

# DESIGNING A PLAGIARISM AWARENESS CAMPAIGN – WHY IT IS NECESSARY

**Viorela-Valentina DIMA**  
**Dana Mihaela COCARGEANU**  
Academia de Studii Economice, București

## **Abstract**

*While teaching English for Business seminars, we have been confronted with a number of occasions in which students' papers were "affected" by plagiarism. Consequently, we have become interested in the need to design a Plagiarism Awareness Campaign, which could raise students' awareness of what plagiarism is and of the means they may employ to avoid it. The key areas of our paper will be: defining and exemplifying plagiarism, means of avoiding plagiarism, and the improvement and/or sanctioning of plagiaristic behaviour.*

**Key-words:** plagiarism, academic writing skills, enculturation.

An increasingly large number of our students' papers are affected by plagiarism. However, we have come to believe that not all of them are aware of several aspects connected to plagiarism, such as: what plagiarism really is, how it can be avoided, why it should be avoided. This paper aims at investigating each of these aspects, with a view to underlining the need to design a university-level plagiarism awareness campaign. We will start by defining the term and providing some examples of plagiarism, then we will address the issue of how plagiarism can be avoided and, last but not least, we will briefly point to means of sanctioning plagiaristic behaviour<sup>1</sup>.

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## 1. Detecting plagiarism

According to the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘plagiarism’ derives from the Latin "plagiarius" ("kidnapper") and the Greek "plagion" ("kidnapping") [16]. Moreover, the notion of "theft" is present in all the definitions from the sources we consulted. For instance, the related term "to plagiarize" means “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own, to use (another's production) without crediting the source, to commit literary theft: present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source” [19 see also 15, 16, 17, 18, 24].

Although these definitions seem self-explanatory, our practice has led us to the belief that more clarification is necessary. As such, we believe that students will benefit from a thorough exemplification of what plagiarism means. In other words, they should be briefed about what the latest literature identifies as plagiarism. Thus, the website of the Concordia University, Canada, lists the following types of plagiarism [26, see also 20, 22, 23]:

TYPES OF PLAGIARISM	EXAMPLES
Verbatim (Word-for-Word) Plagiarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✔ copying all/ large portions of material without proper acknowledgement</li> <li>✔ copying material from a source text supplying proper documentation, but leaving out quotation marks</li> </ul>
Mosaic plagiarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✔ using language closely based on a source but with a few words changed around</li> </ul>
Paraphrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✔ attempting to paraphrase but no source acknowledgement</li> <li>✔ combining sentences/ groups of sentences from various sources</li> <li>✔ paraphrasing material from a source text without appropriate documentation</li> </ul>
The ‘Apt Phrase’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✔ using an author’s original and distinctive term or phrase without citation</li> </ul>
Pattern, organization, or structure of arguments and ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✔ borrowing organization (adopting the structure or organization of an author’s argument while expressing it in your own words)</li> </ul>

TYPES OF PLAGIARISM	EXAMPLES
Multiple submission and self-plagiarism	<p>copying or using a laboratory report from a previous semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ submitting in whole or in part an assignment written for another course</li> </ul>
Submitting other's work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ turning in another student's work without that student's knowledge</li> <li>✓ turning in a paper a peer has written for that student</li> <li>✓ allowing your essay, assignment or test answers to be copied by another student</li> </ul>
Buying a paper from a research service or a term paper mill	

**Table 1. Types of plagiarism**

By presenting students with a detailed explanation of plagiaristic behaviour, such as the one in Table 1 above, we hope to reduce the instances of unintentional plagiarism. However, the issue of (intentional or unintentional) plagiarism cannot be adequately tackled in the absence of solid knowledge regarding the reasons for which students plagiarise. If teaching staff and academic decision-makers lack such knowledge, the measures taken against this phenomenon may either miss their target altogether or offer only superficial solutions. The list of factors determining plagiarism, ensuing both from our experience and from the literature, is surprisingly long and complex.

Thus, there are several causes, according to our experiences and the ideas that the conference participants shared with us. Firstly, apart from not having enough knowledge about plagiarism, or lacking the necessary skills to avoid it, students may disregard it as unimportant, and therefore practise it without worrying too much. Secondly, sometimes students lack the necessary time to write assignments and utilize internet “shortcuts” (“Copy-Paste”). Other possible reasons offered by conference participants were: students’ laziness, lack of confidence in their own abilities, context (i.e. family or other people around them practise plagiarism).

The relevant literature, based on data gathered from students, both confirms and complements the above explanations. Thus, Wang [12] mentions that students do not consider plagiarism “a serious issue”; lack of source documentation when paraphrasing, in their view, is “a trivial form of cheating” [12]. Wilhoit identifies other reasons, such as: laziness, lack of time, the wish to receive high grades, the lack of motivation for hard work [13].

Both authors also refer to the role of teaching staff: students claim that during their high school education, verbatim copying was not only allowed, but also promoted [13]. In addition, at university level there are such problems as: the lack of a unitary definition of plagiarism or interpretation of institutional policy among faculty, and indifference towards the issue [12]. Wang explains plagiarism as being caused also by a difference in values and attitudes between academic staff and students: the latter’s perceptions regarding intellectual property are influenced by their belonging to the “digital age”, and therefore they do not consider plagiarism “as wrong as stealing”.

More importantly, there is a host of reasons related to unintentional plagiarism. To begin with, plagiarism may occur unintentionally, due to defective cognitive processes. Such processes are triggered by the difficulty of the mental operations entailed by working on others’ materials [13]. Furthermore, students are both unable to define plagiarism properly [12], and unequipped with adequate academic skills, like paraphrasing, citing, referencing [12, 13, 1, 11]. Finally, they do not grant proper attention to the operations of “note-taking, revising, proofreading” [13], which again leads to unintentional plagiarism.

The final factor influencing students’ plagiaristic attitudes and practices is their social and cultural environment. This environment has several facets; for instance, various “values in the peer community” [13] may determine students to cheat: “friendship, getting ahead, group loyalty, fear of shame at performing inadequately, distrust of faculty, obligations to work and play”. Moreover, there can be even a “campus culture” [12] which condones such practices and induces the fear that being honest would harm one’s academic results.

As a final point, we would like to mention an extremely interesting explanation provided by Willen [14]. Starting from the facts that academic staff do strive to help students avoid plagiarism and that students who otherwise have strong moral principles do cheat, Willen offers an interpretation which takes into account the wider (American) cultural environment. This is characterised by a strong drive towards the “accumulation of material wealth” and a stress on “performance and profitability”; consequently, what matters are “results”, “numbers”. For this reason, the final product – the research paper, the high grade, the graduation diploma, are more important than the learning process and personal

development. Moreover, according to Willen, American society is still permeated by the “narrative” equating “good grades” with a “good job”; hence, students’ “anxiety” and the exaggerated competitiveness of higher education. All these boost plagiarism, despite faculty’s efforts and students’ being “moral” people, who would not otherwise undertake any other dishonest action [14].

To summarise, the range of reasons why students plagiarise is complex, including not only personal aspects, but also contextual ones. As any adequate anti-plagiarism strategy cannot ignore these reasons, careful investigation is necessary for the Romanian academic context before any measures are adopted.

## **2. Preventing and correcting plagiarism**

The previous section has pointed to the complexity of the plagiarism phenomenon in academic environments. If students are to renounce this unscholarly behaviour, we believe that active measures have to be taken on various "fronts". In other words, we should ask ourselves: *1. What can be done at **student** level?* and *2. What can be done at **seminar/ course/ department/ university** level?*.

As for *what can be done at **student** level*, the conference audience as well as the literature we have consulted agree on the necessity to teach students academic research and writing techniques [1, 11, 13]. Among these we mention:

- ✓ reading comprehension
- ✓ note-taking
- ✓ summarising
- ✓ paraphrasing
- ✓ presenting and defending one’s own ideas in relation to other people’s ideas
- ✓ documenting sources
- ✓ revising/ proofreading.

Noticeably, when involved in note-taking or summarising, for instance, students should be taught to jot down both information and the source of the information selected from the lecturer’s speech. They should become aware of the necessity to distinguish from their own thoughts and ideas, the lecturer’s ones or the ideas of the authors cited by the lecturer. At first sight wearisome, once this technique is mastered, it will save students a lot of time later,

when they have to write an essay or a similar type of assignment based on their notes or summaries.

Moreover, the techniques of presenting and defending one's own ideas in relation to other people's ideas are more readily developed by (foreign) language classes. For instance, the latter emphasize a variety of linguistic means of achieving comparison and contrast. Furthermore, LSP classes also provide continuous opportunities for debates on several topics, during which students find themselves obliged to defend their own opinion as opposed to their colleagues' opinions, while still acknowledging the latter.

Special attention must be paid to the technique of paraphrasing. We have seen above that, under certain circumstances, paraphrasing is still considered plagiarism. More specifically, when one paraphrases just by combining sources and/or does not properly acknowledge one's sources, one plagiarizes. To avoid this, students should acknowledge the source and express their own point of view with respect to the information paraphrased.

Although apparently a trivial matter, students must be constantly reminded of the fact that they should reserve time after they finish the assignment for revising and/ or proofreading. They should also be encouraged to resort to their colleagues for peer-review, as listening to an objective opinion can only have beneficial effects.

In dealing with the second issue, *what can be done at seminar/ course/ department/ university level*, we shall utilize the work of Wang [12], completing it with other authors' suggestions. Wang proposes as solution a process of "enculturation", which he defines as "a process to induct students into the scholarly community, in which students learn norms, values, and skills to grow from peripheral participants to central participants in the scholarly community". This process has three aspects, which are quoted and discussed below:

1. Developing student shared understanding of norms in the disciplinary scholarly community;
2. Teaching students scholarly skills;
3. Establishing teaching and learning as a process of enculturation.

Students can be helped to understand and to share "the norm" in the academia, which is academic integrity, by several strategies. Thus, Willen [14] mentions the establishment of a "campus ethos" by the use of pledges of integrity and honor codes. He also emphasizes the fact that students should be made aware of the consequences of their actions, i.e. lenience can be shown during their first year of studies, when they learn the rules of academic integrity, but

not in subsequent years. Wang [12] underlines the significant role of direct dialogue with students, e.g. during academic integrity seminars; also, he mentions the importance of an institutional web page on plagiarism, as well as of an institutional policy, which should be clearly presented and debated with students.

As far as "scholarly skills" are concerned, first of all, various authors describe work done on raising students' awareness regarding what plagiarism is, or suggest possible solutions. Wilhoit [13] proposes that plagiarism should be very well defined and discussed, that hypothetical cases ("is that plagiarism?") be debated. Also, the findings of Barry's study [1] suggest that paraphrasing training helps students better define plagiarism. Secondly, paraphrasing skills can be developed by discussing original, plagiarized and well-paraphrased texts and by doing paraphrasing work [11]. Finally, students should be made aware and offered practice regarding quoting, documenting and proofreading [13].

Wang's final point is that "learning should be treated as a process to cultivate students into norms of the community"; these norms include the fact that writing is a process, and that research should be relevant. From this perspective, the solutions that he proposes are, first of all, to motivate students to engage in effort, by "stimulating their enthusiasm, imagination and creativity". Moreover, the image of learning that should be promoted is that of a process (consequently, the emphasis should not be placed on the final product) [12]. This idea is present with other authors, too, such as Willen [14], Wilhoit [13], and Vernon et al. [10]. The latter suggest that reports on the writing of assignments should be demanded of students [10], while Wilhoit recommends requiring multiple drafts of essays [13]. In order to make research relevant, Wang advocates the adoption of specific research and writing tasks, which should be somehow relevant or interesting for students [12]. Finally, Vernon et al. [10] claim that faculty's showing students that they are familiar with web resources, technology and means of plagiarizing discourages such practices.

Our internet-based research has also revealed several examples of good practice regarding institutional policies. We have discovered that various universities from three different continents have developed resources on plagiarism, which have been posted on the university websites. Among these we mention Concordia University, Canada ([http://politicalscience.concordia.ca/plagiarism\\_resource/](http://politicalscience.concordia.ca/plagiarism_resource/)), George Mason University, USA (<http://classweb.gmu.edu/rcherubi/ancient/plagiarism.htm>), The University of Kentucky, USA (<http://www.chem.uky.edu/courses/common/plagiarism.html>), and University of Sussex, England (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/academicoffice/1-4-1-2-5.html>).

Apart from definitions and examples of plagiarism, the above mentioned university web pages also host tutorials in which students are taught how to avoid plagiarism. There are also activities designed to help students identify plagiarism and original work based on a set of quotations given. Not only can students cast their vote ("acceptable" or "unacceptable") online, but they also receive immediate feedback, explaining why a certain piece of writing is acceptable or not. In addition, students also find out about the consequences of plagiaristic behaviour: a **failing grade** on the particular assignment, **suspension** or **expulsion** for cases of repeated plagiarism, or for cases in which a student commits severe plagiarism (e.g. submitting a copied piece of writing as original work), or even **revoking of academic degrees or awards** [see also 24].

In conclusion, plagiarism is an issue which should not be disregarded in higher education. It violates academic integrity and efforts to identify, prevent and correct it should not belong only to a few individual teachers. On the contrary, it is very necessary that clear institutional policies and strategies be established and implemented with determination in Romanian universities.

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**Viorela-Valentina DIMA** is a university lecturer with the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, where she teaches English for Business and Communication.

**Dana Mihaela COCARGEANU** is a university assistant with the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, where she teaches Business Communication in English. She is a graduate of the British Cultural Studies MA (University of Bucharest) and of the English Communication for Economics Teaching and Research MA (Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies).