



## Plagiarism: Is There a Solution? – A Case Study

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### Abstract

*As the world is increasingly becoming more digitalized, plagiarism is getting harder to settle. In the literature, a wide variety of causes have been proposed, such as easy access of the Internet, a desire to get higher marks, poor time management and lack of knowledge and/or training. But could a deep investigation of the students' perceptions of their practice give us a clearer picture? This instrumental case study sought to zoom into the attitude of one HE student in Egypt in an attempt to gain an insight into the problem. The goal of the study is to develop a full understanding of the researched case, with an aim to identify the real reasons why students plagiarize. Adopting a grounded theory approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted with one graduate student, who is thought to be an excellent choice for the research purposes as she represents an extreme case of a HE student, who has a full understanding of plagiarism, realizes it is unethical, and believes the practice should be penalized, yet regularly plagiarizes and consistently gets high grades. The use of one individual for instrumental case studies was recognized by a number of researchers as an acceptable practice. Although this study is in no way trying to generalize findings, nor is it claiming that the chosen subject is representative of the HE student population in Egypt; it is still contending that it can infer logical findings that help provide a better understanding of the researched topic. Based on the data analysis, a Plagiarism Hypothesis Model is proposed to attempt to explain HE students' behaviour and perception regarding plagiarism. Effects of plagiarism on learning and on students' perception of teacher have also been identified. Conclusions and implications of this study will be shared with the audience.*

### 1. Introduction

As the world is increasingly becoming more digitalized, more teachers are failing to adequately respond to the unethical practice of plagiarism. In Higher Education, plagiarism seems to be a thorny issue for a number of reasons. A number of questions come to mind: Do students plagiarize due to lack of time, ethics, knowledge, or training? Could it be their poor language skills? Do teachers intentionally or inadvertently encourage plagiarism? This instrumental case study will seek to zoom into the attitude of one HE student in Egypt in an attempt to gain an insight into the problem. The goal of the study is to develop a full understanding of the researched case, with an aim to identify the real reasons why students plagiarize.

This study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of plagiarism?
2. What are the main causes of the problem?

## 2. Literature review

Indiana University [1] defines plagiarism as “using others’ ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information.” Recently, the issue of plagiarism has attracted many researchers to investigate the real causes behind the problem. Some researchers such as Fiona Hyland [2] paid more attention to the technicalities of the teaching process. Hyland identified the indirectness of the written feedback, due to the shared perception of the sensitivity of the situation, as one of the main factors leading to plagiarism. She found that teachers’ subtlety in dealing with plagiarism issues unsuccessfully communicated the students’ problem. Hyland recommended oral feedback to avoid misunderstandings, overcome sensitivity, and communicate realistic expectations of students’ production.

Taking a more idealistic view, Ursula McGowan [3] argues that where everyone is busy with rules of referencing and source-acknowledgement, more attention should be given to the induction of students into the ‘culture of enquiry’, where ‘argument’ and ‘opinion’ are redefined. She contends that helping students develop an appreciation of research and using positive language when referring to their goal of attaining academic honesty rather than the implied negativity of “committing plagiarism” should help change the students’ perceptions, hence practices. McGowan particularly emphasizes the importance of negotiating the ‘why’ together with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of avoiding plagiarism.

A study that took a midway position was conducted by Hrasky and Kronenberg [4], who concluded that strategies that both educate as well as communicate expectations are vital to plagiarism reduction. In their discussion, they listed the most common eight reasons why students plagiarize; on top of which were easy access of the Internet, a desire to get higher marks, and poor time management. In harmony with their study, Razera et al [5] suggested that plagiarism occurs due to a combination of reasons, among which lack of training in scientific writing, lack of time, and lack of motivation were identified as the three most important ones.

## 3. Research design

Adopting a grounded theory approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted with one graduate student (referred to as Salma), who studied in her second language – English.

Salma is believed to be an excellent choice as she represents an extreme case of a HE student, who has a full understanding of plagiarism, realizes it is unethical, and believes the practice should be penalized, yet regularly plagiarizes and consistently gets high grades. The case was regarded as an instrument to shed light on the real reasons of the practice other than lack of the necessary knowledge and training. The use of one individual for instrumental case studies was recognized by a number of researchers as an acceptable practice. [6], [7].

The interview was recorded and the data was analyzed using an inductive approach: With the literature and generic questions in mind, I set on a task to scrutinize, code and interpret the data and try to derive inherent concepts and themes to “develop a framework of the underlying structure” of the raw data and introduce a model of understanding of the researched topic (Thomas [8]). Although this study is in no way trying to generalize findings, nor is it claiming that the chosen subject is representative of the HE student population; it is still contending that it can infer logical findings that help provide a better understanding of the researched topic.

## 4. Data analysis

### 4.1 Is knowledge enough?

The problem with plagiarism in Salma's case is clearly not due to lack of formal instruction or training of academic conventions. She clearly understands what plagiarism means. She knows how to avoid it and did that when she had to. Salma deeply believes plagiarism is a form of 'stealing' as stated by her. The problem is obviously not one of principle. In fact, Salma was of the opinion that plagiarism should be penalized and even suggested harsh penalties.

### 4.2 What are the real reasons?

Salma was conscious of some of the reasons for having plagiarized numerous times while other reasons were inferred from the interview:

#### *Reason #1*

The reason that was repeatedly highlighted by Salma was the teacher's "flexibility"; i.e., accepting plagiarized work. Salma is confident it is easy to detect plagiarism. Hence, she stresses that teachers who accept plagiarized work know very well what they are doing. Although they do not explicitly communicate their acceptance of the practice, they tolerate it and even reward it with high grades, which is enough of a sign to Salma to plagiarize: 'As long as I'm getting an A or A+, then why not?' In her experience, 90% of the instructors allowed plagiarism. In her work for the other 10%, she abided by the rules: 'I had to rephrase everything [and] to have proper citation.' Salma used the word 'expectation' to refer to an unspoken contract between a teacher and her students. Salma was accused of plagiarism only once, but she thought it was unfair since she had been plagiarizing all through for that course and her teacher had consistently been giving her A+. It was a question of inconsistency. To Salma, it is unfair to be inconsistent.

#### *Reason #2*

If teachers allow it, then there is no reason why Salma would not resort to plagiarism simply because it is easy: 'As long as I get the data I want, it is easier for me to finish the work this way.' Salma relies mainly on the Internet where information is readily accessible and "copy and paste" is common practice.

#### *Reason #3*

Lack of time was mentioned by Salma as one of the driving forces. She plagiarizes to 'meet the deadline.' The desire to pass the course was clearly of more importance to Salma than learning.

#### *Reason #4*

A similar attitude was evident in another reason mentioned by Salma. She said she was more likely to commit plagiarism in work contributing smaller percentages to the course overall grade.

#### *Reason #5*

Talking about her post-graduate experience, Salma mentioned one of her courses where she started off avoiding plagiarism; then shifted back to her old practice after two papers because she had lost interest in the material and was considering withdrawing the whole programme. It is worth mentioning, however, that Salma could not work out what to expect from the course teacher because he never gave her feedback.



### **4.3 Effects of plagiarism**

Two main effects were identified based on the interview analysis:

#### *Effect on learning*

Interestingly enough, Salma was aware of the fact that plagiarism is an obstacle to learning. She realizes that the time and effort she puts in non-plagiarized work pays off: 'I earn the words that I include.' More interestingly, she even admitted having included chunks of material that she never read. She recommended that teachers require students to submit handwritten assignments or use illustrations to ensure students read and learn.

#### *Effect on Students' Perception of Teacher*

Quite remarkably, Salma confirmed that there was a negative correlation between allowing plagiarism and how fair she finds the teacher. Teachers who do not allow plagiarism are more likely to gain trust and respect and become points of reference to their students: 'Whenever I'm asked to do a paper or prepare something official, I'm going to head up to them. I'm certainly not going to refer to the other 90%.' She regarded those who accept plagiarized work as teachers who prefer to take a shortcut and avoid the hassle.

### **4.4 Plagiarism Hypothesis Model**

Based on the above analysis, a Plagiarism Hypothesis Model is proposed to attempt to explain HE students' behaviour and perception regarding plagiarism. The Model presupposes knowledge and training of rules of academic honesty. They are regarded as pre-requisites that do not in themselves deter most students from committing plagiarism. The Model then argues that among all the reasons that affect a student's decision to plagiarize, there is one factor which acts as a filter that might either allow or prevent the majority of students from making that decision; namely, the teacher's strictness in applying plagiarism policies. The effect of the rest of the factors is regarded as minor or of limited impact when the filter is up. In case the filter is down, so the argument goes, other factors come into play leading to a decision to plagiarize, which is likely to result into impairing the learning process and distorting the teacher's image. The idea of the filter in the Model is inspired by Stephen Krashen's [9] Input Hypothesis Model of second language learning (Fig.1).

## **5. Conclusion**

This study seeks to have a realistic understanding of the HE students' practices and perceptions of plagiarism away from any romantic notions that the students' goal to learn precedes their desire to pass. The study has hopefully provided an insight into human nature that is in constant need of regulating laws of punishment and reward. The study has clearly revealed that it was the strictness of the teacher and the existence of a penalty that clearly deterred the undesired practice. This conclusion is in conflict with McGwan's [3] argument that the induction of students into the research culture might be the answer. The researched case knew the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of plagiarism, yet, this did not stop her from plagiarizing.

The findings of this study agree to a great extent with much of the reviewed literature. Agreeing with Hyland [2] and Hrasky & Kronenberg [4], this study proposes that the problem is primarily one of

communication of expectations. Yet, while researchers such as Hrasky and Kronenberg [4] and Razera et al [5] numerated possible factors, this study is emphasizing the most crucial factor of them all without eliminating the importance of the other factors. Moreover, the proposed Model is not claiming an exclusive list of factors causing plagiarism. Other students might have other working factors. But the claim remains that all the other factors play a minor role when compared to the teacher's position and persistence in enforcing the rules.

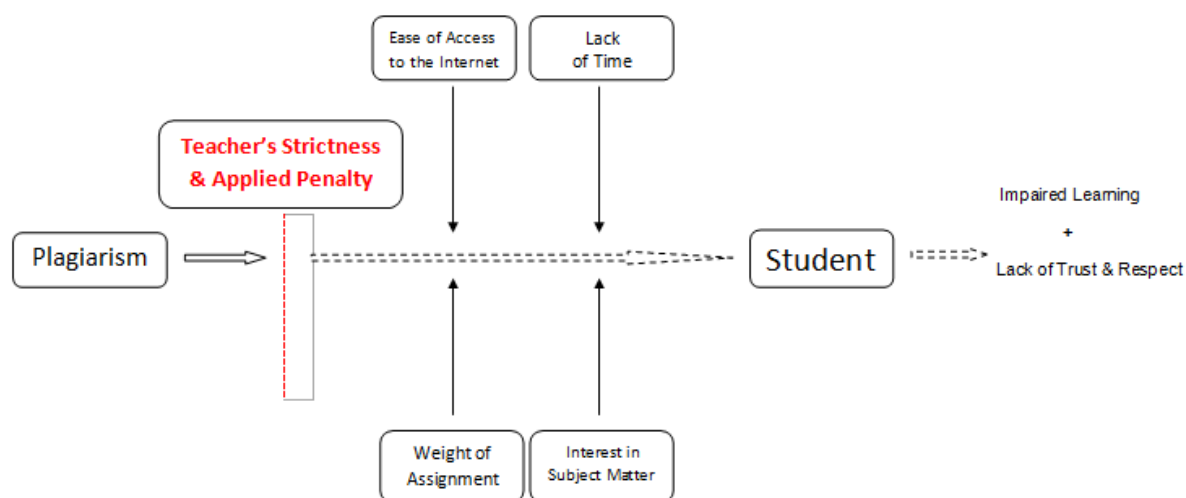


Fig. 1 Plagiarism Hypothesis Model

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