

Plagiarism: A Guide for K-12 Online Learners

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Abstract

This study provides K-12 students, as well as parents/guardians, with an understanding of the concept of plagiarism in an online academic environment. The authors begin with real world scenarios that allow the reader to understand the setting and context of the problem. The impact of plagiarism is explored through a cost benefit analysis from each stakeholder's point of view utilizing power, probability of importance, and probability of occurrence. The authors attempt to explain how plagiarism affects three major stakeholders: school system/educator, student/parent and author/publisher. Finally, the authors answer the scenario questions to provide insight into the concept of plagiarism and how it could have been avoided.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Copyright, Distance Learning, Online Learning, Piracy

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## Introduction

Academic dishonesty is a growing epidemic both nationally and internationally and the use of electronic tools makes cheating much easier and more convenient than traditional methods. Today students can use technology devices to access answers, essays, academic papers, and other scholarly works with ease because the Internet allows access to a limitless amount of information on a global scale. Furthermore, there are many specialty websites available specifically designed to assist academic swindlers. Morley (2009) reported that almost 75% of high school aged students have engaged in some form of cheating.

Plagiarism can mean distinct things to different people, but ultimately, it is still cheating and cheating is rife. Family values can also play a factor. If a brother or sister plagiarized successfully in the past, a sibling may feel allowed to do the same. Despite the best efforts of educators and school institutions to dissuade plagiarism, it is inevitable that such academic dishonesty will continue to occur. For some students, they may not fully understand the concept or consequences of plagiarism let alone how to avoid it. Plagiarism is an unethical activity, and if the work used is copyright protected (PL. No. 105-304), legal ramifications may occur. The purpose of this research endeavor is to inform K-12 students and parents about the challenge of plagiarism in an online academic community.

## Literature Review

Evering and Moorman (2012) explained that plagiarism is common in education and can be complicated to understand because there are many definitions. For instance, Nitko and Brookhart (2007) defined plagiarism as copying homework or purchasing research papers. Willard (2002) described plagiarism as taking someone's ideas or writings and using them as "your" own. Roblyer (2006) found that plagiarism is also called cyber cheating where students use material found on the Internet as their own. Morley (2009) stated that plagiarism is a violation of copyright law.

Plagiarists pilfer because they are lazy or not motivated to engage in learning. Others may have a lack of interest or understanding of the material, or feel the coursework has very little relevance. Some scammers may have started the assignment late or ran out of time to complete it. Yet, some feckless teens steal to protect their academic stature and reputation (Evering & Moorman, 2012); (Shelly, Napier, & Rivers, 2010). According to Willard (2002), plagiarism can be broken down into two areas: first, intentional, in this scenario the student uses someone else's writing and represents it as his own. This includes copying the entire paper to a portion such as a paragraph or sentence. Second, inadvertent plagiarism can happen when a student uses material from someone else because she does not fully understand the concept or topic, making it difficult to use the material appropriately in her work. Moreover, plagiarism can have long term consequences. Students who never learn how to properly cite and reference other's work can be terminated from employment due to plagiaristic activities (Kinavey v. West Jefferson Hills School District, 2016).

Shahabuddin (2009) reported that plagiarism is both immoral and unethical and if ignored, this attitude will undermine quality professional publication and academic research. The author further contended that plagiarism is a serious issue that needs to be discussed with students and discouraged. Doss, Henley, Gokaraju, McElreath, Lackey, Hong, and Miller (2016) studied the perceptions and attitudes of international and national undergraduate students and found that youth do not believe plagiarism to be a criminal action because students are rarely jailed or sued in academia. Morley (2009) affirmed that students who engage in academic dishonesty may suffer

severe consequences such as failing the assignment or course to expulsion from the school system. Students who are caught plagiarizing may also ruin any chances for a post-secondary scholarship or be kept out of a particular college or university of their choice (Clabaugh & Rozycki, 1999). Green and Russell (2003) noted that a student plagiarized extensive material from the Internet in articles she wrote for a local newspaper. The end result, her application to Harvard, was rescinded by the university. Some students may believe that the courts or litigation will protect them from the consequences of plagiarism. Courts have upheld university decisions to penalize students who plagiarize work. In (Smith v. Gettysburg College, 1982) the student was found guilty of plagiarizing work in his chemistry class. As a result, the student received a failing grade for the course and lost tuition grant money because of his actions.

In order to maintain academic integrity, Doss et al. (2016) proclaimed that school systems need to clarify expectations of writing and how to avoid academic dishonesty, as well as the importance of having policies that reflect punitive sanctions for academic misconduct. Clabaugh and Rozycki (2001) justified that both educators and academic institutions have a responsibility to define and combat dishonest students. However, Nitko and Brookhart (2007) concluded that parents and students must also take responsibility to abate plagiaristic behavior.

Bitter and Legacy (2008) postulated that technology makes it much easier for students to copy work due to its versatility and capabilities. Nevertheless, students find it very easy to use the “copy and paste” application feature. Clabaugh and Rozycki (2001) emphasized that students who plagiarize using technology are confident that the teacher will be at least one step behind because the younger generation understands and can adapt to technologies faster than adults.

Young learners need to know and understand that just quoting a few lines or paraphrasing material without proper citation of the source is considered plagiarism. Students can use an author’s writing as long as quotations are used and the author and source of the quote are properly referenced using an appropriate citation format such American Psychological Association (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA) or Chicago Manual of Style (Shelly, Napier, & Rivers, 2010); (Barker, Barker, & Pinard, 2010); (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009). According to Cennamo, Ross and Ertmer (2010) students need to develop a skill set on how to conduct research, properly analyze the information, synthesize, and report the facts before formally writing the essay or research paper.

## Methods

In order to put the concept of plagiarism into a context that can be easily understood, the researchers used a vignette to illustrate five hypothetical situations that students may find themselves in while completing schoolwork online. O'Dell, Crafter, Abreu, and Cline (2012) disclosed that a vignette is a carefully constructed, short descriptive scenario that places a particular behavior such as plagiarism into a concrete context. This allows the reader to explore the different views that can materialize during a real world situation. Vignettes are used in a variety of research designs and are very powerful tools for causal investigations of judgments (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010).

### Vignette

The North Side School System is a small rural public school system in Western Pennsylvania. Roughly 5% of its student body is enrolled in the school system run online virtual academy where they learn from home using the local school system’s curriculum, a computer along with a high speed

Internet connection instead of attending the traditional brick-and-mortar facilities. Sally is in the eleventh grade and is enrolled in the online learning program, and is studying global warming in her science class. On this particular day, Sally overslept because she was up late the night before watching television and is now pressed for time. She is scheduled to work all day at the local ice cream shop, has an appointment to get her hair cut and colored later in the day, and then has dance class in the evening. Furthermore, she promised her parents that she would go grocery shopping that same day because her mother and father will be working late. Sally is now very stressed and is wondering how she is going to get all this work accomplished knowing that her online science assignment is due tomorrow morning. One rule both Sally and her parents agreed upon prior to her enrolling in the online cyber academy was that she would always stay on top of her studies. Sally does not want to receive a failing grade or want her parents to be disappointed in her academic progress. In order to save time and energy, Sally let her favorite Internet search engine find the answers to the questions on global warming that were presented in her textbook. She then used the “copy and paste” tool in her browser and placed the information found online directly into the worksheet. Because she was in a time crunch, Sally thought this would be the fastest and easiest solution because she knew the Internet would have all the answers she needed. Due to her crafty thinking, Sally was able to complete and submit her work on time.

Similarly, Sally’s friend Steve, a tenth grader in the online program is not as motivated as her but has a five page English paper on Romeo and Juliet due this afternoon. He has not yet started the project. Steve knows the Internet has a plethora of papers ready to be purchased on this topic, so he decided to buy the research paper online and plans to submit it to his English teacher as his original work.

Melanie, a cousin of Sally’s, is new to the cyber program and enjoys the coursework flexibility and learning from home. She is now in the eighth grade at North Side and is taking Spanish 1 this year. Although Melanie adores learning a second language, she does not like the textbook; she feels there should be more realistic examples. In this week’s assignment, Melanie is tasked with translating phrases from English to Spanish. Since she does not want to take the time to utilize her text to find the answers or log in to the portal to have a conversation with her online teacher during scheduled office hours, she decided it would be less frustrating and most convenient to find a website translation service on the Internet to answer the questions instead. This would also save Melanie time because her friends are coming home from school shortly and have plans to shoot hoops.

Zeke enrolled in the cyber academy at North Side because he wanted his boss at the local grocery store to provide additional hours so he can earn enough money to purchase a car. Since Zeke is spending more time stocking shelves he is dedicating less time for schoolwork. In addition, Zeke just finished a history project on the Civil War, used five references per the project directions, but never used citations. Zeke knows he does not have the time to learn proper citation formatting. Besides, he suspects his online teacher has too many other projects to grade and will never notice. Zeke uploaded his assignment to the portal and ran off to work.

Likewise, Dick and Jane are seniors at North Side and have been neighbors for many years. They decided to enroll in the virtual academy during the last year of school because they did not want to deal with the nonsense of other students or the rules of the school system anymore. In order to alleviate the workload stress in their psychology class, they decided to collaborate on the essays assigned for this week. They even took the advice of their online teacher making sure they paraphrased correctly, used proper spelling and grammar, as well as quotations when needed, and

employed proper citation formatting. At the end of the day, both Dick and Jane were pleased because the essays were completed. The two then uploaded the same assignments to be graded.

The aforementioned scenarios lead to the following questions: Would it be acceptable for Sally to use the “copy and paste” tool to mirror the global warming information from the Internet directly onto the worksheet? Is it ethically and morally correct for Steve to purchase a Romeo and Juliet paper online and hand it in to his teacher as his original work? What harm can come about if Melanie uses a website translation service to answer the Spanish questions? Does Zeke need to provide citation references in his civil war project? Were Dick and Jane dishonest when completing and uploading the psychology essays?

### Analysis

Analyzing plagiarism in an online academic environment can be accomplished by examining the players involved. A method to investigate this concept is to place the stakeholders into three categories: student/parent, author/publisher and school/educator. Each stakeholder is faced with a variety of costs and benefits along with associated power to make relevant decisions. The factors of importance and occurrence also play a vital role in this process. See the Plagiarism Analysis Matrix in the Appendix for a summary of this investigation.

The key participants in the Plagiarism Analysis Matrix are the student and parent because they have the most to benefit and the greatest power. For instance, plagiarism can easily be accepted by students because the process is quick and easy and it may save time, especially if the student routinely procrastinates or is not motivated to engage in academics. The use of software tools can be another benefit. For example, the application “copy and paste” component can be utilized to quickly and easily copy electronic text directly from a device or computer and used in an essay or research paper. Although online and textbook authors take time to structure sentences and carefully craft wording, students recognize this quality and use the material because they will not take the time to paraphrase and provide proper citation of the material. As a result, this is academic dishonesty. Students have high power to engage in cheating, and because of this circumstance the probability of importance and occurrence are likely high. Another benefit of plagiarizing is that students do not have to learn proper citation formatting. However, this may be problematic especially if higher education is pursued or if the learner is caught. Although the probability of importance to the student is low, the probability of occurrence is high. Parents also reap the benefits of plagiarism because there is a good chance the coursework will get completed and grades will be favorable. Thus, the probability of importance and occurrence for the parents is likely high.

On the contrary, parents and students have many costs associated with plagiaristic activities. In particular, students who cheat are removing themselves from academic involvement because they are not learning the material, which may have severe consequences later on in life because they are not going to understand or be able to apply proper methods. If a cyber student regularly communicates with the online teacher, the learner will receive invaluable feedback on how to approach and properly complete assignments, thus potentially mitigating poor behavior. Similarly, when a student plagiarizes the reputation of that individual may be jeopardized. For instance, if Joey cheats and receives a higher score on an assignment than his friends who did not, these same friends may not hold Joey in high regard. The probability of importance and occurrence for the student is low. Students are caught cheating, the costs can be devastating because they can fail the assignment, course, or be expelled depending on school policy. The probability of importance to the

student is low but the probability of occurrence can be high. Students have all the power to make good or poor decisions.

When students plagiarize the author/publisher has no benefits, only costs. These individuals have the most to lose and have the least amount of power in making decisions. Stakeholders in the Plagiarism Analysis Matrix who do not receive benefits from plagiaristic activities may see students as miscreants. For instance, when students copy, publishers may lose revenue depending on the work pilfered. Likewise, authors can possibly lose credit if a student uses the work and passes it on as his or her own material. Another cost is that they cannot enforce penalties for those who cheat. Moreover, there is no way an author or publisher can impose policies on school systems. Authors and publishers have the lowest power to stop cheating and the probability of importance and occurrence for this stakeholder is likely high.

Although there are no benefits to plagiarism for the school system/educator, there are costs associated. Cheating policies need to be developed and enforced, and discipline needs to occur when incidents arise. For obvious reasons, this will take time and effort on the part of faculty and administration. With the exception of loss of reputation, the school system and educator have great power to deal with students who plagiarize and the probability of importance and occurrence to this stakeholder is very high.

### Results and Conclusion

Knowing the answers to the scenario questions may help students and parents to better understand the impact of plagiarism and how it affects the stakeholders involved. Would it be acceptable for Sally to use the “copy and paste” application tool to mirror the global warming information from the Internet directly into the worksheet? The answer is no. It does not matter if the material was taken using “copy and paste” or handwritten verbatim, the concept remains the same. If Sally continues down this path she is going to disappoint her parents, as well as herself because she is going to be flagged for plagiarism, and her grades will reflect the effort she puts forth into her studies. However, if Sally paraphrases and provides proper citation formatting in her worksheet this will not be considered plagiarism. As Shelly, Napier, & Rivers (2010) reported, students need to credit the source because it is a matter of honor. Students who copy material without citing the source come across as lazy, uninformed and are complete blotters. For assistance with writing format and proper citation use, students should consult the online course teacher or school system librarian. This will ensure proper completion of assignments and coursework. Sally should also develop a checklist of items for the next day on the evening before to assist with time management and scheduling workloads. She can then scratch items off the list as they are completed. By doing so, she will not have to rush to unethical solutions when the pressure is on to meet deadlines. Finally, Sally needs to get a good night’s sleep so she can be focused and attentive the following day as she completes her task list.

Is it ethically and morally correct for Steve to purchase a Romeo and Juliet paper online and hand it in to his teacher as his original work? The answer is no. Willard (2002) calls this intentional plagiarism. Morley (2009), Clabaugh and Rozycki (1999), and Green and Russell (2003) agree that students who plagiarize have a very good chance of being caught and will likely receive disciplinary action. The information that can be gleaned from the Internet is colossal. Students must be vigilant when writing essays and research papers because purloining another’s work is dishonest and this sets a bad example for other learners. Decisions to plagiarize will result in unfavorable outcomes for students. Furthermore, catching plagiarizers has become easier with the use of technology and educators are able to clip online swindlers very quickly.

What harm can come about if Melanie uses a website translation service to answer the Spanish questions? When a student uses a translation site, the response may change the tense or the verb, thus the answer will be inaccurate. The teacher may also consider the answer incorrect if the material has not been taught yet. Since a translation site was used and information was copied precisely from the web, this is a form of plagiarism. Although Doss et al. (2016) believe that students may not be aware of plagiaristic conduct, teachers must educate students appropriately. However, if Melanie speaks fluent Spanish she should have a candid conversation with her teacher during online office hours to explain why she changed the tense or verb. Perhaps Melanie should be placed in a more advanced world language course.

Does Zeke need to provide citation references in his Civil War project? Zeke needs to be careful not to use someone else's work or ideas and then pass them off as his own work. Since Zeke used references in the assignment, he must paraphrase the material and put the author's thoughts into his own words. He must then give credit to those authors by providing proper citation formatting in his project. Shelly, Napier and Rivers (2010) reported that students who paraphrase or quote from references used in assignments must cite the source by using MLA, APA or Chicago Manual of Style citation formatting in the work. Finally, Zeke needs to balance the workload between the grocery store and school if he wants to be successful.

Were Dick and Jane dishonest when completing and uploading the psychology essays? Both students followed correct procedures when completing the essays; however, they submitted the same assignments to their teacher. The answer to the question is yes. Even though they properly researched and developed the essays, they copied from each other and this is a form of plagiarism. Students who collaborate on schoolwork must be mindful to structure the team environment to support original work from each member. Having a conversation with the online teacher prior to collaborating on the assignment may help to set boundaries and expectations.

In order to avert plagiarism, students should take the advice from Cennamo, Ross and Ertmer (2010) and develop a skill set to accurately analyze and paraphrase information instead of cheating. Cyber learners should also use proper citation formatting and give credit where credit is due. To avoid uncertainty and confusion regarding assignments, students should talk with their online teachers to fully understand the directions and expectations and not be tempted to turn to classmates for advice. Young learners should further gain confidence in their abilities to complete the task at hand by building on experience while remaining cognizant of time management and ensuring academic honesty.

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Appendix

**Plagiarism Analysis Matrix**

Stakeholder	Power	Costs of Plagiarism	Probability of Importance	Probability of Occurrence	Benefits of Plagiarism	Probability of Importance	Probability of Occurrence
Student / Parent	High	Do not seek help when needed	Low	Low	Acceptance by students	High	High
	High	Potential loss of reputation if caught	Low	Low	Copy and paste tool is convenient	High	High
	High	Fail assignment or course	Low	High	Saves time when researching	High	High
	High	Expulsion / suspension	Low	High	No effort needed to understand citation formatting	Low	High
	High	Lack of academic involvement	Low	High	Quick and easy process	High	High
					Coursework is finished	High	High
				High grades if not caught	High	High	
Author / Publisher	Low	Loss of revenue	High	High	None		
	Low	Loss of credit	High	High			
	Low	Unable to impose policy	High	High			
	Low	Lack of penalty enforcement	High	High			
School System / Educator	High	Prevention Policy development	High	High	None		
	High	Implementation of Prevention policy	High	High			
	High	Apply discipline	High	High			
	Low	Loss of reputation	High	High			