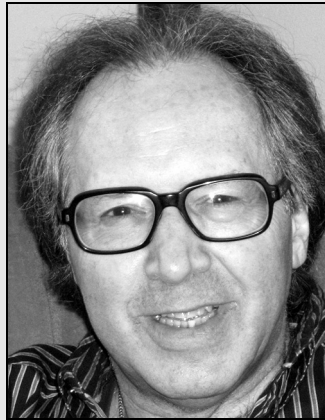


# Responding to Multicultural Plagiarism in the Online Course

**Errol Craig Sull**

Multicultural plagiarism is a challenge for the online educator in North America that continues to grow as students enroll from more countries. In not recognizing the “why” and “how” of multicultural plagiarism there can be an immediate reaction to say “You are wrong!” or “You plagiarized!”



**Errol Craig Sull,**  
Faculty, English and Writing Across  
the Curriculum, Purdue Global University.  
Email: [erroldistancelearning@gmail.com](mailto:erroldistancelearning@gmail.com)  
(for column submissions)

While on the surface both of these reactions might be true it is imperative every case of plagiarism—whether students from a foreign country or not—be viewed individually, and thus assessed per each student’s circumstances. Overwhelmingly, research has shown student plagiarism tends to be accidental, and this is especially the case with students from foreign countries. The more we understand multicultural plagiarism the better we can work with those students to understand why not plagiarizing is so important.

**Note:** Multicultural plagiarism can present an especially difficult challenge online versus face to face, for two reasons. With all assignments online—discussion, labs, written assignments, et cetera—students from other countries have an immediate connection to resources “back home” to give input on how researched material should be handled. Additionally, when students from the same countries see one another’s researched work in peer review or online discussions there may be tendency of reinforcement to handle what we know as plagiarism in the manner they were taught to incorporate it in their country or, in some cases, not be aware of plagiarism.

Some suggestions for responding to multicultural plagiarism are:

- **As much as possible, online educators should be aware of how plagiarism is viewed in other countries.** In my 25+ years of teaching online it has been rare instances where I have come across online educators who are aware of how other countries view plagiarism. This has often resulted in wrong assumptions, needless “punishments,” and deflated learning attitudes from students. The more an online educator is aware of cultural differences in plagiarism the better the online educator will be with the challenge of multicultural plagiarism.

*Here are examples of how plagiarism is viewed in some countries:* Most of Asia and the Middle East—College students are expected to quote or paraphrase the best known political or religious authorities without attribution because readers, especially professors, are expected to know what texts are being circulated. Indeed, it might be a serious insult to the teacher if the student writer formally cites the text being borrowed ... Latin America, South America, India, Poland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic—not much emphasis is placed on the teaching of plagiarism ... Japan and South Korea—ideas that are beneficial to and shared by the community are not individually attributed, but rather recognized as universal knowledge. Furthermore, citations might even make them feel uncomfortable, for they will be recognizing individual authors above the community.

- **It can be helpful to have an explanation of plagiarism posted on Day 1 in class, including how it not only can negatively impact one’s assignment or final grade in a class but also the deleterious effect it can have in the professional job market.** Such a posting indicates the importance of not plagiarizing, how to

prevent plagiarizing, and a welcoming invite from the faculty member for any in class who would like more clarification on plagiarizing. Real-life examples of plagiarism in the business world are important, for they bring teaching out of the classroom and into the world where students will spend most of their lives.

- **Ask for students’ input on how they view plagiarism.** This can be an extremely helpful teaching strategy. First, there will be an overall sense of how informed the students are on plagiarism, allowing, perhaps, for adjustments in teaching plagiarism in the course. Second, any students from other countries might contribute information that culturally does not align with western civilization’s approach to plagiarism, thus allowing the online educator to be proactive in teaching “all about plagiarism” to these students, rather than being reactive when plagiarism occurs on an assignment.
- **Students—any students—should not be accused of plagiarism; this begins with a negative. Rather, approach the subject with Socratic questions.** Open-ended questions about the material suspected of being plagiarized, asking a student if he/she is aware of plagiarizing, et cetera can result in a positive outcome, including an understanding of the student as to what constitutes plagiarizing, why it is “bad,” and how to assure it is not repeated.
- **Ideally, the matter should be discussed with the student in a phone call, as it is more personal.** In a phone call one can “hear” the student’s tone, have immediate responses to student comments/offer immediate feedback to student comments, and establish a stronger/more personal bond with the student (thus the student knows you are there to help). If a phone connection cannot be made an email must be used, and it must, of course, not be accusatory, but

rather present information and ask open-ended questions.

- **Teach plagiarism as it is viewed in Western civilization; do not accept a student's approach that differs from this, but rather employ patience.** Although foreign students may be returning to their countries after graduation, we must consider how plagiarism would be viewed if encountered in other courses or in professional settings in western civilization. Not doing this would merely reenforce the students' approach to plagiarism brought from their countries. While what they learned in their countries should never be diminished nonetheless more and more business in the world is conducted in English, and thus it is crucial that all leave the classroom with a solid understanding of "all things" plagiarism.
- **In explaining why plagiarism is never good approach the subject as if you are the author and your research or quotation is being used.** In teaching "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of plagiarism in a multicultural setting a good approach is to think of one's explanation as if the sports announcing team of the play-by-play commentator and the color commentator. The play-by-play person gives merely the facts, yet the color commentator makes the action come alive, makes it personal—and thus it is easier to understand. Using self as the author and asking the student about use of your material makes the conversation more personal and real.
- **Look for "teachable moment" opportunities with multicultural plagiarism, perhaps in discussion.** Here is an example: One of the most fascinating discussion threads in a classroom I've experienced happened several years ago when a Middle Eastern student plagiarized much of her paper from a well-known Middle Eastern scholar. She and I had a discussion about this, and she was surprised that I would "accuse" her

of plagiarism, for in Middle Eastern countries, as explained above, citations are discouraged, as professors are expected to know the works of well-known scholars.

I saw this as a teachable moment, and asked the student if we might use the example in a discussion thread for a talk on plagiarism. She agreed, and what ensued was one of the most dynamic discussion threads I've experienced in my many years of teaching. It so happened we also had two students from China, one from Bulgaria, and another from India, and those students weighed in with thoughts/practices of plagiarism in their countries, different from how it is viewed in our western civilization.

- **Keep a record of all multicultural instances of plagiarism, including names of students, details of the incidents, and how they were resolved.** There are two important reasons to do this: (1) There will be a paper trail indicating the help you tried to provide in case the student complains. The more information that can be presented in writing the more secure the educator can feel in his or her approach in working with the foreign student on understanding plagiarism. (2) It gives the faculty member more "tools" to use when faced with multicultural plagiarism. We have students coming to our North American universities and colleges in numbers that continue to grow, and this translates to a wider variety of countries. The result could be new approaches to plagiarism or new twists to already-represented countries.
- **Continue research on how plagiarism is viewed in those countries where you do not have this information.** The more information one has on how plagiarism is viewed in other countries the better prepared one will be when a student from a foreign country is in the online educator's class.

### **AN IMPORTANT CONCLUDING NOTE**

It should always be remembered that students from other countries who hold a different view of plagiarism from that in western civilization are not wrong in their approach. Rather, it is merely a cultural difference: while respected for how it is viewed in another country we must also make every effort to teach how to prevent plagiarism to all students from a western civilization perspective.

*Remember:* One person can see a glass of water as half full, another person can see the glass as half empty, yet both are correct—50% of the glass is filled. Rather than view one as wrong and the other as right it is important to understand each person's perspective.