

# Chapter 43

## Education Can be Gained from Errors: Why Plagiarism Should Be Used as a Learning Opportunity for College Students

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### ABSTRACT

*Plagiarism seems like a straightforward term that in institutions of higher education identifies an act of stealing ideas, usually in an assigned paper, without citing the author, and this type of incident usually results in the student who committed the infraction receiving a warning or a failing grade, and on the second infraction, the student usually receives a harsher form of punishment such as being dropped from the course or the incident is reported to the administration. These are the general positions that are described in many university policies. However, plagiarism can also be an accidental act on the part of a student because he or she has not learned how to properly cite a source yet and may not understand the importance of citing all information in a paper. For this reason, college students should not be immediately punished for something that may have been unintentional. Instead, when an infraction takes place, faculty members in higher education should facilitate understanding in students about citations so that incidences of plagiarism might decrease.*

### INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is generally considered to be a term that means that a person has stolen ideas from someone else and claimed those ideas as his or her own, through including them in a paper without proper

citation. However, in order to determine whether a student has plagiarized, an assigned paper is usually scrutinized by the instructor or through detection software such as turnitin.com to search for information that was included without proper citation. The issue with this type of detective work

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in order to uncover occurrences of plagiarism is that the educator takes as an assumption that the student knows and understands the academic views on citation and that the student knows how to use the ideas of others in a critical argument; when in actuality, many college students, when entering their first basic composition course, do not have the basic writing skills needed in order to effectively produce a complete and accurate college level essay yet, let alone understand voice, audience, and citation rules. Micheal, Dickson, Ryan, and Koefer discussed that in separate studies conducted in California and Pennsylvania, instructors in higher education indicated concerns with the significant amount of students who were not prepared for college level work. Among other issues, the faculty members felt that students coming into higher education lacked comprehension, writing, and analysis skills (2010).

If students are entering college with a lack of education in writing skills, then a policy that lists punishments is not going to be effective in facilitating the accumulation of knowledge that students need in order to increase their writing abilities. Dee and Jacob (2012) carried out a study that involved giving students a tutorial on plagiarism before they completed a writing assignment. After the study was over, the researchers surveyed the students to assess their attitude and knowledge about plagiarism. The student responses showed that their knowledge about plagiarism increased as a result of the tutorial, but that their perception about detection by their professors had not changed. The researchers discussed that “students do not understand plagiarism or ethical writing strategies particularly well and that this equilibrium can persist because college instructors often view policing plagiarism and teaching students about it as outside their responsibilities” (2012, p. 427). If students are entering higher education institutions without adequate preparation, then faculty members need to be working to help students succeed, and this includes considering each

student’s position with regard to the understanding of writing skills and citations before drawing attention to the academic integrity policy.

Conversely, students may be struggling with writing in post-secondary environments because they feel intimidated after transitioning from high school. According to Power, Students may have trouble with higher education because they are exposed to new ideas that shake their long-held beliefs, and they are newly placed in a classroom that is taught by a faculty member who is highly knowledgeable in that particular subject area. On top of this, the students are required to turn in papers that include a blend of personal voice, which may be a new concept to them, and the possibly gray area of borrowed intellectual property. Because professors in a student’s chosen subject area have more of an influence on a future career than any high school teachers previously did, the student may feel intimidated about approaching the professor about misunderstandings or confusion on citing sources. Students may also have an unrealistic fear of plagiarizing because of these factors, and not because of personal morals (2009). For these reasons, students should be allowed to be learners before they are given the label of plagiarist when an infraction is discovered.

Rebecca Moore Howard, a well-known scholar in the field of plagiarism, argued that in the academic world, it is a reality that a person who has original ideas is labeled an intellectual, and on the opposite side, a writer who is not original is considered a plagiarist (1999). This black and white view of an intellectual and a plagiarist is accurate for those who are firmly planted in the academic world and consider themselves scholars, but college students are only standing in the threshold of the academic world and have just begun the process of discovering their own voices. These students are not intellectuals or plagiarists; they are learners. Sutherland-Smith agrees with this view that when students are in a learning process, and still unfamiliar with academia, it is inappropriate

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