

Plagiarism as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon

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Many faculty address potential plagiarism with only a brief mention, believing that students understand and know how to avoid it. In fact, the issue is complex and dynamic. While the ready access of Internet material has promoted copying without attribution, the diversity of students and faculty on American campuses who represent varied cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds also influences documentation conceptualization and practice. University students in China (PRC), Latvia, Lithuania, and the United States were surveyed to see how they regarded the concept of plagiarism and how their perception matched actual academic practices. The results suggest that plagiarism may be attributed to multiple variables, including historical, political, economic, social, pedagogical, and technological influences. Additional anecdotal evidence was collected. In one example, citing a half-century of Soviet rule in the Baltic States which had done away with the concept of personal property, students often failed to acknowledge the value of intellectual property, an especially abstract notion. Plagiarism has often been an outgrowth of differences in understanding. Therefore, implications include the need for increased awareness and knowledge by faculty and students provided through pedagogical support for discipline-specific instruction.

Introduction

The real mystery of writing, like all forms of creativity, is that we don't know what makes it happen. *Where did he find the words?* we marvel rhetorically over an arresting passage. More rare and therefore shocking are those moments when we come upon a paragraph and can say factually, declaratively, *I know where he got that.* (Mallon, 2001)

When explaining the requirements of a research paper to students, faculty commonly include the admonition, "Don't plagiarize!" Yet because all of us in recent times have come to recognize that the issues of academic integrity are dynamic and complex, we should also be aware that whether we are hearing about copyright infringement by Napster or appropriation of computer code by graduate student programmers, the subject is more complex and stratified than the brief warning issued in our classes represents.

Indeed, when we make such a simple statement, we may be operating under certain faulty assumptions, and by so doing, we trivialize a complicated western communal value, which has economic, political, and cultural ramifications. Since 1710 when law in England formally decreed that both authors and publishers were entitled to financial reward by means of copyright (Rose 1994), we have recognized that intellectual innovation resulting in published material is often a for-profit endeavor and that the ideas and words of an author have value as property. Consequently, the incentive for intellectual effort is compensation, either as financial remuneration or professional attribution. We hold this tenet as an assumption so fundamental and near that very few of us recognize the economic rationale present within our warning to students.

We may often also fail to recognize that political and historical issues impact our own concerns with plagiarism. Over the years, research has reported on people from some Asian cultures using *verbatim* material to share the wisdom of great scholars (LaFleur, 1999; Leki, 1992; Qu, 2002), resulting in a common recognition of sources by the educated elite with attribution seen as redundant. Copying of these works remains a common and frequent academic exercise. Furthermore, direct language use has often been used to intimidate and command consensus. For example, an editorial style presenting an argument such as, "We all know that Tibet is part of China," offers no opportunity for disagreement, and seeking a source for such communal understanding would undermine the expected and necessary acquiescence and obedience (Leki, 1992).

Further complications for the use of published language and attribution expectations are often based in economic practices, for example, in Communist and post-Soviet environments. In these settings, economic structures have historically disallowed individuals from owning personal property, much less from recognizing the abstract and complex notion of *intellectual property*. A student in post-Soviet Latvia at the most prestigious post-secondary institute recently responded to a lecture on documentation and intellectual property by one of the researchers with, "You Americans do not own everything! The Internet says www—world-wide web. We can use whatever we want!" Further confirming this collectivist mentality, at this same institution, students were found to be copying from each other and comparing composition lengths on free-writing assignments (a warm-up invention strategy), even though there was no grade advantage to be gained. When questioned, the group-held defense was, "We do it this way! We always do it this way! We copy and our teachers all know we just do it!" This communal cultural understanding has supported the notion, regardless of the circumstances, for generations, and made socially acceptable this collective practice. However, new administrators of the same institution have not supported the student opinion and worked diligently to root it out through education and judicial reviews. Seeking to conform with western values, these educators have considered academic integrity requisite for participation in the global economic community (i.e., the European Union), and consequently the administrators expelled several students for these offenses as examples. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), participation in the WTO has also piqued China's recent attention toward trademark and copyright issues (Qu, 2002), but few educators are well prepared in either the legal or pedagogical issues, as we have observed during multiple teacher-training visits. The global push toward free market economy may well be its own incentive. However, rejection of long-held practices and beliefs requires time and explicit instructional effort.

Indeed, the instant access to published material on the Internet undermines to a large degree the arguments we as faculty present against freely downloading without citation. What once required lengthy effort to at least retype a segment of another's written work in order to appropriate now requires only a quick cut-and-paste maneuver. The respect for the creation of text has diminished along with appreciation of the author's effort. Along with this weakened respect for the text, the attention required for accurate documentation has also been minimized. Students often lack the skills and the awareness to tackle the time-consuming procedure of citation (i.e., complex URL, or date of access), usually requiring a discipline-specific format. (Lathrop & Foss, 2000).

Because we as faculty assume that students have been taught documentation throughout their prior education, we do not see the necessity for direct instruction. But when student performance fails to match our expectations for discipline-specific documentation, we might ask ourselves, "From where should the students have obtained this knowledge?" Additionally, when few faculty respond with punitive sanctions in confronting a possible or confirmed offender, what message is being sent and received? And in today's litigious American society, what protections and recourse do faculty have? The lack of specific guidelines for faculty and students at all levels may be responsible for the disparity between academic expectations and performance.

Definitions

When we consider the problem of plagiarism on university campuses today, we often make the naïve assumptions that all university students share the same definitions of the term, that they all have the competence through prior education to correctly document their work, and that they will automatically do so. However, upon closer investigation, we have found that students do not understand the concept of plagiarism; in particular, we have learned that they do not know or agree with the full scope of the concept usually found in writing handbooks. Ranging from the most obvious and easily understood to the more elusive, the commonly held definitions of plagiarism, which form the base of our research, include *failure to document* the following: 1) *Verbatim* material (word by word) and enclosed in quotation marks; 2) Paraphrased material (the author's words transposed into another's to simplify or summarize) and retaining the author's meaning; and 3) Ideas specific to an author (and not commonly held). *The Cal Poly Pomona Catalog* includes a fourth feature, "...using one's own work completed in a previous class for credit in another class without permission..." (*University Catalog 2001-2003*, p.54). A recent mini-survey, which asked 60 university students to identify all the appropriate definitions of plagiarism, revealed that less than one-third of Cal Poly Pomona student respondents were aware of this additional interpretation.

Survey

The survey research sought to reveal student understanding of plagiarism through definition recognition, as well as attitudes and practices. Selected as a sample of convenience, the survey was conducted in four countries where the researchers were teaching and were able to personally collect the data. A two-page survey (copies available upon request from the researchers) was distributed to 645 university students in their respective university classrooms: the USA (n=268); the People's Republic of China (n=164); Latvia (n=108); and Lithuania (n=105). Both the American and the Latvian samplings were ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous groupings, notable especially in Latvia where the population included Russian, Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian students; the Chinese and Lithuanian populations were somewhat homogeneous. While the students in Latvia, Lithuania and the USA represented varied and numerous majors, the students in the China group were all English majors. The data collected from Latvia are exceptional in that the Latvian sample had been exposed to four weeks of direct instruction in academic writing and documentation prior to the data collection; thus these findings may be seen to be "skewed" by education. The other groups were not treated in any exceptional manner.

Findings and Conclusions

The survey questions, designed to elicit student responses in the areas pertaining to plagiarism (i.e., definition, attitude, and practice), presented findings which, although predictable to some extent, were unanticipated in many respects, particularly in regard to the assumptions we make about our own American student population. In the following discussion, we will focus on the student responses most salient to understanding and management of the problem.

Definition

Concerning questions regarding the definition of plagiarism, the study discloses nothing unexpected in the student responses to the most obvious meaning of the concept, namely, copying constitutes plagiarism (see Appendix, Figure 1). A majority of US students (87%) understand that *verbatim* copying without appropriate documentation does indeed constitute

plagiarism. At the same time, considering the cultural values and pedagogical practices of the People's Republic of China, it is entirely understandable that less than half (43%) of the Chinese students consider copying to be plagiarism. As for the Baltic nations, in Lithuania, fewer than two-thirds (59%) of the responses acknowledge copying to be plagiarism, while in Latvia, 80% of the students agree with this definition of the concept, demonstrating the impact of direct instruction. However, in spite of careful training, 20% of the Latvian population still refused to change its perspective, hinting at the complexity of plagiarism. Without an understanding of the far-reaching economic consequences of the concept, why would students readily adopt the notion merely on the word of an American instructor or any similar directive found in a handbook or syllabus?

The results from the question regarding paraphrasing were somewhat unexpected (see Appendix, Figure 2). The data clearly show that nearly half (48%) of the US student population believes that changing the syntax and words of an author's text is sufficient to proclaim ownership, thus eliminating the need for documentation. Notable is the similarity of the US response to the Chinese student response, in which 55% deem paraphrasing to be the same as invention. Predictably, in Lithuania, where collectivism has prevailed, two-thirds of the student population assert that restating does not necessitate crediting a source. In Latvia, despite being carefully taught, nearly one-third (28%) of the students still resisted viewing paraphrasing without citation as plagiarism. The latter data argue for continuous instruction over time in order to inculcate the concept to its full measure.

When confronted with the most problematic definition of plagiarism, data in Figure 3 reveal that for a majority of students, ideas do not constitute private property. More than half (53%) of the US students find appropriation and use of someone else's ideas as their own to be acceptable. Not surprisingly, for more than two-thirds of the Chinese students and for nearly two-thirds of the Lithuanian students, for whom the idea of private ownership is a very recent phenomenon, ideas belong to the collective. Again, in Latvia, education accounts for the 72% who agree with the definition. Yet, again, there is still a strong element of resistance (28%) to the notion.

For those of us who assumed that American students—products of and participants in a society where individual rights and private property are sacrosanct—are better informed, the findings regarding the definitions of plagiarism are sobering. It appears that we may have failed to instill in our young people some of the values that ensure the continuing prosperity of our society.

Attitudes

In an examination of student response to questions regarding attitudes toward plagiarism, the data in Figures 4 through 6 exhibit the degree to which societal values and pedagogical practices influence attitude. When students were asked to consider the moral implication of plagiarism by equating it with cheating (see Figure 4), we find that only two-thirds of US students deem it morally wrong. Fully one-third (combined 22% No, 13% Don't know) does not believe that an act of plagiarism is synonymous with dishonesty. On the other hand, the Chinese students' response (57%) is consistent with the cultural values of their society in which copying is a pedagogical practice, as well as a mark of respect for traditional wisdom.

When asked if plagiarism is acceptable in academic work (see Figure 5), 95% of the Latvian students responded negatively. Their almost-unanimous response shows the consequence of direct instruction. A strong majority (75%) of the US student response demonstrates awareness of plagiarism and its relationship to the notion of academic integrity. However, one-fourth of the same population (combined 8% Yes, 17% Maybe) seems less certain. Where were they, we wonder, when their teachers lectured about the significance of academic integrity and the dire consequences of transgression?

In Figure 6, the Chinese and Baltic responses are remarkably similar for students who live in countries on opposite sides of the world. In all three cases, two-thirds of the students admit to knowing someone who has plagiarized. However, in the USA, only 37% of the students readily admit to direct knowledge of plagiarism, while a nearly one-third (27%) responds with a timid “maybe.” Ideally, we could conclude that few students in the USA plagiarize; therefore, fewer students would know someone who has done so. However, the similarity of the other three populations leads us to suspect that societal values may also influence the answers. In the USA, students are aware of the negative connotations and consequences of plagiarism; therefore, they may be reluctant to admit to such an action, even to a peer. However, students in the other countries, may feel freer to admit to something which is not considered reprehensible by their peers and by the society.

Practice

Figures 7-9 illustrate student response to matters of practice regarding plagiarism. The questions probed the possibility of, the reasons for, and the sources of plagiarism. Figure 7 reveals that neither social sanctions, nor negative moral connotations, nor even limited direct instruction are sufficiently compelling to prevent one-third of the US and Latvian populations from resorting to plagiarism when given the opportunity. The survey also highlights the decisive role played by politics and economics in shaping behavior. Despite geographical distance and different cultural norms, two-thirds of the Chinese and Lithuanian students would or might plagiarize if they could.

When asked why they would plagiarize (Figure 8), all student populations cited the most obvious reasons: It takes less time to complete an assignment, the ideas and writing are better, and it is easier than having to produce original work. Interestingly, quite a number of students in all the countries (more than 10% in the USA, almost 15% in China, nearly 20% in Latvia) believe that teachers do not care. While consistent with the world view in China and the Baltic States, this is an unexpected response from our US population and seriously undermines our assumption that the American educational system carefully inculcates in our students the value of academic integrity.

Predictably, when asked to specify the most likely source they would use if they were to plagiarize (Figure 9), nearly one-half or more of the students in all regions except China (USA 42%; Latvia 46%, China 25%, Lithuania 57%) chose the Internet. Their response confirms the ever-increasing role technology plays in the practice of plagiarism and accounts for the escalating concern expressed by faculty on US campuses. The discrepancy in the responses by the Chinese students, who selected printed material as their source for plagiarism, is evidence of still limited access to technology dictated by a poorer economy and a repressive regime. However, the situation is changing rapidly as China moves closer to a free market economy and seeks to become a principal player in global affairs.

Finally, responding to a question regarding treatment of those found guilty of plagiarism (Figure 10), most students favored a mild, slap-on-the-wrist form of punishment, hinting that they do not consider the act to constitute a serious offense or breach of trust. Regardless of geography or culture, more than half of the students, nearly 60% in the USA, believe a warning, or perhaps a failing grade on the plagiarized assignment to be an adequate penalty. Very few, only 3% in the USA and none in Lithuania, consider the act to warrant anything as harsh as suspension or expulsion. However, a sizable group of students in every country replied that taking a class would be an appropriate response. This reaction, particularly notable in Latvia where the students had been exposed to the benefits of direct instruction, suggests a solution to the problem.

Implications

Drawing from the survey findings, it becomes clear that we must consider the issue of plagiarism in terms of culture and pedagogy to modify student understanding, attitude, and practice.

Confirmation that U.S. students were no more aware of the complex definitions of plagiarism than students in other parts of the world requires that we reconsider our assumptions and practices. Latvian student responses reveal the positive impact of direct instruction while also suggesting that time and continuing education may be necessary to overcome resistance and ensure assimilation. The degree to which the definitions were understood by students in China and Lithuania reveals the other end of a continuum, where cultural and social acceptance are beginning, but where documentation education is both limited and novel.

With regard to student attitudes, we find that in order to instill new values, social attitudes must undergo change. In the U.S.A., where social sanctions are stronger, there is less evidence of plagiarism; in China and Lithuania, where communal values support collectivism, students do not recognize the moral or ethical connotations inherent in the western interpretation of plagiarism. In contrast is the response from the Latvian sample, which was nearly unanimous in its acceptance of the concept of academic integrity, as a result of its intense educational treatment. This is particularly noteworthy in light of similarities to its Lithuanian neighbor, with respect to their common ethnic, political and historical experiences.

Concerns arise from the student response to questions regarding their practice. Internationally, most students did admit they might plagiarize if given the opportunity since they may not know what plagiarism exactly is, how to avoid it, how to document correctly, and that it might be faster, easier and result in better writing. As we know, students' main source is the ready access of the Internet, with China also moving in that direction. Notable is the student perception that faculty do not care sufficiently about academic integrity. This may suggest that documentation is not directly taught in advance and that acts of plagiarism elicit weak response from faculty after the fact. This finding implies that both faculty and students may require more training and institutional support.

The survey research drawn from four different nations around the world leads us to conclude that despite the fact that documentation of sources has been a western concept, as the world moves to a global market, it is now becoming an international concern. This conclusion may require the development of a new global community value— with education as the key.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Definition:
Does copying=plagiarism?

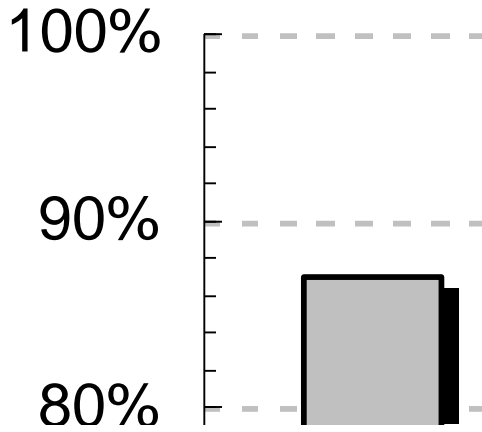


Figure 2

Definition:
Does rewording w/o crediting=plagiarism?

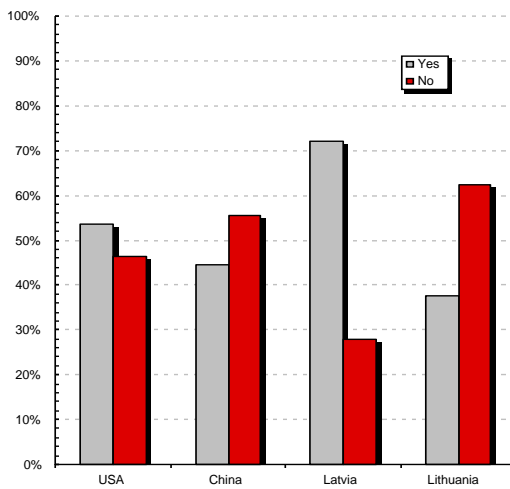


Figure 3

Definition:
Does using ideas w/o crediting=plagiarism?

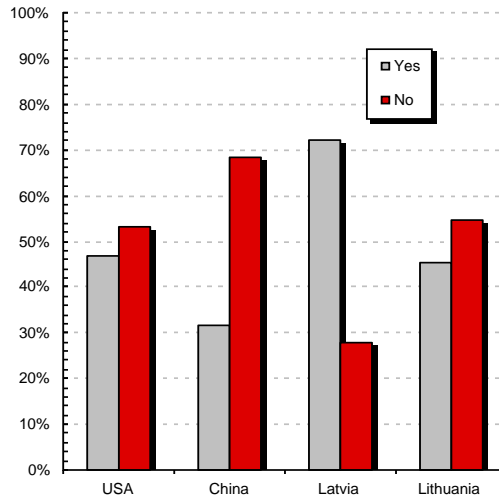


Figure 4

Attitude:
Is plagiarism cheating?

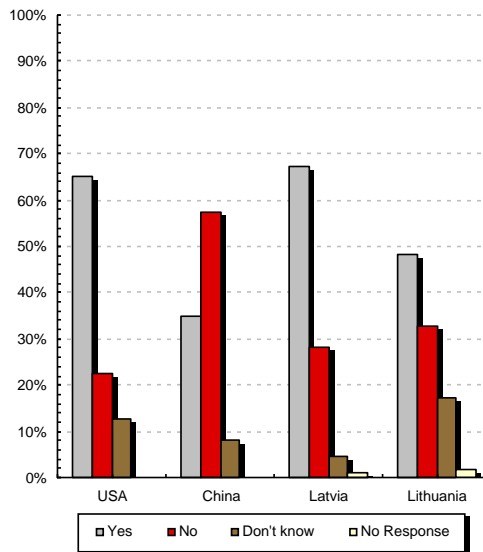


Figure 5

Attitude:
Is plagiarism acceptable in academic work?

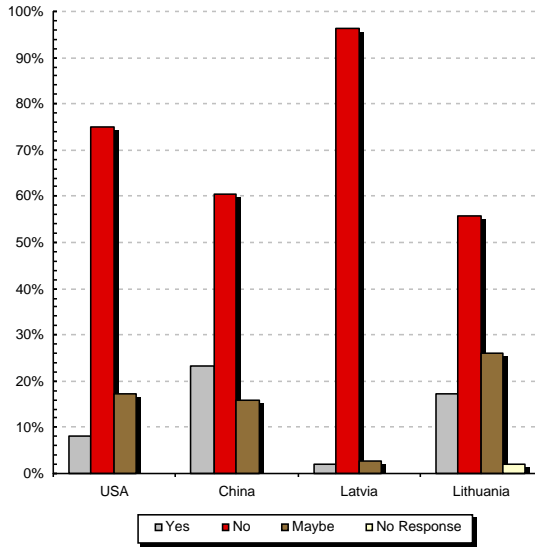


Figure 6

Attitude:
Do you know people who plagiarize?

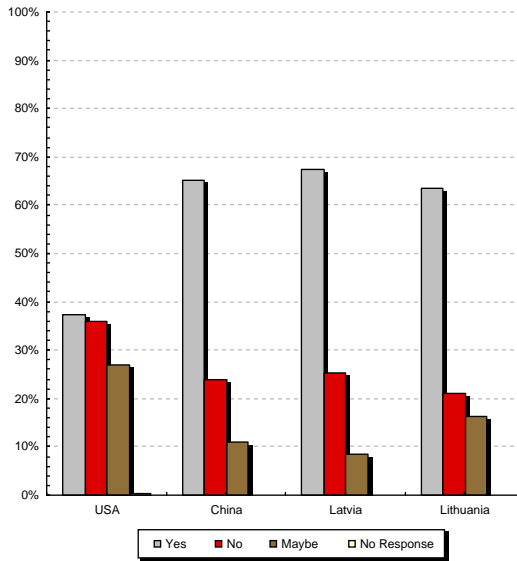


Figure 7

Practice:
Would you use work without giving credit?

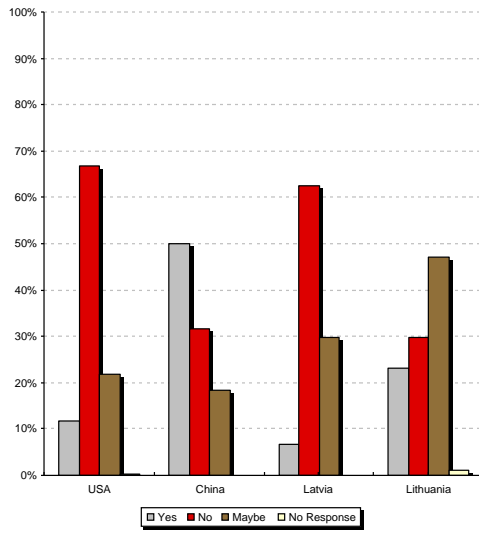


Figure 8

Practice:
What would be your primary reason for using another work?

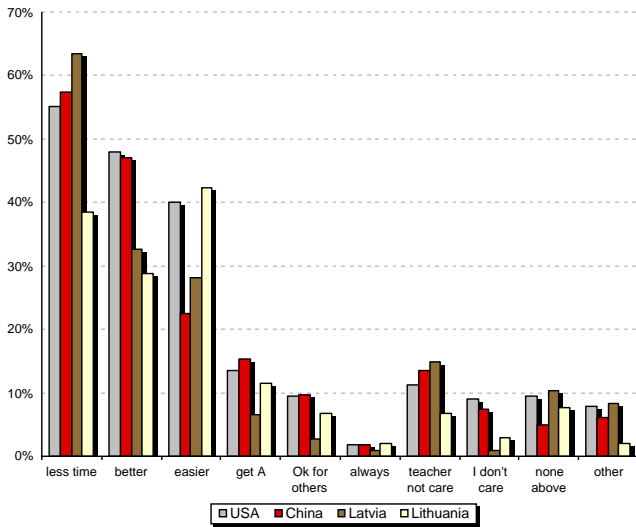


Figure 9

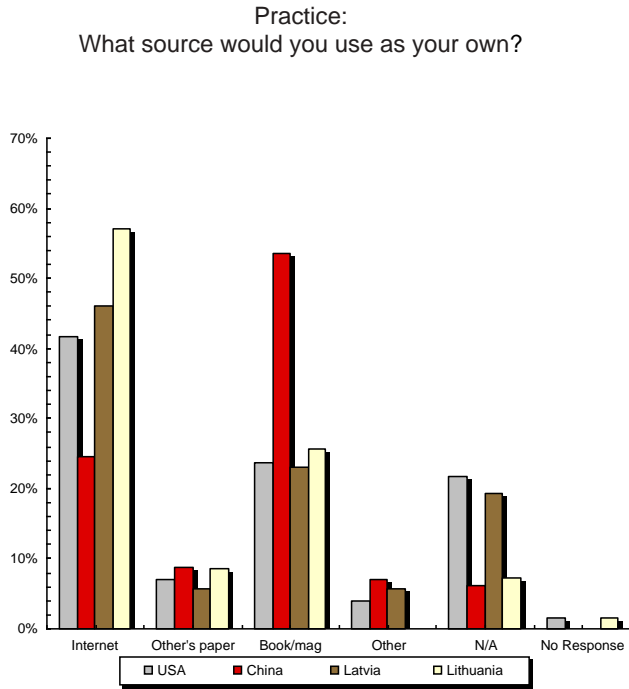


Figure 10

Practice:
what should be the punishment for students caught plagiarizing?

