Factors that influence students’ attitude towards copying and plagiarism

DANIELA SOREA
Sociology-Philosophy Department
sorea.daniela@unitbv.ro
MARIANA BORCOMAN
Communication and Social Work Department
m.borcoman@unitbv.ro
GABRIELA RĂȚULEA
Communication and Social Work Department
gratulea@unitbv.ro
Transilvania University of Brasov
29, Bd. Eroilor, 500036, Brasov
ROMANIA
http://www.unitbv.ro

Abstract: The way in which students regard copying in exams and plagiarism depends on the goal that is attributed to the educational process they are involved in and the perception of their relationships with the classmates as competitive. The quality of the didactic performance influences the tendency towards fraud; on a short term, the enforcement of academic regulations regarding frauds will reduce this frequency. On a medium-long term, a thorough knowledge of the complex of elements that influence fraud tendencies will facilitate the reconfiguration of the didactic process and the reduction of the proclivity towards copying and plagiarism.

Key-Words: Copying, plagiarism, tolerated deviance, didactic process, ethics

1 Introduction
The proclivity towards the achievement of benefits through questionable ways from an ethical point of view is a general human characteristic, claimed Plato nearly 2500 years ago. The Romanian high education system faces a high rate of copying and plagiarism in examinations amongst students. Although Plato considered this a human practice, it does not cancel their fraudulent dimension.

The work at hand tries to emphasize the factors that are responsible for the dynamics of fraudulent practices such as copying or plagiarism in the university environment, following mainly two incentives. The first will study the way students, in regard to the competitive value attributed to academic evaluation, relate to the use of these practices. The second incentive will measure the influence of the educational process’ quality on examination fraud tendencies. Students do not use the same techniques, they differ in numbers and they feel differently about copying in the examinations of all disciplines. Emphasizing the involved factors in the student’s relation to copying and plagiarism will increase the chances to reduce the frequency of these practices.

This work resorts to the results of an unstructured, external or active observation conducted by the authors in the didactic process of a few Romanian universities (University of Bucharest, Alexandru I. Cuza University of Iasi, Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, and Transilvania University of Brasov) in the last 25 years.

2 The dynamics of students’ perception about the practice of copying
The Regulation on students’ professional activity of Transilvania University of Brasov states under the article 14.11 the following: “The student caught in the act of frauding an examination will be expelled. The sanction will be discussed by the leadership of the faculty at the proposal of the discipline titular and is validated by the rector of the university.” [3]. The regulation is available on the university website but not in an easy-to-spot place. Students learn vaguely about this regulation from their guiding teachers or from their older colleagues. Expelling cases due to plagiarism are very rare in the university. In most of the occasions, teachers will not propose expulsion, but prefer alternative
sanctions. Such sanctions do not need the intervention of the university leadership, but presuppose the tacit approval of the examined group of students.

A 1997 study approaches the subject of copying in exams through the concept of tolerated deviance. The concept defines the favorable reaction (of acceptance and/or of encouragement) of a group towards the violation of a regulation, even though that violation represents a setback to non-deviant members of the group [1]. Noticing the existence of a tacit agreement over the possibility of replacing the regulation imposed by the exterior authority with a more suitable one and the role of the ability that the deviant is acknowledged in the acceptance of his deviance, the study shows that in the context of tolerated deviance the regulation has a real impact on the group only if the group negotiates it and assumes it. As well, the study reveals that group’s tolerance to fraudulent members depends on the group’s perceptions over the independence and interdependent relations of the exam results. In the context of ordinary exams, the group of students prefers cooperation even though university is a competitive system, the study also reveals. Its conclusions are adequate to the time of its elaboration. The independence and interdependence relations of the examined results, the relation between cooperation and competition among the members of the group change in time, once the graduation stakes are changed. The approach of this relation’s dynamics in terms of resources, costs and benefits emphasizes the dynamics of students’ perception about the fraudulent practice of copying.

Until 1989, during the national repartitions of graduates of superior education, the graduation mark was the supreme criterion which would establish the location in the country where the graduate would spend his three years of internship. Under the pressure of this criterion, the students found themselves in a real and constant competition. In that time, being expelled due to copying was regarded as a real threat, since the chances of a positive response to an appeal were quite small. The university atmosphere was much less relaxed and the relations between teachers and parents much more formal. There were two main reasons that led students into cheating. Firstly, some study disciplines were characterized as “impossible”. They were mainly yearly exams, which presupposed the acquisition of a large volume of information that was hard to structure. Whenever examination conditions where favorable, sometimes with the approval of the assistant lecturer, all students resorted to copying. Secondly, it was the case of the very weak students. Their performances were considered totally harmless to the future repartitions of their colleagues. They tried – and with a bit of help they succeeded cheating in the majority of examinations, thus allowing them to get minimal pass marks. Their behavior was considered amusing and harmless to the other colleagues and was therefore tolerated. More, as long as their performance stayed the same, they were helped into cheating.

In the first years after 1989, consequent to the disappearance of the centralized repartition system of university graduates, students did not perceive themselves as competition any more. That time saw the boom of place offers in the university admittance system, which reflected directly in the sudden drop of performance of those admitted. The same professors have had to face a new kind of students, who have adapted their behavior faster to the situation they no longer perceived as a competition. The job market appeared to be generous for the future graduates of these universities, thus the student’s only requirement was graduation. It did not matter the performance as for every one of them there seemed to be, already prepared, a future good job. In such conditions, the natural behavior was to obtain maximum benefits with the lowest amount of effort. This behavior favored the staged spreading of copying in examinations. Theft is from the viewpoint of a rapport between costs and benefits an activity of great efficiency. This tendency towards copying has been encouraged indirectly by the high exam standards maintained by teachers contrary to the dropping competences of the more numerous students. The situation stopped to be considered a competition also due to the regulation regarding the awarding of scholarships. The number of scholarships was not limited, therefore all students that met the mark requirement would be granted a scholarship. In these conditions, students rather started to perceive themselves as friends along a road than competitors. Fraud disturbs the ranking of a group of students regarding their personal competence; this disturbance stopped being considered relevant to the new configured uncompetitive context. The ranking itself has been considered irrelevant to the student’s professional route. Student’s attitude towards his good professional training had become a function with the variable of personal responsibility and very diversified values.

The situation changed again during the first half of the 2000s and keeps to evolve in the same direction. The Romanian job market presented signs
of saturation with graduates mainly from the fields thought to be of great interest immediately after 1990. Precisely we are talking about economic sciences, law, sociology or psychology. Due to political and ideological reasons, these fields of study had small numbers of students in the time after December 1989. Therefore, the graduation mark that was present in the CV suddenly became of great interest given the conditions of an open competition to obtain a job. In regard to the scholarship granting, the state had chosen the option of a fix and limited number of scholarships per faculty, which gave the latter the right to manage the granting; as a consequence, direct competition was restored. The replacing of graduation mark with a simple file contest in the admittance competition for Masters programs also gave more importance to the graduation mark of the Bachelor cycle. The Romanian adhesion to the Bologna Convention, through the pressure it maintains over bachelor graduates in the sense of finishing studies with a MA degree, also sustains a competition among students. As a result, a group of students will not agree to fraud attempts of some of its members. The compliance with fraud students seems to be dropping gradually. The quasi-general amusement acceptance of freshmen students is being replaced with a real revolt equally distributed toward the fraud students and the institutional context that accepts fraud in terminal years.

In these conditions, the pressure put upon the university by the students regarding the fight against cheating is increasing, as well. Faculty deans’ offices confront with more and more reports, formal or informal, mostly anonymous, regarding examinations where cheating is tolerated.

The way in which students represent the impact of their colleagues’ fraud exams on their personal interests is not the only factor to be taken into consideration in the research of cheating dynamics as a student practice. Another set of elements can be identified in the characteristics of the didactic process in which examination is a component. The tendency towards copying emerges in the case of an examination that requires students to reproduce a vast amount of information that is relatively difficult to process. We can include here the degree of difficulty of the subjects studied during the didactic activity. This difficulty may be caused by the contents of the information, which is inadequate to the intelligence level of the audience, or by the techniques the lecturers use to present the information. This difficulty is materialized in examination of the acquired information and favors cheating. Nevertheless, in all of these situations, the teacher has all the necessary means of limiting the practice of cheating.

Yet, there is another factor that encourages cheating. It acts indirectly through the type of academic behavior that it shapes. In this case, university lecturers cannot intervene but to diminish consequences. We are speaking, of course, about the practice students bring from the pre-university education system to copy and use for personal purposes information available on the Internet. The Romanian pre-university education system is in a continuous process of aligning to the level of the European system and has been acquainted with the trend of research “projects.” The use of these “projects” in the educational process is academically justified through the acquisition of research and teamwork abilities.

3 Students’ perception about plagiarism
In fact no one explains the students, proud and praised of their discoveries, the conditions under which such information can be used. In this blurry context – without any guidance and explication – pupils get the ability of “copy/pasting” and the perception that the Internet is a land of lost treasures where the latter patiently await being discovered and used. This ability is in compliance with the postmodern need of knowing where to look for useful information in due time [2] and is, undoubtedly useful. The absence of deontological instruction regarding the use of easy-to-find information is truly embarrassing. Pupils – the future students are not explained what plagiarism means and what are the risks associated with it. Later on facing the first sanction due to “copy/paste” practice in the achievement of didactic tasks, they are stunned: what proved to be useful and efficient in the elaboration of these “projects” is now considered blamable. The request of a personal contribution which presupposes effort is viewed almost absurd by the freshmen students very skilled in the “copy/pasting” of already elaborated texts.

The faster and better teachers explain why the abilities and competences acquired in the pre-university education are not desirable but with certain appendices in the university education, the faster students change their perception on the relation between the necessary effort and the praised results. On the others side, each and every student has its own way of handling this change.

The approach Transilvania University of Brasov takes on student conducted plagiarism is quite light. Article 13 of the Code of academic
ethics states the following: “[...] If plagiarism is conducted by a student at his first sanction of this kind, the case will be handed by the titular professor, and exceptionally, by the Ethics Committee. [...] Nevertheless, the Ethics Committee must take note of the incident so that it can register the sanction in the database. The University will not publish the mention of “plagiarism” in the official documents of students (such as BA degrees, MA degrees, registration certificate or academic situation), but will keep track of the sanctions applied in the student’s and teacher’s personal files, etc. Proofs of the incidents will be kept in a database that will be consulted every time a student is accused of plagiarism. Whether a second attempt of intellectual theft of the same person is proven, the student will be expelled from the faculty without the possibility of a re-application.” [3].

Teachers often avoid the registration of plagiarism cases in the students’ personal files. Their option is based on the difficulty they face when establishing which project/paper handed by students is a personal creation or a fraud. Some texts are relatively easy to be catalogued as a plagiarism due to a repetition of whole paragraphs of other student’s papers. In other cases, the accusation of plagiarism cannot be proven only because of the immense quantity of information provided by the Internet and teacher’s naturally limited means of handling this immensity. “A thief passes for a gentleman when stealing has made him rich.” represents a truly uncomfortable approach of the situation by the teacher who is left with the disappointing doubt of a fair treatment of all those suspected but never proven. Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca recently announced the acquisition of a software piece that will allow teachers the identification of plagiarism in the bachelor dissertations of their students. Its efficiency, though, is limited to the comparison of one paper with other already elaborated, asserted and uploaded in the university database. Acquiring this software will not solve the problem teachers confront with regarding the vastness of plagiarism possibilities that students have at their disposal.

Teachers present the same action tendency in the case of plagiarism as in the case of copying and they avoid putting into practice the stipulations regarding the sanction and registration of frauds. This may be a consequence of a late, partially unconscious and untreated thinking of the pre 1989 terror of making notes and classifying information to personal records.

6 Conclusions

The influence factors presented above and the mechanisms of their correlation do not cancel the fraud characteristic of copying and plagiarism. On a short term, respecting and acting accordingly to the regulations is the most efficient way to reduce the frequency of these practices given the upfront facing with the risks. On a medium and long term, learning and knowing the complex of factors that influence students towards fraud practices will prove its efficiency. Knowledge gives one the possibility to prevention. In this case, preventing fraud practices means the change of academic variables in the scope of reducing the need/desire to cheat or plagiarize.

Students’ perception of the fraudulent dimension of cheating and plagiarism are dependent of the existence or the inexistence of the competitive context in the university. Acknowledging this competitive dimension will slowly diminish the group’s tolerance to individual fraud attempts. The trend to accomplish academic tasks in a fraudulent manner is directly influenced by the technicalities of the teaching process. The inadequacy of the amount of information or its difficulty to the student’s capacity of assimilation will increase and amplify tendencies towards fraudulent examinations. Another factor that favors fraudulent practices is the ability acquired in the pre-university education to use with no regard to deontological issues any Internet available information and materials.

The change of the educational process characteristics can diminish the incidence of theft and plagiarism as student feedback to certain academic demands. To assure the efficiency, this change supposes a reciprocal perception of the academic actors – students/pupils and teachers as partners. The assumption of this partnership implies a change of perspective over the efficiency of fraudulent practices in the achievement of an academic goal, and furthermore a resize of fraud tendencies.

7 References