ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND STUDENT PLAGIARISM: GUIDED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION ASSIGNMENTS

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OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, much emphasis has been placed on academic integrity and student plagiarism at faculty meetings in the School of Business at Howard University. Consequently, business communication professors were invited to give a presentation at a recent faculty meeting to identify creative and strategic ways to enhance students’ writing effectiveness, because capstone and core courses at the school increasingly require writing assignments and presentations. Faculty members have consistently expressed strong concern for improved communication skills in the School of Business, and business communication professors have been assigned the task of ensuring that students learn to document sources carefully and appropriately. In addition, students’ written papers should achieve coherence and evidence well-developed content.

At our department meeting last year, faculty members across subject areas also criticized students’ inability to write in an acceptable manner, specifically identifying plagiarism as a more disturbing issue, which, unfortunately, is a common phenomenon on many university and college campuses these days. However, whether or not students intentionally or unintentionally plagiarize in their assignments remains a matter that requires a strategic measure. Painfully enough, despite the availability of established rules and penalties for failure to acknowledge sources, there are still complaints about inadequate documentation, inappropriate use of authority, inability to evaluate sources, and failure to distinguish between paraphrases and quotations.
In response, my colleague and I (both business communication faculty) have embarked on extensive research on the types of plagiarism, causes, and remedies to combat the epidemic of academic dishonesty. As we reviewed the literature, we noticed differences of opinion on conceptual and practical definitions of plagiarism and academic integrity. For example, Perrin (2009), Larkham (2002), and Culwin (2001) define plagiarism as the use of an author’s words, ideas, reflections, and thoughts without giving credit or adequately acknowledging sources. According to these three, source acknowledgment consists of paraphrasing, quoting, or summarizing statements with appropriate identification, followed by an elaboration of the authors’ views or perspectives to provide context.

Recent studies indicate that 90% of college students are aware that plagiarism is wrong and unethical, but educators claim that a vast majority of students plagiarize anyway, because they feel that they cannot be caught. Perhaps, given today’s ethical climate, students consider plagiarism insignificant compared with well-publicized, high-profile instances of political and corporate dishonesty. We also noted that some research contends that many students do not understand what constitutes plagiarism, its nature and components, and that some students were not taught the proper way to acknowledge sources (Blum, 2009; Carroll, 2007; Hansen, 2003). Compelling arguments in the literature indicate that some college students are unaware of the different types of plagiarism, which Perrin (2009) identified as “whole-paper plagiarism, copy-and-paste plagiarism, and careless plagiarism” (p. 15).

Against this background, my colleague and I instituted a number of strategic measures in our business communication classes to combat students’ tendency to improperly use information in their assignments. We require various writing assignments, including case analyses for critical thinking and analytical reasoning. At the beginning of a semester, we distribute a list of topics and scenarios and devote two or three class sessions to explaining our expectations and guidelines. Some of our topics include effective use of the Internet; evaluating sources for relevance; using multiple or combinations of sources; using common knowledge appropriately; writing acceptable summaries and abstracts; examining grammar (subject-verb agreement), punctuation, and mechanics; and using in-text citations and references.

In these effective writing sessions, we encourage students to share their specific problems about writing, which allows us to focus on
individual needs as well as provide more general instruction. As part of our analysis, we spoke with other faculty members regarding the types of writing challenges they are experiencing with students in their classes. We incorporate their concerns, especially source citations, in our lectures and discussion sessions. Indeed, although it has been a time-consuming experience to conduct writing sessions and meet weekly with students one-on-one, we believe that the strategy has been productive, as students’ written assignments show encouraging signs of improvement.

In terms of results, the sessions on developing and improving writing strategies have helped address the question, “Why do students plagiarize?” It became evident from feedback that some students were either not taught the writing process earlier or that they did not pay attention when citing sources in their assignments, because of desperation or poor time management. A careful reading of selected assignments revealed that a few do not know the difference between in-text citations and reference lists. We provided handouts that clearly demonstrate the difference.

Furthermore, in advance of all weekly assignments, students receive a benchmark paper either from the previous semester or from a journal. Students read the paper and discuss it in class for format, style, and documentation. I call their attention to paraphrased statements as well as quotations and show the distinction between citing sources from books and periodicals. I also explain when it is necessary to include page numbers (in the APA [American Psychological Association] style writing format). Next, I share writing assignments that are either devoid of proper citations or have plagiarized portions.

Introducing these measures about 2 years ago has resulted in a noticeable improvement in my students’ written assignments. Our librarian has been very helpful, as he visits class sessions early in the semester to present information on the effective use of source materials. Also, students meet with the librarian to learn how to use periodical databases and online catalogs. Based on this consistent emphasis, I have observed that a significant number of business communication students have become conscious of the implications of using information from sources without acknowledging them. For instance, in addition to the penalty associated with plagiarism published in the student handbook, which is included in the course syllabus, students learn during orientation sessions that using information out of context and without acknowledgment is unethical and unacceptable.
To further stress the value of documenting sources, students discuss, in class, recent articles and other publications on plagiarism. This technique is effective because understanding the need to credit published materials not only discourages plagiarism but also enhances the students’ sense of responsibility in written and oral communications. However, contrary to the view of some educators that students do not understand issues associated with plagiarism or may not think it is a serious problem affecting academic integrity, a survey by Scanlon and Neumann (2002) indicates that nearly 90% of college students strongly consider plagiarism to be unethical and unacceptable. This view is based on students’ awareness of the implications and consequences of not acknowledging sources used in their papers, as Table 1 shows.

In a recent article titled “Learning to Read With the Eyes of a Writer,” Gehsmann (2011) describes the approach of meeting with students to discuss their writing strengths and weaknesses as “a measurable improvement.” Students who need additional assistance are required to review the class handouts and come prepared to explain their corrections. Indeed, ensuring that students understand assignment expectations through personal communication with faculty is an effective approach in deterring or minimizing plagiarism.

Designing an engaging and interactive class assignment is critical for improving the writing effectiveness of students and increasing their attention to documentation. For instance, I distribute a major writing assignment in my business communication classes, due at the end of the
semester, and provide a timeline for submitting each assignment phase for review. The assignment could be a 20-page research paper, and students must organize their work in a sequence of six steps: an introduction, a problem statement, objective statements, a literature review, a conclusion, and references. In evaluating the phases, I provide feedback in the margins and attach written instructions, which we discuss at the next class meeting. This piecemeal approach allows me to read students’ work for originality and provide timely feedback before the next phase of the assignment. Students who do the assignment incorrectly will see me for assistance and cannot start the next phase until the corrections are made.

Requiring students to submit papers without clear instructions and supervision creates desperation and tension, possibly forcing them to plagiarize or collaborate with their friends. In sum, giving students specific guidelines and rubrics on evaluation is important, and students should submit drafts before the final paper.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Maintaining academic integrity is critical to the sustainability of a civil society and to the democratic process. Educators across the disciplines are growing increasingly disturbed by the level of plagiarism on university campuses. Developing supportive ways of empowering students to become more independent writers in the learning process is essential. At least two studies indicate that some acts of plagiarism are driven by desperation because of a lack of knowledge: The Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2009) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (2009) caution that acts of plagiarism in higher education have risen to alarming proportions, requiring consistent and collective efforts to improve and sustain the quality and standards of learning and writing as we develop 21st century academic objectives. Finally, the assumption that students come to class equipped with the rules of effective writing has proven erroneous and misleading. Additional explanations and individual sessions to check assignment drafts can be extremely helpful in sustaining academic integrity. It should be noted that submission of assignments through any of the electronic plagiarism prevention resources such as Turnitin to determine originality is not a corrective remedy or a deterrent. Teaching students how to write is preferable to relying on electronic devices.
References


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