Plagiarism Due to Misunderstanding: Online Instructor Perceptions

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Abstract: Plagiarism is an ongoing problem in higher education. This problem exists in both online and face-to-face modalities. The literature indicates that there are three ways higher education institutions define plagiarism, which includes theft, deception, and misunderstanding. Plagiarism due to misunderstanding has received less attention in the literature. In addition, research has shown that there are at least three different categories of misunderstanding, which include cultural, generational, and academic enculturation factors. In this study, a focus group of 14 online full-time instructors participated in discussing perceptions of plagiarism due to misunderstanding. The results show that instructors identified two primary causes of this kind of plagiarism, which were poor paraphrasing and incorrect citing of academic sources. In addition, the results showed that there were three primary approaches taken to address such cases, which were coaching, simply allowing the student to rewrite the assignment with limited feedback, and referring the student to a plagiarism tutorial. The findings indicate that online instructors may focus more on academic enculturation issues such as poor paraphrasing and incorrect citation and less on cultural and generational factors that may lead to unintentional plagiarism. Lastly, as part of a reflective critique, and in preparation for a pilot study, the authors constructed two vignettes as examples of cultural and generational factors that may contribute to such plagiarism.

Keywords: plagiarism; online instruction; online teaching; misunderstanding

Plagiarism Due to Misunderstanding

One of the aims of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is to make the classroom visible for the purpose of improving the practice of other teachers (Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn, & Savory, 2006). Plagiarism is one pervasive instructional problem not often made visible. From a college instructor's perspective, dealing with student plagiarism is neither attractive nor easy. Having to compile evidence to report each case can be time consuming, and this usually represents an unwanted distraction from other classroom activities (Coalter, Lim, & Wanorie, 2007). As such, instructors may spend less time diagnosing the particular causes of each plagiarism case, and spend more time matching the incident to types of plagiarism recognized in institutional policy. This may lead to occasionally mislabeling a case as theft or deception, where misunderstanding may be the cause (Sutherland-Smith, 2010; Vander Schaaf, 2005). In this result, a teaching moment is lost.

Some instructors follow institutional plagiarism policy almost procedurally (Holbeck et al., 2015; Levy & Rakovski, 2006). Other instructors take excessive pains to determine the cause

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of plagiarism, taking each incident as a teaching moment rather than an opportunity for punishment (Holbeck et al., 2015; Sutherland-Smith, 2014). Given that research has shown that there are at least three broad definitions of plagiarism, which include theft, deception, and misunderstanding, it seems important for instructors to at least attempt to determine the actual cause of the plagiarism incident (Sutherland-Smith, 2010). Here identifying student misunderstanding introduces a teaching opportunity.

Even when an instructor is motivated to determine a cause and engage in a teaching moment, the faculty member may have difficulty in discerning between theft, deception, and misunderstanding (Evering & Moorman, 2012). The notion of plagiarism due to misunderstanding is not a simplistic idea. Cultural, generational, and academic enculturation issues are the three common categories of misunderstanding (Evering & Moorman, 2012; Holbeck et al., 2015). Each of these sources of misunderstanding present their own unique challenges for detection and remediation. The purpose of the present study was to explore faculty approaches to addressing plagiarism, and whether such approaches take into account possible issues of misunderstanding. This included obtaining faculty personal experiences and practices in both identifying the cause of plagiarism and helping students understand the thought process and skills necessary to avoid plagiarizing. First differences by modality will be presented, and then categories of misunderstanding will be explored, including some approaches to dealing with misunderstanding.

Differences by Modality

Plagiarism is an issue that can occur in all classrooms whenever a writing assignment is necessary to assess student learning. Because information is readily available online, some past reports have declared that plagiarism is more prevalent in the online modality (Ackerman & White, 2008; Gilmore, Strickland, Timmerman, Maher & Parsell, 2004; Logue, 2004). This idea is supported by the notion that the physical and psychological distance inherent in the online modality may lead to additional motivation for online students to plagiarize (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Moten, Fitterer, Brazier, Leonard, & Brown, 2013). This paints a picture that online students tend to plagiarize more than face-to-face, traditional students. However, there is not complete consensus on this. Several scholars have reported that there is no significant difference in the amount of plagiarism between the students in each modality (McGee, 2013; Black, Greaser, & Dawson, 2008; Evering & Moorman, 2012). In fact, some have put the blame on the same psychological distance in online classes as the catalyst for false perceptions by faculty and students (Dietz-Uhler & Hurn, 2011; Hancock, 2011). Although there is not complete consensus on this issue of modality, it is clear that plagiarism is an issue that occurs online and face-to-face. Regardless, the potential of psychological distance in the online modality should at least prompt online instructors to be cognizant of the possibility that this could exacerbate the possibility of plagiarism due to misunderstanding.

Cultural Factors

Dealing with cultural issues in the classroom can present awkward situations for college instructors. Certainly this can become more complicated in an online modality. Language and value differences might demand extra preparation and reflection on practice than normal (Mantzourani, Courtier, Davies, & Bean, 2015). Leask (2006) went as far as to refer to these

situations as "intercultural encounters" (p. 196). In addition, such intercultural encounters may be more common with an online modality, as international students have greater access to courses taught in the English language. It is clear then that the diverse cultural values of students present a multifaceted issue for instructors. One prominent view is that students from collectivist cultures might have added difficulty understanding the notion of owning thoughts or ideas (McCabe, Feghali, & Abdallah, 2008). Although there is some debate as to validity of this argument, it is important to at least consider when addressing plagiarism with a multicultural student (Dilin, 2005). In addition, there are several other cultural factors to consider as an instructor. These might include limited English vocabulary proficiency, a preference for using the actual words of authors, and a lack of experience being assessed through essays, in contrast to multiple choice examinations (Hayes & Introna, 2005). Each of these factors might contribute to the likelihood these students might unintentionally plagiarize.

Generational Factors

A mismatch can also occur in generational values. As Gross (2011) argues, a values clash may be underway in which current students have fundamentally different values on issues such as plagiarism. Another way this has been characterized is through the terms digital natives and digital immigrants (Berman & Hassell, 2014). This dichotomy implies a values contrast between students raised with computer technology and social media and those who were not. The use of technology and social media are now culturally embedded practices. Those who have grown up in the digital age and know nothing of the challenges of scouring microfiche and using the Dewey Decimal System just might have a different view toward cutting and pasting text. Both Gross (2011) and Evering and Moorman (2012) argued this point.

Furthermore, students raised with technology might view intellectual property and the dissemination of information much differently than those of previous generations (Evering & Moorman, 2012). Digital natives have grown up with information at their fingertips, while being exposed to free content through digital media such as YouTube, which has made this not only a plagiarism issue, but one of information literacy (Evering & Moorman, 2012). This may not comfort faculty to know, but at least an awareness of this phenomenon may help in identifying the plagiarism cause and suggest ways to approach the situation (Evering & Moorman, 2012).

Academic Enculturation Factors

There are many ways to characterize academic enculturation. In the simplest terms, academic enculturation involves grasping the values and beliefs of an academic group or organization, such as in a college or university (Gilmore, Strickland, Timmerman, Maher, & Feldon, 2010). Such values would include general requirements often manifest in institutional rules and classroom policies, while disciplinary rules would refer to practices mandated by each academic discipline or level of study. Although an underdeveloped sense of moral responsibility might lead to plagiarism in some cases, as may occur with some young college students, it is clear this is not the only factor (Hughes & McCabe, 2006). For example, issues of social and academic integration might help explain at least some variance in academic outcomes by grade level and across different ages (Gardner, 2009). Here the notion of academic enculturation has high face validity (Gilmore et al., 2010).

To effectively enculturate into an academic community there are many skills that students must master. One such skill is learning how to paraphrase (Walker, 2008). Here vocabulary development and sufficient experience within the discipline may be contributing factors to deficiencies in paraphrasing. In addition, variance in reading and writing requirements by grade level, discipline, and even across institutions can have an effect on student academic growth. Each of these factors need to be taken into account when assessing whether a student has the sufficient skills to avoid unintentionally plagiarizing. At the doctoral level, for example, the ability to synthesize vast amounts of studies is an important skill that demonstrates academic maturity. This skill begins with the ability to paraphrase. If a student has a deficiency in this area, unintended plagiarism could result. Regardless of the source, instructor awareness of the potential for underdeveloped academic skills is crucial in addressing plagiarism due to misunderstanding.

Approaching Plagiarism as Misunderstanding

Insley (2011) noted that for many instructors it is important to move past the emotional piece of the problem to an approach that works towards effective management of the problem with logical solutions. The first way to do this is through prevention. The creation of interventions geared towards teaching students how to properly cite, paraphrase, and quote are not only effective but necessary (Belter & du Pré, 2009). In a study by Barry (2006) student knowledge of plagiarism increased through a series of practice activities in appropriate paraphrasing. Students who completed the paraphrasing exercises showed to have a greater understanding of plagiarism than before, and students who did not complete the activity had less understanding of plagiarism (Barry, 2006). Providing instructional remediation such as those outlined above allows faculty the opportunity to bridge the divide students and faculty have in their knowledge of plagiarism (Belter & du Pré, 2009). This proactive disposition promotes a positive academic climate rather than a disciplinary posture. This encourages faculty to teach rather than punish (Belter & du Pré, 2009).

Evering and Moorman (2012) effectively elaborated on what can be done to prevent plagiarism but not what to do once it happens. Additionally, there is a wide range of inconsistency regarding what instructors consider plagiarism and proper paraphrasing (Bennett, Behrendt, & Boothby, 2011; Flint, Clegg, & Macdonald, 2006). While there seems to be quite a bit of focus on preventing plagiarism and consequences for plagiarizing, there is little research on how to coach students during situations where they simply do not understand the true breadth of the problem. Sutherland-Smith (2010) focused on harnessing strategies that instructors can use to address plagiarism. This illustrated a need for developing instructor coaching strategies in dealing with plagiarism.

At minimum, faculty can educate students on plagiarism through simple activities. Providing students with plagiarism definitions is highly valuable, but this is not the place where faculty should end the conversation. Creating opportunities for students to practice correct citing and paraphrasing while increasing their writing skills is important (Holt, 2012). Faculty should take the disposition of explaining to students the importance of being scholars in their field, acting as exemplars by showing what they have learned in their own scholarly writing (Anson, 2011). This can help teach students to take ownership of their education. Providing examples of both excellent and poor writing can help, but it is also important to help students understand the purpose of avoiding plagiarism in their academic writing (Anson, 2011).

Background and Purpose

There were multiple aims in the present study. First, a focus group was conducted to explore how faculty approached plagiarism at a university in the southwestern United States. There was an indication that there might be some confusion amongst faculty as how to approach and address plagiarism (Holbeck et al., 2015). Second, the researchers participated in a reflective narrative on the experienced and perceived challenges to coaching students through the process of comprehending plagiarism. Based upon the study results and the themes arising from the literature, the researchers created vignettes to characterize two cases of misunderstanding. The primary purpose of the fictional vignettes was reflective and educational, as the use of storytelling can be useful tool in critical reflection (Lowenthal, 2008). Secondly, the creation of the vignettes was also for the purpose of a future pilot study intended to further investigate faculty perceptions of plagiarism due to misunderstanding.

Methodology

There were two research questions set forth in this inquiry into faculty perceptions and responses to plagiarism.

R1: For the sample of online faculty at a university in the southwestern United States, how do the participants define accidental plagiarism?

R2: For the sample of online faculty at a university in the southwestern United States, how do the participants address plagiarism when it is detected?

To answer the two questions, the researchers emailed invitations to 174 online full time faculty at a university in the southwestern United States. From this inquiry, 33 instructors responded. Purposeful sampling ensured all content areas and levels were represented. Participants included faculty who taught at the Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral level. Content areas that were represented included English, education, theology, psychology, philosophy, biology, communications, mathematics, and political science. Final participants in the focus group included 14 online full time faculty. The focus group included one moderator who asked the group a series of 10 open-ended questions about their experiences with plagiarism. The focus group session was audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Due to the research focus, only two of these focus groups questions were used for analysis in this study. The two questions asked the instructors to define accidental plagiarism and how they might address it. The research team followed an open coding strategy to analyze the responses by the participants to the two questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each researcher coded the text for the questions analyzed in this study. The team utilized inter-rater reliability as a method for ensuring consistency in coding. Codes were collapsed and themes were generated for each question. During this process, outliers were removed from the analysis, which explains why the themes generated add up to less than 100 percent. The results of the emergent themes can be located in Tables 1 and 2.

Results

Although several definitions of accidental plagiarism developed in the focus group, only two primary themes emerged from the analysis of transcripts. These two were *poor paraphrasing* and *incorrect citation*. In combination, as shown in Table 1, these two themes accounted for 75 percent of the perceived reasons for accidental plagiarism. In the case of poor paraphrasing, the

focus group members continually indicated that some of their students either demonstrated a lack of necessary academic vocabulary or skill to read and properly put in their own words an accurate depiction of cited sources. This supports what Walker (2008) referred to as the need for modeling correct paraphrasing skills, but even here, modeling these skills would not directly address vocabulary deficiencies, especially if there were cultural factors involved. *Incorrect citation* was the other most frequent theme. Two distinct subthemes emerged here in the analysis, which included incorrect formatting of direct quotes and other errors with in-text citation and reference formatting. Many focus group members expressed concern for the lack of student preparation and attention to detail on writing assignments. For example, incorrect citation could also be due to cultural factors, such as being trained using a different formatting style. Regardless, the participants perceived academic enculturation as the likely cause of accidental plagiarism. Perceived cultural and generational factors were absent in their analysis. This is an important finding.

Table 1.

How do you define accidental plagiarism?

Themes	Examples	Theme %
Poor Paraphrasing	I think it goes back to what we said earlier about paraphrasing. They [students] are really trying to paraphrase, but to you it's very obvious that it is not their own writing. They are attempting it, so they think, "Oh I wrote kind of what they said, and so it's mine". I think you can tell your students that genuinely are trying to write their own work.	37.5
Incorrect Citation	They attempt to use quotation marks but there was a space between the quotation mark and their quote, or they use one quotation mark instead of two, or they use quotation marks correctly but they didn't write an in-text citation. You know, they quoted correctly, cited it correctly, but they didn't include the source in the reference page. Those kinds of things. When they are making an attempt to cite it and reference it as well, you can see there has been an attempt to do that so they are not saying, "these are my ideas".	37.5

The next step for analysis of faculty perceptions of accidental plagiarism was faculty response. Here three themes emerged in the analysis. As shown in Table 2, these three themes were *coaching*, *reassignment*, and *refer to plagiarism tutorial*. Surprisingly, these three themes only accounted for 50 percent of the responses. The remaining responses either referred to the plagiarism policy but did not explain a faculty response, or included outliers such as the

procedures taken for reporting plagiarism incidents. The primary three themes that emerged involved very different activities. Coaching here referred to some active intervention on the part of the instructor to correct the misunderstanding. As for reassignment, this appeared to often result only in cursory guidance, such as affirming the need to paraphrase or cite correctly. Lastly, referring students to the plagiarism tutorial provided them indirect guidance. This is clearly a passive approach to instruction. In the focus group discussion, the faculty provided in-depth details that helped illuminate their perspectives on these three themes.

Although faculty coaching was the most frequent faculty response to unintentional plagiarism, it only represented 22.2 percent of all responses. Interestingly, there were many differing strategies used in coaching. For instance, some performed coaching using the telephone and discussing the actual errors with students. Others provided written feedback in the assignment as the primary coaching response. Also, some faculty referred students to an outside website or video, other than the tutorial, for self-help in this area. Some indicated there was often a need to refer students to the writing center to obtain one-on-one tutoring. Lastly, there was some variance in views held between graduate and undergraduate instructors. The faculty who taught at the graduate level were less inclined to coach and leaned more toward punitive measures without coaching. This is similar to the result of simple reassignment of the paper.

Simply reassignment of the paper accounted for 16.7 percent of sample responses to accidental plagiarism. According to the faculty participants, in these cases the respondents gave little or no feedback prior to offering such students the opportunity to resubmit. In the case of a failed student rewrite, some instructors would provide at least some additional feedback. It appears in these cases the faculty members assumed that the student should either be self-directed or be able to correct the error with little guidance. In some of these cases the only direction given was to view the plagiarism tutorial.

Referring to plagiarism tutorial had 11.1 percent theme frequency. This is a passive form of coaching. Here it is important to note that the plagiarism tutorial was an approximately five minute video, which explored some basic plagiarism definitions and different ways to avoid plagiarizing. The video did include some examples of paraphrasing and correct ways to cite sources, but the presentation was brief and lacked context that might be necessary for those who would still misunderstand the purpose. Regardless, the passive nature of this theme is the most important part of this perceived response, as it would not position the instructor as an active agent in the teaching process. Here the primary role of the instructor would be that of a facilitator.

Table 2.

Once you define plagiarism, how do you address it?

Themes	Examples	Theme %
Coach	To piggyback off of what you said in regards to phone calls, sometimes if I pull it up...and you can just kind of tell based upon what's matching and how it's matching; you can almost see that, oh man they are trying and they are confused. So sometimes I just pick up the phone and try to call	22.2

	them because talking to them seems a lot easier than writing it out, especially with individuals that are already having trouble understanding.	
Reassign	I begin by, usually I would reassign the assignment at times and ask them to fix it, and you know if it doesn't look intentional.	16.7
Refer to plagiarism tutorial	I send them back [to the plagiarism tutorial] but I don't know, I can't force them.	11.1

Discussion

This study provided support for the idea that online college instructors may not embrace or fully understand the potential variety of causes of plagiarism. The three main themes of plagiarism due to misunderstanding may provide a useful heuristic to identify and address accidental forms of plagiarism. One of the primary benefits of this study is to bring focus to this often overlooked aspect of plagiarism – the instructor's role in defining and addressing plagiarism once it has occurred. There is a need to remind faculty of their own presuppositions about plagiarism and to make them aware of approaches to addressing plagiarism when it occurs. Specifically, the findings of this study indicate that some faculty members may have a narrow conception of accidental or unintentional plagiarism. With only 22.2 percent frequency, coaching appears to be either an underutilized or underappreciated response to plagiarism due to misunderstanding. This is the most troubling finding of the study. It underscores a few important points. First, as put forth in this essay, there are at least three categories of plagiarism due to misunderstanding that have emerged from the literature. Of those, cultural and generational factors seemed to be less important to the study participants. This should be a concern, as it these populations that may not understand the purpose behind plagiarism policy and may be the most in need of coaching or mentoring to assist in grasping correct paraphrasing and citation. Second, even when academic enculturation is clearly the cause, such factors may intersect with cultural and generational factors. If online instructors are to correctly assess a case of plagiarism, or rather, if instructors are to embrace the teaching opportunity, such instructors need to consider all of these factors. Based upon the findings of this study, it is clear that some instructors do not understand or embrace this practice. Here there clearly may be a need for reflective critique.

According to Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997), effective presentation and reflective critique are important factors in well executed SoTL studies. Storytelling offers one way to combine these two elements. Lowenthal (2008) further supports this approach in making the point that while storytelling has been shown to be effective in increasing learning comprehension it has not been widely used as a professional development tool. In accord with the opportunity of using storytelling to both communicate the message of this study and help the authors critically think about their own practice, two fictitious vignettes were created that represent the two categories of plagiarism due to misunderstanding that were missing from the results of the present study – cultural and generational. As Ely (2007) has stated, vignettes are portrayals or fictitious stories that capture a snapshot of important points about a topic. Put another way, vignettes can convey some of the important aspects that need to be understand about a policy,

procedure, and general practice. As shown in Figure 1, the vignettes provide examples of cultural and generational contextual dynamics that may result in plagiarism. Also, in a planned future pilot study, the researchers intend to use these vignettes as part of surveys to explore a deeper understanding of faculty perceptions of plagiarism due to misunderstanding. The vignette creation process involved three steps. First, the research group discussed the general framework for creating the vignettes on culture and generational factors, relying on Ely's (2007) discussion of vignettes in qualitative research. Second, two of the researchers volunteered to create the vignettes. Next, a third researcher volunteered to edit the vignettes, and finally, the vignettes were discussed and further revised to align with the literature on cultural and generational factors of unintentional plagiarism.

Vignette 1 (Cultural)
Since moving here as a teenager from Ghana, Yoofi has struggled with learning the English language. His afterschool teachers in high school and writing center tutors in college helped Yoofi become proficient at speaking and writing the English language, yet he still lacks confidence to deviate too much from basic syntax. For example, he does not understand semi-colons, so he avoids using them altogether. Additionally, he still struggles with vocabulary words. Before admission to his online MBA program, he thought it would be just like his undergraduate work. After starting the coursework, he said to himself, "this is foreign!" Terms like *ergonomics* and *fiduciary responsibility* seemed complex. He came to revere these words, which made him think they were the right words or phrases to use in his own writing. To him, the business authors he reads say it best – they seem to have the best way of speaking business speak. In reviewing Yoofi's first writing assignment, his online instructor notices a high similarity index. After reviewing the Turnitin report, the instructor determines that Yoofi's has plagiarized. He failed to give credit to the textbook authors. He was using their phrases and representing them as his own. The online instructor emailed Yoofi, and requested a conference call to discuss this writing assignment. In the conference call, the instructor stated, "Yoofi, do you realize that it appears you plagiarized?" Yoofi had heard the term plagiarism in his undergraduate studies. He thinks it means stealing, so in response, Yoofi stated, "I did not steal; I did not cheat." Immediately realizing that Yoofi sounded defensive, the online instructor stated, "do you know the difference between summarizing, paraphrasing and directly quoting?" Yoofi thinks he understands, but he is not sure. He becomes worried that his instructor is accusing him of plagiarism. In his mind, he is not a thief.

Vignette 2 (Generational)
After high school graduation Madison decided to work full-time and post-pone college. As an assistant web designer, her role was to update client webpages with premade messages. She loved it. Shortly after starting, she realized the senior designers all had bachelor degrees. To move up in the company, she would have to go back to school, but Madison was so busy with work she worried if going to school would be possible. She knew attending school in person just would not work, so she decided to enroll in an online program. Madison had grown up with computers and the internet, so she figured that she could always just "Google it" if she had any problems with an assignment. In her first major writing assignment, Madison had to include five academic sources. She had written some short papers in high

school, but nothing this serious. Her instructor encouraged the class to use the university library. As Madison began writing her paper, she went to *Youtube* to listen to some music while she worked. Before Madison got too far on her assignment she decided to check her Facebook page to see what her friends were up to. She then checked her Twitter and posted "Getting ready to knock out this paper. #College #DoWork." Madison found way too much information on Google, so she decided to go to yahooanswers.com. Finally, she thought, "the answers!" She began copying and pasting the answers into her paper. She figured she then needed to cite some sources. There were no authors on yahooanswers.com, so she went to Google Scholar and found some articles that seemed to match the answers. She thought if she provided a reference she would be fine. Also, she remembers reading a note from the instructor that she was supposed to write the paper in her own words. Just to make sure she changed a lot of the pasted text to her own words. A few days later Madison received an online forum posting from her instructor explaining that there was a problem with her essay. The instructor explained that Madison had plagiarized. The instructor explained that although she had occasionally cited a reference, the text was not only not her own words but it did not match the cited reference. Madison assumed all the information on the internet was public and free just like *Youtube*. In fact most of the information she found online from websites like yahooanswers.com and about.com had no authors. In her mind, she had found all of the answers and even changed some of the words. She thought to herself, "why is the instructor being so mean?"

Figure 1. *Vignettes Prepared for Pilot Study*

Conclusion and Recommendations

The main purpose of this study was to explore how full-time online instructors perceive plagiarism due to misunderstanding. The two primary causes of accidental plagiarism identified by study participations were *poor paraphrasing* and *incorrect citation*. As for post-identification approaches, there was some variance in opinion. For instance, some contended that the response be contingent upon the level of study (undergraduate and graduate). One primary finding is that while some instructors chose to delve deeper to both determine the cause and offer guidance, many others chose to either take a passive approach or simply place the burden on the students to correct their mistakes.

As outlined in the discussion section, the authors are currently undertaking a study to pilot vignettes to explore faculty responses. Once validated, survey questions based upon the vignettes will be designed to determine instructor perspectives on the examples. Here faculty perspectives will further contribute to understanding how such instructors makes sense of plagiarism due to misunderstanding, as well as reasons why such faculty might place the burden of correction on the students. With ever increasing access to online courses, younger and more culturally diverse populations will likely continue to enroll in such courses. Future research can help in defining not only kinds of plagiarism but the types of attitudes online instructors should take in approaching such a diverse student population.

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