Student Plagiarism and First-Year Composition: A Study

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New Voice

This study reports on student comprehension of plagiarism and plagiarism avoidance before and after the first-year composition course.

In my first term as a community college instructor, I was surprised at the number of students who seemingly possessed little background knowledge on citing sources, research methodology, and plagiarism. While we covered said subjects in class, including a chapter in the textbook dedicated to researching and citing sources, I found that of the sixty-four students in my first-year composition (FYC) sections, eight had committed some form of apparent plagiarism, or 12.5%. Of those eight, six seemed to be cases of plagiarism-by-error: inaccurate citations, sloppy or incomplete paraphrasing, occasional lack of punctuation around quotations, inaccurate quotations, and similar problems. The remaining two appeared to be egregious cases of “intentional” plagiarism. One of the latter was an essay cobbled together in its entirety by copying and pasting paragraphs from various Wikipedia articles. The other was a novelty in my experience—a paper from an online paper mill—which I discovered through a simple Web search. When I asked the student what happened that led to turning in such a paper, the student simply responded, “I didn’t plagiarize.” When I presented the student with the website where ten out of twelve of the paper’s paragraphs appeared verbatim for the site’s marketing purposes, the student then said, “I don’t know how my paper got there.” Evidently, such experiences are not rare. According to Steven K. Happel and Marianne M. Jennings, students are experienced and skilled plagiarists coming out of high school: “They have a strong sense of entitlement, believing they are customers […] and that customers are always right. Many can look you directly in the eye when faced with cheating and plagiarism charges and, in all sincerity, say that they did nothing wrong” (213). While their description fits my experience with one student, it certainly was not universally true. In fact, it seemed that the vast majority of plagiarism-like behaviors in my classes resulted from the students’ lack of knowledge and skill rather than intentional subterfuge.

As a literature scholar, and an inexperienced composition instructor, I was concerned that my teaching was inadequate. In conversations with my colleagues I...
discovered that my numbers were similar to theirs: most observed a rate of plagiarism at or above 10%, and most saw more cases of “intentional” or egregious “accidental” plagiarism than I. When I asked my colleagues how they taught plagiarism avoidance, they produced a litany of pedagogies: lecture defining plagiarism, discussion of consequences, explanation and practice of citing, looking at examples of paraphrasing, publishing the college statement on academic misconduct in the syllabus, and so on. These were the same strategies that I employed; yet students were still not utilizing research effectively and legitimately. Rather than getting angry at the students, I wondered instead if my teaching was in some way flawed. If students really were coming to college with little knowledge of research or citation, then we would need to provide more basic, foundational instruction for them, before even getting to citing sources.

Students’ attitudes toward plagiarism and academic dishonesty (i.e., cheating) more broadly have been the focus of numerous studies. Robert Harris, author of The Plagiarism Handbook, says that our students do not consider cheating to be as “serious” as we do; they “have never done an actual research paper”; and, “partly from the self-esteem movement and partly from personal experience, they expect very mild penalties for plagiarism” (qtd. in Berg 9). How can students’ values not be out-of-sync with faculty expectations when they see plagiarism-like behavior all the time? Mass media reports suggest that the penalties for such behavior are barely punitive or non-existent. Katie Elson Anderson and Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic cite the (in)famous example of Doris Kearns Goodwin in arguing that academic codes and punishments for plagiarism cannot be fully effective: “These attempts to scare students into not plagiarizing are being thwarted by such real-world examples where there are light penalties” (5). Additionally, the decade of research conducted by Donald L. McCabe, Linda Klebe Treviño, and Kenneth D. Butterfield suggests that context is far more influential over student behavior than individual factors. Their studies consider “context” to include “peer cheating behavior, peer disapproval of cheating behavior, and perceived severity of penalties for cheating” (222). A consideration of contextual issues, such as peer pressure and the popular media, is incomplete if it does not recognize that these students are immersed in the written word all the time: email, Web-based news, Internet radio, Twitter, Facebook, and the list goes on. As Susan D. Blum puts it, “In some ways, this is the wordiest and most writerly generation in a long while” (4, original emphasis). The problem, of course, is that what they are reading and writing does not always fit with an academic ethos, and much of it eschews the rules of proper attribution. Even in a news source on the Web, it can be difficult to trace the origins of a particular story that has been reposted somewhere, and most daily users of such material are not interested in returning to the original source. In sum, there is a serious gap between faculty expectations and student attitudes and knowledge. This gap is not quite a chasm, and it can be bridged, but it exists, and we must acknowledge it before we can approach students with plagiarism-avoidance techniques.

In spite of efforts by faculty, administrators, software firms, and even some student groups, it seems the practice of plagiarism has not been curbed, and if any-
thing, may be on the increase. Building upon Bill Bowers’s study in 1963 for the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield spent much of the 1990s studying academic dishonesty individually and in collaboration with one another. It is important to note that they published their findings throughout the decade, and getting into the material can feel a little like tumbling down the proverbial rabbit hole. For example, in “Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research,” published in Ethics and Behavior in 2001, McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield cite eight of their own previously published studies in seven different journals. Nevertheless, their work is impressive, and the data they collected are extremely informative in relation to the state of academic honesty in higher education. In one study from 1996, McCabe and Treviño found that 54% of students reported they “copied material without footnoting” (up from 49% in Bowers), 26% reported they “plagiarized” (down from 30% in Bowers), 29% said they “falsified a bibliography” (up from 28% in Bowers), and 14% “turned in work by another” (down from 19% in Bowers) (“What” n.p.). These data indicate moderate increases in general rates of student plagiarism. However, in another summary of their findings, these authors note the major role played by academic honor codes, which could reduce instances of plagiarism and other academically dishonest behaviors by as much as 50% (McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield 224). Additionally, they delineate “copied one or two sentences without footnoting” in this study and found that the 1993 numbers were somewhat anomalous: in 1990-91, 41% of students at non-honor-code institutions admitted to this infraction, and 23% at honor-code institutions. And in 1995-96, the numbers were 43% (non-code) and 32% (code) (224). Finally, the largest growth in plagiaristic behavior was in “unauthorized collaboration,” which was at just 11% in Bowers’s 1963 study. The numbers fluctuated from a low of 21% at honor-codes schools in 1990-91 to 49% in 1993 and in non-honor-code institutions in 1995-96 (224).

I draw two major conclusions from the McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield body of work. First, plagiarism is a persistent problem that we must strive to understand and mediate, but it does not seem to be the four-alarm crisis that is sometimes reported in the mass media. It will never be possible to completely eliminate plagiarism, and it will probably never be possible to catch and punish every plagiarist. However, it seems likely that we can make great strides toward reducing the amount of plagiarism by drawing attention to it, being vigilant, and teaching our students more effectively. Specifically, and this is my second conclusion, we can define plagiarism and the specific activities that constitute plagiarism far more effectively. At first glance, one could argue that most of the behaviors students were asked to self-report in both the Bowers study and in the 1990s data could be considered plagiarism. Additionally, Web-based publishing, document and file sharing, and the free and open ethos of the Internet are continuing to challenge notions of authorship and collaboration. I say continuing, because the assault on the “lone genius,” “authoritative,” and “original” author obviously began with postmodernism, and we still have not found a completely satisfactory way to address this in FYC classrooms.
Thus, one of our greatest challenges as educators is to define plagiarism effectively, to clarify specifically what writing behaviors are plagiarism, and to distinguish among them effectively. According to Sue Clegg and Abbi Flint, who cite works by Flint et al. in 2005 and 2006, “Students do not have a clear or common understanding of plagiarism,” and even more saliently, their research demonstrates that “the understanding [faculty] hold of plagiarism shows divergent views; both of the types of activities that constitute plagiarism, and the relationship between cheating and plagiarism” (376). The crux of the issue seems to be, as it was for me in my first term as I noted earlier, intention. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) defines plagiarism thus: “When a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common knowledge) material without acknowledging its source” (n.p., my emphasis). The problem, of course, is determining what is deliberate and what is inadvertent. The WPA Council furthers this point by saying that most of the discourse around plagiarism does not delineate between plagiarism as defined above or as an attempt “to blur the line between one’s ideas or words and those borrowed from another source” and the more common form (at least in my experience), “carelessly or inadequately citing ideas and words borrowed from another source” (WPA n.p.). The WPA Council’s statement does not acknowledge, however, that sometimes the distinction between intentional or “blurred” plagiarism and “misuse of sources” can be difficult to determine. A student who fails to use quotation marks regularly may appear to be, even with citations, using the words of another without acknowledgment. Similarly, a writer who, in one of my student’s words, “goes back” and fills in the citations after completely drafting a paper, may forget to cite some material, and this may appear to be plagiarism.

Rebecca Moore Howard coined the term patchwriting: “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one substitutes” (“New Abolitionism” 89). Howard has championed the idea that student patchwriting is an essential part of the learning process and should not be punished in the same way that plagiarism is. She calls it a “positive plagiarism” (89) and argues that even calling it “unintentional plagiarism” suggests that there is something negative and ethically transgressive about patchwriting (“Ethics” 80). It seems that most writing faculty know of Howard’s work and take it into consideration when teaching. However, even Howard acknowledges that students should strive to move beyond patchwriting, that it is a step in the learning process, not the end of the learning process. Thus, for FYC students, we can accept and understand, and perhaps even praise, their efforts when we see patchwriting, but we still must encourage students to move beyond it as they become more familiar with academic reading and writing. Blum envisions plagiarism as a triangle: at one corner students are “willfully, unambiguously” cheating (12); at another corner is professional plagiarism, where “copyright infringement and other matters of law come into play” (13); and finally there is the inadvertent corner, where “plagiarism results from a failure to master conventions” (13). Blum goes on to argue, in the same vein as Howard, that penalties for plagiarism should take into consideration the type of infraction as elucidated in her triangle metaphor (27).
All of this theorizing led me to believe that our students simply do not understand plagiarism effectively, and that often we, as educators, do not understand what students are attempting when they exhibit plagiarism-like writing. When we factor in the widespread use of the Internet, the challenges to the very notion of authorship, and the ideas about learning that Howard, Blum, and others espouse, it can be a very tangled web. In order to help us better educate our students, and guide them and ourselves through the tangle of plagiarism, I set out to discover two things: what students know about plagiarism when they arrive in our FYC classrooms; and what they know about plagiarism when they complete FYC.

**Methodology**

In order to ascertain that information, I formulated a ten-question test that was administered at the beginning of the term and at the end in FYC courses. I spent two terms evaluating questions and test formats in my own classes before I fixed the test on those questions that were most effective and clearest in measuring student understanding of plagiarism. The test was anonymous and administered by the participating faculty members in their own classes. Students were instructed to answer the questions honestly; faculty members were asked not to give credit beyond participation for the work and not to “coach” their students in any way. Participating faculty understood that this study was not meant to evaluate their teaching efficacy, but rather the overall effectiveness of the course in conveying said information and skills to students. Additionally, the data were not to be shared with the administration of the college with faculty names or course numbers attached. In other words, this was not an internal review of our teaching, but an attempt to gather information about our students’ knowledge.

The ten questions were designed to test students on both a basic understanding of plagiarism and some more nuanced concepts. While all cases of plagiarism are important to examine, I am swayed by the theory that not every case of plagiarism in student writing is equal. In response to the work of Rebecca Moore Howard, Susan Blum, and the Council of WPA noted above (among others), it is important to draw a distinction between lower-order plagiarism-like behaviors (sloppy, insufficient, inaccurate work) and higher-order plagiarism (verbatim copying, lack of citations, purchased, borrowed, or stolen papers). Shelley Angelie-Carter’s book *Stolen Language? Plagiarism in Writing* addresses student plagiarism in South Africa, where she teaches. Many of her students face linguistic, cultural, and racial challenges. While much of what she says clearly must be contextualized in the post-Apartheid nation, many two-year college students in the United States face analogous challenges (socioeconomic disadvantages, racial divisions, first-generation collegians, even language barriers). Stemming from a Bakhtinian-inflected understanding of language, Angelie-Carter argues that “imitation is an important part of the learning process. Plagiarism ‘criminalizes’ imitation” (17); thus first-year writing courses need to push beyond simplistic notions of plagiarism in order to better serve students who are just beginning to try on academic discourse (11). These ideas, and those
I cited earlier, were major influences on the test that I designed for our students, which sought to define their basic knowledge of plagiarism and to assess their understanding of plagiarism–like behaviors (such as patchwriting) as they exist in student writing examples.

The test, after the two quarters of trial and error I noted earlier, was presented in three parts. In part 1, encompassing questions 1–5, student understanding of what constitutes plagiarism was tested. Students were asked to fill in A for not plagiarism and B for plagiarism. The questions read as follows (answers appear parenthetically):

1. A student uses the spelling and grammar check on the computer to fix the errors on a paper. (A, not plagiarism)
2. A student gives a paper from her/his class to a friend to turn in to another instructor. (B, plagiarism)
3. A student visits a tutor in the Learning Center to help generate ideas for a paper, but develops those ideas alone. (A, not plagiarism)
4. A student purchases a paper from a website and submits it for an assignment. (B, plagiarism)
5. A student quotes from a newspaper in an essay for class, but does not cite that newspaper story. (B, plagiarism)

The questions here range from fairly basic (questions 1, 2, and 4) to somewhat more nuanced (questions 3 and 5) to get a sense of student understanding of behaviors that constitute plagiarism.

In part 2, the two questions gauged how students understood what to cite and how to cite material taken from another source (correct answer in bold and italics):

6. Of the following types of information, which one does NOT need to be cited in a paper?
   A. Quotation from another author
   B. Paraphrase from another author
   C. Summary of another author
   D. Statistics from a website
   E. Common knowledge

7. Which of the following are BOTH needed for a correct in-text citation (MLA)?
   A. Author’s last name and page number
   B. Author’s last name and date
   C. Author’s first name and last name
   D. Title and page number
   E. Title and date

These two questions were the focus of refinements during my two trial quarters. Question 6, and the very idea of “common knowledge,” are admittedly problematic. While most style guides still suggest the time-worn rule that anything that is not common knowledge must be cited, the question of what is and is not common knowledge is increasingly problematic. Angelie-Carter notes, for example, that no-
body cites Kant when using the term *Enlightenment* and that “failure to make such a
reference is not counted as plagiarism. The dividing line between what is common
knowledge, and what are ideas attributable to first sources is difficult to discern,”
especially for first-year students (17). Widespread use of the Internet, especially for
conducting research, also creates problems for the notion of common knowledge.
Rebecca Moore Howard states, “The computer is precipitating and accompanying
shifts in textual values that may be as profound as the modern emergence of the
normative autonomous, individual author” (“Plagiarisms” 791). I tried to craft this
particular question to avoid “common knowledge” disputes. The other four answer
choices are clearly material that must be cited, so regardless of a possible shift in
values and understandings regarding the Web and common knowledge, there was
only one correct choice.

Several faculty members expressed concern over the wording of question 7
on the grounds that our students conduct so much research on the Internet. These
views from my colleagues are certainly viable, especially given the proliferation of
valid, even peer-reviewed, research being published online in open-source forums.
However, our students seem to struggle with distinguishing between an unnamed
author’s comments on, for example, *WebMD*, and a conference paper published on
a scholar’s blog. Therefore, we should address evaluation of sources in discussions
of research methodology (which most faculty already do). Most scholarly material
published on the Web is available in downloadable PDFs; therefore original pagi-
nation is usually available. When it is not, or for sources that are only published on
the Web without pagination, such cases should be (and usually are) discussed in the
classroom. Thus, I chose to keep this question as worded; however, this is an issue for
consideration going forward and certainly a locus for further pedagogical innovation.

For the third and final part of the test, questions 8–10 followed a short passage
from “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The instructions
preceding the passage said that it was from page 2, and that the letter was published
in 1992 as part of a collection of King’s writings. The passage read as follows:

> You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement,
> I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought
> about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content
> with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does
> not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are
> taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white
> power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

Following the passage were sentences said to be from student papers for a class that
attempted to use material from the excerpt. The students were asked to determine
if the sentences constituted A, not plagiarism, or B, plagiarism:

8. Martin Luther King was certain that nobody would want to be contented
with a superficial type of social analysis that concerns itself only with effects
and doesn’t deal with root causes (2). (B, plagiarism)
9. Martin Luther King wrote that the city of Birmingham’s “white power structure” left African-Americans there “no alternative” but to demonstrate in the streets (2). (A, not plagiarism)

10. In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King writes to fellow clergy saying that although they “deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham, your statement fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.” (B, plagiarism)

The goal of these three questions was to measure how well students could recognize patchwriting (or insufficient paraphrasing) when it was presented to them, and to test whether they could recognize accurate/inaccurate citations in examples, rather than simply knowing the mechanics of citation, which were tested in part 2.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is test population: 578 students in total took the pretest, and 393 took the post-test. The number of students taking the post-test is a significant drop from the pretest, showing just how many changes in enrollment many community colleges face after the first week of a term. Many students drop courses, change sections, simply stop showing up, or add classes. Thus the post-test population is significantly smaller than the pretest population, making comparisons between the results less significant, though still empirically valuable. The only guarantee is that the students taking the post-test had completed (at least in terms of attending until the sometimes bitter end) a term of FYC.

My second limitation is the lack of demographic information for test takers. These data were gathered at James A. Rhodes State College in Lima, Ohio, in three subsequent terms: the spring quarter of 2011, the fall quarter of 2011, and the winter quarter of 2012 (summer quarter was excluded). During this period, Rhodes State College’s published demographics provide a fair generalization of the test takers’ demographics. Of the just over 4,000 students, 47% were part-time and 53% full-time. Rhodes State reports a student population ratio of 69% female to 31% male. Ethnically, 88% of students were white, 8% African American, and 1.5% Hispanic, with no other ethnicity representing more than 1% of the student body. During this time period 80% of the college’s graduates came from a six-county area immediately surrounding the campus, with very few out-of-state students, and fewer than 0.1% international students. The average age of students was 26.7 years, the student retention rate was just under 60%, and the student-faculty ratio was 21:1 (“Fast Facts”). My own classes closely resembled these general statistics. However, the average age of students is a little misleading, as the ages deviated widely in my classes. The youngest student was a 17-year old dual-enrollment student, and the oldest was a 62-year-old returning to college after years in the workforce. My own classes had closer to 75% retention rates, and my overall study suggests higher retention in FYC courses (65%) than the college average, based on post-test over pretest numbers. FYC courses at the college were capped at 33
students, though many regularly had one or two more. During the spring term,
the courses averaged 25.1 students taking the pretest; the following fall, the courses
averaged 22.5 students taking the pretest; the winter quarter classes averaged 18.2
students. Overall, this reflects a higher-than-the-college student-faculty ratio, which
certainly takes a toll on pedagogical effectiveness. It should also be noted that the
number of students in individual sections varied widely. Numerous sections were
near, at, or above the 33-student cap, while others had only 10–14 students enrolled
(particularly hybrid sections).

An additional limitation related to both of these limitations is the lack of
student tracking. Ideally, I would have liked to track each student in each participating
course by an identifying number, making it possible to determine how individual
students improved their understanding of plagiarism while maintaining anonymity
for publication. This would have allowed demographic analysis and faculty input
on student effort, the level to which an individual student took the test seriously,
and better identification of statistical outliers. It would have also made it possible to
eliminate the results of those students who took the pretest but not the post-test,
which may be skewing the pretest data, and to reach better conclusions regarding
learning effectiveness. Unfortunately, there were limitations on the data collection
imposed by a lack of technology available. The tests were administered via Scantron
brand answer sheets, and I did not have software available at the time to gather
and track data at the level I wanted. This testing system did force me to eliminate
19 pretests and 7 post-tests over the three quarters because of faulty completions
(e.g., using a pen rather than pencil) or because they represented statistical outliers
(e.g., filling out only one answer for the entire test sheet, selecting answer choices
not available for the given question, getting every question incorrect on the post-
test). As there were numerous students who got every question correct, I did not
eliminate perfect scores as outliers in the same way I did for those students who
scored a zero on the post-test.

The FYC faculty enjoyed a great deal of freedom in the design and teaching
of the course. When I began at Rhodes State, I was advised to choose from one of
two textbooks, but I soon discovered that every faculty member had a very indi-
viduated approach to the course. Some used one of the two suggested texts, others
used a different text of their own choice, and at least one used no textbook at all.
Some faculty members allowed students to revise papers and thus learn from their
mistakes; at least one utilized a portfolio approach to assessing student writing. Most
of the classes in the study were traditional classroom style, but several were “hybrid”
sections. Summarily, there were few norms for the faculty; therefore pedagogies
varied widely. What is interesting is how similar most of the results were (only a
few sections deviated significantly from the mean), despite this lack of a consistent
pedagogy. Faculty views of and approaches to plagiarism also varied, though all
looked at plagiarism as a serious offense. The majority of my colleagues viewed all
but the most egregious cases of student plagiarism as “teachable moments.”
Results

Table 1 represents the cumulative data for each term and the total for the course of the study. Table 2 represents the results for the overall group of test takers, broken down by the parts I describe earlier in my methodology and the knowledge points tested in each part. In the top row, \( N \) represents the total number of students in that part taking the test (separated into pretest and post-test categories); in the corresponding column for each section’s pretests and post-tests, \( n \) = the number of correct answers; and the percentage represents \( n/N \), or the correct-response rate. The left-hand column is the question number.

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</table>
Discussion

I began this study accepting the prevailing opinion that our students are under-prepared for collegiate research writing by their high schools. I hypothesized that much student plagiarism was the result of my own flawed teaching of citing sources. I also accepted that student plagiarism was the result of students’ failure to fully understand the conventions of citing sources. The data I gathered indicate that my first two conclusions were wrong. As the pretest numbers suggest, students were especially capable of understanding the basics of defining plagiarism, with a 94.36% correct-response rate for part 1 of the test. In fact, the post-test data indicate a marginal decline in correct responses. This suggests two things: first, that Robert Harris and others are wrong: our students are not woefully underprepared for avoiding plagiarism at the collegiate level; and second, most of our problems must occur with either the intentional cheaters, or within the more nuanced realms of research writing. Dânielle Nicole DeVoss and Annette C. Rosati suggest, “The vast majority of students who plagiarize might not even realize that they are plagiarizing, and others may even harbor a somewhat constant fear that they are possibly plagiarizing” (197). This anxiety may result in the kinds of mistakes that look like intentional plagiarism at first glance but turn out to be inconsistencies in citation, patchwriting, or a similar problem. Such anxiety may also account for the marginal decline in correct responses on the post-test: by the end of the term, students have so much information crammed into their heads that several may have simply thought their ways out of correct answers. For example, the use of the word ideas in question 3 may have thrown some students after discussion of citing ideas from sources. The only other explanation for this marginal decline is in the reduction of tested students from the pretest to the post-test: for example, question 1 saw a decline in correct-response rates by nearly 1%; however, the number of incorrect answers actually declined (from 19 incorrect answers on the pretest to 18 on the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2. Results for All Test-Takers</th>
<th>Pretest (N=578 x number of questions per part)</th>
<th>Post-test (N=393 x number of questions per part)</th>
<th>Percentage Improvement</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Part 1 (questions 1-5): understanding what is and what is not plagiarism</td>
<td>n=2727 94.36%</td>
<td>n=1853 94.3%</td>
<td>(0.06)%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2 (questions 6-7): understanding what and how to cite</td>
<td>n=867 75%</td>
<td>n=692 88.04%</td>
<td>13.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3 (questions 8-10): understanding citation in practice and recognizing patchwriting</td>
<td>n=812 46.83%</td>
<td>n=597 50.64%</td>
<td>3.81%</td>
</tr>
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post-test). As noted in the discussion of limitations above, the varying populations of students from pretext to post-test problematizes attempts at definitive conclusions.

The numbers do suggest, however, that the widespread view that students are not prepared adequately in secondary schools is either inaccurate, exaggerated, or simply an attempt to deflect blame for the ongoing problem of plagiarism. Our students demonstrated that they have a strong, albeit basic, knowledge of plagiarism and research writing. However, there likely is a gap between the standards set for research writing at the secondary level and the standards for collegiate writing. Many of my students, including some “advanced” and conscientious ones, expressed frustration that I would not accept “articles” from Ask.com or YahooNews blogs as viable sources. This frustration was often compounded by the difficulty of the jargon they experienced reading peer-reviewed journal articles. To borrow Angelie-Carter’s phrase, students in this situation are clearly “trying on” academic discourse for the first time (37). Such struggles with discipline-specific or scholarly language can lead to inaccurate synthesis of material, which in turn yields patchwriting, faulty citation, and internal anxiety of plagiarism. Thus, the issue may not be that students are “rewarded” for plagiarizing at the secondary level, nor that they are not taught to cite sources, but that they lack the ability to read material that may be somewhat “over their heads.”

In part 2, testing what and how to cite yielded some of the most positive results in terms of reflection on instructors, debunking my initial hypothesis. In the pretest, 75% of students responded correctly, again suggesting that their preparation in previous (and mostly secondary) education was not woefully incompetent. That 3 out of 4 students knew the “common knowledge” rule and remembered the (Author’s last name and page number) system of in-text citation is actually quite impressive, given that some time may have passed since they had utilized that knowledge. The response rates improved dramatically to over 88% correct on the post-test, driven in large part by significant improvement on MLA citation style (from 57% correct to 81%). I should note as well that there was no departmentally mandated documentation style. Some faculty preferred footnotes or endnotes, while others may have used an alternate style manual (APA and Chicago were both popular, though I do not know if any FYC faculty taught them). The significant improvement suggests that our teaching is not deeply flawed and that our students are grasping the basics, at least objectively.

Part 3 of the test sought to determine if students could apply objective knowledge of plagiarism to a working text. For comparison, Tilar J. Mazzeo cites a study at the University of South Carolina in which only 40% of students recognized “using a direct quotation without citing a source” as plagiarism. In that same study, 27% saw patchwriting as plagiarism, and only 17% understood the necessity to cite the source of ideas (91). In the objective sections (parts 1 and 2), the students in my study had a stronger understanding of plagiarism than the students Mazzeo cites. Questions 5 and 6 both ask about direct quotation, with 93% mean correct response rates for both on the pretest, and 94% and 95% mean correct response rates on the post-test (cumulatively). In practice, though, it was far more difficult for students.
Questions 8 and 10 provided students with examples of patchwriting and of direct quotation without correct citation. Question 8 had only a 34% correct response rate on the pretest, which dropped to 31% on the post-test. So students may know what must be cited, but they fail to recognize poor paraphrasing as plagiarism. Question 10 had a 36% correct response rate on the pretest, which improved to 44% on the post-test. Given the improvement shown on part two of the test, this is not surprising, as the sentence in question 10 clearly lacked a citation. Still, by the end of class 69% of students failed to recognize patchwriting in practice as plagiarism, and 56% failed to recognize quotation without citation in practice as plagiarism.

More positively, question 9 gave students a correctly quoted and cited passage. On the pretest, 70% of students recognized this accurately, which improved to 77% on the post-test. So by this measure, only 23% of students failed to recognize the need to cite correctly when quoting. In other words, the results are mixed and clearly show that some research writing practices are more difficult than others, and students continue to struggle with these more difficult areas. The responses to questions 8–10 in my study demonstrate that students do learn these more nuanced aspects, like patchwriting, in our FYC classes, but not at an adequate level. Cumulatively, students correctly answered these three questions at a rate of 46.83% in the pretest and 50.64% on the post-test. These data support the theories of Angelie-Carter, Howard, Blum, and others. Patchwriting, especially in relation to texts with which students are unfamiliar, is clearly something that many students do not recognize, even when confronted with a fairly easy to comprehend text like the King passage. The data also suggest that even students who understand the mechanics of citation at a high level may not see problems with citation or paraphrasing in practice. These final questions tested students almost as much on their close reading skills as on their knowledge of plagiarism, and if only half of students recognize patchwriting and faulty citations, but do recognize correctly quoted and cited passages, then this seems to be where we need to focus our efforts.

Implications for Pedagogy

The word plagiarism clearly means different things depending upon context. The problem of defining plagiarism, which I discussed earlier, remains important for pedagogy. The students in this study were largely able to discern plagiaristic behaviors from acceptable practices. In part, this may be because of the intensified focus on plagiarism that my study created. Nearly every member of our English faculty took part in the study in at least one term, and this alone may have driven home the point to students that plagiarism is something we took seriously, but also that it is something that they (the students) can understand. Susan Blum suggests that we “convene symposia and conferences with faculty and students. Put these issues out in public, spell them out so everyone knows what we are talking about” (177). Raising awareness among all parties is essential to improving student knowledge of plagiarism and keeping faculty apprised of current theory, attitudes, and best practices. Similarly, it is necessary to discuss plagiarism in the classroom.
Gillian A. Newton and Jeffrey J. Teichmann argue that simply pointing to a policy in the syllabus is not enough: “when the policy was discussed and supported by the teaching faculty, the students had a greater respect for, and an understanding of, the boundaries” (78). This is especially important in FYC, but it can and should be supported across the curriculum, especially in the first year.

Students must be involved in defining plagiarism. As McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield concluded, contextual attitudes (peer and institutional) are a major factor in student cheating (222). Without student input, any definition of plagiarism continues to function as a seemingly arbitrary rule imposed upon them, and thus as a mechanism of the academic hierarchy designed to keep them disempowered. Angelie-Carter urges faculty to mediate a shared definition of plagiarism including student input (114), and DeVoss and Rosati encourage faculty to have students do their own research and write their own definitions of plagiarism, and then create a collaborative definition out of that work (200). The goal of these strategies would not only be to ensure improved student understanding of plagiarism, but also to encourage our students to take ownership over the rules of research writing. Blum argues, “Most of the time students are simply expected to absorb and accept the mandate to cite quotations or paraphrases, without being given reasons why” (166). An understanding of the rationale for avoiding plagiarism and for the rules of citation will encourage students to “buy in” to the system and hopefully desire to understand things at a deeper level. I have begun doing this in my classes, and students have responded very well, if interestingly. The conversation nearly always begins with my asking my students why they should cite sources; inevitably, the first answer is always “to not plagiarize.” This furthers the sense that students come to us not with an incomplete knowledge of citation or research writing mechanics, but having essentially absorbed the rules by rote, without a deeper understanding of the purpose of such rules. In my classes, I now moderate a blog via our course management website that allows students to collaborate on a definition of plagiarism, including specific examples (always hypothetical, I hope), and to share their ideas on citing sources, especially tricky citations and special cases. This has resulted in a noticeable drop in cases of both intentional plagiarism and misuse of sources.

We must continue to decriminalize patchwriting. This is not a new idea. Perhaps, in FYC, we must go as far as Rebecca Moore Howard suggests and remove patchwriting from the category of plagiarism entirely. This is a risky strategy, of course, because we do not want students to be satisfied with patchwriting, nor do we wish to be perceived as lowering academic standards. As Howard elucidates:

Instead of the easy solutions of punishing [patchwriting] or teaching citation conventions in response to it, teachers are plunged into the arduous engagement of students’ learning processes, their understanding of source texts, their manipulation of language. And then there are the consequences of such pedagogy: decriminalizing patchwriting is a direct contradiction of the “charge” of composition instruction. Composition teachers who treat patchwriting as a normal part of even an expert writing process are opening yet another gate in the Great Standards Debate. Now we will not only be eschewing our duty to teach grammatical correctness, but we will also be allowing Plagiarism. (“New Abolitionism” 94)
However, if we continue to punish students who patchwrite, we deny them the opportunity to learn. Patchwriting is indicative, as numerous scholars have noted, of students’ failure to understand a text completely, not of students’ attempts to deceive. As this study has identified, FYC students continue to fail to identify patchwriting in examples as plagiarism, even after a full term of the course in which patchwriting is certainly addressed. Perhaps this indicates an attitude shift, but more likely it simply is something they do so often that they do not see it as a transgression.

As part of the process of decriminalizing patchwriting, we need to address students’ incomplete reading comprehension. Students generally, and my study supports this, seem to lack the ability to read and synthesize material for use in their own essays and papers. My students’ most frequent complaint is they cannot find a source that gives them their argument. Of course, I respond that if they did find this “silver bullet” source, they would have to change topics. Angelie-Carter calls for “the development of an academic literacy programme within the curriculum” (114). Even the WPA Council encouraged this in their best practices statement: “Develop reading-related heuristics and activities that will help students to read carefully and think about how or whether to use that reading in their research projects” (n.p.). I include reading-intensive writing exercises throughout FYC, and my students seem to recognize the benefit of this to their writing, though they do grumble about the workload. In describing her “summary-writing” pedagogy, Howard argues that “one or more of the assigned texts should be over the students’ heads” (Standing 142). I suggest that we consider adding to the curriculum a course in critical reading at a nonremedial level that we couple with FYC. The courses together could do the work of “encouraging” student patchwriting that Howard promotes and simultaneously push students toward more and more difficult, scholarly, and jingoistic sources. A reading course could even explore genre-specific reading strategies, encompassing early/classical reading, poetry, scholarly research across the disciplines, and even digital reading and Web scanning.

Elaine E. Whitacker provides a heuristic pedagogy that she implements in the first week of classes. After demonstrating the mechanics of quotation, paraphrase, and citation, she has students read a current magazine article and synthesize specific passages into their writing (509). This assignment gets students engaged with research writing early, in a relatively low-stakes exercise, and probably with material that is fairly easy to comprehend. Such an exercise reduces stress on the students, and plagiarism anxiety, and simplifies paraphrasing so that students can “move beyond” patchwriting. Also, the magazines come from Whitacker’s personal collection, and she has read them and marked the passages for students to use, so she would recognize problematic student synthesis. Requiring students to submit their research sources, as some scholars have suggested, requires faculty to read all the sources, which is time-prohibitive in most circumstances. I use several exercises similar to Whitacker’s in my own classes, substituting readings from our anthology for magazine articles. This has allowed me to work more with the students who seem to struggle with comprehension and synthesis, while allowing students who do not have problems to move on to more and more difficult texts.
Both Robert Harris (cited in Berg 11) and the WPA (n.p.) suggest creating original and context-specific assignments and requiring that students follow a process approach in FYC. In my own classes, students are assigned a mode of writing and required to come up with topics themselves, and then follow a process through to producing the final paper. This seems largely effective in curbing most plagiarism. In terms of research writing, where patchwriting comes into play, the WPA suggests having students draft their own research schedules and collecting research-process material at various intervals (n.p.). DeVoss and Rosati add the additional suggestion of having students write a reflective paper analyzing their own research methods (200). All of these are excellent pedagogies; however, they are time-intensive. Many FYC faculty are likely in a situation similar to my own, teaching around 100 students per term, keeping up with the literature in their fields, and trying to maintain a research and publishing agenda. I have used all the techniques suggested above, and I have struggled to keep up with the workload, but they are undoubtedly effective in curbing plagiarism and allowing students to learn from their patchwriting.

Another method for curbing plagiarism is to spread the responsibility for teaching research citation beyond the FYC classroom. Newton and Teichmann suggest that libraries should provide specialized workshops in the various forms of citation (85). Research librarians are an invaluable resource to both students and faculty, but many students seem oblivious to the library, except through online resources. Newton and Teichmann go on to argue that “creating a bond with a librarian and the library in their first year of college-level research” will make students more likely to continue to use those resources as they progress (75). These are excellent suggestions and would help take some of the burden off writing faculty. I would add that the writing center should be viewed by all faculty as a place of pedagogy rather than one of remediation. Many faculty send students to the writing center for extra help, but on my campus the center offers workshops on MLA and APA style, avoiding plagiarism, close reading, and more. I offer my students extra credit for attending these sessions, and I would go further and integrate such co-curricular opportunities into my course framework but for the fact that they are offered at times when I cannot assure all students are available. A final suggestion for spreading the burden is to involve all faculty in the process of defining, explaining, and curbing plagiarism. Earlier I mentioned the need to raise awareness, and this is closely related, but faculty from other disciplines can also provide input to students on discipline-specific research writing and citation practices that FYC faculty simply do not have the knowledge or ability to provide. This would reinforce a culture of academic honesty in the institution, further students’ knowledge in research writing strategies, and perhaps allow FYC faculty to encourage patchwriting as a step in the process of academic writing without the stigma of being seen as reducing academic standards.

Administratively, institutions must embrace the idea of plagiarism as a varied typology of practices that necessitates individuated responses. Benie B. Colvin describes her “department’s blanket punitive practices when plagiarism is discovered”
(149) as a one-size-fits-all response that does not take into account the changes that are occurring with technology and student attitudes or even variations in the degree of plagiarism in student work. Additionally, such responses likely do not exempt patchwriting from plagiarism. Thus, it is time for institutions to revisit their academic codes and set down some of these ideas so that faculty and students have a clearer and more uniform sense of what to report and what to expect. Student input needs to be solicited in the crafting of updated plagiarism policies and in their implementation “so that cheating become[s] a behavior that does not find approval among peer groups on campus” (McCabe and Treviño, “Individual” 394). The process for reporting plagiarism needs to be streamlined, and faculty need to be supported by the institution for doing so. Finally, writing faculty (especially FYC faculty) need reduced teaching loads in order to provide students with the quality pedagogy and heuristic practice that is needed in intensive research writing. The WPA Council specifically calls for administrations to “recogniz[e] and improv[e] upon working conditions, such as higher teacher-student ratios, that reduce opportunities for more individualized instruction and increase the need to handle papers and assignments too quickly and mechanically” (n.p.). All of these suggestions will further the culture of intolerance toward plagiarism at an institution, but through individualized responses and effective pedagogies rather than an iron fist or plagiarism-detection software.

This study found that most student participants knew what is and what is not plagiarism at a basic level (part 1). It also suggests that effective teaching can influence students’ procedural knowledge of citation (part 2). Finally, the data encourage a closer look at students’ reading comprehension and our own practical research-writing pedagogies as a likely weak spot that can lead to excessive patchwriting and other practices that can resemble plagiarism (part 3). Numerous studies have asked if students have plagiarized, if they have witnessed plagiarism, if they understand abstracted concepts and practices as plagiarism, and so on. From these studies, potentially harmful generalizations have proliferated, including that plagiarism is on the rise, that high schools utterly fail to prepare students for research writing at the collegiate level, and that our students are very good at cheating us and the academic system. There is an established body of literature to which this study contributes that explores plagiarism as a range of practices constituting a heterogeneous dialectic and argues that student plagiarism must be addressed as such and not as a prescribed list of prohibited writing practices.

Works Cited


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**Nell Ann Pickett Service Award Call for Nominations**

This award is granted each year to an outstanding teacher whose vision and voice have had a major impact on two-year college professionalism and whose teaching exemplifies such outstanding personal qualities as creativity, sensitivity, and leadership. The award, presented at the annual CCCC Awards Ceremony, consists of a plaque from NCTE and free registration to the following year’s CCCC convention. Candidates must meet the following criteria:

1. Major impact on two-year college professionalism.
2. Service qualifications: Positive contributions to professional leadership with a clearly national reach and an inclusive vision demonstrated in such activities as mentoring, publication, or work uniting the goals and efforts of organizations and groups that promote two-year colleges.
3. Teaching qualifications: Past or present excellence in teaching, which exemplifies such outstanding personal qualities as creativity, sensitivity, and leadership.

Any person may nominate a service award candidate who meets the award criteria by sending an overview of the applicant’s qualifications in no more than two double-spaced typed pages and a current vitae. The selection committee may request other supporting materials. The 2016 award committee will select the winner from nominations postmarked no later than **November 15, 2015**. Please send two-page nominating materials (include a résumé, if possible) to: Linda Walters-Moore, Nell Ann Pickett Service Award Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, tyca@ncte.org.