




# Teaching Academic Integrity: the Missing Link

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## Abstract

Student plagiarism and cheating have been at the focus of scholarly investigations for over two decades now, the discussion being conducted on the backdrop of the question of whether traditional didactics is suitable for Google generation students who supposedly think and process information differently. Using data collected via start-of-term questionnaires, a series of follow-up semi-structured interviews and a specially calibrated session on academic integrity, the present study looks into the students' ideas on cheating, school work, internet use, studying habits and understanding of academic integrity. The study aims to suggest (albeit tentatively) a holistic approach to teaching academic integrity in higher education taking into account the students' perspective: an in-depth qualitative approach was used in the data analysis, evaluating students' investment, engagement, motivation, learning habits, attitudes to cheating and plagiarism. The findings suggest a conflicted picture of the Bulgarian student: hardly taking the all-practical approach towards higher education, conflicted about the value of learning, this generation of students has little structure to their knowledge, they critically underuse ICT tools for learning and regard cheating as a commodity, unburdened by moral or ethical implications.

**Keywords** Academic integrity · Cheating · Plagiarism · Google generation · Learning

## Theoretical Background

It has been almost two decades since Hunt pointed out four reasons to be happy about plagiarism (2002). It was a priceless opportunity, he claimed, to reexamine our pedagogical approach to teaching new generations of students who present important differences with those before them, mainly due to the “information technology revolution”. The questions related to student plagiarism are usually accompanied by a sense of alarm at the casualness and

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propensity to plagiarism and cheating in general on the one hand, and, on the other, worry that linking plagiarism and cheating with moral and/or ethical failing may obscure the cold and clinical gaze of the scientist, if they yield to the temptation to judge from a moral high ground (Hawthorn 2001, p. 143). This sense of alarm, paired with changes in curricula, educational policies and priorities, creates a sense of urgency in educators around the globe, who lament falling literacy standards in native and foreign languages alike and blame technology for creating corner-cutting commodity profiteers: conversation feeds on [ResearchGate.net](https://www.researchgate.net) are filled with worrying professors. This tendency transpires in the way plagiarism is talked about: news coverage abounds with references to “plagiarism epidemic” (e.g. BBC news 2008); researchers are not averse to using similar terms (e.g. Thomas 2004). Yet, one cannot but feel disconcerted about a certain disproportion which appears to dominate plagiarism research, with more attention being apportioned to transgressing students than to plagiarizing academics, while some kinds of plagiarism (ghost-writing, for example) have long been accepted in society (Martin 1984, 1994). Does student plagiarism matter this much more in comparison?

Research dedicated to student plagiarism addressed various facets of the phenomenon, from reasons for cheating to plagiarism prevention techniques. Outside of discussing regulations - punitive for transgressors or implementing honor codes appealing to the sense of morality to curb cheating – researchers attempted to quantify the extent of plagiarism (Scanlon and Neumann 2002; Blum 2011), discussing pedagogical aspects, such as preventing plagiarism by providing fewer opportunities for doing so, be it by crafting assignments (Zobel and Hamilton 2002; Heckler et al. 2013), by teaching how to properly exploit sources (Chankova 2017), or by helping students to find their authorial voice as a remedial action against plagiarism (Elander et al. 2010). Despite those efforts, recent studies do not show a decrease in plagiarism (Breuer et al. 2014; Guibert and Michaut 2011) and the ease and convenience of plagiarism practices still need addressing. This article will share an alternative look into a complex of practices (including, but not limited to, plagiarism) that tend to impede student learning, in an attempt to frame a discussion about academic integrity in the tertiary education. Observations and commentary will be contextualized for Bulgarian tertiary institutions, marked by a twenty-five-year-long transition period and never-ending educational reforms on every level.

I will not be addressing the complex notion of plagiarism itself (for an in-depth investigation of the notion, see Pecorari 2013); however, it might be worth mentioning that student plagiarism has mainly been associated with textual plagiarism – borrowing entire texts or parts of text to paste in an assignment, poor paraphrases, or assignments entirely made out of quoted text. Furthermore, problems with copy-pasted text that is fished out online are being exacerbated by a proliferation of ghost-writing institutionalized plagiarism facilitated by the so-called paper mills, where students can purchase ready-made academic papers or commission a ghost-writer to prepare one, complicating the dimension of cheating.

While some researchers expressed serious doubts about the perceived explosion of internet-aided plagiarism (Pecorari 2015; Scanlon and Neumann 2002), others suggest that inexperienced citation techniques and awkward paraphrasing in grappling with the elusive rules of writing academic texts may be a learning stage called patchwriting (Howard 1995). Researchers mostly agree that emphasis should be placed on providing support for students rather than stigmatizing and punishing the wrongdoers, with works being conducted to identify pedagogical solutions to the problem, as mentioned above. Addressing inadequacies in skill and knowledge may indeed seem like a very promising way to deal with plagiarism. Poor writing

skills, poor writing from sources skills, insufficient language proficiency (especially when students write in a second or foreign language) have been the targets of many instruction-oriented approaches in plagiarism studies: it was one of the most obvious remedial paths that I too took in an effort to understand and limit the students' recourse to plagiarism (Chankova 2017). In an ironic twist, a standard course of 30 units (2 h per week) often does not allow the instructor to include remedial training sessions in producing coherent logically sound and well-argued texts, especially when it comes to special disciplines. And besides, knowledge and skills gaps are merely one of many possible reasons for plagiarism: pressure in various forms, be it pressure from parents or pressure to maintain high grades (in order to be eligible for stipends, participation in inter-university programs or having access to Master's programs, to name a few) is an aspect which seems outside of the control of the individual instructor. It is important to note here that pressure as a motivator to plagiarize and/or cheat in order to gain easy advantage sets the debate in a slightly different lane than the well-meaning attitude of researchers who allow for the idea that plagiarism practices can occur inadvertently/unintentionally (for a discussion of unintentional plagiarism, see Pecorari 2008; Flowerdew and Li 2007). Hunt (2002) suggested that the entire institution of grading and certification is open to reconstruction as it clearly perpetuates pressure on students, which is conducive to plagiarism and cheating.

Researchers have tried to understand the impact of culture on plagiarism practices in students, especially L2 students, by focusing on differences between the Eastern and Western cultural beliefs and norms (e.g. Shi 2006; Chien 2014). However, claiming that a cultural belief predisposes to plagiarism leads to a paradox which is best expressed in Pecorari's words (Pecorari 2015, p.4):

If factors inherent in some cultures cause a predisposition to plagiarize, then plagiarism does not violate a universal academic value; it violates a belief locally situated in the English-speaking world.

Liu (2005) warns against falling in for negative stereotyping and dangerous misconceptions which can result from imputing too much explanatory power to the hypothesis of cultural conditioning to plagiarism. It is indeed telling that French and Canadian researchers, coming from multicultural societies, do not focus on cultural differences at all, but rather found links between cheating for class and other fraudulent acts students are likely to commit (Guibert and Michaut 2011; Audet 2011). Researchers of different cultures have added to the debate, correlating plagiarism practices with an infringement of moral or ethical values, lack of knowledge or understanding of plagiarism in its complexity rather than cultural predispositions (e.g. Hosny and Fatima 2014; Idiegbeyan-Ose et al. 2016).

The discussion is further complicated by concerns over how much the development of digital information and communication technologies has influenced and/or facilitated student plagiarism and cheating, with instructors using those same technologies to detect plagiarism through text-matching software. This difficult discussion is conducted in a context where scholars and teaching professionals ask themselves whether traditional didactics is suitable for Google Generation students who supposedly think and process information differently (recall Prensky 2001; cf. Jones et al. 2010; Jones and Shao 2011). Slowly, play and learning through play has taken the place of learning, with teachers around the globe focused on keeping their students entertained, while more and more (higher education) institutions are embracing text matching software to sift through students' assignments. The technological revolution referred to by Hunt (2002) may well have changed in a fundamental way the very idea of a learned

person: having the privilege of carrying in one's pocket, at a click or a swipe away, vast amounts of knowledge, stored conveniently in ever-replenished repositories, one does not have to know it oneself; just how to get it. Unfortunately, education is not only about accessing a collection of facts.

After a couple of decades of painstaking research into the new generation of students entering higher education, first generation Y, then Millennials, authors came to understand that these generations were heterogeneous regarding skill and aptitude, especially so in regard to digital technology (Bennett et al. 2008; Rowlands et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2010), that fluency with technology did not equal digital literacy (Lorenzo and Dziuban 2006), that digital literacies of these generations were mostly lacking for want of instruction (Combes 2009) and that, on top of everything, the new generation struggled with mastering traditional forms of literacy, such as deep reading (Carr 2011) and functional literacies (e.g. PISA reports 2015). In a way, what those perspectives suggest is that students are learning less.

The Bulgarian school system has undergone a number of changes to respond to what are considered to be the new requirements of the digital age. Academic content was seen dwindle under the pressure of new principles about the role of education. These changes reflected poorly on educating high school students about their role in the academic endeavors, turning them into passive consumers of educational services. This sentiment is transplanted into higher education, exacerbated by an ever-expanding cheating culture and plagued by short attention spans and little factual knowledge. Adding to that mediocre information searching skills and poor digital literacies (Breuer et al. 2014; Chankova *in print*), it becomes a difficult task to discuss information reliability, when students believe that simple searches serve them so well. It has become consistently harder to obtain well-written compositions, be it a basic argumentative text or a term paper (for an exploration of reasons in the Bulgarian university setting, see Bogdanov 2014). In the Bulgarian setting, where reading for class has become a rarity, with students readily admitting to that, teaching a particular kind of (academic) discipline – rigorously looking for information, reading and critically evaluating it in order to provide a reasoned, personal stance on the issue, then arranging the information in a logically robust exposé – becomes an even harder feat. So, *contra* Hunt, academic papers in tertiary education are never about mastering a practical format as one does with writing a CV or a motivation letter; it is about mastering a set of analytical skills.

So it might indeed be the case that teachers and instructors need to evaluate how their pedagogical approaches stand the test of applicability to those new cohorts of students who live parallel lives within their digital devices while at the same time lacking curiosity for exploring the very environment they evolve in. But more importantly, the reason why any sensible discussion of student plagiarism and cheating in school assignments and/or exams needs to be conducted is because of the serious negative effect they have on learning.

## Design of the Study

The study was originally designed driven by the desire to understand how the students construe their learning process in tertiary education in Bulgaria on the backdrop of the emerging cheating culture, on the one hand, and the impact of multimedia environment, on the other. I expressly did not focus on either plagiarism or cheating, opting for a more global view on different facets that shape the students' experience in higher education. The aim of the study was to test the validity of a set of propositions about students' attitudes towards their

own learning process by directly eliciting their own perceptions on the issue and by indirectly testing investment and motivation through analysis of their class work. The main propositions are as follows:

- underdeveloped writing skills and/or language skills are (part of) the reason for student plagiarism and apparent resistance to academic integrity issues (in continuity with the results of a prior study on preemptive techniques in Chankova 2017);
- digital age students have a more practical view of what their higher education should provide them with, along with a more consumerist approach to higher education, which is seen as a service that is provided to them;
- higher education is for students a means to an end, the end being obtaining a diploma or having an advantage at the job market; learning has nothing to do with that;
- digital age students require a fundamentally different approach to teaching, especially one that draws heavily on the use of ICT tools, thus finding themselves at a loss to cope with pedagogical methods that they feel are inapplicable to them.

Several different methods of data collection were used in the course of the study which spanned over three semesters with students of Applied Linguistics and English Philology in their second and third year. First, I draw on start-of-term questionnaires run in the fall semesters of 2017 and 2018, which originally helped finalize and calibrate the contents of the English Punctuation and Orthography course to the specifics of the cohort of students. The questionnaires are anonymous and comprise a set of general questions probing into different aspects of internet and information consumption, learning habits and expectations about both the course and higher education studies. The questionnaire, in which a total of 54 students took part, was filled in by hand in class (see Appendix). Second, a series of follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted in class, as part of the discussions on the curriculum details, assessment modalities and course work, all of which had the aim of eliciting the students' ideas on cheating, school work, internet use, studying habits and understanding of academic integrity. The interviews served the purpose of helping calibrate the session on academic integrity and information reliability, part of the curriculum for the course on Punctuation and Orthography of Modern English, and aimed at providing the students with some context on the issues which were to be discussed. This format was chosen for the ease it provides in approaching different questions and treating the responses when no recording is available; protocol was taken by the instructor in shorthand and semantic/thematic clouds. A total of 41 students took part in the interviews. Third, the session on academic integrity and information reliability itself was crafted to include examples, trial runs, exercises, work on documents and discussions. Every session's results – the students' responses to tasks and their investment in performing them, their reactions and participation in discussions – were noted in order to refine subsequent interventions which spanned over four weeks in total and supplied additional information on the knowledge background of students, as well as their working habits. In order to manage the workload and make the analysis feasible, the production of ten students was looked into more closely, following random blind selection; the sample was then supplemented by the production of the student who obtained the highest result in the class. For contrast and perspective, those were further supplemented by the class work for Modern French class. The classes involved are taught by the author. The written production was looked at using a detailed analysis grid for propositional attitude markers, arguments supporting claims, originality and text plagiarism, citations and references indicating background reading, assumptions and projections, language (spelling and punctuation, grammar and style).

The students were informed about the purposes of the study before the start-of-term questionnaires were distributed to them; they were equally reminded of them before the follow-up interview session and gave consent to have their in-class production to be added to the data collection. Nearly all of the students who filled in the questionnaire took part in the interviews, as the interviews were designed to clarify the answers provided to the questionnaire. The results of each session were amply discussed with the students, as the primary motivation for conducting the study was to find an efficient way to discuss problematic areas and questions and increase learning efficiency. The cohort under investigation are Humanities students, enrolled in English Philology and Applied Linguistics; the former with emphasis on linguistics, literature and civilization, advanced language classes and translation; the latter have also a second language (a minor), with a stronger emphasis on linguistics and translation. The instruction is provided mainly in English and in the minor language, in rare cases in Bulgarian. About two-thirds of the students in these programs enroll in an additional teacher-training program, allowing them to teach in the secondary upon receiving the certificate.

As a result, the data thus collected was in many different formats and of different nature(s), so that the decision was made to analyze it using a qualitative approach and descriptive methods of data analysis. In its core, the study was designed as an action study, involving “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention” (Cohen and Manion 1994, cited in Cohen et al. 2007, p. 297) and it aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the motivations and reasons behind the students’ academic performance and the way they judge the utility and relevance of that performance for their lives. It equally aimed at having all the participants actively engage in self-reflection. The discussion of the results shall proceed in a thematic manner, ending with a suggestion of a holistic approach to teaching academic integrity in higher education taking into account the students’ perspective. This format allowed for a great flexibility in calibrating the interventions during the course of the study, incorporating the results of preliminary analyses conducted as the study progressed.

As the interpretation of results obtained in action study might be problematic (Winter 1982, cited in Cohen et al. 2007, p. 312), one obvious limitation of the study is the difficulty to generalize the results. But rather than aiming for statistical representation, this study demonstrates the ways and efforts one can employ to improve instruction in tertiary education, along with an exploration of the reasons which can undermine it.

## Results and Discussion

### The Bulgarian Context

Students in Bulgaria are the product of a special socio-economic environment which is shaped by a long, virtually never-ending reform in the secondary education striving to adopt western models of putting emphasis on testing and of early profiling and/or specialization rather than on fostering long-term in-depth knowledge that covers a wide range of domains as it used to do before the 1990s. It is an environment which needs to cope with ever-decreasing birth-rates, to the point where universities – 52 (in 2019, according to the Ministry of Education) for a population of 7 million (National Statistical Institute, December 2018) offer more places than there are graduates in a given academic year and one where a percentage of high school graduates leave to complete their education abroad, some of whom stay abroad for extended

periods of time. Many countries of Eastern Europe may find this context familiar: moved by socio-economic reasons, but also by a lack of trust in the national institutions, such migration has come to be natural for most East-European countries. Of course, there are more factors that come into play in shaping the socio-economic reality of the students: for example, many of them grow in families in which one or both parents leave the country to work abroad for several months in a row in order to provide for the family, thus leaving the student without parental supervision and fostering mistrust in national institutions and in the possibility of professional realization in the country. As the inclusion of these factors would unnecessarily complicate the study design and its subsequent discussion, they were omitted from consideration.

English Studies are generally considered by students to be a soft option – it is picked not because the students have an idea what they would like to do after they graduate, but because English was what they were good at in high school (28 answers). This answer is given by students who attended language high schools and those who attended regular high schools or high schools with a different profile. In some cases, English Studies are chosen to substitute for language courses, with students being only interested in acquiring higher language proficiency. In both of these types of cases, confronted with the highly technical areas of linguistics (general linguistics, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexicology, stylistics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and historical grammar), they tend to struggle immensely. At the very beginning of their academic careers, they have to face the unpleasant reality of finding themselves in a curriculum that does not make sense to them. This sentiment transpired in several students sharing the thought that phonetics and morphology did not help them learn English, displaying an inability to distinguish between language learning and language studies; their curriculum combines the two. Instructors often need to make up for the lack of understanding of fundamental terms (subject, predicate, simple sentence, participle, gerund, to name a few) which appear to have only been cursorily covered in secondary education.

The male to female ratio of the participants was 22 to 32. The responses of female and male students did present slight average differences worth noting in two particular areas: first, female students reported reading slightly more than male students (0.625 to 0.455 respectively for female and male), perfectly in line with recent observations about male to female academic success differences (e.g. Kolster and Kaiser 2015); and second, female students provided the rare negative judgment towards cheating students, when male respondents did not pass judgment, also in line with Simon et al. (2004) who found that female students were more likely to report dishonest behavior. Another interesting difference was the tendency to use humorous language and jokes in answering the questions displayed by male respondents, whereas female students tended to skip the questions they did not wish to answer.

## **Students' Attitudes towards Academia**

### **The High Point of their Freshman Experience**

Very few of the recorded good experiences were academic in nature; mostly, the students seem to focus on the socializing part of starting a new school (meeting new people, partying, having a good time); many of them are not sure what they want to single out. They cite exam formats, novel activities (especially translations); only three reflected on the effects of academic excellence (getting praise for doing a task well, expanding knowledge). Some Applied Linguistics students wrote about starting to understand the second language, even



acknowledging some interference as they start misspelling words in English under the influence of German. One student reflected on their realization that they could do much more than they had previously thought.

### **The low point of their experience**

The large majority state they did not have or do not recall any major disappointments about their freshman experience. However, a common trend in the answers was a statement of their shock, struggle to adapt to the new environment and the unusual rhythm of study, which is described being much faster than expected, with a significantly larger workload than what they were used to in high school. There is a common conception of student life in Bulgaria that students work only around exam time, are not required to go to class and that they mostly socialize and party. As a result, the reality of a language student who is required to constantly work on their proficiency is difficult to adapt to. Two shared their disappointment that they were not able to complete an exam on time. Further two mention specifically trouble with low attendance rates which led to several cancelled classes and having trouble to follow classes as they were “taught faster than I imagined” they would be. Attendance, which has been problematic in the last several years, leading to the reinstatement of the validation reports, is a problem for about a third of the students enrolled in the two BA programs. Public speaking and presenting in front of the class were also mentioned by several students as challenges.

### **Expectations about the Punctuation and Orthography of Modern English Course**

The general phrases used to describe their expectations (here and elsewhere, the original spelling and grammar of the respondents have been preserved) – learn (to write) better English, speak correctly; improve performance; gain confidence, “useful rules about the English language”, “new things” or “learn how to write properly” – do not allow me to judge how they estimate their own academic needs; in five cases the students expressed a desire to learn as much as possible; one student wrote they expected to learn “not much, basics only”; yet another expressed the wish to “learn enough to help me pass the exam”. In subsequent discussions and during the interview session, the students spoke mostly of the difficulties related to English spelling, of the lack of any consistent rules that regulate spelling. Punctuation was not in general a preoccupation they explicitly expressed they had. Judging by the rare use of punctuation marks in their answers to the questionnaire, they seem to pay little attention to it. This observation is partially confirmed by their written production (it is to be noted that the written production assessed for this study was completed after the students finished the punctuation module of the course).

The answers provided by the students at the start of their second year suggest a natural struggle to adapt to a novel environment and understand the rules and requirements for navigating it successfully. The first year seems to be marked by the process of constructing their student identity, and in many cases they struggle to construct a learner identity – an identity oriented towards intellectual engagement and understanding, which has been demonstrated to be positively correlated to academic performance (Bunce et al. 2017). There is strong evidence to suggest that learner identity is neglected in favor of building social ties with their peers and fit in with the group.



## Learning Habits

### Number of Study-Related Book they Read in their Freshman Year

23 students stated they did not read any books in their freshman year; 23 students stated they read one; 6 people stated they read two books. One stated they read more than 2 books and one responded “partially”. The students predominantly cited fiction (novels they chose for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for their English language practice exam), with only 7 people referring to academic introductory books (Handbook in General Linguistics and Phonetics and Phonology). One further student stated they read “mostly handouts”. During the interviews, the students reflected on the use of the reading list (or the bibliography, as it is called at the university), voicing the idea that it seems redundant to them, as they go to class and “get the information anyway”. The idea that in academia there might be researchers who have different perspectives or may disagree on subjects seemed irrelevant to them. Further, it appears that they construe classes as the place where they are provided with “the knowledge”, not spaces where they are challenged to discuss or debate ideas or learn how to articulate and argue for their viewpoint. Their attitude in class – passive semi-attention, limited to copying down slides projected to them or taking photos of the slides, with some browsing the net or their social network accounts – reflects this idea, suggesting that for all its emphasis on innovations and use of ICT for class, secondary education does not succeed in breaking the old sage on the stage view of the teacher. Prompted with the question of whether they go online to find alternative sources of information, they mostly said they did not have to use any (additional sources of information) in their freshman year. Other aspects of learning – engaging in non-traditional forms of learning, such as out of class learning or cooperative initiatives such as project-based learning – seem to have little appeal to them. In fact, any kind of additional effort that falls outside of their curriculum (attending lectures given by guest-lecturers, attending thematic events, attending cinema nights, participating in theatrical or expression workshops) attracts a minimal number of students who are typically part of smaller learning groups or communities and thus feel more comfortable to join in. I run several thematic workshops for learners of French and it takes usually a couple of semesters to get the students comfortable with the idea of attending and joining in these events. Even cinema nights, oriented towards the problems and the preoccupations of the French society, have limited success in provoking questions, let alone animated discussions.

### Class/Assignment Preparation

The answers comprised students stating they went to the library (8 answers), browsed the internet (30 answers), asked their Facebook friends for help (6 answers), and read the course book (16 answers). These results do not correlate well with the answers to the previous question, where only seven people stated they read the course book. Four people added that they asked more knowledgeable friends or family for help; one wrote they discussed the matter with an instructor. The interviews did validate that some people sought peer help; however, it was impossible to confirm or disconfirm the number of people who usually complete their reading for class. Interestingly, when asked whether they have many courses with a course book, the students had difficulties answering, finally coming to an agreement that in the first year, they only had one course with a designated course book. The results of the written production of the students tend to suggest that reading is not usually completed for class.

The results of a novel running assignment I introduced for French language class students in the fall of 2018 to encourage them to follow French language press revealed that even well-performing students get to doing the assignment the day before it is due. The assignment consists in encouraging the students to read French language press and choose an article they find the most interesting/ important/ curious to summarize. The publication date of the article is always the day before the assignment is submitted. It is true that this kind of assignment is not hugely time-consuming; a daily overview of the press should not take up more than fifteen minutes (admitting for some language difficulties) and the elaboration of the summary once the article has been selected does not take up more than half an hour. The preparation pattern that can be assumed is that the students do not do a daily overview of the press, wait until the last day before the due date, and do not do drafts of the summary.

It is significant that most students do not approach the instructor for additional discussion of their assignment, do not ask for further help or clarifications either in class or during office hours or via email; they seldom have questions after they are provided with explanations about the assignment. In rare cases, after feedback on the assignment which reveal misunderstanding on the part of the student, they are interested in hearing a detailed feedback about how to improve the assignment. Highly performing students are usually willing to resubmit work upon re-working. The majority of the students listens to or reads the feedback only half-heartedly, mainly interested in the grade.

Concerning the assignments they submit, one recurring question when discussing the assignment is “How long the assignment should be”. It is always difficult to understand the reasons for this question, even more difficult to answer. In contrast, there were two cases in which the students had completely misunderstood their tasks, yet they asked why the assignment had a poor mention, when they had written “two whole pages worth of stuff”.

The training session culminated in the following exercise to prepare for Punctuation and Orthography class:

Read the following discussion thread on the academic network [ResearchGate.net](https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_may_account_for_students_ignoring_punctuation_marks_in_their_writing_nowadays_How_can_the_practice_be_checked) by professors concerned with punctuation and grammar problems on the part of their students: [www.researchgate.net/post/What\\_may\\_account\\_for\\_students\\_ignoring\\_punctuation\\_marks\\_in\\_their\\_writing\\_nowadays\\_How\\_can\\_the\\_practice\\_be\\_checked](https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_may_account_for_students_ignoring_punctuation_marks_in_their_writing_nowadays_How_can_the_practice_be_checked)

Task 1: Present their positions in a short summary. Be careful to refer appropriately to people. Do you think students have trouble with punctuation and what, according to you, is the cause? Do you consider that you personally have problems with punctuation? How important is punctuation? How important is punctuation in the digital age?

Task 2: Annotate your webography: your estimate on the type of site and its reliability for academic purposes, like so: [www.webpage\\_on\\_punctuation.dictionary](http://www.webpage_on_punctuation.dictionary) Note: A dictionary entry on punctuation with writing advice; for practical purposes.

I had limited the number of posts to read to 15–20 (roughly corresponding to two and a half A4 pages). The assignment was set after completing the module on English punctuation, with a detailed look at the distribution rules, some discussion on written standards and the origin of punctuation marks. Two trial runs of information search online were completed in preparation to the assignment, with strong emphasis on evaluating the reliability of websites, testing both the checklist technique and lateral cross-reference search (adapted from Wineburg and McGrew 2017).

The exercise was aimed at putting to test comprehension (understand opinion posts in a particular context; understand the context of the communication taking place), the ability to summarize the main points from the posts, have a glimpse into the instructor's perspective, explore the validity of that perspective, compare with the learner's perspective, read more on punctuation and reflect on written standards. All of these aims were implied in the questions formulated in the exercise and explicitly explained when the assignment was set.

The students produced on average half a page up to one page of text (for a total of 450–600 words), in which they all offered personal opinions on the subject matter; however, an important common trend in their texts was the complete lack of evidence of any reading done on the matter. Two commonly recurring opinions are to be noted: first, teachers failed to properly address problems of punctuation and grammar in high school classes; and second, that punctuation nowadays was very important, but unnecessary as people understood each other without it on social media. The reluctance to engage in challenging their positions by learning more about a topic and understanding better the complexities and implications is symptomatic of the kind of disengagement towards their own learning process, even though they tend to agree that punctuation (and by extension, grammar) problems exist to a large degree. It is worth noting that very few plagiarized works were submitted (only 2 of 45).

From the ten randomly selected assignments, I offer here a string of student perceptions about the topic under discussion and the value attached to it. First, they believe that their teachers' attitude towards ICT and digital gadgets is negative; thus, they feel the need to include a statement about the importance and utility of digital gadgets. In some cases, the advent of digital technology is cited to be the culprit for poor written literacy. It is difficult to take such an idea at face value as it is expressed by a cohort of students who were born well into the digital technology era and who, by extension, have practically no experience of a society without digital technology. Our common experience during the class demonstrated that after being introduced to cloud systems and being offered the possibility to access a repository of course materials and a way to submit course work electronically, the students still insisted on submitting paper printouts, resistant to adopting time and paper-saving devices. Second, they believe that knowledge of grammar and punctuation are the signs of a successful and respectable person. Acquiring that knowledge is not perceived as being within the student's control. The main job of the teacher is formulated by many to be motivating the student. The teacher should also provide the information, provide support, not make the student guilty of their mistakes, and penalize severely for punctuation omission. No action or duty of the student is described in relation to learning. Third, they believe that punctuation and grammar problems are real and that they are the result of L2 proficiency levels, the influence of the digital communication and less structured instruction in school. The remarks on the digital communication usually contain references to the idea of saving time and to expressing emotions through other means than language (emojis, gifs, imagery, stickers). The reference to other uses of written communication than apps and social networking is limited to CVs and resumes, with the remark that their resume will be also judged by the language quality. Curiously for language and philology students, they do not connect to other uses of written production; the idea of language register is also nowhere to be found. The students appear to believe that these two types of written production are the only texts they will have to produce in the future. Curiously, they did not think of translation (a common focus in both programs), creative or journalistic writing as possible professional openings. Thus, they as individuals exist on a separate plane from a disconnected educational setting where they acquire abstract knowledge unrelated to any practical professional or social context. They also seem to connect knowledge

about grammar and punctuation to traditional schooling activities like writing by hand on paper and reading hard-copy books; by extension, the internet is mostly connected with social media and entertainment, in a way excluding the acknowledgement of e-books, scientific production, news outlets and other non-colloquial and more formal writing contexts and online genres. Curiously, they seem to believe that in reading hard-copy books, one takes notice of punctuation, while in reading online, one does not. It is worth noting that the discussion thread was not replaced in its context and thus all of the students have either misunderstood or ignored that most of the posts concerned students writing in their native language.

Fourth, they seem to agree that high school teachers do not pay attention to punctuation and that in L2 classes they did not learn about punctuation at all. This is a very common perception, but it is a counterfactual claim; while it is true that school curricula in foreign language teaching do not have special classes on punctuation, punctuation rules are covered where applicable (in restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses, sentence adverbials, subordinate clauses, tag questions, etc.). Fifth, it is alarming that second-year philology and linguistics students do not seem to understand the differences between language-related notions such as language, speech, written standards and grammar. Thus, they produce claims that punctuation is part of grammar or part of language, and thus, “extremely important”. On the whole, without any additional reading on the subject matter (here, written standards, grammar and writing, punctuation), the students’ conception of learning is inextricably related to the teacher and thus, under the teacher’s responsibility. They appear to have difficulties projecting the practical applications of their education and its relevance in a professional setting.

In the context of English punctuation and spelling class, learning seems to be associated with having a list of rules to memorize; active participation in the learning process – completing writing exercises, quizzes, creative writing, text interpretation and analysis of meaning – and its relation to internalizing the rules and principles is not discussed by the students as an option. Unable to articulate clearly what they do in order to learn a new word, the students still communicate their desire to improve. The way the desire is phrased, however, does not and cannot constitute enough information to build a curriculum for the class. It has been suggested (e.g. Lea et al. 2003) that student-centered approaches to learning have undeniable advantages in order to personalize and contextualize the content to the particular student and give the student responsibility for their own learning process. If one truly wishes to know “what the academic and non-academic needs of the students are, one has to ask them” (op. cit., p. 323). The alarming reality of their assignment performance reveals in most cases that insufficient time and effort were invested to complete that task, undermining in a way the principles of student-centered learning. Rare interactions with the instructor to discuss the assignment, no collaborative enterprises, little autonomy in information search and documentation, practically no personalized meaning construction, little interest in continuous assessment mostly inferred from the uneven class attendance (the elements of student-centered learning are adapted from Lea et al. 2003) – student-centered learning requires the kind of engagement on the part of the students which they are evidently unwilling to invest. Most significantly, adding to that the inability to relate the didactic content to a professional setting, the students appear ill-equipped to help shape the curriculum as consumers. Thus, the Bulgarian setting at least escapes dilemmas of the kind described by Lesnik-Oberstein (2015) who expressed concern over creating a “conservative status quo mentality; for what is there left to learn, when you already know it in order to demand it?”

## Cheating and Plagiarism

**Cheating** Some of the most common answers are reproduced here: “using unfair ways to gain something”; “writing things you didn’t know on your exam”; “writing something that you saw from your phone”; “using sources (not your brain) to pass an exam”; “when students help themselves to pass the exam with their phones for example, or they look at their colleague’s list”; “something you do on texts or exams that will help you pass”; “you search the information of the test find answers and copy them, so you get a good grade”; “using other methods to pass an exam when it is not allowed”; “passing an exam by getting help from others of a book or notes even if didn’t study”; “doing something unfair to achieve higher marks or something else”; “[it] is when you are lazy to study your lessons and you are trying the easy way”; “a really bad thing and unfair”; “when students do not use their own abilities and knowledge during the exams. That is kind of plagiarism”.

The answers were oriented mostly to the results obtained through cheating – passing the exam, getting a good grade, in most cases without passing judgment on the reprehensibility of the deed; in their presentation, it is merely “using sources” – phones (the internet), notes, their colleagues’ help, knowledge external to the cheaters themselves; few of the answers contained quality or morality judgment words such as “unfair”, a “bad thing” or “not allowed”; the essence of cheating behavior, its parentage to lying and/or creating a false impression or representation of the person’s knowledge, which has the aim of obtaining undue benefits was partially reflected in two responses: “getting a result you do not deserve” and “not being honest about what you know”. In one answer, the word “plagiarism” appears, a lone reference to the fact that this cohort of students should have all been advised on basic university regulations pertaining to plagiarism at the start of their freshman year. In the interviews, the students admit to not understanding well the different ways one can infringe proper source use; what is more, they have difficulties to understand textual plagiarism, even in its most obvious form – when large parts of text are copied and pasted verbatim into the assignment. They often get confused and say they were using the webpage as a source. Distinctions between quoting, citing or paraphrasing, while giving proper credit, are lost on the students.

But even allowing for the confusion, as cheating and not plagiarism was at the core of the question, it appears as if students do not perceive cheating in moral or ethical terms (at least part of the students); fraudulent behavior is usually clearly discernible by students who usually understand the implications of such a behavior.

**Attitude towards Students Who Cheat** Curiously, several students wrote they did not have an opinion (8); 6 people wrote unequivocally that cheating is wrong; but this answer does not inform us on their opinion about students who do it; 4 students expressed a negative attitude towards cheaters; the rest of the answers range from people who admit to being cheaters themselves, to praising the behavior, to taking a morally noncommittal stance of saying if one feels like doing something they should do it or saying they are not interested in other people’s situation. Most of the answers lie in a moral grey area (“it depends on whether cheat to pass or to get a good grade”); or “sometimes I agree, but I don’t think it’s good”; in the way the subject matter is discussed leads one to conclude that they evolve in an environment of cheating tolerance; paired with the previous question, it seems like their failure to fully engage with the notion of fraudulent behavior leads them on the path of tolerating that behavior. The strange detachment of the students may seem like they do not perceive the behavior as wrong. During the discussions, they said they do not report their peers for cheating; what is more, they form

the perception that some instructors silently allow some amount of cheating to go on, be it by allowing the students to copy on exams or by passing papers made by cheaters (in line with McCabe 2005). This is a crucial piece of information about instructors they ask of students who have completed a particular course; thus, even students who believe cheating to be reprehensible may not be averse to trying it themselves under particular circumstances. Asked about their opinion on a widely discussed plagiarism scandal involving a university rector, they said they were not familiar with the case.

The non-committal attitude towards cheating students, non-judgmental and devoid of ethical tinge, seems to be a collateral result from the educational reforms which have brought about a shift in the attitudes towards education in Bulgarian society. But more importantly, this attitude seems related to the lack of engagement of students towards their studies (Guibert and Michaut 2011). This ambivalent attitude towards cheating is found in Denisova-Schmidt et al. (2016) who report a study in several Russian universities: students legitimize and offer justification for cheating in cases which they clearly identify as cheating, they engage in cheating behavior unaware of any wrongdoing in the case of copying content online to paste into their assignments. As higher education still seen as a means to access the job market, many of the newly enrolled students are ill-prepared to cope with studying at such a high level (Denisova-Schmidt et al. 2016). In Bulgaria, this is further complicated by the accessibility of higher education to a much larger proportion of high school graduates, for both demographic and financial reasons. The instructor has a crucial role in perpetuating and/or influencing the students' attitude towards cheating: by pretending not to notice or ignoring cheating, the instructor may create the impression that cheating is tolerated and/or actively encourage cheating in students. If the students believe that they are getting away with fraudulent practices, they are likely to keep recurring to them.

## Digital Literacies

In addition to browsing the internet to complete their assignments, students had to identify the internet platforms/ social media/ blogs/ websites/ fora/ they use on a regular basis. Out of the thirty people who provided answers to this question, the diversity of the internet tools mentioned was not great: Facebook for nearly all of them, Instagram (18), Youtube (a small minority of 6), Wikipedia (1 answer), Tumblr (1), Viber (2), Flipboard (1) and Briefing (1). These answers did not correlate well with answers to the question where the students got their news: a third of the respondents cited Facebook and TV, many combined news sites and Facebook. In the interviews it became apparent that even though students did watch TV, they rarely watched news bulletins. The news consumption appeared to be uneven and superficial; some of them were only able to provide general recollection about news stories (the interviews took place at the time of Cambridge Analytica scandal, in spring 2018).

The data on the students' use of the digital environment for their studies is highly inconclusive; they appear to never use scientific papers (publications in scientific journals), despite having such items on the reading list, being drawn more to popular sources which are more concise and explained in a way as to be understood by non-specialist public (blogs, dictionaries, self-help pages). Also, despite being active consumers of content and social media (but not Twitter), they rarely produce content themselves, apart from posting pictures: blogging, video-blogging, and opinion-sharing are not something they are engaged in. They do not discriminate between different kinds of content in terms of its reliability. They do not appear to



have preferred sites for scholarly work and they use translate websites like Google translate to help them with language assignments. Multimodal content is preferred for both educational and entertainment purposes: videos, podcasts.

Even though data is inconclusive here, there are several points that I wish to raise in relation to digital age challenges in higher education. ICT cannot substitute for effort and engagement: while many researchers praise mobile technology as a promising tool for supplementing learning, mostly based on perceptions (e.g. Al-Emran et al. 2016), looking closely into the actual impact of ICT tools on learning might hide surprises. For instance, Heflin et al. (2017) showed that students who respond positively to mobile learning tools were less likely to demonstrate deep critical thinking when phrasing their answers on the device and were likely to become distracted and thus disengaged from the process, making the recommendation that instructors combine various tools to counterbalance the tools' limitations. During the discussions, the students did not display great interest or awareness for questions related to online security, protecting their identity online, sensitive data, source reliability despite having all of those topics covered in their high school ICT curriculum. This suggests that ICT tools are used as a commodity and mostly intuitively (also Breuer et al. 2014). Digital Generation students can display resistance to active learning and/or introducing unfamiliar digital tools to aid with learning/sharing information, which appears to be expected to some degree (e.g. Allan 1999); I conjecture that this sentiment is in line with the disengagement to their studies, as they need to spend time and effort in familiarizing themselves with the tool in order to use it effectively. Although there are strategies that instructors can use in order to counteract resistance (e.g. for STEM students, see Tharayil et al. 2018), counteracting disengagement will amount to providing external motivation for the students to learn; in the context of higher education, which is not compulsory and which is the result of the free choice of the student, it might seem counterintuitive to have to motivate students to be excited about the path they picked for themselves. Of course, this does not refer to the instructor's efforts to make the class interesting and engaging.

## Conclusions

The results of the study present a highly disjointed and internally conflicting cluster of ideas: students seem to value learning, but are reluctant to engage in learning practices, especially those which require self-monitoring and independence. Students seem connected via their digital devices, but do not seem receptive to new ICT tools for class use. Their idea of a class is that the teacher offers a knowledge pack which in their view is sufficient for exam-passing purposes. Importantly, students do not seem to take the all-practical approach towards their higher education expected of them, hinting heavily towards a general decrease in the value of higher education and an inability to project their professional realization at the early stages of their education; at the same time, they seem to focus on practical applications of their program – translation and pedagogical module in this case. They seldom take initiatives or volunteer in class and they seldom challenge or antagonize ideas they are exposed to; however, they have strong opinions (usually not motivated by extensive reading or research) about some matters, which they do not challenge, nor want to argue for in class debates. Extracurricular activities, built on the idea of learning in non-traditional environments, hold little to no appeal to them. Cheating is mostly viewed as a commodity practice, something that is rarely conceptualized in ethical or moral terms. Thus, the propositions articulated above seem to be only partially



confirmed. First, underdeveloped writing skills and/or language skills are (part of) the reason for student plagiarism and apparent resistance to academic integrity issues (in continuity with the results of a prior study on preemptive techniques, Chankova 2017) – partially confirmed; even with structured instruction oriented towards the use of information sources, the general detachment of students from their own learning process seems to impede learning even if no plagiarism is involved. Second, digital age students have a more practical view of what their higher education should provide them with, along with a more consumerist approach to higher education, which is seen as a service that is provided to them – unclear; the results of this study do not allow for a categorical confirmation or rejection of this proposition. It seems clear that higher education is not regarded exclusively as a path to personal improvement, be it by acquiring knowledge in an assisted way, or acquiring skills in a controlled environment, or challenging beliefs and convictions. Third, higher education is for students a means to an end, the end being obtaining a diploma or having an advantage at the job market; learning has nothing to do with that – partially confirmed; taking into consideration motivations for enrolling and attendance problems, the diploma seems more important than any knowledge and/or skills that might be the objective of the learning process. This is also suggested by the non-committal answers on cheating. Fourth, digital age students require a fundamentally different approach to teaching, especially one that draws heavily on the use of ICT tools, thus finding themselves at a loss to cope with pedagogical methods that they feel are inapplicable to them – unconfirmed; in my experience, a certain resistance on the part of students in adopting new digital tools to aid learning is the norm rather than the exception.

It thus seems that, for the Bulgarian context, little has changed in the two decades after Hunt's suggestions: in terms of new knowledge models that emphasize the connection between information and skills with a practical setting of application, none have emerged to replace the one that seems to persist in the students' perceptions. However, the cohort of students under investigation seems conflicted about their ideas about learning, knowledge and the value of higher education; this conflict is the result of a lack of structure to their knowledge, already restricted by little reading and cuts in the curricula, and thus lack of perspective. ICT use, with its accessibility and speed, tends to warp the perception of the value of information. The privilege of the modern-day student – having access to massive amounts of unrestricted and uncensored information, which only thirty years ago was not the case for Bulgarian students – appears to be unwanted and unused by the digital generation. Plagiarism and cheating in the Bulgarian context are symptomatic of a rift in the students' involvement in their learning. Unless instructors manage to restore the idea of the students' responsibility for their learning in the tertiary education, there will always be a missing link in addressing academic integrity.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire

This questionnaire is anonymous; do not write your name or any other identification. The results will be used in a study on academic integrity. Thank you for your cooperation!

Please, circle the appropriate: female male; Age: Languages:

Which internet platforms, social media, blogs etc. do you use on a regular basis?

How many study-related books did you read in your freshman year? Name one.

None One Two Other (specify):  
 Describe yourself using one word only:  
 What is your opinion about students who cheat on exams?  
 What is cheating?  
 What do you find the most difficult about the English language?  
 You have a difficult problem to solve for class. What do you do?  
 Go to the library Browse the internet Ask my Facebook friends Read the course book Other  
 (specify):  
 What was your favourite subject in school/ high school? Why?  
 Why did you enrol in higher education?  
 Language changes under the influence of gadgets and the internet. Do you agree?  
 Is spelling important in the digital age? Why/ why not?  
 What is/are the most useful quality/skills to have in your professional life?  
 Resourcefulness Creativity Problem-solving skills Knowledge Communicative skills Other:  
 Where do you get your news?  
 On TV on Facebook on news sites (which?) I do not follow news.

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