in the learning management system for easier access. The most significant issue reported in this theme was the amount of time required to submit a report. Along with this, some faculty mentioned that it would be easier if they were not required to submit multiple forms of documentation for each incidence. Each of these items may explain why some faculty members preferred coaching to submitting a code of conduct report.

The third robust theme reported in Question 16 was that more training on the plagiarism protocol should be required (19.6%) The large amount of responses related to training shows that some faculty did not feel that they were sufficiently knowledgeable of the current process and procedures. This conclusion can also be gleaned from the variations in the reasons that faculty recalled to have reported plagiarism. From this theme, it is clear that more training would be beneficial to improve implementation of the protocol.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Clearly many of the faculty members in this study were not closely adhering to the piloted plagiarism protocol, which resulted in a variety of approaches to dealing with plagiarism incidents. The variety of approaches included filing a code of conduct report upon identification of blatant plagiarism, which is in accord with the required protocol, providing an indefinite number coaching or teaching moments, coaching at least once, and following 20% originality guideline through the Turnitin software. Along with the fact that 19.6 % of faculty recommended training on the plagiarism process, it is clear that the plagiarism protocol was not being followed closely by most of the faculty members.

Since the protocol did not appear to be followed consistently with all faculty members in the sample, it is important to look at the reasons why. One possible reason for this could be the time-intensive nature of the code of conduct reporting, possibly due to the process not being integrated into the learning management system. Secondly, there appears to be a lack of knowledge about the current process among some faculty. Again, 17.8 % of respondents to Question 11 indicated that they either had not filled out a plagiarism report and/or were newly hired. In both of these instances, providing additional training would ensure the faculty members had received the same information to adhere to the plagiarism protocol. Martin, Rao, and Sloan (2011) recommended faculty training that includes faculty use of plagiarism tracking software, how to provide feedback to students, and how to communicate university norms to students regarding plagiarism. To accomplish this, recommendations could include creating either an in-person training program, or an online tutorial, to increase consistency in reporting plagiarism. Martin et al. (2011) further mentioned the importance of creating uniform guidelines for dealing with plagiarism. Another recommendation would be to hold focus groups in content meetings where faculty could learn how others deal with similar incidences of plagiarism as well as norming sessions using examples of plagiarism with a discussion of how each person would approach it. This would give faculty members inclined to deviate from the protocol not only a voice but an opportunity to hear rationale from their peers for following the plagiarism protocol. In turn, this would help to standardize the reporting, coaching, and feedback for plagiarism incidences.

Plagiarism has been a consistent phenomenon in higher education. Various higher education institutions deal with these incidences in different ways. Future research on the effectiveness of institutional plagiarism strategies would be useful to add to the current literature. More studies on faculty and student perceptions regarding plagiarism are also necessary. In this study, the purpose was to explore the

difficulties of implementing a plagiarism protocol, to highlight the challenges of defining plagiarism, motivating faculty to following strict guidelines, and investigate ways to improve the current process at a university in the Southwestern United States. There is one final recommendation for those implementing similar plagiarism protocols. As the cited literature shows, there are a variety of ways to define plagiarism. For those choosing to implement similar protocols, it may be helpful to make clear the theoretical framework under which the protocol operates. This is important for at least one reason. Making clear the theoretical framework would allow decision makers to align plagiarism policy with implementation procedures. Again, there are three prominent theoretical definitions of plagiarism, including theft, deception, and misunderstanding (Sutherland-Smith, 2010). Each of these definitions alone or in combination would theoretically produce different outcomes in practice.

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