

INFORMATION LITERACY EDUCATION AND PLAGIARISM ISSUES: INPUTS FROM INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Plagiarism is an important issue for academic institutions to deal with in Canada and other parts of the world, and this issue is becoming more serious because of the increasing number of international students and easy access to online resources. This paper reports a study conducted in a mid-sized university in Canada with the intention to have an in-depth understanding of how international graduate students perceive plagiarism, and what measures universities could employ to help students, especially international graduate students, avoid plagiarism. Research data were collected through focus group discussions and findings indicate that by providing proper information literacy education could be one of the effective solutions. Based on an extensive review of relevant literature and input of research participants, some suggestions are presented for university administrators and faculty members.

Keywords: information literacy education, plagiarism, international students

1. INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is an important issue for academic institutions to deal with in Canada and other parts of the world, and this issue is becoming more serious because of the increasing number of international students and easy access to online resources. International students' "cultural, educational, and linguistic hurdles" (Amsberry, 2009, p. 32[1]) may keep them from a proper understanding of the academic integrity and plagiarism guidelines, and digital technologies, while they can provide increasing opportunities to enhance teaching, learning and research, may also make a catalyst available for plagiarism (Power, 2009[2]; Sulikowski, 2008[3]). One aspect many universities take is a legal approach to addressing plagiarism, however, a "holistic" approach can help implement "sustainable reform in university plagiarism management" (Sutherland-Smith, 2010, p. 13[4]).

At the institution where the first author works as a faculty member, it is reported that among the 74 cases of plagiarism investigated during the 2012-2013 academic year, 29 (39%) cases involved international students, whose population makes up only 14% of the total student population (Arbex, 2014[5]). According to our observation, as it has been documented in relevant research literature, many international graduate students experience challenges in their academic writing in regard to the proper use of citations. This study was conducted to obtain input of international graduate students regarding their understanding of what plagiarism means, what are the main causes, and what could be done to address this issue. Data were collected from focus groups representing international students coming from different countries who were enrolled in a variety of disciplines on campus.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though instructors pay attention to academic integrity, what frequently happens is that besides having a paragraph regarding the topic in a course syllabus, little is done to inform students about this issue (Hulsart & McCarthy, 2008[6]). Students ought to receive sufficient instructions during the beginning of all courses on the undesirable aspects of engaging in plagiarism alongside the context of plagiarism (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox & Payne, 2010[7]). How instructors respond to instances of plagiarism plays an important role in students' views of it (Bennett, Behrendt & Boothby, 2011[8]). It is necessary for instructors to make efforts to clarify expectations during the semester, as it is found that such efforts do result in a change in student attitudes when it is made clear to them what behaviors are acceptable/unacceptable (Aasheim, Rutner, Li, & Williams, 2012[9]).

Evering and Moorman (2012)[10] argue that there is "a lack of understanding that plagiarism is a socially constructed concept that is not universally recognized" (p. 35), so it is necessary for schools to have reconsiderations on the policies regarding plagiarism, through the methods of teaching where explicit explanations should be advanced in ensuring students have a concrete grasp of the varying degrees assigned to unauthorized copying.

Davis (2011)[11] asserts that the approaches directed at dealing with plagiarism with specificity on international students offer mismatches in the desired results owing to the minimal consideration of the differences in the cultural backgrounds of students from other nationalities, and educators usually concentrate on guidelines and punishment mechanisms without consideration on the challenges the

international students face. Davis suggests that the classroom should be utilized in ensuring students have increased awareness on plagiarism with sensitivity indicated to international students rather than the institution of strong policies detailing threats and punishments. Rather, students should be imparted with increased knowledge and information regarding plagiarism followed through with the consequences rather than addressing the issue commencing with consequences.

Chen and Van Ullen (2010)[12] assert that international students are confronted with numerous aspects of changes with the leading challenge being in terms of cultural differences where the students have to make adaptations. The changes extend to the academic environment with the stringent restrictions identified in academic discourses away from the practices in the home country. Cultural shocks are normal in the new instructional methods presented with specificity on aspects dealing with plagiarism where the student's background lacked strict restrictions in terms of the penalties for plagiarism. The changes noted in the writing styles further extend the difficulties in identifying and adapting to the restrictions provided through expectations of plagiarism-free papers.

Weidler, Multhaup and Faust (2012)[13] identify cases of plagiarism as of raising increasing concern in both the non-academic and academic aspects, but notes that not all the incidences of plagiarism are perpetuated intentionally. They argue that in some incidences, plagiarism is linked to unconscious aspects with the concerned student lacking complete awareness of the crime perpetuated. The context of plagiarism not being intentional under all circumstances is chiefly applicable to the international students who lack sufficiency in information regarding plagiarism. The methods of sensitization on plagiarism could in several incidences be erroneous and as such, the perpetuation of plagiarism is determined as being unintentional or committed unconsciously. Despite the identification of the possibility of plagiarism being perpetrated unintentionally, the regulations governing plagiarism often, and in many incidences, condemn the concerned student. The offense is identified as being a gross violation in academic terms with its identification as occasioning violations to the integrity of the concerned student and serves as impairment to the learning process (Youmans, 2011[14]).

According to Youmans (2011), majority of the avenues engaged in the determination of plagiarism, including the online program, Turnitin.com, do not offer the objective consideration of the identified plagiarism as in some incidences the overlap identified among papers could be coincidental. Owing to the challenges facing international students linked to their writing styles, numerous incidences of overlapped coincidence could contribute to the undue punishment of the concerned student. Hu and Lei (2011)[15] maintain that the concept and meaning attached to plagiarism has variations among the international students with some difficulty being exhibited in the conceptualization

of plagiarism. The association of plagiarism as being the theft of the ideas and language of others based on the perception of proprietorship, authorship, authenticity, and originality does not resonate across all persons.

The writing skills linked with persons who have other native languages other than English cannot be compared to those having English as the native language posing a barrier to the understanding of aspects deemed as being inappropriate in the utilization of sources, and there may exist the possibility of inappropriateness of attributing sources owing to the cultural background of the students (Abasi & Graves, 2008[16]).

The notions informing the conception of plagiarism are not global, but are limited to certain cultural perspectives and are difficult in their implementation across board in the present educational context where students are from varied backgrounds, and the current trends make it necessary to reformulate the approach to plagiarism (Hu & Lei, 2011). Additionally, majority of the international students are noted as being from Asian countries (Chen & Van Ullen, 2010), and Confucian-influenced Asian societies have two significant cultural norms that conflict with Western views of textual citation: the reverence of a leader's words, and the inability to question the authority of those words. Consequently, international students from these countries use the text or spoken words of a cultural leader verbatim, in order to pay respect to the leader. If their culture has fostered these practices, it can be very hard for the students to let go of such practices when they come to an English-speaking country to study. And their unrefined English language ability could hamper international students in the quest of ensuring the availed information is synthesized and utilized properly, and therefore create opportunities for plagiarism (Iannuzzi, 2000[17]; Lund, 2004[18]). Pennycock (1996)[19] writes about his experiences with Chinese students, documenting how they learn by rote memorization, a way to infer meaning of a text, which makes the practice justified in the eyes of the student.

The citing and referencing of sources is essential in any comprehensive and all-encompassing academic writing and the intellectual engagement within the academic scope. The skillful citation enhances the authors' position and acknowledges their work, further offering evidence or the source and equally avoids plagiarism (Vardi, 2012[20]). However, most international students are challenged when it comes to the application of proper citation of the source materials, with limitations in understanding the aspects to be referenced and the indirect utilization of the ideas of others (Auer & Krupar, 2001[21]).

This is different from the academicians and authors who are thriving in the field of citation (Abasi, Akbari & Graves, 2006[22]). Therefore, it is of paramount importance for international students to learn effectively how to cite in their academic field. Like other academicians, it is equally important for the students to undertake the citation

apprenticeship because they are neither reproducing nor establishing new information. Proper citation involves the learning of new textual and contextual practices, through which the students can demonstrate their ideas and understanding through the expertise of others (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010[23]). However, this is a taxing exercise for both the teachers and the international students that raise a wide range of concern. The challenges include lack of comprehensive understanding of paraphrasing, quotation and the textual borrowing that causes cases of plagiarism (Vardi, 2012), and the utilization of ideas in external material (Owens & White, 2013[24]).

Owens and White (2013) argue that the methods of instructing students on the avoidance of plagiarism are often insufficient and have ambiguities as they insist on students not copying from other works. Academicians should, contrary to insistence on students not copying, facilitate them with the needed education on the avenues of utilizing the ideas of other in the creation of unique contributions. The unique contributions can only be registered in incidences where students have a mastering of the concerned subject matter and are examined for parameters they have awareness on to aid in the minimization of plagiarism.

Risquez, O'Dwyer and Ledwith (2013)[25] introduce a course with a critical and creative approach to referencing to promote the learners' academic integrity. The course was offered as a core communication unit to all students irrespective of their faculties, which was taught from a point of plagiarism evasion and the subsequent penalties. Instructors are advised to not rush for accountability and penalties for plagiarism, but to embrace the academic skills and knowledge that results from the students' critical thinking.

Besides consideration of characteristics of international students in terms of their language, cultural and previous education backgrounds, it is also necessary to take into account the age of university students, the majority fall into a generation of technology users Prensky (2001)[26] calls "digital natives," native speakers of the language of technology (p. 1). Digital natives have lived lives shaped by technology, and through their use of technology, they have developed different ways of learning than their parents' generation (Prensky, 2001). If digital natives are to be given instruction related to plagiarism, the method should match their natural tendencies of learning.

It is believed that information literacy education can play an important role in helping students understand what plagiarism is, and how to avoid it. Various solutions have been offered, including collaborative work between instructors and librarians, workshops organized by libraries, a required topic in research methods course, etc. Online tutorials are frequently mentioned as a useful tool because students who engage in online plagiarism tutorials are "better able to recognize cases of plagiarism" (Risquez,

O'Dwyer & Ludwith, 2011, p. 760). Jackson (2005)[27] suggests that international students would benefit from online tutorials and web pages specifically designed for them. However, as "those who may have the greatest need for such tutorials may be reluctant to participate" (Risquez et al., 2011, p. 760), it may be more beneficial to integrate anti-plagiarism instructions into the information literacy curriculum (Lampert, 2004[28]).

3. METHODS

After approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee, the researchers approached the International Student Center of the target university, who helped to send out an email message to all the international graduate students inviting them to voluntarily participate in a focus group, and research data were collected from two focus groups with a total number of thirteen participants coming from different countries, such as Nigeria, China, Saudi Arabia, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia. One participant was a PhD student and the rest were Master's students enrolled in a variety of programs including Human Resources, Education, Engineering, Computer Science, and Medical Biotechnology. Five of the participants were studying in the Master of Education program. Gender and age were not the focus of the study, so information regarding these characteristics was not collected.

Both focus group discussions were carried out by the authors, and the discussions were recorded with digital voice recorders with the participants' informed consent. The audio recordings were later transcribed before the data analysis process commenced.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Understanding of Plagiarism

In response to the question of what their understanding of "plagiarism" was, participants gave different answers, such as "Plagiarism is something that a person claims someone else's work as their own, or when they copy and paste something from the Internet;" "If you get something from a website and you don't say where it is from;" "We use someone's paper or assignments but don't inform them, or without their permissions;" "If I have an assignment for a semester and I want to use it for next semester;" "If you are writing a paper and you use some words or expressions from another article, but you do not say who speaks these words;" "If you translate something from one language to your own language, but you do not acknowledge the original author;" "If you quote the exact words or sentences in your paper, you are plagiarizing, but what you can do is to paraphrase or keep the same ideas and write the paper in your own understanding."

4.2 Main Causes of Plagiarism

Participants were asked what they thought were the main causes of plagiarism, and following is a summary of their answers:

- Lack of clear instruction from instructors. If instructors do not give clear instructions, or do not clearly explain what plagiarism is, student will run into the problem;
 - Culture difference. Different countries have different rules. In some countries, it may be acceptable to quote someone's work without giving credits, but that is considered plagiarism in Canada;
 - Lack of relevant education programs from university. If the university does not provide proper education to students regarding the plagiarism issue, students may commit plagiarism because of the lack of knowledge. Some participants also stated that students could have plagiarism problems because they did not know how to use proper citation styles, such as APA.
 - Ignorance or lack of proper understanding. One participant said that "I think it is ignorance. If you talk about it without giving examples, someone may still plagiarize because they do not know how exactly to deal with plagiarism. Now we have software that you can put your papers in and see whether you plagiarize or not. Some people do not know about that. Some people would believe 'oh I have cited what I want to cite', but if you did not do it appropriately that is still plagiarism." Another participant stated that "When I was back home, in my bachelor's degree program, I literally used to copy and paste all my research and I was ok. It was not plagiarism, and I used to get good mark. When I came here, this is considered plagiarism. It was hard for me to understand the difference, and what is plagiarism and what is not."
 - Some students do not want to invest time and efforts in their studies and want to take a chance. A view of one participant that was supported by a few others was "Some students just intentionally do it. They do it because they want to cut in the short way. They just want to get good results without working. They think maybe others do not [know] where these words come from. Maybe the professor is not smart enough to search about it."
 - Language barrier. One participant said that "We have some ideas but don't know how to express in English, and we find articles that the content is what we [want to] say, so we copy it."
- "My professors start the lecture by saying something about this (plagiarism), then they talk about APA format. Very brief introduction."
 - "When I was studying at the English Language Development Center, there was a lecture about plagiarism. They explained everything. I think they brought one professor from university and educated us about plagiarism, how to avoid it, the ways, and cultures. All of us were international students."
 - "I first received [education on] information literacy about plagiarism from Dr. XXX, our instructor in a course. We were working on a mid-term paper, we handed in the paper, she returned it to me and said I should use the APA style and not plagiarize others' works. I went to the library and made an appointment with a person from Writing Support. I got lots of information, she recommended me to go to the OWL Purdue website, and I got lots of information from there."
 - "At our first orientation for new students, the head of our department gave us a talk on how to write papers, and to not copy others' works."
 - "In our courses instructors talked about plagiarism, but didn't tell the exact definition. There were also some local students in our classes, so the instructors may assume that we all already knew it."
 - "The first time I learnt it was in a course this semester called Engineering Communication which was an optional course. It helped me a lot because I didn't know how to use it in proper format, but now I can."
 - "My professors tell us not to plagiarize in the first lecture of each course, then they post it on Blackboard (Learning Management System used by the university)."
 - "I learnt it from a course named Education Research."

4.3 Information Education Received at the University

When the participants were asked what kind of information literacy education they had received since they joined the university, their responses included the following:

- "We received an email about an orientation, at which we were told something about what plagiarism means. We were educated about what we should do and what we should not do when writing course papers."

4.4 Suggestions for Information Literacy Education for International Graduate Students

Towards the end of each focus group discussion, participants were asked to give suggestions on information literacy education for international graduate students. Some were suggestions for students while others for faculty and administrators.

Most of them suggested that awareness be raised among instructors and administrators that students, especially international students come from different backgrounds, so information literacy education should be provided at the beginning of academic year. Some also suggested that it is not enough to only have it in the orientation, because "you cannot guarantee that everybody pay[s] attention in the orientation...you need to remind them during the semesters." Some also stated that "It should be done in small workshops because students usually get bored in long lectures. If we [are] put it in a small workshop, we can have more interaction[s] between the professors and the students."

The professors could offer us many examples what plagiarism really is.”

Approximately half of the participants made the suggestion that each department should have mandatory workshop for new students before the start of the semester so that they have a good understanding before they start their courses. “Each department may have different rules, like education may be different from computer science. Students should learn in their disciplines what [is] consider[ed] plagiarism and what is not.”

One participant shared their opinion that “I think in addition to explaining what plagiarism is, it will be useful if they say why it is important, and what consequences will be. They should also give some tips or advice [on] how to avoid plagiarism.”

A few participants suggested that “there should be some online classes that students should attend and pass an exam” before they can register for courses. This would especially be useful for those who missed the orientation or workshop. Two participants talked about plagiarism detecting software programs should be made available for students so they could check their assignments before submitting them.

There were also suggestions that a booklet that summarizes all the information, such as what plagiarism is and how to cite and reference, be available for students.

5. DISCUSSION

Their responses indicate that participants had an understanding of plagiarism to some degree, such as citation and self-plagiarism, but generally speaking, they were not very clear about certain aspects of the issue. For example, some participants thought making direct quotations was plagiarism and others thought paraphrasing somebody else’s work was not plagiarism.

Regarding main causes of plagiarism, many items mentioned by participants echoed what was documented in the research literature, such as cultural difference, language barrier, students trying to take a chance, and lack of clear understanding. Lack of clear or adequate instruction from instructors, or the university did not provide programs for student to gain enough education related to plagiarism issues were also mentioned as important factors.

When the participants reported information literacy education they had received since they joined the university, their responses indicated that they had attended various kinds of workshops offered at orientations at the university level or departmental level, and some had more opportunities to learn about the topic than others, usually depending on what disciplines or programs of study they were enrolled in. There were differences among instructors as well.

Participants made a number of suggestions on the improvement of information literacy education that aims to help international graduate students prevent plagiarism, and many or most of them agreed that awareness should be raised among instructors and administrators that international graduate students may need more such education than their domestic counterparts due to their diverse cultural backgrounds and language barrier. It should be emphasized that dealing with plagiarism issues takes more time and efforts than just offering a workshop at the orientation, or a paragraph in the syllabi. It needs to be understood that international students usually feel overwhelmed the first few weeks after their arrival in a new environment, and attending a workshop on plagiarism is only one of many activities for them at the beginning of an academic year, so it is necessary for the university and its academic units to provide information literacy education to the students throughout the year in a variety of formats, so their learning can be enhanced.

It may be necessary for the university to have information literacy education regarding plagiarism issues as part of the curriculum, which is embedded in all the programs of study, and make helpful resources available online and in booklets. The university library could have an online tutorial accompanied by face-to-face tutors, and it may be necessary to have requirement for a certificate of such information literacy education before students can register for courses in their first semester.

6. CONCLUSION

With the increasing online resources and number of international students, it is becoming even more challenging for academic institutions to deal with plagiarism issues. A study conducted with international graduate students in a Canadian higher education context indicates that more things should and can be done to help students, especially international graduate students, improve their academic skills and prevent or reduce incidents related to plagiarism. It seems that awareness among instructors and administrators needs to be raised and more attention should be paid to information literacy education, which can be carried out by employing various formats, such as online tutorials, booklets, workshops, and face-to-face sessions that are tailored for specific disciplines. It may be necessary to have such education embedded into the curricula of all the programs of study, and possibly have a prerequisite for graduate students to get a certificate that demonstrates their adequate knowledge of plagiarism issues before they register for courses.

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