

Educational Integrity: A Strategic Approach to Anti-Plagiarism

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Abstract: The widespread perception that plagiarism is a growing problem in tertiary institutions is supported by some large-scale research studies and, indeed, by the attention the topic is attracting in the literature, the media and in the renewals of plagiarism policies to be found on websites across the tertiary sector. While guidelines that accompany some plagiarism policies “encourage” educational strategies, the focus is still firmly fixed on dealing with “offenders”. There is little detail available on educational means that have the capacity to address the incidence of inadvertent or unintentional plagiarism. In this paper an approach is suggested that attempts to redress the balance between disciplinary and educational measures. The approach is twofold. While supporting the application of penalties for plagiarism that is deliberate cheating, it advocates that students be given an explicit period of apprenticeship into the academic culture, its conventions and its multiple “languages”, in order to give innocent learners a realistic chance of understanding and learning the skills of academic writing. With such an approach adopted in mainstream teaching in order to reach all students who are in transition to university study, whether from the Australian school system, the workforce or from overseas, effort and resources could be re-directed towards dealing more confidently with the real offenders.

Keywords: cheating, inadvertent plagiarism, academic culture, apprenticeship

Introduction

A perception that plagiarism is a growing problem in tertiary institutions is voiced in academic publications on websites and in the media, and now also in conferences specifically devoted to the topic. One reason for this perception has of course been the arrival of the internet with its easy cut-and-paste facility making cheating a tempting possibility. Since information has become available in this way, academic staff can no longer be confident that they are familiar with their students’ sources. Even when they take the time to check suspect items by using a search engine such as *Google* or an electronic text-matching service such as *Turnitin.com*, there is no guarantee that cleverly concealed cheating is detected. At the same time, with the increasing numbers of international students for whom English is a second or additional language (EAL), and indeed local residents from language backgrounds other than English, the incidence of apparently unwitting plagiarism is becoming an issue that needs to be addressed in Australian universities.

The core of most definitions of plagiarism found on Australian university websites is “using the ideas, words or works” of someone else “without proper acknowledgment” (The University of Adelaide 2005). However, the interpretation of university definitions and their associated policies presents a problem for both staff and students. The simplicity of plagiarism definitions stands in contrast to the complexity of possibilities to which it is applied. Although the term plagiarism has its origins in the Greek term for “kidnapping” or “man-stealing” (Oxford Dictionary of Etymology 1966-1992), its current usage has become somewhat “rubbery”, stretching as it does across the entire spectrum from deliberate cheating and deception, to failed attempts at citing as a result of a student’s incomplete or embryonic understanding of the academic conventions, or their underdeveloped skills in the academic language required for incorporating and referencing sources.

Although guidelines that accompany some policies suggest that educational strategies be “encouraged”, the focus of plagiarism policies still remains firmly fixed on dealing with offenders at the cheating end of the spectrum (ACODE 2005). The language of plagiarism as an “offence” makes no provision for “learning by

making mistakes". At best it allows for "leniency" or "tolerance" (Pennycook, 1996). For a strategic anti-plagiarism approach academics need to be able to distinguish between deliberate cheating and inadvertent or unintentional plagiarism. I propose that, to be effective, an anti-plagiarism approach needs to combine a fair and consistent disciplinary process with consistent and effective learning and teaching strategies during a period of "academic apprenticeship" for all students in transition to tertiary study (McGowan, 2005a).

The suggestions put forward in this paper are based on more than a decade of my theoretical and practical engagement with academic issues faced by staff and students. While they do not represent the result of an empirical study, they are the outcome of my personal reflection on many years of experience in providing individual consultations and group work for staff and students on the issues of dealing with or avoiding plagiarism. My theoretical framework derives from a combination of a variety of language learning theories and a practical application of functional grammar as developed by Halliday (Halliday 1994, Halliday & Hasan 1976) and the Systemic Functional Linguistic movement, and in particular, Genre Theory (e.g. Halliday & Hasan 1985, Swales 1990, Halliday & Martin 1993, Cope & Kalantzis 1993, Eggins 1994, Ventola & Mauranen 1996, Christie & Martin 1997), and more recently, Appraisal Theory (Martin 2000, White 2005). I have discussed the approach with many colleagues, both informally and more formally during my membership of my university's plagiarism policy working party in 2003, and have presented it in local and national seminars and conferences.

In attempting to redress the balance of anti-plagiarism approaches, from over-reliance on a disciplinary one to a more educationally focussed one, it is easy to give the impression of being "soft on plagiarism". However, far from condoning the dishonesty of deliberate cheats, the two-part anti-plagiarism approach suggested here should help to give innocent learners a more realistic chance of understanding and learning the skills of academic writing and incorporating quotes with "proper acknowledgment", and by doing so, focus more specifically on identifying and dealing with the deception of genuine offenders.

Disciplinary Measures – a matter of targeting the real culprits

"Cyber-cheating" is a reality in universities, as are other forms of cheating. While fraudulent acts are damaging to the integrity of academic institutions, for students they are at best a barrier to their own learning and, at worst, acts of deception for short-term personal gain at the expense of their fellow students. The severity of penalties should be designed to act as a deterrent and to ensure that students realise the seriousness with which the academy regards ethical behaviour and values the integrity of its educational outcomes.

The US-based *Center for Academic Integrity* (CAI) provides a focus for exposing and deterring cheating of all forms, including plagiarism using web-based or other sources. The CAI website cites a June 2005 report on 50,000 students surveyed in a US-wide project conducted by CAI founding president, Don McCabe, stating:

On most campuses, 70% of the students admit to some cheating. Close on one quarter of participating students admitted to serious test cheating and half admitted to one or more instances of serious cheating on written assignments (Center for Academic Integrity 2005).

Another US-based initiative, *Turnitin.com*, confines its focus to plagiarism by providing an electronic "text-matching" service that has been adopted to varying degrees by a number of Australian universities. Results

from a much-cited 2002 trial of the service across 17 subjects in six Australian universities indicated that out of a little under 2000 students whose essays were scrutinised in this trial, 14% contained “an unacceptable level of unattributed materials” (CAVAL 2002, O’Connor 2003). Clearly, these are strong indications that problems of dishonest behaviour are serious enough to warrant stringent deterrents and to uphold the academic values of honesty, trust, respect, fairness and responsibility, as set out by the CAI. At Oxford Brookes University in the UK, the work of Academic Conduct Officers, carried out over the past five years in applying equitable means to deterring deliberate acts of plagiarism, has been used effectively to moderate and standardise decision-making processes and penalties (Carroll, 2004). This system has served as a model for at least two Australian Universities (Newcastle and New South Wales) and includes an educative function for the conduct officers (ACODE 2005). It involves a highly organised procedure and a firm commitment to upholding the integrity of the institution by enabling the institution to take firm but fair and effective disciplinary action against students whose intention is to exploit others and gain an unfair short-term advantage.

Traditional detection methods have relied on the assessors’ capacity to pursue suspect cases based on their own familiarity with their students’ sources and their ability to spot breaks in style when passages of text were incorporated badly into their assignments. An assessor’s suspicion is raised by giveaway terms or phrases that are out of step with the rest of a student’s work. They may be highly unusual or coined expressions, technical terms from another discipline or simply words of appraisal, such as “unfortunately” for example – that are not part of the argument the student is meant to develop at all, but belong to the view of the writer of the original text. Since the internet has become the preferred resource for many students, internet tools such as search engines or *Turnitin* and other text-matching services, have been used by staff to confirm their suspicions. There is a problem, however, with following up only on cases that appear suspicious because of such surface features, because the most easily spotted are the students from non-English speaking backgrounds, as their styles fluctuate between halting grammar and flawlessly academic prose, while students who are more at home in the English language, and able to modify plagiarised material successfully to present it as their own, may get away with deliberate deception. A more equitable approach to detection would obviously be to check all of the assignments of a particular batch rather than only the suspect ones.

To do so may yield some unpleasant surprises. A calculation based on results of the Australian trial of *Turnitin.com* in which 14% of the papers contained a level of unattributed material used was “unacceptable” projects a grim picture. Add to that the fact that to obtain this figure the “bar” on the quantity of unattributed material, above which it was to be labelled as unacceptable, had been put at 5% (CAVAL 2002). By extrapolating from this information, an assignment of 1000 words may have contained up to 50 words of plagiarised text (or 250 words in a 5000-word essay) but would not have been included in the figure of 14% that were considered to be “unacceptable”. It is not known yet whether the figures found by CAVAL can be projected on to the broader Australian student population, and the issue still seems to be too sensitive for much information on the results from individuals and universities using *Turnitin* or a similar service to be available for scrutiny, but we must conclude the probability is there that the numbers affected are greater than we would wish to believe.

One of the consequences of stating or implying that “all” plagiarism is “unacceptable” is that the default solution is necessarily a disciplinary rather than an educational one. Incidences of plagiarism are seen firstly

as misdemeanors that require penalties, and it is in the hands of the assessor or – in the case of some universities now – academic conduct officers – to decide whether or not to show tolerance or apply leniency during an initial learning period. Students who plagiarise unintentionally are therefore, in my view, inappropriately exposed to the possibility of disciplinary procedures. Academics are also at risk every time they take a decision between reporting and not reporting an incident of plagiarism in the face of a policy whose wording allows for a *learning process* only as a matter of *leniency*. They, and their universities can risk public exposure and the accusation of favouring certain students, and of “lowering the institution’s standards” by another assessor who may be less inclined to practise leniency, and such accusations are eagerly picked up by the media.

Educational integrity – a matter for universities

Despite wishing to be tough on plagiarism, the university sector appears to be reluctant to use the concept of “intent” to clarify the distinction between instances of plagiarism as an offence on the one hand, and as a learning situation on the other. The reason that I have heard given for avoiding the concept of intentionality in plagiarism statements is that “it is not possible to know what is in a person’s mind”. While this may be so, the question of intent is nevertheless a central element of our legal system and a deciding factor in the difference between, say, murder or manslaughter, to look at just one example from the legal system under which we all live. As there are high stakes involved in the imposition of penalties for intentional plagiarism – or in other words for cheating – and a person’s academic career prospects may be ruined as a result, it seems unreasonable to shy away from attempting to establish the person’s intention, as the unequivocal decider between plagiarism as an offence, and plagiarism as a lack of knowledge or skills.

By-passing the term *plagiarism*, and referring to *academic integrity* instead, has done nothing to solve the dilemma that comes from not *explicitly* naming intentionality, while it is to be found *implicitly* throughout the Australian universities’ policies and guidelines. The notion of intent is there by implication in the antitheses to the concepts of *honesty, trust, respect, fairness and responsibility*, the five values proclaimed by the CAI (2005), and it is there in words taken from a random selection of Australian University websites, such as *academic honesty / dishonesty* (Universities of Sydney, Newcastle, Flinders, New South Wales, Latrobe, Tasmania, Southern Cross), *academic conduct / misconduct* (Universities of New South Wales, Newcastle) or *serious offence, deception, cheating, collusion* (The University of Adelaide) to name just a few examples. It would probably be more educationally sound to change our terminology and use neither *plagiarism* nor *academic integrity*. Instead we might, as Crisp (2005) puts it, use “either cheating if it is deceptive, or substandard work if it does not demonstrate the development of skills that are considered essential in professional life”. While mechanisms for “detering, detecting and dealing with” plagiarism that is *cheating* (JISC 2005) are well described on university websites, the same cannot be said for educational strategies that might help unintentional plagiarists *develop essential skills* to raise the standard of their academic writing.

The major educational suggestions found on university websites focus on staff providing “clear information” on the rules and guidelines on plagiarism and on directing students to resources for developing appropriate referencing skills. The educational effectiveness of these measures relies on two assumptions: firstly, that all students will access and understand the information that is provided; and secondly, that they have the skills – or the capacity to develop the skills – to apply the information they are given in doing their assignments. The reality is that in many cases these assumptions are not well founded.

Many students who have, over the years, come for language and learning help in the academic development centre in which I work have indicated that they had not fully understood the need to read the guidelines that each of their courses provided for them. To give them their due, the fact is that some of the course guides may be up to 20 or 30 pages long, and in addition to these, there is a multitude of other print material as well as oral information that students need to take in during orientation and the first week or two of lectures. Much of this material is put aside – and eventually forgotten – as students try to make sense of the confusion around them. It is doubtful whether students will sift through and read the relevant parts of their orientation handouts when they start to do their first assignments, and even if they do look up the rules, that they will all understand the requirements or have the skills to apply them in their work. Many students who come for help in our centre typically have either forgotten, or never realised, that these handouts contained important information or helpful hints. Others who have read the rules on referencing have continued to be perplexed as they try to deal with the trivia of *how many words to change* to convert a quote to a paraphrase, or alternatively, the number of words in a sequence they may use from another text before *committing* plagiarism. Such students are simply not aware that the research-based environment of a university represents a new culture with new rules and “new languages”.

Students in transition from local secondary schools may have been introduced to the concept of “argument” (or their own point of view), and the practice of providing referenced evidence of the views of others on which they base their opinions, only to find that their university courses are generally quite diverse and that they need to learn as many as four or more different sets of requirements. Students who are mature age, in the workforce and returning to study – or attempting it for the first time, perhaps after raising a family – and who have, of course, formed many opinions based on their life experiences – often find it confronting to be in a “straitjacket” as it appears to them, when they realise that their personal views don’t count if they can’t relate them to the facts and opinions of others in the literature. But the fastest growing minority is that of the international students. The fact that Australian universities have come to rely heavily on the income generated from this group should provide universities with cause for concern that of the three groups in transition, international students are the least well prepared for the complexity of our academic expectations.

With so much diversity in the educational and language backgrounds within the different student groups, staff can no longer retreat behind the objection that students should “already know” (how to reference), should “have learnt at school” (how to write an essay) or should have “learnt sufficient English” (not to have any more problems). Sending students away for remedial work is no longer an appropriate educational measure when the numbers who need it keep rising. It is becoming a matter of *educational integrity* for our tertiary institutions to *address these issues at the source*, and to place greater emphasis on *effective learning programs*, rather than to regard students’ learning needs as a remedial issue, and instances of unintentional plagiarism as offences that may in certain circumstances be allowed to be treated with understanding or leniency.

Educational measures – a matter of apprenticeship

One of the methods advocated by some universities for reducing the incidence of plagiarism is that all student work should be accompanied by a signed declaration testifying that the assignment is “their own work”. The effectiveness of this requirement in deterring plagiarism presupposes that a student’s notion of “their own”

work will mean the same to them as it does to their lecturers. However, this cannot be taken for granted with new students when they are at so many different starting points educationally, culturally and linguistically. The following anecdote illustrates my point. In a one-to-one consultation with a student discussing a passage that was clearly copied, the student stated that, yes, it was her own idea because, having read it, she agreed with it! Clearly, in order to give innocent learners a realistic chance of understanding and learning the skills of academic writing, it is important that they engage with the requirements for academic writing from the very beginning of their university studies. To ensure that this takes place effectively, new students should be given explicit periods of induction or apprenticeship into the concept of evidence-based argument within a culture of enquiry that is a basic characteristic of tertiary learning and teaching (Boyer Commission 1998). I support the view that students should be provided with this induction as part of the core curriculum within the context of their chosen disciplines, and that this is likely to be the most educationally effective manner of ensuring that they practise and gain skills in the academic conventions and written language that characterise writing in those disciplines which are most relevant to them (McGowan 2005a, 2005b).

Assessment practices

A starting point for the induction of students into the concept of constructing evidence-based writing might be to explain it directly in lectures and tutorials, but the proof that this is what is valued is most clearly recognised by students when it is reinforced by assessment criteria that explicitly include items on the use of evidence and a critical evaluation of sources used. The disciplinary requirement of students' signatures on declarations that the work being submitted is "their own" would then be appropriately balanced by an educational one. Positive criteria against which the value of the assignment would be judged could be set out as follows:

- | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| • Provides at least x references from reputable journals | excellent/good | satisfactory | needs work |
| • Critiques internet sources in terms of xxx | excellent/good | satisfactory | needs work |
| • States a personal position (or "argument") | excellent/good | satisfactory | needs work |
| • Answers the question set | excellent/good | satisfactory | needs work etc. |

As a formative exercise, the relative weightings of these items could be varied in successive assignments in accordance with the desired emphasis of a particular aspect of academic writing.

The need for careful design of assessment practices to avoid plagiarism "by phrasing questions so that they do not invite copy / paste methods of internet copying" (James Cook University) and for giving timely and clear feedback has been advocated for some time (Carroll 2002, AUTC 2003, JISC 2005) and is mentioned repeatedly on Australian university websites. The idea, however of an explicit period of apprenticeship into the language of academic writing within mainstream teaching, in order to reach all students who are in transition, is still awaiting development and acceptance by academics.

Internet detection – educational use of *Turnitin*

Some staff already use the *Turnitin* service formatively – allowing students to submit drafts and adjust their citations in the light of the results. However, it could also be put to use in a diagnostic way – for staff to gain a realistic picture of the size of the problems their students are facing in attempting a particular assignment, and to work out educational strategies for dealing with the misunderstandings or lack of skills of their students at whole class level. Doing this could lead staff to accept that they are dealing not with a remedial strategy but one that needs to be part of mainstream teaching.

In response, staff could arrange a feedback session for the whole class and show some examples of inappropriate use of sources – provided of course, that they either obtain prior permission of the students concerned, or modify the examples in such a way that they are no longer identifiable. On the basis of such examples they could demonstrate to students how the use of downloaded material had failed to address one or other of the vital assessment criteria, e.g. “states a personal position”, or “critiques the internet sources”. They might then go on to brainstorm with the class and arrive at a version that better fulfils the criteria. Alternatively, the *Turnitin* results might prompt the assessor to re-visit the design of the assessment task and criteria, and adjust the design of further assessments to expect a greater amount of critical input by the students.

Apprenticeship and mastery - student questions

Much good work has already been done by Australian universities in providing students with print and website materials designed to induct them into the academic culture. The University of Melbourne’s Centre for the Study of Higher Education, for example, provides an exemplary introduction to the values of evidence-based writing and scholarly practice (The University of Melbourne 2002). This information is specifically directed at international students, in answer to the question “Why do I have to use these complicated rules?” but applies equally well to all academic novices (see also McGowan 2005b).

Another question that often needs to be answered is “What is common knowledge?”. The fact that this may be a matter of context and intended audience is often insufficient and may be quite confusing for beginners. A question that should also be asked, but usually is not, is “What is common language?”. Variations across spoken and written language are, in my academic advisory experience, not clearly understood and only learnt intuitively over a period of time. Similarly the fact that there can be great variations in the language used in written genres of different disciplines is generally more a matter of personal intuition than explicit teaching.

Discipline-specific language

To learn to master these different writing conventions and styles requires much more than to abide by simplistic rules on how many words in a sequence may be used from a source. It means understanding that certain words and phrases are common to the language for that genre and that these may, and in fact should be re-used, as they form one of the trademarks that identifies the genre. A great deal of theoretical and practical work has been done and published on genre theory that provides a tool that can be used by students and staff to accelerate the otherwise intuitive process of acquiring the discipline-specific “languages” (McGowan 2005b).

Active learning

A vital step for new students during their apprenticeship into the academic culture, and into the languages of its disciplines, is communication, through interaction with others and by trial and error in their written work. They are helped by practice assignments and assessment criteria that highlight the value of students’ critical evaluations of source materials, and incorporating them into their writing, perhaps to be contradicted, or otherwise to serve as evidence in support of the student’s argument. In my view the process of active learning would best be initiated in face-to-face sessions during tutorials and lectures, and might then be continued in

an online environment, for example in a structured “discussion board” program where students can be asked to respond to specific issues or raise their own questions for general discussion.

Learning by making mistakes

For effective skills development, students need an environment of enquiry in which it is accepted that students learn by taking risks, by making mistakes and receiving timely and constructive feedback. If the environment is one of fear, where mistakes which are due to an incomplete understanding of academic conventions can be construed as a lack of integrity and a punishable offence, there is little opportunity for learning to take place. I suggest that if universities embrace the concept of intent as the deciding factor for incidents that require disciplinary procedures, and clear statements are made to the effect that it is only intentional plagiarism that is unacceptable, the fear factor could be removed. Staff might then also feel encouraged to use the *Turnitin* or other text-matching detection services as diagnostic tools without fear of recrimination, and students could accept feedback on faulty referencing without fearing the loss of face associated with a lack of integrity!

Summary and conclusion: a strategic anti-plagiarism approach

In summary, I have proposed that to be effective, an anti-plagiarism strategy needs to balance firm disciplinary processes with an effective educational approach. The suggested approach is twofold. While strongly supporting the application of penalties for plagiarism that is deliberate cheating, it provides for an explicitly stated period of apprenticeship into the academic culture, its conventions and its multiple “languages”. The purpose of such a period of induction is both to accelerate student learning and to protect innocent learners who plagiarise unintentionally. Such protection is particularly important for students from language backgrounds other than English whose problems with incorporating sources are more easily identified than those of native speakers of English. I have proposed that all students who are in transition to university study, whether from the Australian school system, the workforce or from overseas, should be given a realistic chance of understanding and learning the skills of academic writing. To ensure that the academic apprenticeship needs of all these groups are systematically met, the proposed educational strategy is therefore best adopted in mainstream teaching. By this means, effort and resources could be re-directed towards dealing more confidently with deliberate offenders.

The question is: Can this be achieved? I believe that an answer must be found if we are not to make a mockery of our earnestness in defending the educational integrity of our institutions by trapping the easy prey while the big fish get away.

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