STUDENTS' PERCEPTION and BEHAVIOR of ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: A Case Study of a Writing Forum Activity

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ABSTRACT

The use of online tools such as forum has helped instructors develop courses that are engaging and challenging. However, instructors want to ensure that all students maintain academic integrity when they were assigned to work in an online community. This paper investigated students' perception and behavior of academic integrity in an online discussion forum. Data were collected from 160 students enrolled in a fundamental English course who were assigned to post and respond to the topics in a forum. A survey was administered to measure how students perceived 'academic integrity' as well as to investigate students' experience of violating academic integrity. A semi-structured interview was further conducted with the involved participants to find out the reasons behind their performance. The findings revealed that students perceived some misconduct actions as not cheating, leading to behaviors of academic dishonesty. As such, students should be informed more about what they can or cannot do in order not to commit academic dishonesty.

Keywords: Academic integrity, online discussion, learning management system

INTRODUCTION

Technological skill, besides English language competence, is another vital qualification expected for Thai graduates. They are required to employ information and communications technology in data analysis, information receivability, and presentation skills. Therefore, most educational institutions offer further supports on the use of computer technology as a learning tool and medium. The incoming of technologies in computer networking facilitates language instructors to alter their practice in computer uses in classroom. Numbers of on-line tools like e-mails, synchronous CMC, and discussion forums are more implemented in languages courses. The Internet, of course, promotes autonomous learning (Chapelle, 2001).

Learning Management Systems (LMS) refers to server-based software that administrates access and provides on-line learning resources via a standard web browser. Blackboard and Moodle are commonly used in tertiary education (Schroeder, Minocha, & Schneider, 2010).

150

Most instructors consider the tools applicable and helpful for students' learning, activities, testing, practice, access to materials, scoring, keeping tracks, and receiving feedback from teachers and peers. A discussion forum is a widely recognized tool in the LMS. Instructors and learners can share their opinions on the electronic platform and interchange their feedbacks. Online forums foster convenient interactions among students and between instructors and students (Xie, Durrington, & Yen, 2011). Collaborative knowledge construction and information distribution outside classrooms have increased through the process of intercommunications (Lipponen, 2000).

Online discussion boards provide more challenging features for instructors to design more engaging and rigorous courses. In addition, the "writing in the discussion forum" activity was embedded in the two English courses in the first semester of academic year 2010. Its goal was to provide students more writing and intercommunication opportunities through the use of computer. Students' collaborative learning and critical thinking skills could expectedly increase in the CMC writing context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online discussion tends to promote thinking abilities; nevertheless, validity of student discussion and its quality are unreliable. Students' postings may be copies from others. Instructors face disappointment and frustration after comparing students' tasks or keeping tracks to original sources. Student performance is also unable to be evaluated. Plagiarism becomes a serious and actual issue, even though students have been informed since the beginning of the course that copies are not be tolerated, and their organic ideas and comments are mainly graded, not grammar.

As stated by Hard, Conway, and Moran (2006, p. 1059), academic honesty refers to "providing or receiving assistance in a manner not authorized by the instructor in the creation of work to be submitted for academic evaluation including papers, projects and examinations (cheating); and presenting, as one's own, the ideas or words of another person or persons for academic evaluation without proper acknowledgement (plagiarism)". The definition indicates that when students present others' work or ideas as their own, academic dishonesty takes place, and plagiarism is the most practice.

Bloodgood, Turnley and Mudrack (2010) advocated that academic misconduct happened because students had no idea what they were doing. Numbers of researches disclose that a culture of student dishonesty nowadays does exist in school and university everywhere (Chapman & Lupton, 2004; Lee & Wen, 2007; Gallant, 2008). Students themselves have reported plagiarism in classroom. In line with Gallant (2008), 90 percents of students have witnessed their classmates' plagiarism on a regular basis. Many researchers have investigated student perceptions regarding academic integrity. For example, a study of Mangan (2006, showed that 56 percents of business graduates were found dishonest when comparing to 47 percents of non-business graduates. Moreover, many studies have reported that male undergraduates, members of Greek social organizations, and low self-esteem students were tentatively dishonest more (Iyer & Eastman, 2006).

According to Spaulding (2009), student perceptions of academic integrity have a correlation with online and face-to-face course settings.

A survey measuring the frequency of student participation in academic dishonest practices has showed no significant difference regarding student perception of the academic integrity of their own behavior based on face-to-face or online course types. Kwong et al (2011) have reported the result of their comparison of Hong Kong students' and faculty members' perceptions of academic integrity and their acknowledgement of experiences in various views of academic integrity violation like plagiarism.

The findings of the reasons of such misconduct showed that student and faculty members possessed different understandings in defining plagiarism, its seriousness, and collusion. Students, generally, practice academic dishonesty because of pressure for scores, academic workloads, and ambiguity in teachers' instructions of what academic integrity is.

Academic integrity has been found a critical offence in online setting. Students admit it is convenient to plagiarize in online learning. Thus, academic cheating tends to happen more (Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas, and Davis, 2000).

Online learning enables students to work anywhere with anybody, so teachers have hard time detecting, identifying, and evaluating students' real performance. These mentioned reasons spell out the challenge teachers are coping with, and dilemma to embed on-line activities into their courses.

Primary effort regarding academic integrity is to hinder plagiarism and assure students produce their own work. Therefore, students should be clarified of definition of academic integrity, and guidelines of instructions and behavior expectation, and penalty.

Sutton and Taylor (2011) point out those university lecturers are in a difficult position. On the one hand, they want to improve students' transferrable skills and on the other hand, they need to ensure the integrity of the assessment procedures.

This study was, therefore, conducted to provide information which will assist educators to understand what students perceive in terms of academic integrity and learn more about their behaviors. Studying students' behaviors of academic dishonesty in an online activity enables the teacher in charge to reconsider whether the time spent on posting messages is worth it when balanced with knowledge students will acquire. Knowing students' actual behaviors can help teachers resolve the problem of academic dishonesty appropriately.

Without this understanding, it is rather difficult to develop suitable teaching methods or set ground rules that will successfully help to protect academic dishonesty in online learning environments.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study contains four main research objectives as follows:

- ✓ To study students' perception of academic integrity relating to posting the contents in the forum.
- ✓ To study students' behavior of academic integrity when they are required to post the contents in the forum.
- ✓ What are the reasons why students violate academic integrity?

METHOD

Participants

This study employed a mixed method approach. That is, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants and the interviews were performed after the participants completed the questionnaire. The survey included the responses of 160 participants from four sections, enrolled in a fundamental English course (EN111). Of the 160 total participants, 91 were male and 69 were female. Since the academic dishonesty issue was rather sensitive to all students, the researcher was afraid that the real information could not be reached. Therefore, four students working as research assistants were asked to help in distributing the questionnaire in each class without the teacher presence. Students in all sections were informed that responding the questionnaire was voluntary and their responses would not affect their score or grade since the data would be used for the research study. Selection was based on the participants' willingness to take part in the study.

Instruments

The questionnaire was developed through initial focus groups and feedback from experts in the area. The first part asked about their gender.

The second part asked students to rate the degree of academic misconduct on ten items with three-rating scale (1= not cheating, 2=minor violation, 3=major violation).

The third part assessed whether students did 10 actions when they were assigned to join the forum writing activity. Responses were on two choices -- yes or no. The 10 items were adapted from Spaulding's work (2009) in combination with an analysis of academic misconduct types found in students' postings in previous semester. The draft questionnaire items were checked for content validity by three experts in the English teaching field. If the IOC value is higher than 0.5, it is accepted (Rovinelli and Hambleton, 1977).

However, if the item is lower than 0.5, it has to be revised. The results showed that all items could be reserved as they possessed proper index (0.66-1.00). Based on the experts' feedback, the revisions had been done to prevent any misinterpretations.

The validated questionnaire was then pilot-tested with 40 students who were not the target group and checked for determining an internal consistency reliability coefficient. The alpha coefficient value of 0.96 indicated that the reliability of the questionnaire was high.

After students completed the questionnaire, research assistants would ask only the ones who checked "yes" in the third part of the questionnaire to stay and have a semi-structured interview for an average of about 10 minutes for each person.

A written consent was obtained from the participants for the audio tape interviews.The participants were asked to state the reasons behind each action they performed. The interviews were recorded by an MP3 player for further analysis.

Later, all the recorded interviews were fully transcribed by the researcher and the transcriptions were judiciously read and coded. The codes were then categorized.

Teaching and Learning Context

EN111 (Fundamental English I) was a 3-credit, 14-week compulsory course designed for the first-year students who met the instructor in class once a week for two periods (140 minutes). The main objectives of classroom meetings were set for developing two skills including reading, and writing.

As for listening and speaking skills, students were required to practice them through computerized language learning in a self-study language laboratory for one period a week. Since the course aimed at enhancing students' skills in writing logical responses to texts, an activity called "writing in the discussion forum" through Learning Management System (LMS) was assigned to all students who were enrolled in these courses.

Although the discussion forum was originally set to be a place for general topics, this course took advantage of using it as a platform for students' practices of English writing skills.

With this text-based forum, students could initiate their own discussions or contribute to discussions initiated by others. To write in the discussion forum, students logged on to enter the online course.

They clicked on the menu "forums" then the menu "general topic." The screen would display the already existing topics shown as hyperlinks, with the number of replies, names of the posters, the number of viewers, and the post dates. Students could choose either to respond to the already existing topics or initiate a new topic by clicking on the menu "new topic."

The forum writing activity which was designed to give students a kind of intellectual participation lasted 10 weeks starting in week 3. Students formed a group of five. They took turns to post a topic for discussion in the LMS forum.

A rubric for assessing the writing can be distributed as follows:

Score	Rubric Distributions
8-10 points	The number of posts is of 8-10 posts, responding to 2-3 topics. The length of each post is very close to the requirement (50-100 words for each message). The content of each message is relevant to what has been discussed (the topics or messages), accurate in terms of language use and grammar and mechanics, effective in terms of consisting mostly of statements of describing, explaining, expressing like or dislike of what others have posted, and showing agree/disagreement with others."
5-7 points	The number of posts is less than 8 posts (or responding to less than 2 topics). The length of each post is quite less than what has been required (50-100 words for each message). The content of each message is not quite relevant to what has been discussed (the topics or messages), not quite accurate in terms of language use and grammar and mechanics, not quite effective in terms of consisting mostly of statements of describing, explaining, expressing like or dislike of what others have posted, and showing agree/disagreement with others."
1-4 points	The number of posts is only few (showing that they hardly join the forum). The length of each post is of only a few words for each message. The content of each message is so little that it is not enough to be evaluated for its relevance, accuracy, and effectiveness.
0	Not joining the forum at all.

The topic had to be written in a paragraph to express ideas or opinions in a way that encouraged other students to discuss. Each posted topic required a response in a well thought-out paragraph from others. The response messages were supposed to show how the students could think critically. The length of posting each message was about 80-100 words. All in all, everyone was required to post a topic twice and respond to another eight topics. In this activity, the instructor acted as a facilitator who often read students' writing and gave suggestions about the grammar and mechanics of writing. To make this writing forum more important, students would have 10 points to earn, and they were informed beforehand of the standard for assessing their writing.To allow students to respond critically, the teacher taught them how to give reflections in terms of describing, explaining, expressing their likes or dislikes of what others had posted, interpreting, and showing their agreement or disagreement with other students' thoughts.

DATA COLLECTION and ANALYSIS

In week 13, after the writing activity in the online discussion forum finished, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants, and the interview was conducted. Then data were calculated for frequency and percentage.

RESULTS

Research Question 1
What is students' perception of academic dishonesty in a writing forum activity?

To answer this question, the data of students' views of academic integrity were analyzed by frequency and percentage, and the results were presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Frequency and Percentage of Students'
Perceptions of Academic Integrity (n=160)**

Regarding the forum writing activity, please rate the degree of academic misconduct in the following items	Not Cheating	Minor Violation	Major Violation
1. adapting the content from another person's work or other academic sources such as books and websites to post	70 (43.8)	72 (45.0)	18 (11.3)
2. receiving unauthorized aid from another person in composing ideas	78 (48.8)	79 (49.4)	3 (1.9)
3. allowing another person to copy your work	22 (13.8)	100 (62.5)	38 (23.8)
4. taking another person's material as your own to post it	-	32 (20.0)	128 (80.0)
5. using the same ideas to post in different topics	71 (44.4)	87 (54.4.)	2 (1.3)
6. copying some sentences from other academic source such as books and websites without using quotation marks or giving proper acknowledgment to the original author or source	101 (63.1)	54 (33.8)	5 (3.1)
7. copying all information from other academic sources such as books and websites to post it as your own work	-	23 (14.4)	137 (85.6)
8. helping another person to compose ideas	107 (66.9)	47 (29.4)	6 (3.8)
9. preparing all the content and post for another person	-	55 (34.4)	105 (65.6)
10. having another person to work and post for you	-	84 (52.5)	76 (47.5)

Table: 1 shows how students perceived academic integrity. Among ten behaviors, "Copying all information from other academic sources" was rated the most violating (85.6%), followed by "taking another person's material as your own to post" (80%), "preparing all the content and post for another person" (65.6%), and "having another person to work and post for you"(47.5%). Even though these four behaviors were perceived as misconduct behaviors for all students, their perception varied into two groups: major violation and minor violation. However, behaviors similar to collaboration among peers (number 2, 3 and 8), adapting the content (number 1), reusing the ideas (number 5), and copying some sentences (number 6) were not perceived as major violation of academic integrity for some students. So, they rated these items as 'not cheating.'

Research Question 2
How do students behave in terms of academic integrity when they are required to post the contents in a forum? To answer this question, the data of students' perceived behaviors were analyzed by frequency and percentage, and the results were presented in Table: 2.

156

Table: 2
Frequency and Percentage of Students' Behavior
of Academic Misconduct (n=160)

Items	Yes	Percentage
1. adapting the content from another person's work or other academic sources such as books and websites to post	16	10 %
2. receiving unauthorized aid from another person in composing ideas	24	15%
3. allowing another person to copy your work	19	11.9%
4. taking another person's material as your own to post it	5	3.1%
5. using the same ideas to post in different topics	13	8.1%
6. copying some sentences from other academic source such as books and websites without using quotation marks or giving proper acknowledgment to the original author or source	25	15.6%
7. copying all information from other academic sources such as books and websites to post it as your own work	2	1.3%
8. helping another person to compose ideas	17	10.6%
9. preparing all the content and post for another person	9	5.6%
10. having another person to work and post for you	5	3.1%

Table: 2 showed that misconduct behaviors occurred on "copying some sentences from other academic source" the most, followed by "receiving unauthorized aid from another person in composing ideas" and "allowing another person to copy your work." Among ten items, students engaged in no. 7 the least (copying all information from other academic sources to post it as their own work, n=2). It is interesting to see that only five students violated academic integrity in two items concerning allowing another person to copy work or to work for them.

Research Question 3
What are the reasons why students violate academic integrity?

This part required the replies from students who had experiences of violating academic integrity. The results revealed that only 22 out of 160 participants used to perform the actions specified in part three of the questionnaire. The reasons why students violated academic integrity can be listed in order from most to least as follows:

Table: 3
Reasons of violating academic integrity

Reasons	n
Wanting to get good scores	15
Having a lot of assignments to do at the same time	12
Wanting to help friends	10
Teacher's unclear explaining about what to be posted	8
Not giving enough time to post in the forum	6
Feeling bored with the posting activity	2
Knowing that other students also violate academic integrity	1

n=number of respondents answering the item

The numbers of students answering this part were 22. From data analysis, it was found that most students stated more than one reason.

According to Table: 3, the reasons they stated most was 'wanting to get good scores' (n=15). The second reason was 'having a lot of assignments to do at the same time' (n=12). Moreover, students identified 'wanting to help friends' as the third order for the reason of violating academic integrity (n=10).

DISCUSSION of FINDINGS

The results come up with two interesting issues that should be brought to discussion as follows:

Based on the result of students' perception, it is clear that most students do not understand the meaning of academic integrity, they identified some behaviors as not cheating. For example, they cannot distinguish between collaboration and academic misconduct. Students might think that they were helping their friends. It is rather difficult for them to distinguish between collusion and academic misconduct. The wrong concept could lead to violating academic integrity as misconduct behavior occurred when they were assigned to post in an online forum. Apart from that, copying some sentences to use in their posting was not violating academic integrity for most students. It was found that a few students used the same content to post. The reason why nearly half of all students chose to post the same ideas many times was probably because they might not realize that this is self-plagiarism.

Therefore, it is necessary to explain to them the rules of good writing as well as to encourage them to do an assignment on a basis of honesty. Before the activity starts, students should be informed and explained about what behavior is a kind of 'violating academic integrity.' However, students in this study were not told about misconduct behaviors since the aim of the study was to investigate their perception. That is why academic misconduct behaviors still existed. It is interesting to see that very few students violated academic integrity in terms of copying all information from other academic sources such as books and websites to post it as their own work. This finding is consistent with previous perception in that the action is a kind of major violation. Meanwhile, certain behaviors such as allowing another person to work for them and working for another person can be easily understood that if they commit them, they will get a punishment.

Therefore, they tend to avoid these actions. In addition, students had confusion about working together and academic integrity.

Previous work has shown that whilst students generally have a clear understanding about the more overt acts of academic misconduct such as coercing others into doing assignments, they are less clear about the distinction between legitimate collaboration and collusion (Taylor, Glaister, & Sutton 2007).

Whenever students have a sense that they are involving in a learning process, they will not accept a certain action to be academic misconduct (Yeo, 2007).

However, their responses point out that they do not know much about plagiarism since some students copied some sentences from other academic source without giving references.

This finding can be supported by what Bloodgood, Turnley and Mudrack (2010) stated in that students had academic dishonesty because they did not know they were copying.

CONCLUSION

Teachers need to clearly explain to students regarding rules of good writing, and to highly value honesty in work in the beginning of the class.

Once students are informed and understand what 'violating academic integrity' is, plagiarism should be increased.

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160

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