

## Chapter 21

# Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism in Online Courses: A Design-Based Research Approach

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study used design-based research approaches to investigate student plagiarism in an online course, with the objective of determining the instructional interventionist strategies that can help students avoid the practice in online courses. Twenty eight (28) undergraduate students who were engaged in a semester-long online course in Educational Technology at a private university in Ghana participated in the study. Drawing on relevant learning and related theories, the study implemented different learning activities pertaining to plagiarism at regular intervals during the semester, and then subsequently analyzed students' individual and group course writings for evidence of plagiarism. Findings reveal that regular and varied instructional interventions helps students reduce and eventually avoid plagiarism in the online learning environment. Students were also found to plagiarize to a much lesser extent when they worked in groups than when they worked individually. Implications of these findings for the design and management of online learning courses in higher education are briefly discussed.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism, defined broadly as the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own without crediting the source (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 2009), has long been viewed as an unethical and immoral practice, particularly in the academe (Loui, 2002; Maddox, 1995). This is because, for scholarly works, persons who plagiarize not only take credit for the plagiarized content and thus benefit undeservedly from the works of others, but also deceive all readers of such content.

Plagiarism is therefore considered an illegal act (Skandalakis & Mirilas, 2004), and in the academe, several researchers and scholars have been duly punished for engaging in the practice. This notwithstanding, plagiarism is still quite prevalent, particularly among higher education students across disciplines and in all parts of the world (Park, 2003). For instance, a survey by the Center for Academic Integrity revealed that over 70% of students in a cross-section of North American institutions admitted to some form of plagiarism (East, 2010).

Plagiarism is, however, quite a contentious issue in the academe as the term is applied vaguely to issues ranging from unintentional paraphrasing or honest confusion over the standards of academic discourse and proper citation (Wilhoit, 1994), to outright premeditated fraud (Bouville, 2008). The direct fraudulent act of stealing parts or all of another persons' work is unquestionable plagiarism, but drawing a line between what other practices along this continuum constitute plagiarism and what simply represents poor but acceptable academic practices has been a challenge in the academe. Thus, whilst some authors (e.g., Maddox, 1995) are of the opinion that simply copying a string of words, including one's own previously reported works, without proper attribution is plagiarism, others (e.g., Yilmaz, 2007) argue that it is ideas that count, and so copying commonly used words that contain no original idea cannot be

considered as plagiarism. Skandalakis and Mirilas (2004) on their part, even suggest that acts such as incomplete or careless attribution and "second generation" referencing, are all plagiarism.

This apparent lack of consistency and consensus on the nature and scope of plagiarism offers a big challenge to higher education instructors as they have the daunting task of clearly outlining to young learners the kinds of scholarly writing practices that are acceptable and those that might be considered plagiarism. Hence most higher education students are either totally ignorant of the existence of such a phenomenon, or lack a full understanding of the act of plagiarism and its implications (Power, 2009), even in institutions with specific anti-plagiarism committees and policies. The ease of access to information through the Internet and World-Wide-Web is also contributing significantly in making plagiarism a persistent issue in the academe, and it will likely remain so for a considerable time.

As preventing plagiarism and promoting standards of academic integrity is of utmost concern in the academe, several literature reviews, conceptual, and research articles have been written on various aspects of this subject, with most seeking to highlight issues such as the prevalence of plagiarism among students within particular institutions (e.g., Power, 2009; Sims, 2002), the contributory factors to student plagiarism (e.g., Park, 2003; Wang, 2008), students' perceptions with regard to the practice (Lin & Wen, 2007; Wang, 2008), how the practice can be mitigated (e.g., Wilhoit, 1994) etc.

Most of these studies have, however, either largely relied anecdotal evidence, or on student self reports as per their responses to survey questionnaires and/or interviews, with little being reported on empirical studies that seek to provide insightful and in-depth analysis of plagiarism, particularly the aspects that are pervasive among students within particular learning contexts. Likewise, researchers have paid little attention to unraveling the appropriate interventionist strategies that

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