

# An Interdisciplinary Approach to Preventing Plagiarism: A Librarian - Social Work Educator Collaboration

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## Abstract

Preventing plagiarism is congruent with the social work view that prevention of a problem is a better option than intervention. Social work educators can learn a great deal from librarians since librarians often present much of the education for prevention of plagiarism as part of instruction on how to use the library and the Internet to best advantage. Collaboration between library professionals and social work educators is a logical collaboration and models interdisciplinary cooperation for social work students, as well as presenting a strong model for teaching about the prevention of plagiarism. Linking instruction about prevention of plagiarism to the *Code of Ethics* makes this material more relevant to social work students.

*Key Words:* Plagiarism, Prevention, *Code of Ethics*, Academic Honesty

## Introduction

Parts of the NASW *Code of Ethics* relate directly to issues of plagiarism. Appropriating the work of others without adequate credit is certainly a violation of section two of the Code: *Ethical Responsibility toward Colleagues* Section 2.01 Respect. Section four: *Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals*, section 4.04 Private Conduct: Social workers should not participate in, condone, or be associated with dishonesty, fraud or deception" also relates directly to plagiarism.

The *Code of Ethics* also discusses interdisciplinary collaboration in Section 2.03.

Social workers are encouraged to collaborate with other disciplines in a way that respects what social work brings to the table but also acknowledges the expertise of other disciplines to best serve the client. In social work education, the student can be seen as the client, and the teaching of ethical research and writing skills can be viewed as the work of an interdisciplinary team, including writing instructors and librarians, as well as social work educators. This paper will discuss the

advantages of a partnership between librarians and social work educators in educating students in a way that plagiarism can be prevented.

Librarians in colleges and universities understand the risks of plagiarism when students are required to produce creative work or research papers as part of the work toward the degree. In order to build barriers to plagiarism, college librarians have incorporated the preventive instruction in writing and avoiding plagiarism developed by middle school and high school librarians. The concept of preventive instruction, transferred from middle school and high school librarians to higher education, brings practical solutions that may ease frustrations over plagiarism. Social work educators can either partner with librarian colleagues to present material designed to prevent plagiarism through appropriate education or can borrow from the experience of librarians in educating to prevent plagiarism.

### **A librarian's approach**

Middle school and high school librarians have developed three action steps appropriated by college and university librarians that are designed to support creative ideas and avoid plagiarism:

1. Teach students what constitutes plagiarism.
2. Teach research skills enriched with notetaking and writing practices. This step is critical since, with the use of word processing programs and the ability to copy and paste, many college students bypass note taking for a pastiche of copy and paste in which the original source often is dropped.
3. Through instruction support, present established consequences for cheating. This content helps enhance the value of the instruction, and the established consequences underscore the importance of this content.

These steps seem simple and obvious; however, many social work students, when confronted with suspicion of plagiarism, indicate that freshman composition classes did not teach these skills or spend time discussing plagiarism avoidance. Further, students comment that other classes in which library research was required also did not teach plagiarism recognition and avoidance.

### **The need for prevention**

In reality, the practice of unchecked plagiarism threatens the credibility of higher education. The Center for Academic Integrity found that 75 percent of students cheat (Jackson, 2006). There may possibly be learning in copying another's work. Doing so and representing it to be original work is the problem. When this is undetected, the professor is unaware that the student

has not mastered the material required by the assignment. Further, there is the element of cheating by stealing the work of another. For social work students, plagiarism goes beyond an academic violation; it is a professional violation of the *Code of Ethics* and must be framed in this way.

Librarians are aware of the ease with which students photocopy written materials and hand copy sentences from library resources. In colleges and universities, the use of the Internet exacerbates this problem, as does a fairly sophisticated understanding of how to manipulate word processing programs. Social work educators can talk with the librarians about this issue and learn a great deal about the way in which many college students approach both print sources and Internet sources. If social work students are learning about plagiarism from a librarian, then the social work educator can follow up in class with a discussion of professional as distinct from academic ethics related to plagiarism.

Social work educators can also learn from librarians how to approach the teaching of material to prevent plagiarism. An important tool for librarians in teaching about plagiarism is the establishment of ground rules. In many instances, it is the librarians who “take charge of the ethical education” (Johnson, 2004). Early in the lessons presented by librarians, a distinction is made between confusing terms. Librarians often introduce material on copyright before discussing plagiarism when teaching library research skills. Presenting copyright law is a way to give the plagiarism issue a broader context related to the theft of ideas. Copyright has the purpose of controlling the distribution of a work and is often confused with plagiarism. Discussion of copyright law also emphasizes the illegality of photocopying a work instead of purchasing a copy. The heart of the lesson stresses the lie in academic dishonesty when portions of another’s creativity are stolen. This information sets up a natural transition to plagiarism.

### **Action steps**

This first action step teaches what plagiarism and cheating are through delivering definitions and explanations. Examples often break the ice and help students to a beginning understanding of the issue. Simply putting a statement not to plagiarize or inserting an academic honesty policy on a syllabus is inadequate. However, this is the practice of many colleges and universities. Social work programs often think that this is sufficient and surely students understand what constitutes plagiarism. Further, the statement on the syllabus rarely links to the *Code of*

*Ethics.* Other explanation and education on the issue of plagiarism beyond the syllabus statement is not given, yet students are held responsible.

When librarians teach about plagiarism and related academic dishonesty, often an example of academic dishonesty is presented to the students, followed by an explanation of how the example is plagiarism, as well as reflection on the meaning of plagiarism and elements that constitute plagiarism. The librarian often continues by helping the student understand that creating original work yields a sense of pride. The individual student's own work is discussed as a means by which to proudly showcase acquired knowledge and skills, not skills in deceit. Repeating this lesson annually is encouraged. Social work educators could follow up by reiterating this lesson or by structuring presentations on plagiarism in a similar way.

Even for professional educators, recalling the detail of the structure of citations once, perhaps twice a year, is a substantial effort. Most keep a manual at hand or bookmark appropriate Web sites. Helping students understand the need to either have the appropriate style manual or sites bookmarked is useful in helping students avoid plagiarism. Often plagiarism is not intentional, is due to laziness, nor is due to computer issues involving dropped citations when material is copied and pasted from one paper to another. Lack of knowledge in the preparation of citations is often the reason for some of what presents as plagiarism.

### **Changing expectations and behaviors**

Plagiarism is not limited to the academic world. The news and professional literature are filled with reports of people in the real world who are guilty of plagiarizing (Willis, 2001).

The persuasion to clip another's work is a temptation for professional writers, also (Cosgrove, 2005). The frequency with which this takes place also lends credence to the theory that many college graduates have not been sufficiently educated about plagiarism.

It is also important to acknowledge that college testing in many classes is not conducive to teaching students to avoid academic dishonesty. Many professors reward direct regurgitation of lecture material from class and direct copying from the text under the guise of passing an examination. No wonder college students who have spent most of their educational careers repeating from textbooks to answer test questions have difficulty with the concept of plagiarism. Further, many college students do not have experience with any exams or tests other than objective

tests. In short, often, prior to writing a research paper, no higher order or critical thinking has been asked of students, and direct copying of the ideas of others has been rewarded.

In teaching the lessons on developing a research paper and on plagiarism, the librarian can almost hear the wheels turning in students' minds as they pose the silent question, "You want me to do what? Students just take tests." The transition to producing one's very own work is broaching creativity, a wide-open empty space. Some fear of creativity may exist because the mental space where it occurs is an equivalent to the unknown. That is until the often invigorating and magical thing identified as creativity begins. Often teaching faculty are unaware of the fear of creating original work. Social work faculty in particular, because of the mandate posed by accreditation standards to teach students to think critically, may be unaware of how many students may never have written a paper in other college classes. Often students complain about the amount of writing that is required in social work education compared with other majors.

Social work students may conceive of the act of producing a research paper with terror, believing that they cannot write a paper of any value. Further, many social work students have no idea of how to construct a research paper. In a time when many students transfer from one or more institutions before arriving in the social work program, social work professors can no longer assume that all students received this education in earlier classes, even if other classes at the institution offer this.

In the next section of the training offered by librarians, students are taught how to begin creativity through the use of research materials supportive of their own ideas. In this case, the ideas are to be expressed in writing. In this training, from middle school through college, careful instruction in accessing print and electronic resources, of necessity, is complimented by introducing a professional set of rules for citations (Dames, 2006). College and university professors often assume that students already know this material. However, many students have not had the advantage of depth of instruction in research from the perspective of the librarian. It is interesting to note that generally librarians find when teaching the preparation of bibliographies and reference lists for the paper that plagiarism is not nearly as likely to be a problem for students who understand the reasons underlying the need to cite completely and specifically. Ideally, in the training, generous handouts with both the rules and lots of examples are distributed for reference.

Librarians also are more likely to return to tried and true methods for teaching students to produce a research paper. Often, students have no idea that in a time of computer programs that the use of note cards can be critical in organizing research citations and notes and also offer the ability to rearrange the order of the paper. Therefore, librarians give special attention to the preparation of citations on note cards. Generally, since students do not have the paper fully formulated at the time of research, they must be taught to make a bibliographic citation of all items consulted. At this point, librarians remind students that summarizing another writer's material without giving credit is plagiarism. They further remind students that it is indeed very difficult to write a truly original manuscript after reading materials relative to a topic. Social work educators can follow the same steps in discussing the research paper, or if students have received this information from the librarian, ask the students to share what was learned with the social work professor.

Librarians also point out to students that there will inevitably be some close similarity of words, phrases, and even concepts or ideas as a second writer expresses his/her collected knowledge on the same topic. Planning to steal may be the greatest of the plagiarism evils, but integrity in authorship calls for scrutinizing one's work thoroughly to avoid failure to give credit. Much plagiarism falls into the category of unintentional failure to give credit. Librarians emphasize this concept in the training sessions.

Librarians also have some helpful ideas for the college professor who is invested in preventing plagiarism and in helping students develop scholarly habits. One option is to require reading outside of class and then preparing the paper in class. This is much like an open book test. A variant of this option is to require students to prepare a single note card with citations and a fact or quote which impressed them from each source. These may or may not be used in class and could be submitted as evidence of research completed even before the written assignment. This lessens the chances that students will copy and paste from library and/or electronic resources without attribution. Another variant on the note card assignment is to switch topics for writing. Instead of writing on the topic, the students write papers describing their research and note-taking strategies on a selected topic. Students may share these ideas with one another.

The third barrier to plagiarizing reflects all lessons in academic honesty, whether presented by the librarian or by the instructor. Librarians are generally helpful in assisting professors to

develop materials detailing the consequences of plagiarism. For example, professors may choose to establish and make available to students a grading scale awarding a failing grade to plagiarized work. Such a scale usually has consequences where additional cheating results in failing the course, or receiving academic dismissal (Dutilloy, 2003).

Ideally, the classroom academic honesty policy is supported by an enforced policy of the institution. Chances are that no classroom will be completely free of plagiarism. Copying from a printed work is only one form of plagiarizing. Foss (2006) points out that “parents writing papers, using papers from another class or submitting an old paper of someone else” are falsifications of originality. Buying papers on the Internet and hiring someone to write an assignment merit addition to the list. In another arena, electronic availability of full text has brought volumes of research to the reader. Along with the availability of full text articles and books has entered the ease of clipping from another’s work with a click of the mouse using copying and pasting skills (Auer, 2001). All of these possibilities give librarians reason to support classroom teachers in their efforts to control plagiarism.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, students’ plagiarism cannot be allowed to threaten the actual worth of the degree. Librarians are key players in the process to prevent plagiarism. The librarian can be an important team member to help control plagiarism through preparatory lessons that incorporate preventive instruction. If it is not possible for librarians to do the actual instruction, the methods used by librarians can be utilized by social work educators. Further, if librarians do the major part of the education for plagiarism prevention, social work educators can follow up with questions about what students are learning in the instruction from the librarian and also add material from the *Code of Ethics* to make plagiarism prevention professionally relevant to social work students.

Students equipped with these research skills enriched with note taking coupled with the ability to convert their citations into footnotes and bibliographies experience successful writing. The reward is more than the grade. The student learns the joy of joining the company of those who enhance the knowledge of others. In addition, social work students are complying with Section 5 of the *Code of Ethics*, Section 4 Part B: “Social workers should promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge.”

Knowledge acquired through research and writing papers facilitates the switch from objective tests stressing recall to creative productivity as evidence of learning throughout students' scholastic careers. Stealing another's creativity occurs in all areas of knowledge. Assuming anyone understands plagiarism is an error. Instructors in higher education must check their own knowledge of plagiarism and then teach students so plagiarism can be avoided. Teaching about plagiarism should be linked to professional ethics in the context of social work education. Teaming with a librarian to teach this material models interdisciplinary collaboration for students and also models the professional behavior of seeking consultation when necessary.

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