EMBRACING COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN ONLINE CLASSES TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: A CASE STUDY

Miranda Karjagdi Çolak[1], Irene Glendinning[2]

[1] *Bursa Technical University, Turkey*
[2] *Coventry University, United Kingdom*

KEY WORDS

The recent transition to distance education due to the Covid-19 pandemic raises the need for universities to focus on academic integrity. In an online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context teachers face challenges in distinguishing between plagiarism and intertextuality as language learning can be viewed as a process of borrowing from other's words (Pennycook, 1996). This study involves students taking an English Preparatory Program (EPP) in a university in Turkey and explores the community created between them and their teachers. For some students it is a compulsory part of their programme, and for others it is an optional subject. In normal times the EFL students collaborate, interact, and learn from each other, which helps them to develop their English language skills. Coping with requirements of the EFL curriculum becomes a challenge for the students with the move to distance learning.

Other research has demonstrated the need to promote academic integrity through an alignment of policy, assessment and pedagogy (Bretag et al., 2011; East,2009) that embraces trust and community building. In the current situation, teachers not only need to refocus on subject matter, but also need to acknowledge that it is often simple day-to-day practices that build the community and establish a climate of integrity. There is a requirement to acknowledge that students moving to on-line learning and assessment have more opportunities to get inappropriate help and support that can be difficult for teachers to detect. Teachers need to remain alert to the situations that may arise and take appropriate action. There is a need to reduce the potential for cheating and ensure that breaches to integrity are found and managed.

While previous studies have approached academic integrity by exploring detection of plagiarism by analysing text-matching software or investigating the phenomena of contract cheating, this research is about developing a learning community in online classes as a way to promote academic integrity and reduce academic misconduct. The current study has two key research aims. First it explores views of teachers and students on academic integrity in online teaching and whether students report on any breaches of academic integrity, either by themselves or by others. Second it seeks to provide evidence for the relationship between community building and academic integrity in online teaching. This investigation examines daily teaching practices towards community-building and analyses elements of good pedagogy that work in favour of academic integrity in the context of distance education. Eighty students of English as a Foreign Language in a Preparatory Program of a state university in Turkey and their six teachers participated in the study. This case study drew upon a mixed methods approach. The triangulation of the findings was carried out through a combination of various data sources. 80 student questionnaire responses, 13 student volunteers from the 80 contributing to 2 focus groups (6 and 7 students respectively) facilitated by researcher 1, 6 teachers undertaking self-observation and con-

tributing to one focus group, facilitated jointly by researchers 1 and 2.

The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured focus groups with six teachers undertaking self-observation and contributing to one focus group, then 6 and 7students respectively participating in two focus groups. Quantitative data was gathered through a short survey with one open-ended question and three self-assessment items specifically designed for this context. Another aim of using the survey was to promote awareness on academic integrity among students.

In parallel with the other forms of data collection, content analysis of course syllabi, assignment documents and policy statements, was conducted to establish what advice the students had been given about academic integrity.

The results from multiple sources revealed that community-building not only facilitates positive collaboration in online classes, but also creates room for mutual trust and reduces opportunities for academic misconduct. Understanding the views from students and teachers participating in this research has helped the teachers to design measures to prevent academic dishonesty and eventually will shape the institutional policies.

In summary, although this was just a small study, the results demonstrated how to improve support for students and integrity of the courses when delivered on-line. It showcases best practice towards building communities in an online context, that encourage students to work with integrity despite new opportunities for them to engage in academic misconduct. The authors believe that the positive implications of community-building towards academic integrity that emerged from this study will be of interest to conference participants and applicable to other contexts. A journal paper about this study has been submitted to The Literacy Trek and has been accepted for publication in 2021.

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