PREVENTING PLAGIARISM AND CHEATING

TOWARDS A LONG-TERM STRATEGY

MÉLANIE PAGÉ
Educational advisor
CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy

NANCY JOLICOEUR
Educational advisor
CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy

Given today's extensive use of technology, plagiarism and cheating constitute a "scourge" many educational institutions are constantly trying to battle. In this crusade, they must, first and foremost, defend the principles of academic integrity, which is essential to validating learning and preserving the value of diplomas and degrees. Colleges are doing their best to develop communication plans that condemn plagiarism, train faculty members in anti-plagiarism strategies, instruct students in the proper ways to cite sources, and so on. While all these measures are certainly worthwhile and helpful, how can we optimize their use and ensure their effectiveness?

The issue is complex, and we do not claim to have found the perfect solution for eliminating plagiarism once and for all; unfortunately, there will always be ill-intentioned students. Furthermore, as stressed by François Guénard (2012), failure to obey the rules, deception, and "compromises with reality" are here to stay. What we will do in this article is summarize the deliberations stemming from our contribution to the CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy's work on plagiarism. After discussing a few definitions, contextual factors, and issues, we will discuss the benefits of some anti-plagiarism strategies available to the colleges and detail potential avenues of action.

A GOOD DEFENCE MAKES THE BEST OFFENCE

Very often, "plagiarism" is used to designate all cases in which the principles of academic integrity and recognition of intellectual property are ignored; accordingly, the term is applied, in standard discourse, to plagiarism in its true sense—i.e., the unacknowledged wholesale copying of passages from an external source—as well as to cheating (with or without "cheat sheets" and the complicity of others) and forgery (Guénard 2012). On the Université de Montréal's *Intégrité, fraude et plagiat* Website, plagiarism is defined as:

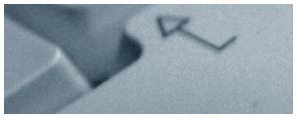
> "passing off the texts or ideas of others as one's own. Cheating involves deception in order to gain a personal advantage, at times to the detriment of others" (Université de Montréal 2014).

With these factors in mind, we have considered various cases reported to us[1] with a view to better rethinking anti-plagiarism strategies and ensuring enhanced consistency of action among all stakeholders involved.

Plagiarism very often occurs when written assignments are done outside class time. Students may copy passages from a Website or book without citing the source; copy the work of another student or a teacher's course notes; use an image and pass it off as their own, without mentioning the origin, in a context where creation is the object of the assignment; and so on. In many of these situations, plagiarism involves the failure to comply with the standards and rules for source citation, and is thus *behavioural*. (According to the Office québécois de la langue française [OQLF], a behaviour is a habitual or occasional way of acting and being in a given environment [2012]). Students who have been accused of plagiarism sometimes use their unfamiliarity with such rules to maintain their innocence; some even protest in good faith that no one has ever accused them of plagiarizing before. While we would not claim that all students are honest and sincere, we can still assume that plagiarism may be unintentional, depending on the situation.

As regards cheating, several cases reported to us happened in class, "live" during an assessment. Cheating involves *wrongdoing*—i.e., dishonest or reprehensible actions that are generally used to gain undue advantage or for some other end (OQLF 2012). In such situations, students might copy from their neighbours' papers, receive exam answers via texting, obtain exam answers beforehand, use an unauthorized calculator, etc. In other words, cheating is most often linked with dishonest, unethical, and secretive conduct. In the light of these few examples and explanations, one might think that cheating is often intentional (as reflected in this definition proposed by *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: "to practice fraud or trickery, to violate rules dishonestly"). However, students may

[1] At the CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy, since the new learning-assessment policy was implemented (see CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy 2013), each case of plagiarism must be reported to the academic dean or continuing-education department on a form. Such cases are classified "confidential", and a scale of penalties has been established. For a first offence, students are given a "0" on their exam or assignment; they also receive a letter stating that any recurrence will result in a failing grade for the entire course. For a second offence, the associate academic director instructs the teacher concerned to give a failing grade. In the case of a third offence, other sanctions, up to and including expulsion, can be implemented.



also cheat out of carelessness or negligence (because they have not read the instructions for an assignment attentively enough, for example), but this does not occur as often.

OPTIMIZING STRATEGIES

The distinction between the characteristics of plagiarism and cheating would indicate that the related preventive actions must take account of a variety of cases. By way of illustration, instructional strategies aimed at alerting students to the dangers of plagiarism, such as lectures on the rules for citing sources or workshops providing examples for how—and how not—to reference sources, will doubtless not have much of an impact on certain students' determination to cheat; none of these strategies will have a real influence on individuals who are tempted to use their smartphones during exams. It might be expected that dissuasive strategies (such as college-wide plagiarism awareness-raising campaigns, classroom discussions of the penalties established for those caught plagiarizing or cheating, a special layout for exam rooms, having students leave their knapsacks at the front of the classroom before beginning an exam, and handing out clear instructions on how exams are to be conducted) are more appropriate for eliminating cheating. However, we are not entirely sure this is the case. Figure 1 summarizes our thoughts in this regard.

This summary confirms our observation that, whether the goal is to prevent plagiarism on assignments or to dissuade students from cheating during exams, the ideal solution is to establish a long-term information strategy for all stakeholders involved in the college's action plan to fight plagiarism and cheating.

This would make it possible, year after year, to reach the main targets of this comprehensive strategy—i.e., students—and influence their actions, behaviour, and source-citation habits. Measures must be taken to ensure students are properly informed of the principles of intellectual integrity, as well as of the sanctions that will apply in cases of plagiarism and cheating. It is also important that a majority of teachers (novices and veterans alike) be aware of the role they have to play in preventing plagiarism, so they can implement preventive or dissuasive strategies during exams. Lastly, it is essential that other means be established so the administration, which deals with plagiarism and cheating, can provide the necessary follow-up and keep abreast of situations experienced by educators and new methods used by students to cheat.

In this ideal scenario, faculty would implement the penalties established, likely because they would have been involved in establishing the measures aimed at preventing plagiarism and reducing opportunities for cheating. The administration would have to approve the decisions made by teachers, and the latter would, as a result, feel that their efforts were part of a greater whole.

If students are familiar with the rules for citing sources, it may be presumed they will be more inclined to implement them.

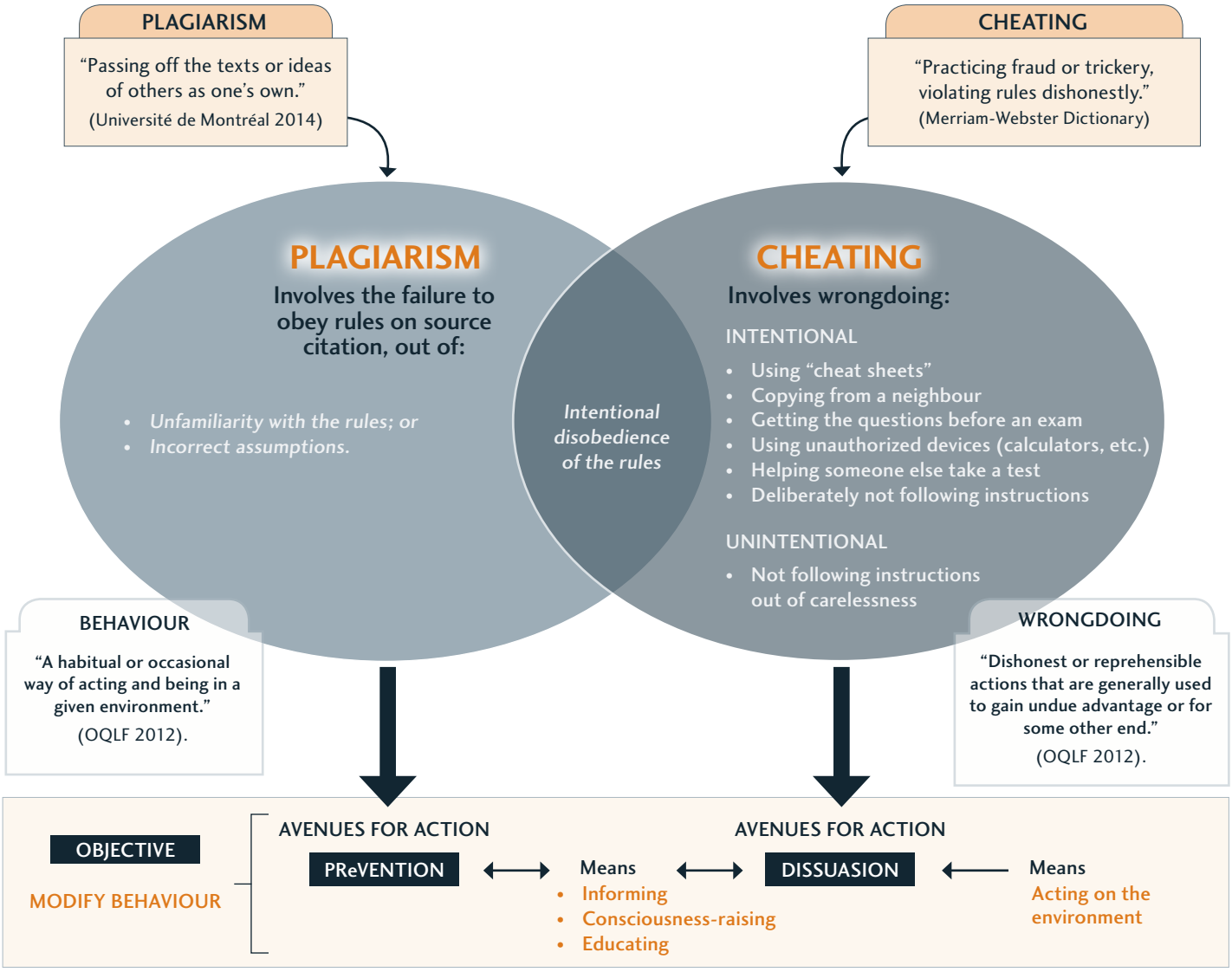
Where plagiarism is easily identified and proven (especially where instructors manage to find the passages in question on the Internet or in a book), this ideal is obviously easier to attain; in these cases, it can be relatively simple to implement the penalties specified in the college's Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement (IPESA, or PIEA in French). Similarly, faculty who have developed plagiarism-prevention strategies or, in black and white, laid out the instructions for doing homework and assignments, all the necessary details on the degree of collaboration allowed, or the need to cite the sources consulted, will be more justified in implementing those penalties.

But, what about educators who are placed in more contentious circumstances? In actual fact, problems arise when the situations involved in plagiarism or cheating are vague and ambiguous. For example, faced with very similar but not identical exam answers supplied by two students who know each other very well and have spent the term together, one teacher might assume that copying was involved. Unless the students have been caught red-handed or there has been a witness, however, that teacher will not be able to prove his or her suspicions beyond a doubt and may decide not to sanction the individuals concerned, given his or her unease with the situation. A different instructor, on the other hand, might well decide to punish those students, feeling there is sufficient contextual evidence.

As another example of a situation that is far from cut and dried, let us say a first-term college student, given the assignment to analyze a literary text, copies fairly short passages word for word from a Website without citing this source. One teacher, feeling the student is still learning and may not have yet mastered the principles of citation, may tend to modify the punishment, for example by penalizing the students a few points; another could judge the situation entirely differently, decide to implement the sanction established, and assign a mark of "0".

By providing these illustrations, we are not looking to discredit the work done by faculty or advocate that they alone be responsible for eliminating plagiarism and cheating. Rather,

FIGURE 1 SUMMARY OF CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH PLAGIARISM AND CHEATING



we want to highlight the isolation that educators may feel when it comes to implementing the penalties in question, as well as emphasizing that the uneven or irregular implementation of sanctions can send an ambiguous message to students and, accordingly, that those in the wrong might be more inclined to re-offend. For this reason, we wonder about the actual effectiveness of institutional prevention strategies used and action taken, as well as how to optimize them. While we do not have a specific solution to propose, we can offer a few avenues for reflection.

MORE CLEARLY DEFINED TARGETS FOR ACTION

We believe measures should be established to ensure effective sustainable plagiarism-prevention strategies, whether the latter are undertaken by faculty members themselves or, more



globally, by the college. Once identified and implemented, they will have to be bolstered over the medium or long term, in order to reduce the isolation felt by teachers and deliver a consistent message to students, constantly reminding them of the importance of adhering to the principles of intellectual integrity. As Nicolas Boileau wrote so beautifully in the 17th century, "Hasten slowly, and without losing heart, put your work twenty times upon the anvil."[2] In other words, anything worth doing is worth doing well!

With this in mind, it might be worthwhile looking at various measures already taken by the colleges, which are based on the following five action targets.[3]

Make it harder to cheat and plagiarize

The number of opportunities for cheating will decline as a function of the quality of tools used by faculty to implement dissuasive strategies, *inter alia* because the conditions for conducting classroom assessments will be better defined. The same holds true for plagiarism-prevention strategies: if instructors are familiar with them and the effect they can have on students, they will also be able to issue extremely detailed instructions on assignments and the subjects thereof. It is a known fact that selecting a broad theme for assessment facilitates plagiarism, as it is easier for students to substitute someone else's words for their own on a general subject (found on the Web, for example) than to write an assignment in which the concepts studied and described in class are to be reviewed and synthesized.

Increase students' perceived risk level

Whether perceived or real, a low risk of being caught "red-handed" can promote plagiarism and cheating. Informing students of the penalties that will be imposed, and actually imposing them, may convince students that cheating is not worth it. If all faculty are on the same page and consistent in implementing sanctions, students will very likely take efforts to eliminate cheating and plagiarism more seriously. Providing administrative follow-up will only reinforce that perception.

Mobilize faculty members and encourage them to report cases of plagiarism

Knowing their college will take charge of part of the overall plagiarism and cheating prevention strategy and also reporting process will help teachers overcome feelings of isolation. In the medium term, teachers who feel the college has their back (for example, by means of dedicated support staff to advise them) when they report plagiarism or cheating will probably be less likely to modify or fail to implement the sanctions established.

Overcome student ignorance about plagiarism

Impressing on students the need to follow good intellectual-integrity practices and teach them the standards to be respected in doing their assignments will help overcome ignorance. If students are familiar with the rules for citing sources, it may be presumed that they will be more inclined to implement them.

Reduce opportunities for plagiarizers and cheaters to claim ignorance of the rules as an excuse

When instructions for assignments and exams are clear and announced in advance, it is more difficult for students to play the "ignorance-of-the-law" card.

CONCLUSION

Clarifying the concepts of plagiarism and cheating in accordance with the related challenges and contextual aspects may help provide a fresh perspective on prevention and dissuasion strategies. In the long term, considering the benefits in terms of better defined action targets may be one avenue for optimizing the effectiveness of those strategies. Such efforts will help mobilize all stakeholders involved in promoting the principles of intellectual integrity and ensure the quality of the related conduct. We also believe an ongoing dialogue between college faculties and administrations is needed to maintain a climate of confidence and trust, so teachers can rest assured that the institution will support them in their action and follow up on their reports, and so colleges can have faith in their instructors and make every effort to establish preventive and dissuasive strategies. Preventing plagiarism and cheating requires long-term cooperation; the crusade is far from over.

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[2] These targets have been taken and adapted from a document entitled *Stratégies de prévention du plagiat*, published by the Université de Montréal; it can be viewed at [integrite.umontreal.ca/documents/strategies_003.pdf]. In French only.

[3] *Wikiquote*.

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Nancy JOLICOEUR is an educational advisor at the CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy, where she also taught literature for several years. She holds a Master's in Literature and an advanced graduate diploma in college teaching. As part of a project on academic success, she became interested in strategies aimed at promoting the high-school/college transition, and has developed an expertise on preventing plagiarism and cheating, thanks to her involvement in the CÉGEP's work on this particular matter.

njolicoeur@cegep-ste-foy.qc.ca

Mélanie PAGÉ taught literature at the CÉGEP de Sainte-Foy for 15 years before taking up the position of educational advisor there, where she is responsible, *inter alia*, for educational innovation and anti-plagiarism measures. She is notably interested in approaches requiring students' cognitive engagement, especially problem-based learning and project-based instruction. Together with Anne-Marie Duval, she co-authored *La situation authentique : de la conception à l'évaluation*, published by the AQPC, and gives the "turnkey" training sessions offered by the Association.

mpage@cegep-ste-foy.qc.ca

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For further information on plagiarism and cheating, *Pédagogie collégiale* suggests readers consult the following sources:

DIAPASON [mondiapason.ca/accueil].

PERREAULT, N. 2013. *Le plagiat électronique : un sujet toujours d'actualité ?* Profweb. [profweb.ca/publications/articles/le-plagiat-electronique-un-sujet-toujours-d-actualite].

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