

Plagiarism in Cross-Border Online Education

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Universities looking to distinguish themselves, expand their reach, and provide superior learning opportunities for their current students may increasingly find themselves considering international programs. Whether through international partnerships or through direct recruiting of international students, universities can create more global experiences by welcoming international students into their courses. One way this might be done is in online programs, allowing students from across the globe to interact in the same online courses. Such international offerings bring a number of benefits, but also introduce challenges, including how to prevent and handle cases of plagiarism. A notable body of research has been conducted on plagiarism in international contexts; however, this research has focused on traditional, face-to-face learning. Western universities planning to offer online courses to international students will need to consider their philosophy and strategy around plagiarism in this unique context.

Benefits of the International Online Classroom

There are a number of benefits to offering online courses with an international mix of students. Whether online or face-to-face, one of the most notable benefits of the international classroom is diversity. In a review of diversity research, Holoien (2013) found evidence that exposure to diversity is beneficial for learning, intergroup outcomes, and civic engagement. The positive effects on learning may be the most immediately evident. Holoien (2013) reported on research showing that exposure to diverse points of view can help people become more active learners, and that members of majority groups can particularly be influenced by exposure to minority or outgroups.

Universities can leverage the advantages of having diverse students in their online classes to increase domestic interest in their programs. While many universities now offer some form of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2016) doing so on an international scale can serve as a differentiator.

Students may be attracted by innovative programs that allow them to pursue their major course of study while also being exposed to international perspectives.

Finally, by offering online courses to international students, universities can help expand access to higher education. Through online learning, students with internet access (not a trivial matter in many parts of the world) can gain access to specialized courses and programs that might not be available locally.

Plagiarism and International Students

Offering online courses to an international student population is not without its challenges. This paper will focus on the particular challenge of handling the issue of plagiarism. Defining plagiarism turns out not to be a simple matter (Louw, 2017); here I will define it in general terms as *using sources in one's writing without adhering to the expected conventions for giving credit to other writers for use of their ideas and writing*. Plagiarism can range from blatant and intentional acts, like turning in a paper written by another person, to more subtle acts of omission, like failure to use quotation marks around a quoted passage or failure to include a citation when restating another writer's ideas.

Because plagiarism is defined by failure to adhere to convention, and because conventions are culturally and contextually based, it is not surprising that students learning in cultures outside their home culture face certain challenges in meeting expectations not to plagiarize. The familiar concept of plagiarism is a Western one, so it is important to consider the challenges that non-Western students might face in adhering to expectations concerning plagiarism.

Lyon (2009), for example, discussed Western conventions on attribution as being related to speech act theory, the theory of how actions are taken through language, as in the utterances "I pronounce you husband and wife" or "I quit." She theorized that academics view their writing as a kind of speech act, through which they have effects on their readers and the world, and negotiate identity. Therefore, it is crucial to be clear about what words and ideas are the writer's own and how they relate

to those of other writers; this is part of the negotiation of meaning and self. Understanding and participating in this type of written negotiation is part of the process of academic acculturation, and is non-trivial for all students. She suggested, however, that this process is more difficult for students from authoritarian nations like China, with limits on free speech, as they have not been encouraged to express their own ideas freely in the past (Lyon, 2009).

Vogel (2013) also considered the reasons behind Chinese students' academic practices in Western contexts. He suggested that the difficulty of studying in a foreign language and culture contributes to cheating by Chinese students in Western business and law programs. Though not all cases of plagiarism are cases of intentional cheating, it is easy to imagine how plagiarism can occur when students have language difficulties. This idea is corroborated by a survey of international students studying in Australia, conducted by Song-Turner (2008). She found that the most common reasons citing by international students for plagiarizing were lacking the skills to meet Western expectations for academic writing, and language barriers. Other reasons were time constraints (everything takes longer in an unfamiliar language/culture), stress of being in a foreign country, and desire to defer to experts (especially important in Eastern cultures).

It is important to recognize that the factors that lead Chinese students to plagiarize in Western universities are not unique to international students. Academia has its own culture and linguistic style that is, to varying degrees, foreign to most students when they arrive at the university. The practice of teaching academic literacy/literacies (Lea & Street, 2006; Weideman, 2014) is meant to address this. Therefore, it is not helpful to problematize international students, as tends to occur (Bodis, 2017), but instead, universities can facilitate teaching that helps acculturate all students, with additional support for international populations as necessary. This suggested approach of meeting international students' needs in a way that benefits all students is similar to the approach of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Al-Azawei, Serenelli, & Lundqvist, 2016) to assist not only disabled learners, but all learners.

Plagiarism in Online Classes

Teaching and learning online create some additional considerations when it comes to plagiarism. Among eight different character trait dichotomies they studied, Rawwas, Al-Khatib, & Vitell (2004) found that opportunism was most strongly correlated with an accepting attitude toward academic dishonesty. They therefore recommended reducing opportunities for academic dishonesty as a key tactic. However, it seems that teaching and learning online would only increase the opportunity to plagiarize. When all assignments are distributed and submitted electronically, it is simple to share essay requirements with essay-writing services and unethical “homework help” sites, to share completed essays with others, and to copy and paste material into an assignment to be turned in. Online learning also brings with it concerns about contract cheating, in which students contract with others to complete entire assignments in their place (Lancaster & Clarke, 2008).

In reviews of the literature, both McGee (2013) and Moten, Fitterer, Brazier, Leonard, and Brown (2013) reported inconsistent findings on the relative prevalence of cheating in online courses compared to face-to-face courses. Information on the relative prevalence of plagiarism in online classes, let alone plagiarism in cross-border online classes, is not readily available and is an area for future research.

One common technique for detecting plagiarism in online courses is using similarity-detection software like Turnitin.com or Blackboard’s SafeAssign (Michael & Williams, 2013; Moten et al., 2013). Such software will be of no help, however, in cases of contract cheating where an original assignment is composed for the student by a paid proxy. More importantly, if plagiarism-detection software is used as a “gotcha” tool, it does not address the problem of why the plagiarism occurred or how students can be coached to meet expectations in the future. While plagiarism detection is a necessary part of maintaining quality and credibility of academic programs, prevention through teaching and acculturation are arguably more important.

Making clear academic dishonesty policies known to students has been advocated as one way to prevent cheating, including plagiarism (McGee, 2013; Moten et al., 2013). Communicating expectations is certainly a piece of the puzzle; however, overreliance on or oversimplification of this practice may reveal an underestimation of the gap between expectations and student perceptions. Leask (2006) proposed thinking about plagiarism through the metaphor “old game, new rules.” Students are accustomed to writing and communicating ideas in particular ways. The introduction of new rules to this game, Leask explained, is not a simple matter and requires more than simple one-time instruction. Leask’s argument applies just as well in online learning as in the traditional environment: Consistent, ongoing instruction in academic integrity practices is necessary and cannot be replaced by either plagiarism detection methods or simple announcements of policy.

Conclusion

Offering online courses across international borders can provide many benefits to universities, their students, and the world, and universities may increasingly consider these offerings as both online learning and global connections continue to develop. Of course, the benefits of cross-border online learning do not come without challenges. When Western universities include international students in their online classes, handling diverse attitudes toward plagiarism is one of those challenges.

Differences in linguistic background and cultural norms have been identified as causes of non-Western students’ plagiarism. It has been suggested here that, in fact, linguistic and cultural issues are relevant to plagiarism by both Western and non-Western students, though students will differ in the degree to which their linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ from the norms of Western academics.

Looking beyond the question of detecting plagiarism in online courses, a bigger issue is recognizing the underlying causes of plagiarism and preventing plagiarism through student support. Online courses may present greater opportunity for plagiarism than face-to-face courses, and therefore

it is essential that universities have a plan to support online students in the academic acculturation process, regardless of their country of origin.

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