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A perspective on plagiarism

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Abstract: *Premeditated plagiarism is a serious breach of scholarly ethics and, as such, needs to be addressed by rules of conduct that are clear, significant, and above all consistently applied. However, most cases of what is identified as plagiarism could more usefully be recognised as symptoms of students' difficulty in engaging with academic discourse and developing a scholarly voice. This view is supported by analysis and discussion of data from preliminary research surveys and focus groups.*

The paper argues that if universities take plagiarism seriously, they must take responsibility for providing a learning environment that stimulates academic engagement and gives students guidance in developing their own scholarly 'voice'. Universities' investment of time and resources needs to be directed towards holistic teaching and learning strategies rather extrinsic techniques of detection and punishment

Keywords: *Motivation to plagiarise; learning environment; university responsibility*

Introduction

In semester one, 2003, the Curtin Student Learning Support Unit conducted an informal survey of ninety students, followed by four focus group discussions to ascertain students' views on why students plagiarise (Dawson, 2004A). The objective of the survey was not to produce a definitive profile of student motivation to plagiarise but, rather, to gain insights into the issue of plagiarism from the point of view of students attending study enhancement seminars, and from this insight to develop appropriate learning support strategies. On the basis of work by Ashworth and Bannister (1997), Thomson (2002), Macdonald and Freewood, (2002), and others, it was anticipated that students' responses would support the hypothesis that, in the vast majority of cases, what is identified as plagiarism is less an indicator of students' lack of integrity and more a symptom of their difficulty in engaging with academic discourse and developing their own scholarly "voice".

The survey

The survey canvassing the question "Why do you think some students plagiarise?" was conducted during three seminars of the StudyPlus Program. Studyplus is a program of study skills, strategies, techniques, and management seminars developed at Curtin University by the Student Learning Support Unit to enhance students' academic performance and experiences of learning. A wide diversity of students attend individual StudyPlus seminars: some attend because they have been identified as "at risk" and referred by their lecturers or course coordinators; some

attend to gain a competitive edge in their studies; for some, attendance at selected StudyPlus seminars is a required component of their course assessment.

Because the survey was aimed at soliciting students' spontaneous rather than conditioned responses, it was decided to ask the survey question at the beginning of seminars that were not themselves related to citing or referencing. The seminars chosen were those addressing exam preparation and exam techniques; these seminars attract a wide diversity of students, and it was felt that their responses might be more generally representative than a group who had identified their need for assistance in plagiarism-related areas of study. Eighty-eight out of the ninety students present agreed to participate in the survey. Of these, eighty-three were undergraduate students (fifty-two international and thirty-one local), and five were international postgraduate course-work students. They came from a diversity of discipline areas.

In light of current concern and controversy over plagiarism and of the amount of institutional energy that has been put into warning students of the consequences of failing to acknowledge and reference sources, the difficulty in eliciting students' *candid* responses had to be factored into the research design. Informality and assured anonymity were considered the key to overcoming students' reticence.

Initially, the students were asked if they understood what is meant by the term "plagiarism", and all affirmed that they did, commenting that the University's policy on plagiarism is included in Unit Outlines of all academic units being delivered. Each student was given a plain sheet of paper on which they were asked to write the main reason for student plagiarism. Two students chose to abstain, but the remaining eighty-eight responded, and, while some written responses commented on the motivation of *other* students, many made disclosures that clearly came from personal experience.

These eighty-eight comments were coded under seven headings as in Figure 1:

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Difficulty with the topic | 18 |
| Poor time management | 18 |
| Ignorance/inadequate referencing skills | 15 |
| Laziness | 15 |
| Language deficit | 11 |
| Fear of failure | 8 |
| Cheating | 3 |

Figure 1

Focus-groups

In twenty-minute focus-group discussions, students in three subsequent StudyPlus classes and in a Regional Centre week-end workshop were given a copy of Figure 1 and asked to discuss the extent to which they thought it accurately represents student motivations to plagiarise. The groups recognised Figure 1 as a comprehensive list of motivation, with several giving examples of category overlap where, for instance, language deficit or poor time management might compound difficulty with the topic. A further category was suggested: "the challenge of beating

the system”. This was a particularly revealing suggestion because, although challenging the system appears not to be a common motive, the assumption that there *is* a “system” and that it is repressive, impenetrable, and intimidating does seem to underlie many comments in the survey. Whenever students are penalised for plagiarising out of ignorance, misunderstanding, or misapplication of the conventions for acknowledging sources, for them this assumption appears to be confirmed. It is further reinforced by inconsistencies between different lecturers’ own understanding of the term and their interpretation of University policies (Dawson, 2001A) – what may be permissible practice in one class may be penalised in another.

Interpreting the data

The data were interpreted not only from the perspective of identifying why students plagiarise but also from the perspective of identifying factors within learning contexts (Biggs, 1999) that might contribute towards the motivation to plagiarise. With this perspective in mind, this paper discusses the factors in the following order:

- *cheating,*
- *fear of failure,*
- *difficulty with the topic,*
- *ignorance/inadequate referencing skills,*
- *language deficit,*
- *poor time management,*
- *laziness.*

Cheating (3)

Given the blanket exposure of students to the University’s policy on plagiarism, it was surprising that only three mentions were made of “cheating” or “stealing”. This suggests that while students understand that plagiarism is unacceptable, and that cases of detected plagiarism will attract penalties, only a minority think of it in terms of personal morality (Newstead et al., 1996). The indication here is that the majority of students differentiate between cheating, which they perceive in terms of a premeditated attempt to deceive, and plagiarism, which they perceive more as a failure to follow required institutional procedures. The focus group discussions revealed that some students rationalise plagiarism in utilitarian terms of fairness and that if an assignment is seen to be unreasonably difficult or insufficiently explained by the lecturer, then students are justified in doing *whatever it takes* to get through.

Fear of failure (8)

This category refers typically to the behaviour of extrinsically motivated learners (Entwhistle, 1998) within a learning context that they experience as psychologically threatening (APA, 1997). Anxiety and lack of self-confidence inhibit these students’ deep engagement with learning; they often report feeling overwhelmed by particular assignment tasks that are actually within their intellectual capacity (Dawson, 2001B). These students may use some level of plagiarism as a strategy for meeting assignment requirements without exposing their lack of deep understanding of a topic. As one survey respondent wrote,

They are desperate to pass and are unable to come up with their own ideas.

A common factor in students' fear of failure is the fear of falling short of parental expectations. In the focus group discussions, a Malaysian second-year Information Systems student explained his own predicament:

I cannot fail a unit because my father cannot send my younger brother to be educated until I graduate. If I stay close to what the textbook says I think I will not be much wrong.

The focus of such students is on their goal of a particular grade to pass a subject or meet quota requirements. From an educational perspective, the fact that they are not sufficiently engaged to interrogate and cognitively reprocess what they read should perhaps be of more concern than their inept textual appropriation. Drilling them in correct referencing techniques does not address the primary source of their difficulty; it does not help them to develop as intrinsically motivated "deep" learners (Deci et al., 1991).

Difficulty with the topic (18)

The eighteen responses categorised under the heading of "difficulty with the topic" referred to a range of factors. Students' lack of confidence in their own understanding of the topic and of what they are reading was referred to most frequently in such comments as:

*Students plagiarise because they don't have self-confidence,
When uncertain, use the expert words.*

These comments reveal students' aversion to risk; they fear that using their own words may expose their inadequate understanding of the texts. Like the students in the "fear of failure" category, these students tend to approach assignments with the narrowly pragmatic objective of gaining a pass mark, rather than the more authentic educational objective of testing their own understanding and learning from constructive critical feedback.

Other comments suggest that many students struggle to grasp concepts in their reading, and this difficulty is compounded by their lack of cognitive sophistication to re-articulate them in an academically appropriate way. The following two comments are representative:

*Unable to explain a topic's content, so they copy it word for word,
Students sometimes have the wrong understanding but the textbook is always correct.*

There was also a disturbing prevalence of comments that suggest many students feel they are out of their intellectual depth, and no amount of personal effort will change the situation:

*Questions/problems given in the assignment are beyond student's ability,
Another reason is the lecturer/tutor that gave them a lot of pressure to be able to write above their standards/ability.*

Since expectation of success is a crucial component of motivation leading to actual success (Feather, 1982; Biggs & Moore, 1993), these students are at a serious disadvantage. In the focus group discussions, a number of students shared with the group their own experiences of panic when faced with assignment briefs they did not understand and could not easily relate to what they had learned in lectures, tutorials, and set readings. The mature-age students in the regional focus group, in particular, expressed the difficulty they sometimes experienced in "getting a

handle on what is expected in assignments”. In teasing out this problem further, the group agreed that more guidance through modelling and clear, directive feedback from lecturers would enable them to focus on key concepts in the topic. From their discussion, it was clear that markers’ comments on assignments tended to focus on the more easily identified superficial errors rather than on substantive issues. This applied to referencing, too; marks were being deducted for misplaced brackets in bibliographies, but dilemmas about when, how, and how much to quote, paraphrase, or appropriate were not adequately addressed.

Ignorance/inadequate referencing skills (15)

Coming through the comments in this category was the strong impression that although students are very aware of plagiarism and its penalties, they *don’t know, don’t understand, lack knowledge, and are not sure of, correct* referencing practice and conventions. The most disturbing aspect of the responses was the implication that students see using and acknowledging the words and ideas of others in narrowly mechanistic terms. In the follow-up discussions, there seemed little recognition that when students read, think about, reprocess, and use the words and ideas of others in their discipline, they are actually entering into the discourse and becoming part of the disciplinary community. Nor was there any appreciation of the dynamic through which students incorporate new ideas into their understanding and interpret further ideas in terms of this new understanding. In fact, there was obvious confusion over the relationship between originality and scholarship, and there was consensus affirmation from the regional group when a second-year Nursing and Midwifery student observed:

It’s really confusing. We’re told we need to research and not rely on our own ideas and then we’re told our essays have to be original and not rely just on what we’ve read.

At issue here is the process through which students develop their own scholarly authorial voice. It is a complex, organic, cumulative process that requires students to read widely within their disciplines and to have the opportunity to discuss with lecturers and peers the ways in which experienced writers evaluate, discriminate, select, compare, contrast, and integrate existing ideas into writing that offers a new or individually held perspective. In other words, genre modelling and genre analysis have much to offer (Swales, 1990); however, none of the students in the focus groups had been exposed to generic approaches.

Another aspect of the difficulty students experience in producing writing that is simultaneously well-informed and “in their own words” is paraphrasing. This was highlighted in such survey responses as:

They do not understand how to rearrange the structure of the sentences correctly.

Sometimes authors put the ideas down really well and it is hard to think of a different way.

Focus group discussion confirmed the prevalence of the misconception among students (especially among students whose first language is other than English) that paraphrasing is essentially a process of omitting and changing words in the text, rather than the intellectual assimilation, reprocessing, and rearticulation of source material (Ventola, 1996). It was also apparent from comments made by students in the focus groups that they were unclear about what constitutes legitimate citation in their discipline. As Wilson (1997) points out, the distinction

between unacceptable *plagiarising* (paraphrasing several sources and joining them with acknowledgements in the bibliography but without paginated in-text referencing) and acceptable academic writing is often obscure not only to students but also to their lecturers.

Language deficit (11)

It was anticipated that language deficit as a motivation to plagiarise would be largely restricted to students whose first language is other than English and who might not *understand the real meaning of the sentence*; however, it became clear that first-language English users also experience difficulties both in reading and in writing scholarly texts.

In the focus groups a number of first-language English users disclosed that they had most difficulty reading *boring* and *abstract* texts, which suggests that interest in and engagement with the text is a significant determinant of effective critical reading and, in turn, scholarly textual appropriation. The survey respondents recognised difficulties for both first- and second-language users in expressing or re-articulating ideas and concepts in a cognitively as well as linguistically sophisticated way. Typical comments were:

Lack academic vocabulary,

Agree with what the author says but due to lack of English unable to put in your own words,

When they try to put it in their own words they lose the meaning.

It was also noted that students whose first language is other than English require more time to reprocess source material into their “own words” because they need to consult dictionaries and English grammar books. As one respondent wrote,

English not a first language, much quicker to copy than to work out how to write something.

In the focus groups, a number of students suggested that the trend towards shorter semesters was exacerbating this problem of time pressure:

It's really hard for international students to digest everything covered in such a short period and then have to write it up in a language that isn't their first language. There isn't enough time.

Poor time management (18)

Survey responses in this category related either to students' behaviour or to the pressures of heavy workloads and short timeframes. Typical responses were:

Doing assignments on the eve of the due date, not enough time to layout your own thoughts,

Heavy work loads,

Just not enough time to do the assignment at a high level.

In the focus groups, most international students accepted a “blame the student” perspective (Biggs, 1999), while local students were more likely to be critical of lecturers and the curriculum.

Both groups, however, felt that under pressure it was “Ok to cut and paste as long as you give reference details”. A part-time first-year Education student’s comment summed up what many students had stated more obliquely:

When it comes to assignments all my time is taken up with understanding the concepts and terms and getting them right, so I don’t have enough time for proper paraphrasing and things like that. We’re given a sheet with referencing requirements, but some things I don’t understand and lecturers don’t have time to explain.

Laziness (15)

This category has been given the heading of “laziness”, because the words *lazy* and *easy* appeared repeatedly in survey responses:

*They’re just being lazy in thinking,
Because it is easy, simple, no need to think.*

In many comments, however, it was clear that respondents perceived “laziness” in terms less of personal indolence than of taking shortcuts. Typical comments were:

*The main reason I think students plagiarise is laziness ... they want information quickly so they find something and copy it,
May be shortcut to finishing the study,
It is a quick and easy way to produce assignments.*

A number of students in the focus groups suggested that although students may be aware of what is required in citing, acknowledging and referencing, many find the process tedious and *annoying*, perceiving it as ancillary rather than integral to academic writing. In one of the focus groups, the analogy was offered that

If you can catch the bus to go from A to B, why walk?

This comment and the ensuing group discussion demonstrated to the researcher students’ failure to engage with the concept of scholarly authorial ownership. In fact, few students in the focus groups seemed to have seriously entertained the notion that they might be participants in a scholarly discourse and not simply consumers of training for a profession. Another student expressed an opinion informed by what seems to be a common perception among many student enrolled in vocationally and technically oriented courses: that the ethical niceties of academe are irrelevant to *the real world* students enter as graduates.

Addressing the issue

Because premeditated plagiarism is such a serious breach of scholarly ethics, penalties need to be clear, significant, and above all consistently applied. However, the preliminary research that this paper has presented suggests that many cases of what is identified as plagiarism are motivated less by a competitive desire to gain unfair advantage and more by desperation to *get through* to graduation. Generally, plagiarism appears to be symptomatic of students’ lack of deep engagement with learning, suggesting perhaps that the process of “learning how to learn” (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Entwistle, 1998) in higher education has not been successfully

completed. If this is so, then plagiarism needs to be approached as a complex teaching and learning issue in which scholarly ethics, important as it is, is only one aspect.

The complexity of motivations to plagiarise is exemplified in a confidential meeting two second-year international students from one of the focus groups sought with the researcher. In the meeting, they disclosed that they had sometimes *borrowed* material from essays of their friends who had in earlier semesters studied their course units. They said they plagiarised because they lacked confidence both in their understanding of the topic and in their English language competence. They said they were *very disappointed* in themselves, because in both cases their parents had made sacrifices to pay their fees in the expectation that they would *become expert* in their chosen discipline. By *taking shortcut* [sic] they felt they would have gaps in their expertise when they entered the workforce. Significantly, they expressed not remorse but, rather, a fatalistic acceptance of themselves as inadequate students who nevertheless had a filial obligation to achieve the credentials their parents expected.

The ethical issue here is surely not only the students' plagiarism but also the university's acceptance of students with levels of competence that are inadequate for success in their discipline (Dawson, 2004B); as Marginson (1993, p.197) has observed, "Some institutions ... are insufficiently concerned about the scholastic, language and welfare problems facing international students."

The broadening of the student demographic to include increasing numbers of international and local "non-traditional" students (Dawson, 2004B), many of whom speak a first language other than English, does indeed present many challenges. The university as an institution has the capacity to meet the challenge of accommodating increased diversity and inclusiveness, but the commercialisation of higher education that, arguably, has been the driver of a broadened enrolment, has been accompanied by an increase in lecturers' managerial, organisational, and accountability-related duties and involvement in corporate enterprises and entrepreneurial activities, potentially leading to less time for staff to be available to students, including students who need experienced guidance, clear and comprehensive feedback, and individual assistance if they are to succeed in their courses. Add to this the trend towards shorter semesters, larger classes. The professionalisation/vocationalisation of disciplines, and the increasing use of less-experienced sessional staff and on-line teaching, and it is perhaps not surprising that so many students in the survey and focus groups expressed a sense of being *out of their depth*, as one respondent put it.

Although responsibility for ethical conduct rests ultimately with the individual student, universities do have a responsibility for providing an environment in which students actively learn to be competent learners. Such competence includes not only a comprehensive deep understanding of scholarly citation and referencing but also time management, effective reading and note-making, and so on, because the lack of these competences is clearly a significant factor in the motivation to plagiarise. Student responses described in this paper offered the Curtin Student Learning Support Unit many useful insights into the conditions under which students are most likely to plagiarise and these insights have informed the Unit's approach to helping students avoid plagiarism. In the wider higher education context, they also strongly support the argument that plagiarism cannot be adequately addressed through narrow, punitive measures that inevitably isolate citation and referencing practices from the scholarly enterprise as a whole; it must also be

addressed through holistic teaching and learning strategies that support students' acquisition of a range of competences, self-management techniques, and an awareness of and confidence in themselves as full and legitimate participants in an on-going scholarly discourse.

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