

# Honest Communication in Online Learning

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## HOW TO CREATE HONEST COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning promises much for the present and the future of education because it bridges the gap of distance and time (Valentine, 2002). Students have doors opened wide because of online courses, and in many ways, these opportunities bring in an equalizing quality for those who want to be educated. The bottom line is that the “convenience of time and space” (Valentine, 2002, p. 2) makes online courses an appealing option. Online courses come under the general heading of “distance education.” Pallof and Pratt (2001, p. 5) define distance education as “an approach to teaching and learning that utilizes Internet technologies to communicate and collaborate in an educational context.” This definition is what online courses are today. Some common modes of delivery include WebCT, Blackboard, Convene, and eCollege. Technology or these authoring tools are “not the ‘be all and end all’ of the online course. [They] are merely the vehicle for course delivery” (Pallof & Pratt, 2001, p. 49).

As with many things, there are also some potentially negative aspects possible with online learning. This progressive form of instruction is not impervious to problems with student cheating, and in fact, cheating is often considered easier in online courses (Rowe, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to examine plagiarism within the different elements of online learning courses and investigate what can be done about it. Before examining plagiarism, a case for integrity should be made.

### Academic Integrity

Academic integrity presupposes that the students will follow the rules of an institution and its instructors.

Integrity in any situation implies that an individual is incorruptible and will be completely honest. The Center for Academic Integrity (CAI), a highly respected consortium of more than 390 educational institutions, has this to say about academic integrity:

Academic integrity is a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. From these values flow principles of behavior that enable academic communities to translate ideals into action... Cultivating honesty lays the foundation for lifelong integrity, developing in each of us the courage and insight to make difficult choices and accept responsibility for actions and their consequences, even at personal cost (The Center for Academic Integrity, 1999, p. 4-5).

The opposite of integrity is dishonesty. The issue of academic dishonesty is a concern on every campus and is no less a concern in the area of online classes. Because online courses have a distant feel, students may be even more susceptible to the lure of cheating when taking an online course (Rowe, 2004). There are many reasons why students cheat: they want the easy way out, school work is low on the priority list, they possess poor time management skills, they fear a bad grade, or they simply like to break the rules (Harris, 2004). Sharma and Maleyeff (2003, p. 22) point out that “psychological distancing combined with moral distancing, increases the ease and the probability that unethical acts will be committed” and that the “Internet increases the number of temptations and very often [an individual] may not feel wrong because nobody appears to be hurt.”

One of the greatest benefits of an online course is the opportunity for interaction between teacher and student and also among the body of students. This element also can open the door for cheating. The instructional method in online courses is very open and interactive. Students are encouraged to learn from each other. The instruc-

tor is eager to have students collaborate and construct knowledge; however, this delivery method makes it easier for the dishonest student to act corruptly.

## **Plagiarism**

Of the many issues of academic integrity, plagiarism is considered a significant ethical issue in online education (Rowe, 2004). Plagiarism in common terms is taking someone else's work and passing it off as your own. This includes taking words and ideas or "claiming to use sources that you haven't" (Brandt, 2002, p. 40). "Cut and paste" plagiarism is a term that means taking only a sentence or two from the Internet without citing the source, not the whole paper (McCabe, 2001).

Plagiarism in online courses most often resembles plagiarism in the traditional classroom and is not unique in the stealing of ideas and words through e-mail, discussion questions, class postings, and group projects. These methods are inherent in online courses because they are common elements in that educational system. Following is a discussion about plagiarism within each of these elements.

### **Research Papers**

This form of plagiarism has the same potential in online courses as in the traditional classroom. Students are assigned a paper to write but do not cite their sources correctly, either intentionally or unintentionally. A student may cut and paste some or all of their research paper from the Internet or the student may purchase a completed paper from an individual or online source. The Internet makes plagiarism easier and available to more people, according to Underwood and Szabo (2003). As indicated by their study, 20% of students they surveyed admitted they would definitely plagiarize to avoid failing. Six percent of students in this study use plagiarism as a part of normal, everyday life.

John Barrie, founder of an Internet plagiarism-detection service called *Turnitin.com*, says that "while researching the sources of students' plagiarized materials, [he] found that 70% of them came from the Internet; 25% came from 'swapped papers'... and 5% came from other sources, such as papers purchased from online 'cheat' sources" (Minkel, 2002, p. 53). Plagiarism is on the rise. A 1999 CAI study showed 10% of students admitting to cut-and-paste plagiarism,

while a 2001 survey showed 41% surveyed taking part in this practice.

As illustrated by McCabe's study in 2005, students have an indifferent attitude about plagiarism. His study revealed that in the area of Internet plagiarism, 77% of students surveyed did not consider "cut & paste" plagiarism a serious issue. Online course instructors fight the battle against this permissive culture to the same extent traditional classroom teachers do.

A mere cursory Internet search reveals an abundance of sites which sell term papers to students, a direct indicator that plagiarism has a thriving market. The advertising scheme from a Web site that sells research papers offers insight into the prevalent plagiarism culture. It persuades with this rationale:

As if a job and a social life are not enough to drive you insane while you try to pass college! Add to this the burden of term papers, which are sometimes designed to make you tear your hair out in frustration... How difficult is it to begin writing term papers when an evening out is equally important (<http://www.perfect-termpapers.com/>).

### **Group Projects**

Another element of the online course which is susceptible to plagiarism is the collaborative project. Everyone in the class has access to the discussions of all the members in *all* the groups. This can lead one group to steal an idea from another group. In this case, they do not give credit to the originator of the idea but instead try to pass it off to the instructor as their own.

### **Discussion**

A constant flow of discussions are common in online courses. Discussion may take place in synchronous chatting or asynchronous postings. Students then submit comments and additionally read the remarks and observations of fellow classmates regarding that particular issue. Ideally, this is an excellent way for students to express what they have learned and to learn from the insights of each other; however, for the insincere student it is tempting to plagiarize all that information and misrepresent their knowledge on a particular subject.

Discussions about assigned readings can also be plagiarized. The unethical student does not read the

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