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Mix(ed/ing) Messages: Online Teaching, Student Success, and Academic Integrity in Sociology

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Plagiarism and cheating are nothing new. While these terms may be regarded as distinct categories of academic integrity, significant overlap exists, particularly when working with students in an online environment. The most common intersection includes when a student uses someone else's work, language, ideas or other original material without acknowledging its source, either deliberately, carelessly, or inadequately (Heckler & Forde, 2015). More specifically, this paper focuses primarily on textual plagiarism which is "...the reproduction of text from other academic sources, such as journal articles, books, or lecture notes without the adequate acknowledgment of the source, copying some or all of other students' assignments or even having assignments ghost-written by other authors" (Selwyn, 2008, p. 465). In Latin, "plagiarism" means "kidnapper" or "abductor." Not long ago, plagiarism was hard work, involving physically visiting brick and mortar libraries, combing through seemingly endless volumes of papers, books, or microfiche, copying these sources by hand, followed by re-writing or re-typing them into another paper, and eventually turning it in as one's own work. Alternately, students could find someone else to do their assignment, often for a very steep price. Still, most cases of plagiarism are largely unintentional due to the lack of knowledge of what exactly constitutes plagiarism and cheating (Howard & Davies, 2009). However, in today's fast-paced, high-tech world, finding ways to assuage the stresses involved with producing college-level work are much more streamlined and accessible than ever before.

At the same time, colleges and universities are increasingly relying on partially or fully online classes to teach students, and sociology is no different (Bergstrand & Savage, 2013; Mokoni, 2015; Allen & Seaman, 2016). Consequently, many sociology instructors are concerned that online courses might be particularly vulnerable for instances of plagiarism. As the study of human social interactions and institutions, sociology's subject matter is both extremely diverse and engaging. Students learn about important matters impacting their own lives, communities, and the world, creating an almost unlimited amount of available information from which to draw. For online sociology instructors, this strong emphasis on reading, writing, critical analysis, and qualitative methods requires careful attention to encourage independent thinking and deter plagiarism. Overall, this paper discusses the occurrence of plagiarism with regard to online sociology courses, important sociological factors that contribute to an overall culture that may support plagiarism, and current recommendations for encouraging student success and academic integrity specifically within online sociology courses.

The Prevalence of Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a widespread concern among colleges and universities. Both academic studies and non-academic polls consistently show that students cheat across all disciplines, course structures, and types of assignments (Campbell, 2006; Dalal, 2016; Martinelli et al, 2015; McCabe, 2005). For example, a study sponsored

by the International Center for Academic Integrity surveyed over 1,800 students from both public and private colleges (including those with online programs) found that 80 percent of college students admitted to cheating at least once (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2004). In their book *Cheating in College—Why Students Do It and What Educators Can Do about It*, researchers McCabe, Butterfield and Trevino (2012) shared the results of a national survey indicating that 74 percent of students admitted to at least engaging in “serious” cheating at least once in the past school year; 54 percent of students admitted specifically to plagiarizing from the Internet; and 47 percent of students believed their teachers blatantly ignore students who cheat. Another survey of both faculty and students also reported that 36 percent of undergraduate students specifically acknowledged having plagiarized on assignments and 26 percent of papers submitted actually contained plagiarism, as reported by instructors (Belter & du Pre, 2009). Alarming, 77 percent of 50,000 students surveyed nationwide did not view plagiarism as a serious offense (Badke, 2007). This was even truer with regard to self-plagiarism, where students re-use a paper or assignment that was previously submitted and graded for another class. More specifically, over half of students did not believe that self-plagiarism should be considered an offense (Halupa & Bolliger, 2015). Students overwhelmingly believed that they owned their own work and should be able to re-use it for other assignments at any time.

Online education is expanding tremendously within higher education, allowing more opportunities for students to learn than ever before (Allen & Seaman, 2016). But, does this also create new opportunities to cheat? According to recent studies of online education programs at colleges and universities, online enrollment is up while faculty confidence in the online courses is down. In fact, more than one in four students (28 percent) now take a least one distance learning course, totaling more than 5.8 million students nationwide, most of whom attend public universities (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Still, only 29.1 percent of academic leaders stated that their faculty accepted the “value and legitimacy of online education” (Allen & Seaman, 2016, n.p.). Similarly, only half of college presidents said that online course provide the same value as more traditional face-to-face courses (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). In a study of 118 sociology courses, online sociology students indicated that they felt that they had learned less, were treated with less respect, and rated online classes less effective overall compared to traditional face-to-face classes (Bergstand & Savage, 2013). The perception that online courses are less academically challenging and rigorous is one that is commonly held by administrators, faculty, and students alike.

Research shows that the percentage of college students admitting to cheating increased steadily from about 23 percent in 1941 to as much as 90 percent in some more recent studies (Drake, 1941; Jenson et al, 2002). In a survey of 1,055 public and private college and university presidents, more than half reported a

significant increase in plagiarism over the last ten years, largely assumed to be attributed to technology and the Internet (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). With the assistance of the Internet and related technologies, students do have more ways to be academically dishonest than previous generations. In 2015, two text-similarity programs, Turnitin and Urkund, were used to identify potentially plagiarized papers submitted to online social science courses identified that 75 percent contained “significant” or worse plagiarism (at least 100 words) and 39 percent “very much” plagiarism (at least 500 words) (Mokoni, 2015). When comparing on-line and face-to-face classes, survey results showed high levels of academic dishonesty in both groups with very few ever caught (Watson & Sottile, 2010). Dishonest behaviors included giving someone answers, submitting others’ work as their own, using instant messaging through a cell phone or handheld device during an exam or quiz, receiving answers to a quiz or exam from someone who has already taken it, copying another student’s work without their permission and submitting it as one’s own work, knowingly copying passages from an article or book directly into a paper without citing it as someone’s else’s work, and using a term paper from a writing service to complete an assignment. For many of these fraudulent behaviors, face-to-face students actually indicated higher rates of participation in cheating, especially receiving answers from a previously taken quiz or exam, directly plagiarizing someone else’s work and submitting it as their own or without proper citations, and using a term paper writing service (Watson & Sottile, 2010).

Similarly, in a comparative study of dissertations from a brick-and-mortar versus online institutions, there was no statistically significant difference between dissertations from traditional and online institutions (Ison, 2014). In both environments, about half of all dissertations contained plagiarized material with traditional dissertations exhibiting higher levels. Because students in any course format utilize the same resources (e.g., online databases and literature) and technologies (e.g., cutting and pasting), the risk of plagiarism exists everywhere and is not exclusive to online environments (Ison, 2014). Online learners may even experience some protective factors inhibiting plagiarism. For instance, online learners may also be savvier in navigating online resources and technologies, perhaps lessening their chances of unintentional plagiarism. Online learners seem to be more knowledgeable about the details of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism (Halupa & Bolliger, 2015). Moreover, online learners (particularly graduate level students) tend to be older and more mature, possibly making them less prone to commit plagiarism (Ison, 2014).

Several other studies assess the tempting nature of the Internet towards cheating, particularly though instant communication measures, easily accessible information, and simple cut-and-paste features (Gilmore et al, 2010; McCabe, 2005). For those who can afford them, SmartPhones and even newer SmartWatches also provide easy to hide electronic cheat sheets, tiny video cameras,

silent messaging, translators, powerful search engines, and access to underground mechanisms for students to share assignments (Evering & Moorman, 2012). Research supports high rates of plagiarism and cheating among online learners who spend the bulk of their academic careers behind computers (Baker, Thornton & Adams, 2008; McCabe, Travino & Butterfield 2001; Selwyn 2008). Until recently, much of this research has been based on anecdotal evidence and/or self-reported data from faculty and students (Ison, 2014). Because cheating has been evident throughout the history of higher education, the realities of plagiarism and cheating among online learners, especially compared to traditional face-to-face students, still remains unclear. Additionally, the growth of online learning and improvement in online course management impacting academic integrity has not been fully assessed.

While online courses bring their own set of unique challenges, plagiarism and cheating are prevalent everywhere, regardless of course subject or format. Furthermore, current research shows the general assumption that online courses are worse off in terms of academic value or integrity is largely unsubstantiated.

The Culture of Plagiarism

Plagiarism continues to be a major concern throughout higher education. In his book, *The Culture of Cheating: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (2004), David Callahan explains that cheating on every level has risen dramatically over the last several decades. In terms of academic integrity specifically, this rise in plagiarism is the result of several interrelated sociological factors influencing social behaviors and norms around the issues of plagiarism and cheating. This social understanding of academic integrity among college students is crucial to help faculty and administrators better combat any acts of plagiarism and cheating. The social factors that help establish an overarching culture supporting plagiarism and cheating on college campuses often include the inconsistencies found in policies and sanctions, socialization, the strong influence of peers, and cultural differences.

Most importantly, the *variation of institutional policies on academic integrity* across universities, colleges, and even individual classes leaves a lack of understanding or even ignorance about basic norms involving plagiarism. These policies may lack simple detail or be severely ambiguous, vague, or inconsistent (Bretag et al, 2011; McCabe & Makowski, 2001). Moreover, the response to violations is so vast and unpredictable that students may believe such sanctions are of little consequence and importance, so they should not be distressed when engaging such acts in their work (Bretag et al, 2011). In many universities, colleges, and individual classes, plagiarism may result in experiencing no penalties, receiving a warning, having to re-write the assignment, earning a zero on the assignment, failing the course, being suspended from school (either temporarily or permanently), or anywhere in between (Heckler & Forde, 2015). Sometimes these

consequences depend on the degree of infraction severity, who is assessing the situation, and what evidence can be collected and verified. These factors are further complicated in online courses where the environment can be geographically distant, highly impersonal or even alienating, as well as exclusively dependent on technology versus face-to-face interactions (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997; Bergstrand & Savage, 2013). Who makes the ultimate decision on the student's future—the instructor, administrators, a university-wide academic integrity office, or some type of honor board (consisting of students, faculty, or both)—also varies. Some schools and faculty adhere to a formal or uniform process while others elect more informal, case-by-case resolutions (Greenberg, 2015). The institutional inconsistencies that exist, or are at least believed to exist by faculty and students, are often further reinforced by student rumor and shared beliefs that reinforce further incorrect interpretations of academic integrity and consequences of violations (Heckler & Forde, 2015). Ultimately, students almost always receive mixed messages about what constitutes plagiarism and cheating and what are the eventual results.

Even more alarming, 54 percent of students specified that cheating was considered acceptable and 97 percent of cheaters admitted to never being caught (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2004). Likewise, in a popular poll administered by the *U.S. News and World Report*, 90 percent of students believed that cheaters were rarely or appropriately disciplined (Lytle, 2012). According to a study looking at administrators' perceptions of student academic dishonesty, 257 chief student affairs officers across the United States believed that colleges and universities do not address the cheating problem adequately (McCabe & Pavela, 2004). Overall, these long-term trends create a culture among many colleges and universities that perpetuates plagiarism and cheating, causing significant confusion for students, faculty, and administrators.

Further threatening the culture of academic integrity, *high-profile academic plagiarism cases* also result in unclear and inconsistent outcomes, problematizing the ethical constructs informing today's social perspectives on this issue. In 2017, Monica Crowley, a *Fox News* contributor who earned a PhD from Columbia University, was accused of plagiarizing her dissertation written in 2000. The reports indicated that she had "40 lengthy instances of lifting paragraphs from numerous sources, including several scholarly texts, the Associated Press, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger" (Kaczynski, Massie & McDermott, 2017, n.p.). Similarly, plagiarism was found in Crowley's 2017 book entitled *What The (Bleep) Just Happened*. Other instances of plagiarism by Crowley, dating back to 1999, were also met with no apparent consequences. While these revelations led to Crowley being dismissed from consideration to serve in a top national security communications role in Donald Trump's presidential administration, she retained

her employment at *Fox News* and regularly serves as a guest expert and host despite any acts of academic dishonesty (Smith, 2017).

Another recent example is Alice Goffman, a Princeton University trained sociologist and Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of Wisconsin-Madison (and also the daughter of famed sociologist Irving Goffman), who was accused of dishonesty concerning her award-winning book *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (2014) which chronicles the lives of young black men in urban Philadelphia. When questioned by colleagues about the accuracy and integrity of her ethnographic research, Goffman failed to provide details of her work, indicating that she had destroyed all her field notes and interview transcripts in order to protect her subjects. Although these accusations circulated through the media, including a cover story in *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Parry, 2015), University of Wisconsin-Madison and her publishers continued to fully support Goffman and her work stating that the allegations had no merit. However, students and alumni of Pomona College argued against Goffman's recent visiting professor appointment at their institution based on her troubled past. Academic scholars and administrators warned that this type of reaction accusing an esteemed researcher of untruthfulness "treads on dangerous territory" (Brown, 2017, n.p.).

If well-trained academic professionals from top-tier universities can find themselves in academic dishonesty quagmires, it is not surprising that for many college students, difficulty lies between clearly copying someone else's texts and blurring the lines of borrowing words from another source to incorporate into their own ideas. The ready access to an unlimited number of Internet resources has particularly increased the occurrence of digital plagiarism, making such behavior the most prevalent among plagiarism forms (Butakov & Scherbrinin, 2009; Tackett et al, 2010). Some students do fall into the categories of intentional or "sneaky" cheaters, sometimes even working hard to avoid detection by cutting and pasting bits and pieces from a variety of Internet sources to blend together a supposedly original piece of work. However, as students take short-cuts or misunderstand the concepts of plagiarism in an era of shared media, retweets, and data-sharing, who "owns" information and what is "general knowledge" is progressively confusing and questioned, resulting in careless or inadequate citations (Bouchard, 2017). Given such unmitigated access to a wide range of information and resources now, not understanding exactly what "common knowledge" is and is not as well as confusion around individual versus collaborative work is widespread (Mokoni, 2015). Many college students may not appreciate the importance of acknowledging someone else's hard work, especially when considering a significant lack of knowledge about plagiarism coupled with the added effort needed to properly cite and more fully develop their own individual perspectives.

Deliberate plagiarism and cheating still account for a low percentage of all academic integrity cases (Howard & Davies, 2009; Jones, 2011). Moreover, some

level of plagiarism and cheating occurs amongst nearly all students (Gilmore et al, 2010). Students may create opportunities of convenience or feel compelled to turn to plagiarism and cheating due to numerous characteristics and stressors, such as poor time management skills, competing priorities (e.g., work, family, and other classes), feelings of panic, and the inability to effectively deal with this anxiety or fear of failure (Bouchard, 2017). Students may also lack confidence in their own work and abilities (Williams, 2002). Additionally, students may not develop the appropriate studying, research, and documentation skills and do not understand the time and patience required to effectively learn, particularly based on their prior educational experiences (Cizek, 2003). Students may see some practices, such as homework collaboration, work sharing, and sharing assessment questions and answers as collaborative short-cuts, increasing their efficiency, rather than recognizing these acts as violations of academic integrity or cheating.

Although most public and private colleges and universities have some sort of academic policy or honor code admonishing plagiarism and cheating, very few instructors *explicitly discuss plagiarism and cheating* with their students, including providing specific examples of contexts and variations. Without specific guidance otherwise, students are socialized to view plagiarism and cheating as acceptable behaviors, particularly when students are also struggling with limited time, little enthusiasm for the subject, increased external pressure to succeed (often for financial reasons given the high costs of tuition), and an innate desire to test the system (especially with minor offenses) (Houston & Whigham, n.d.). In fact, for students who show considerable initiative, plagiarism can save time and effort and improve results, particularly in a results-driven environment (Duguid, 1996). This mentality is further supported by prominent “real world” examples, such as software and technology industries which are built on free and accessible resources like open-source code as well as an ethos of collaboration in order to share “ideas, hints, de-bugging help, or problem solving strategies and program structure” (Greenberg, 2015, n. p.). Students might begin to believe that it is easier just to copy someone else’s work--when it is literally right in front of them and at their fingertips--than to actually do the work themselves and create something new.

Many college students develop the notion that plagiarism is not theft, but rather the spread of information and knowledge. Evering and Moorman (2012, p. 37) explain that the current methods for defining plagiarism and cheating are “based on the capitalist view of property and ownership.” As a result, everything of value (including ideas, knowledge, art, and music) can be owned, bought, and sold. Instructors want their students’ work to represent their own personal hard labor and reflect successful learning outcomes (Evering & Moorman, 2012). However, should these assumptions change given the Internet and the boundless access to a wide variety of ideas and information (much of which goes uncited or unattributed) that is available today? Today’s college students experience lifelong exposure to

technology. Anthropologist Susan Blum (2010) suggests that this open-access Internet age changed concepts of authorship, intellectual property, copyright, and originality which needs to be better clarified. What constituted “cheating” 100 years ago vastly differs from “cheating” today when every known fact is readily accessible on the Internet, students are increasingly encouraged to collaborate on projects and share knowledge, inspiring both creativity and problem-solving (Greenberg, 2015). Those students who have come of age in the digital age understand originality, authorship, intellectual property, and copyright very differently based on a sharing economy dominated by the likes of Wikipedia, Airbnb, Uber, and freely borrowed music and videos (Introna et al, 2003). Consequently, most cases of plagiarism stem from poor information processing practices in terms of what get cited (or not) and what citation actually means. Again, students have difficulty sorting through varying definitions and understandings of plagiarism, mainly between academia and actual practice.

Even when students are aware of cheating, plagiarism, and their consequences, it continues. Students’ *perceptions of peers’ behaviors* are one of the most powerful influencers on whether a student cheats (McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield, 2001). As established through numerous studies and real life examples, plagiarism and cheating within academia has a long and sordid past even amongst some of the best and brightest (Belter & du Pre, 2009; Brown, 2017; Kaczynski, Massie & McDermott, 2017; Lytle, 2012; McCabe & Pavela, 2004; McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield 2004; Parry, 2015). Researchers Scanlon and Neumann (2002) offer a different perspective based on their survey of 698 college students across nine campuses. In their study, very few students admitted their own cheating--only 8 percent of students reported frequently copying text without citation, 3 percent copying a paper without citation, and 2 percent purchasing a paper online suggesting much lower levels of plagiarism compared to other studies. On the other hand, when asked about their peers’ behaviors, students indicated much higher rates--50 percent frequently copied text without citations, 28 percent copied a paper without citations, and 21 percent purchased a paper online (Scanlon & Neumann 2002). Students routinely perceive that other students engage in plagiarism and cheating much more often than they are willing to report about themselves (Evering & Moorman 2012). Assumptions about the high frequency of cheating, particularly among others, may distort the understanding of the overall climate around academic integrity. Regardless of their own behaviors, students believe their peers cheat much more often, contributing to a culture of general malaise regarding plagiarism and further establishing a justification for dishonest behaviors.

Students across the globe agree that cheating is unethical and creates a stain within the academic community (Doss et al, 2017; Heckler & Forde 2015). However, plagiarism and cheating are not universal concepts. The exact definitions

and expectations of plagiarism and cheating are often based on *cultural values* (Heckler & Forde 2015; Thompson et al, 2017; Vance 2017). Some international students might not fully understand the notions of “common knowledge,” idea sharing versus cheating, group work versus individualism, teacher-centered versus learner-centered models, collaboration versus competition, and honor versus betrayal (Bethany, 2016). Additionally, students have different experiences with learning a writing style, accessing teachers, getting help, ownership of intellectual property, technology dependence, and overall classroom culture, particularly online (Thompson et al, 2017; Vance 2017). In some settings and cultures, using other people’s words or ideas as their own is an acceptable (and sometime revered) practice for writers of certain kinds of texts, making the concepts of plagiarism and documentation even less clear cut (Gunnarsson, Kulesza, & Pettersson 2014; Houston & Whigham n.d.). For example, information sharing is common among students from countries like Russia, Germany, Mexico, Burma, Spain, and Costa Rica and citations are not always expected (Bethany, 2016; Introna et al, 2003). In other countries, such as China, India, and Bangladesh, “intellectual property” is a foreign concept and cheating is sometimes seen as necessary in order to succeed (Introna et al, 2003). For these reasons, plagiarism due to copying without proper citations or misuse of sources is often higher among international students (Chuah, 2010). International students bring with them their own world views that may result in conflicting teaching and learning styles with regard to accurately understanding plagiarism and cheating.

This confusion is further complicated by the contradictions commonly found in academic expectations across universities, colleges, disciplines, and individual face-to-face and online classes. For students with different cultural backgrounds and histories, discussing both the philosophy behind academic integrity and honesty in addition to the mechanics of how to avoid plagiarism and cheating is instrumental (Introna et al, 2003; Vance, 2017). More specifically, many students may not understand the emphasis on reasoning, individualism, creativity, and autonomy as important cornerstones of western intellectualism (Vance, 2017). Clarity on these issues is especially important since for some international students, plagiarism and cheating infractions cannot only lead to academic sanctions but also life-altering consequences such as deportation, public loss of honor, or a permanently tarnished reputation.

Because plagiarism and cheating are social and cultural constructs, establishing a climate of academic integrity and accomplishment is paramount (Heckler & Forde, 2015; Vance, 2017). This culture should be consistently reinforced at the classroom, department, college and university levels in order to change social norms and values involving academic integrity. The following recommendations can be used to more effectively address critical issues, change

attitudes, values and beliefs about plagiarism and cheating, and support a successful learning environment within online sociology courses.

Encouraging Student Success and Academic Integrity

Although the consequences of plagiarism and cheating are often inconsistent, most faculty and administrators focus on *punishments* after a transgression has already occurred in order to instill fear as a deterrent. Harsh punishment may seem like the appropriate reaction because plagiarism and cheating are considered by many (particularly in academia) morally and ethically wrong (Evering & Moorman, 2012). However, just making punishments more consistent and severe is not an effective deterrent either. Education, psychology and behavioral science research consistently shows that punishment does not change the tendency to engage in the behavior that was punished. For universities with strict honor codes, a zero tolerance allows for a uniform “one strike and you’re out” expectation, often for both students and faculty, but even these most stringent honor codes fail to stop cheating on college campuses. (Cyrnowski, 2012). Not only do these honor codes do very little to eliminate cheating, but they also inhibit enriching collaborations outside of the classroom which are fundamental for learning and skill development (Greenberg, 2015). In a study conducted by academic integrity expert Donald McCabe (2005), more than half of all honor-code school students reported that they had engaged in some form of cheating compared to 68 percent of students at schools without honor codes. However, given this was a self-reported survey, students at the honor-code schools may feel more pressure to lie about their dishonest behaviors resulting in lower reported rates (McCabe, 2005). Instead of deterring academic dishonesty, these types of strict policies only make the person want to avoid the source of punishment—in these cases the instructor, the class, and maybe school all together (Qualls & Gibbs, 2017). Punishment does nothing to improve student’s knowledge, skills or behaviors, nor does it inspire students to do better next time.

To be most effective, clear discussions about cheating and plagiarism need to take place regularly throughout any course before students are faced with any opportunities for academic dishonesty (Carter & Punyanunt-Carter, 2007). If not, students can interpret this tacit response as actually condoning dishonest behaviors (Martinelli et al, 2015). Colleges and universities need to shift their priority from deterring plagiarism and cheating to encouraging academic integrity, honesty, and accomplishment. While it is impossible to eliminate plagiarism and cheating from higher education all together, different pedagogical expectations, tools and techniques can be employed to support student success and honesty specifically within online sociology courses.

Due to the vast inconsistencies of plagiarism and cheating policies across campuses, it is necessary to *review the campus’ policies* first, particularly with regard to online classes, including the student handbook and any college-specific

academic policy websites. Also, conferring with colleagues and administrators is beneficial to better understand the overarching institutional expectations and specific processes regarding plagiarism and cheating, both face-to-face and online. Providing faculty development opportunities for instructors and administrators to compare experiences, reflect, and consider new ways of dealing with plagiarism and cheating, especially in light of advancing technologies, is also productive. Advocating for more consistency, as well as collecting data about types of infractions, prevalence within certain disciplines or courses, and students who seem to be at most risk, can help explain why students cheat, who may be at increased risk, and how to prevent it. Often, faculty only learn about the details (or lack thereof) of their academic integrity policies when they are forced to confront a crisis situation. Confronting students about academic misconduct and plagiarism is highly unpleasant, maybe even more so with online students who are harder to reach (Bertram Gallant, 2008). Consequently, it is important to be proactive and understand options beforehand, such as procedures, penalties, standards of proof, administrative support, and documentation and reporting requirements at the department, college, and university levels.

Clearly reflecting these policy statements and making expectations explicit in the syllabus are crucial (Davis, 2009; Svinivki & McKeachie, 2011). Students need to know exactly what constitutes plagiarism and cheating and what are the consequences. These policies can include the overall institutional policy, class-specific policies, and/or an official definition of academic dishonesty. Since education is the best prevention, focusing on continuous improvement and clear feedback on what plagiarism and cheating entail is paramount. Linking these policies to specific online course content is also important, particularly with major assignments like exams or term papers. Because plagiarism and cheating are not necessarily universal concepts, detailed examples and models of appropriate behavior can be effective. The differences between the misuse of sources and actual plagiarism as well as what paraphrasing means need to be explained thoroughly. In order to affirm the understanding of this material and commitment to academic integrity, online instructors can assess the student's knowledge through a quiz, a response paper, or discussion board (Cizck, 2003; Schuetz, 2004). Many online courses include a separate learning module about plagiarism and cheating, as well as the proper use of Internet resources and citations, that students can refer back to throughout the semester and with each assignment.

One of the most effective ways to address plagiarism is to treat it as *an inherent part of the teaching and learning process* rather than as a problem that needs to be admonished. Faculty need to be open and honest about plagiarism, including highlighting examples in professional academic writing (Introna et al, 2003). Furthermore, discussions about plagiarism within the context of a social, political and cultural framework, particularly in a sociology course, are productive

(Scallon, 1995). Providing relevant and specific examples of various forms of plagiarism common among online courses is encouraged. Students must understand how to develop independent thought through effective borrowing of words and ideas and paragraphing, and faculty should maintain a supportive learning environment for this. Regular reminders about academic integrity throughout the course are also key. Students must realize that issues of integrity and honesty extend beyond just college. The importance of academic honesty to their overall career goals should be included. Lessons learned in class will prevent any potential problems later with graduate school or professional employment when consequences can be much direr.

Utilizing *creative and reflective assignments* that are both plagiarism-proof and re-inforce academic integrity within online sociology courses is critical. For example, the sociological imagination is a useful tool for teaching about academic integrity and plagiarism (Trautner & Borland, 2013). Developed by sociologists Trautner & Borland (2013), this in-class exercise gives instructors the platform to engage with students in a more detailed dialogue about academic integrity and the sociology imagination and can be easily modified for online use. After brainstorming via discussion board or another interactive online modality (e.g., Padlet or Voicethread) about why students might engage in dishonest behavior, students are presented vignettes (based on actual student cases experienced by instructors) which ask whether or not the cases go against academic integrity policies. Once answers are given by the students, step-by-step information is provided about what happens if the policy is violated, whom it affects, and why. Students are then able to better understand the relationships between personal troubles and public issues.

Many students choose to cheat when they perceive the assignment to be *irrelevant or busy work* (Mokoni, 2015). Topics that students can connect with their own interests and academic curiosities while giving them the opportunity to utilize the knowledge and skills learned in class are encouraged. To discourage plagiarism, assignments should be specific to the class with detailed questions that must be answered individually based on specific course content and linked to course objectives. Broad-based or “create your own” topics that can be easily searched on the Internet or re-cycled from other classes should be avoided. Instead, active writing assignments where students must operationalize or apply the information they find, rather than regurgitate it are preferred (Heckler, Forde & Bryan, 2013). Likewise, creating “authentic” writing projects that encourage students to use current events and/or think about how professionals in their field would respond are unique enough to be memorable deterring students from copying from a peer or re-using old papers (Anderson, Hoffman & Little, 2014).

Scaffolding the assignment or sequencing writing assignments, such as requiring students to submit brainstorming notes, proposals, outlines, annotated

bibliographies, cited references, and/or multiple drafts before the final draft is due promotes academic honesty. Students can also actively practice differentiating between an exact quote, paraphrasing, summary, critique, and expressing their own ideas. Detailed examples of correct citation formats and assessment criteria can be provided. If available, some campus writing centers or writing-across-the-curriculum programs will provide a virtual visit to your online class through a special module, video lecture, discussion board, or group chat.

Requiring paper/print-only sources can deter students from relying exclusively on Internet only sources. Since many online sociology students engage in multi-media assignments, copyright issues with regard to images, photographs, videos, and music should be discussed. Not only is copyright infringement against the law, but it also inhibits learning outcomes. For online writing assignments or assessments, reliance on pre-packaged test banks or assignment generators from textbook publishers should be avoided. Without much effort, students can find most of these test banks or assignments online and just cut and paste responses. It is important to regularly create new (and unsearchable) questions and assignments (at least some) each year to supplement any online resources.

There are some other simple *structural and formatting changes* to online writing assessments that can minimize the temptation to plagiarize or cheat. For papers, instructors should emphasize that the students are solely responsible for ensuring that they submit the correct paper and file to the digital dropbox by the deadline. Savvy students may “accidentally” submit draft versions or completely incorrect files, with the hope or expectation that the instructor will allow them to submit the correct version later, thus allotting them additional time for assignment completion. Another tactic that might occur is the submission of an intentionally corrupt file¹, with the same extended time goal. To deter this behavior, any corrections to the incorrect submission after the deadline should be subject to the same late assignment penalties as would any other late assignment.

For quizzes and exams, the questions and answer order can be randomized so no two students receive the exact same assessment. Also, instructors can allow only a certain number of questions to be seen at a time on the computer screen, prohibit backtracking through the exam, and not allow students to open up other windows (such as a search engine) while completing the assessment. Think about how much time students need to complete an assessment. Allowing too much time to look up answers while they are actually taking the assessment could invite trouble. A common tactic for cheating on online assessments is for students to take the assessment together or in sequence, either in the same physical location or via digitally enabled communications like video chatting or texting. Depending on the size of class, it can be challenging to recognize a pattern of student collaboration

¹ There are various tutorials readily available online to guide students on how to create a corrupted file.

however efforts can be made. Depending on the online platform in use, it is perhaps possible to download student assessment dates and times and sort them within an Excel file. While a high number of students will likely complete a quiz or test near the deadline, consistent patterns of times and days within a week, may raise concern and should be addressed. When such coordinated timing appears, it may be useful to also examine the pattern of correct and incorrect answers to see if consistency is demonstrated. Suspicion is raised with unexpectedly short engagement with an assessment—if the majority of students hypothetically take 8 minutes to complete a quiz and a student takes 1 minutes and earns a high grade, this should raise concern.

“Policing” academic dishonesty should be considered a last resort as it distracts instructors from ensuring learning (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Trautner & Borland, 2017). However, *plagiarism checkers* like TurnItIn (www.turnitin.com), PlagiarismDetect, VIPER and others are widely available to students and faculty and can be integrated into most learning management systems. They are used by thousands of institutions across the United States, both brick-and-mortar and online, and process tens of millions of student papers each year. This plagiarism detection software cross-references student papers to millions of student papers previously submitted to this system along with the Internet and online databases. Instantaneously, they produce a color-coded “originality report” that identifies areas of plagiarism and the source of the original text. Caution should be exercised as plagiarism checkers are sometimes unreliable. Such checkers may indicate a high likelihood of plagiarism, but upon review of a submission those content sections may be fully quoted and cited, thus not violating integrity and plagiarism policies. Ultimately, these tools serve as potential indicators of violations, not definitive describers of such activity. Some critics believe that these tools erode trust between teachers and students, but the knowledge that such tools are in use may also serve as a deterrent for students who are considering engaging in plagiarism.

This software also offers the opportunity for the assessment of any written student submissions beyond traditional papers, with some effort by the instructor. While creative assignments, with distinct topics and personal viewpoint and opinion may discourage plagiarism, Heckler, Forde & Bryan (2013) found students still engage in plagiarism of other students’ opinions. This may be particularly evident in discussion boards or assignments, if the same discussion board questions are repeated semester-to-semester. One potential way to address this issue is to inform students that discussion boards will also be assessed for originality. Originality can then be assessed by the instructor compiling discussion board posts into a single document and submitting it to originality assessment software, such as Turnitin. In so doing, the instructor may both assess the originality of the current posts and establish those posts within the originality database for later comparisons—thus identifying if a student has submitted work shared with them by a prior

student. Similarly, originality can be assessed with short answer and essay questions on tests and quizzes. One can compile all student answers into a single document for submission for originality assessment. It may be found that a student used the Internet during an exam to look up a question and simply copied an answer into their test, rather than writing an answer in their own words, based upon their learned knowledge and application of course content. In such an instance, it is important to again reiterate to students the importance of academic integrity and that their exam responses should be written in their own words, demonstrating their synthesis of learned course content.

In planning for any negative results obtained from plagiarism detection, reflective means such as dialogues and essays can be used to deal with plagiarism in addition to or in place of traditional disciplinary or punitive methods to address the application of unclear rules (Dalal, 2016). Again, these reflective exercises were originally designed for face-to-face courses but can be modified for online sociology courses. Reflective essays are meant to encourage honesty and awareness of thought and action, especially through a more personalized approach within an often detached environment such as online courses (Dalal, 2016). Among his undergraduate information systems students, Dalal (2016) found that while many students initially denied that they plagiarized, the reflective essay allowed students to acknowledge their wrongdoing without being accusatory or judgmental of the whole person. As a result, this led to feelings of regret and learning from the experience that went beyond academic integrity. This type of method takes into account plagiarism's many dimensions—technological, social, cultural, ethical and even generational in a diverse student body that typically seek out online learning.

Technology companies are also currently working on *early warning systems* for identifying students at risk for plagiarism and cheating (Bohannon, 2017). One example is using academic and demographic details to predict the likelihood of passing specific courses. Instructors are then given class lists that mark each student as green, yellow or red depending on their risk level. Verificent is using airport security technology to locate abnormal facial expressions that could indicate dishonestly. ProctorTrack is utilizing algorithms to detect unusual behaviors (like talking to someone off screen) that could constitute cheating and categorize students as having high or low integrity. These types of technologies are very expensive and imply that complex human behavior can be reduced to an algorithm. Simple and benign behaviors like stretching, looking away, or leaning down to pick up a pencil could flag your assignment. Also, there are significant ethical issues and privacy concerns with these new technologies that have not been entirely explored.

Conclusion

Cheating on assignments has always existed. Students turn to plagiarism and cheating for a wide variety of reasons, including lack of knowledge, concerns about grades, poor time management, financial stresses, pressure from parents and

peers, anxiety or fear, negative role models, inconsistent consequences, technology advancements, and cultural differences. Students, as with everyone, are also continuously trying to come up with faster, easier, cheaper, and more innovative ways to succeed. While nothing will eliminate plagiarism and cheating completely, encouraging a culture of honesty and integrity in every class environment is imperative regardless of format. Plagiarism and cheating are multi-faceted problems requiring multi-faceted solutions. Preventing plagiarism and cheating is a shared responsibility—just as students must live up to their ethical and moral responsibilities, instructors and administrators should also take an active role in maintaining structures and policies that help students succeed. Although addressing plagiarism within online courses provides a unique set of challenges, successfully overcoming these difficulties is possible. Online sociology instructors must carefully integrate a variety of productive strategies and techniques that foster academic accomplishment and integrity throughout the course, resulting in improved long-term student learning.

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