Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

The Student Experience

Proceedings of the

32nd HERDSA Annual Conference

6-9 July 2009

Darwin, Australia

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Taking plagiarism personally: negotiating a psychological contract to enhance the student experience

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This paper explores the interaction between lecturer and student in the development of academic integrity, utilising the findings from a single graduate unit. Through this case unit, we explore the lecturer's response to student plagiarism through the metaphor of a psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) between student and lecturer and its perceived violation. As a result of the perceived violation, it became critical that the lecturer and student work to restore equity in the contract. In the process of restoration, student and lecturer together built shared understandings of what it means to write with integrity from sources.

The lecturer followed a continuous improvement process, refining the ways in which he interacted with his students in attempts to improve academic integrity within the unit cohort. The findings illustrate the many ways in which the lecturer 'takes plagiarism personally': firstly through the personal affront he experiences when identifying plagiarism in student work; secondly, by taking personal responsibility for student plagiarism; and, finally, by taking a personal interest in the students' development of academic integrity. The outcomes highlight the impact of the lecturer/student relationship on understandings of plagiarism specifically, and on the student experience generally.

Keywords: academic integrity, psychological contract, lecturer/student relationship

Introduction

For many students, plagiarism is an arcane aspect of the tertiary learning experience. Not only are the rules about academic integrity dense and context driven (Leask, 2006, p. 60), but the students' own expectations, understandings and valuing of knowledge and expert materials (Chanock, 2008) contribute to their uncertainty about how to integrate sources into their work.

The lecturer's role in teaching students to write from sources is similarly complex and anxiety inducing (Leask, 2006, p.183), fraught with the 'moral dilemmas associated with pedagogic work' (Singh & Doherty, 2004, p. 11). Lecturers' engagement with their students is grounded in tacit (and often inconsistent) (Chanock, 2008, p. 4) assumptions about the nature of plagiarism, and of their role as arbiters of educational integrity. Often, lecturers are placed in, or assume, an adversarial position in their response to examples of plagiarism (Leask, 2006). While research on the reasons for student plagiarism and on students' perceptions of

plagiarism is quite well developed (Park, 2003; Thompson & Pennycook, 2008), there is little work available on the impact of the lecturer's relationship with the student on the practice of academic integrity. However, the lecturer plays a central role in setting expectations about plagiarism and, once having detected an apparent lack of integrity in students' work, the lecturer has an extended responsibility in following through with further education and/or punishment.

The case study presented here, drawn from a Business unit in an Australian university, illustrates the ways in which the development of a personal relationship between lecturer and student can contribute to clarification of expectations and understandings of academic integrity. Borrowing from management perspectives on social exchange and psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995), the case provides an opportunity to explore the student experience of plagiarism as one rooted in individual expectations of, and affordances for, fairness in personal relationships. Bowen, Gilliland & Folger (1999, p. 39) propose that "…people have a justice motive that derives from an implicit contract with others and with society, in general, to be treated fairly". In this paper, we discuss the various implicit contracts held by both lecturer and student, focusing on the impact of violations of these contracts on their perceptions of academic integrity. We maintain that negotiation around such violations can result in clarification of the notion of academic integrity for both lecturer and student, and dramatically improve the student experience.

Reponses to plagiarism and the negotiation of academic integrity

The literature on plagiarism represents two contrasting approaches and the jostling, contestable ground between these two positions. On the one hand, the literature reflects an underlying anxiety that plagiarism has the potential to undermine the integrity of western education systems: if we are not sure if a piece of writing represents the student's 'own work', how can we be sure that we grading it fairly and reliably? If we cannot grade work reliably, what validity is there in the credentialing system of tertiary education? Furthermore, student acts of plagiarism appear to transgress on the hallowed ground of academic claims to intellectual property: the fragile notion that published words are the unique property of their creator. The literature also includes alarming reports of a plagiarism epidemic: for example, Kidwell, Wozniak & Laurel (2003) report that over 70% of students in a small liberal arts college in the US admitted to cheating. Tertiary institutions have embarked on vigorous attempts to deal with the problem including both 'behaviour modification strategies' (identify and punish plagiarism) and 'character development strategies' (foster ethical behaviour) (Roberts-Cady, 2008, p. 60). 'Behaviour modification strategies', according to Roberts-Cady, include attempts to minimise plagiarism by setting assignments which do not readily lead to plagiarism, as well as technical solutions to identifying and quantifying plagiaristic writing using tools such as Turnitin. Such strategies are typically linked to academic integrity policies which stipulate sanctions against offenders. 'Character development strategies' include efforts to encourage ethical behaviour, for example, by introducing an 'honor code' (Kidwell *et al.*, 2003).

In contrast to this legalistic view of plagiarism, stands a sociocultural approach to academic literacies. Howard & Robillard (2008), for example, emphasise the pluralism of plagiarism. Contributors to their collection of essays point out that plagiarism is perceived differently by different participants in different contexts: the notion of plagiarism is not a monolithic construct – a matter of right or wrong, but is subtly nuanced according to sociocultural context. As Scollon (1995) made clear, what is considered to be plagiarism in one context

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(e.g. academia) may not be considered to be plagiarism in another: public service writing, for example, is often heavily derivative. Across cultures, too, attitudes to copying from sources differ markedly. Pennycook (1996), Angélil-Carter (2000), Hayes & Introna (2005), and Thompson & Pennycook (2008) are among the many authors who have discussed differing attitudes to text between cultures. Pennycook's (1996) seminal paper described the Chinese view of language as embodying reality, as opposed to representing reality. To change the words of a text, from this perspective, would involve a substantial change of meaning. Thus, copying the words of a source is not simply condoned, but positively encouraged.

The notion of plagiarism is also challenged by post-structural understandings of language. As Bakhtin (1994, p.77) argues, the very nature of meaning-making depends on the appropriation of words from other people's contexts. Words do not exist as a given reality, but depend for their meaning on echoes of previous speakers and writers reverberating in the minds of both text-readers and text-authors. As students learn to participate in the discourse community of their discipline, they adopt these words and phrases and gradually make them their own. As many writers have emphasised (Angélil-Carter, 2000; Hayes & Introna, 2005; McGowan, 2005; Wilson, 1998, 2007), this is a developmental process: learning how to handle textual references according to the subtle conventions of different disciplines, and to position oneself appropriately as a writer in relation to previous participants in this discourse community means acquiring a new repertoire of deeply embedded social practices. Such development can only occur over time, with feedback from more advanced participants, and with growing awareness of the genres of the discipline. Several authors refer to this development as 'gaining a voice' in the discipline (Angélil-Carter, 2000; Ivanic, 1997), and point out that the ability to write in one's own voice while referring to the writing of others entails taking on a new identity.

For many students, the politics of writing from sources remain obscure (Thompson & Pennycook, 2008): it is not clear to many students (both domestic and international) why they should be expected to 'use their own words' when the original author has expressed it so well. They agonise over whether an idea can be fairly claimed as their own, whether it is 'common knowledge' or whether it should be attributed – and if so, to whom. They are unclear about who they are expected to be as writers in this unknown cultural contact zone. Students frequently transgress as they struggle to make sense of the quagmire of integrity in the academic context; while lecturers may respond by applying institutional standards and policies which inevitably introduces tension for students in this zone.

Less obvious, but equally inevitable, is the tension that lecturers experience as they attempt to balance their own understandings of fair treatment of students with the demands of the institution. When 'service oriented' lecturers are asked to apply rules that they perceive to be draconian or unjust, they experience role ambiguity and conflict (Schneider, 1980) and search for strategies to reduce the anxiety that such ambiguity creates (Eddleston, Kidder & Litzky, 2002; Litzky, Eddleston & Kidder, 2006). There is a well developed literature that explores the tension experienced by organisational members who work in customer service roles like that of the university lecturer (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1988; Eddleston *et al.* 2002; Litzky *et al.* 2006). While discourses of teaching and learning rarely address the relationship between lecturers and students as one of customer service, the tensions that emerge in the relationship are parallel. Of particular interest to this discussion is the set of literature that deals with the psychological contract between employee and customer and its impact on relationships, ethics and role performance (Colquitt, Conlon, Ng & Porter, 2001; Kennedy & Corliss, 2008). There is a solid body of research that illustrates the ways in which perceptions

of justice impact on employee sentiment and behaviour within the organisation (Bowen *et al.*, 1999), the contract metaphor drawing attention to perceptions of reciprocation in which both parties have clear expectations of the behaviour of the other. The psychological contract metaphor may be utilised in the university context to unravel the multiple and complex ways in which academic integrity is negotiated between lecturer and student.

The following vignette is reconstructed from a lecturer's reflection on his experience of confronting and addressing apparent lapses in academic integrity in his unit. The lecturer experienced a profound violation of this unwritten contract when he encountered incidents of plagiarism. While he considered that he had fulfilled his end of the bargain by informing students about citation conventions and providing thorough preparation for academic writing, he was deeply affronted when the students apparently did not keep their end of the bargain by demonstrating academic integrity. However, by continuing to 'take plagiarism personally', he was able to work at repairing this violation and in adjusting his side of the bargain, deepen his own understanding of the pedagogical dilemmas in the 'transcultural contact zone' (Singh & Doherty, 2004; Thompson & Pennycook, 2008) of academic writing. Importantly, too, he achieved a sense that the repaired psychological contract opened up a new potentiality for future positive experiences for the student.

Taking it personally – Doug's story

'Taking it personally' is essentially a story about how international students and a new lecturer came to accept mutual responsibility for academic integrity in the way that they approach the theory and practice of referencing conventions in academic writing.

The setting is a Business unit at a small, urban university campus that attracts some 10,000 students each year. The unit has been convened by the same co-ordinator for 3 years and attracts around 50 to 60 students each semester. International students represent a significant and growing proportion of each class (international student representation has grown from 55% to 65% in this unit in the past three semesters). The unit's learning objectives require students to demonstrate an understanding of the nature, impact and application of a range of organisational theories in a contemporary context.

What makes this story somewhat unique is that fact that the lecturer was both student and tutor in this unit prior to taking over as the lecturer: for Doug it was an exciting and challenging opportunity to move into a new academic career. How Doug came to make sense of the differences in perspective that existed between the students and himself in relation to the issue of academic integrity provided an important learning opportunity for the lecturer and created for students an openness to the possibility of an alternative perspective on integrity in the academy. The learning at the heart of this experience was the insights that it offered both students and lecturer about learning and teaching in a 'transcultural contact zone'.

The course design had been regularly modified based upon systematic, objective evaluation feedback whilst maintaining its emphasis on student centred learning and co-construction of knowledge. The course design includes:
- concisely defined frameworks for each piece of assessable work
- a reasonable balance between individual and group work
- an interactive workshop on how to research and write an academic essay, which is the main item of assessment

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- an essay outline which is submitted for assessment before students can proceed to finalise their academic essay, and
- an on-line tutorial and quiz on academic integrity that must be passed before students can lodge their academic essay for assessment.

Doug believed that he had grown progressively more confident about the subject matter of the unit and become more familiar with the way the learning design was intended to facilitate co-construction of knowledge and assist students to develop clear understandings about expectations of academic integrity. So it came as quite a shock when he began to mark the academic essays and found that a significant number of his international students appeared to have committed plagiarism.

His first reaction was personal affront. Doug stated that he felt 'a violation of trust between my students and myself'. As might be expected, he advised each of these students of his judgement about the way they had handled referencing conventions in their essays. It was only then that he began to realise that there was a strong and genuine misunderstanding about referencing conventions and, far from attempting to 'cheat', these students were earnestly trying to do the right thing by including citations, while at the same time negotiate the power structures of academia by not modifying the words of the 'experts'. They were also anxious not to reveal themselves as incompetent users of English. Altogether, in trying to support his students' writing practices, it appeared, as Hayes & Introna (2005) suggest, that he had merely contributed to their sense of disempowerment and alienation.

Rather than immediately embarking on the University's formal student conduct management process for 'academic misconduct', a process not only punitive, but also onerous, Doug arranged to meet individually with students to clarify the problem and develop 'next steps'. He began conversations with students by articulating his disappointment, his concerns for the students' integrity, and through discussion reassessed his assumptions about what the student 'owed' him as a lecturer. The students in turn revealed shifting perceptions, recognising the very personal interest Doug took in their development and success, and taking stock of the weight of importance academic integrity has in the academic world. Together, lecturer and student adjusted the tacit contract they held with each other, giving a little bit of themselves to opening up and rebalance their expectations of the other. The negotiation of contract led to a clarification of the lecturer/student relationship and, as a result, better understanding on both parts of the ways in which academic integrity is constructed. Doug sensed a shift in the students from vulnerability to confidence, and when they resubmitted their work following appropriate academic conventions the experience was one of potential success rather than one of fear of failure.

The personal conversations that Doug pursued with students allowed him to realise that he had never tried to see this issue from his students' perspective. Nor had he fully engaged with them in meaningful dialogue to provide them with an opportunity to exchange views about their understanding of referencing conventions or their perceived apprehension about the consequences of plagiarism. It made him critically aware of the constraints that are imposed by different learning perspectives, cultures and experiences, particularly amongst those whose first language isn't English. It also led him to question how realistic his assumptions were about the level of trust that could exist between lecturer and student when the issue of power in the teaching context is never fully considered and is closed to discussion.

Doug's experience of perceived violation of the psychological contract has motivated him to make further course design changes in the unit to provide his future students with a space for mindful dialogue about issues of academic integrity. He intends to extend the opportunities for lecturer/student joint exploration of the ways in which practices of intertextuality in academic writing can complement formal in-class learning and on-line learning. Hopefully, by continuing to 'take plagiarism personally', Doug can encourage his students to gain greater confidence and understanding of academic writing practices.

Plagiarism, power and personal engagement

This vignette highlights a number of ways in which the development of a relationship between lecturer and student created an intersubjectivity that not only supported student academic development, but reduced the tension experienced by the lecturer. The lecturer's consideration and appreciative treatment of the students led to reciprocation of this fair treatment and a negotiated understanding about integrity in the academy. Thompson & Pennycook (2008) argue that, above all, students need to know *why* they are being asked to adopt new writer roles; by demystifying the ideology and politics of intertextuality, lecturers can empower students to choose (or resist) new identities in the 'transcultural contact zone' (Singh & Doherty, 2004). By imposing standards and plagiarism policies, without recognising and respecting individual agency, lecturers risk entrenching student alienation. And as Hayes & Introna (2005) point out, alienation tends to lead to further transgression of expected norms.

Institutional policies and standards also impose restrictions on lecturers as they attempt to apply their personal expectations of, and assumptions about 'fair treatment'. Corsun & Enz (1999) recognise the effect of psychological contracts in management studies of customer service employees and their customers, and further identify the importance of an employee's ability to behave in accord with his or her personal ethics. This freedom to follow one's own personal 'justice principles' (Bowen et al., 1999, p. 8) can have significant impact on the employee's engagement with and enjoyment of work as it supports the three dimensions of empowerment: meaningfulness, influence, and self-efficacy (Corsun & Enz, 1999, p. 207), key characteristics of satisfying work.

In this case, the lecturer applied concentrated effort in critical reflection, doing the 'troubling work' that is vital for personal development. Fenwick (2003, p. 151) uses the verb 'disturb' in her references to strategies for development of new insights, challenge designed to "…interrupt the normative, decentre it, and invert the terms of reference" in order for new knowledge to emerge. Reflection on issues around coercion, oppression, control, and direction led to fresh perspectives for the lecturer and improved outcomes for the student and developed the foundation for students to participate as members, rather than outsiders, in the discipline community (Lave & Wenger, 2000, p. 171). This case draws attention to the articulation of power in the institution through negotiated constructions of 'truth' as exercised through relationships (Contu & Willmott, 2003) and begins to provide some insight into the problematic and largely unaddressed relationship (Huzzard, 2004, p. 350) between learning and power in higher education. In this case, the lecturer, through the development of a personal relationship with the student, explored the hegemonic logic of the superiority of expert and the orthodox positioning of the professional educator as the legitimate vessel for valued knowledge (Fenwick, 2003).

Most crucial, of course, was the students' ability to develop as a member of the academe through the process, to assume an identity as a competent student with the knowledge, ability and confidence to act with integrity within the confines of academic expectations.

Conclusion

The student experience is often constructed as a journey; but this case study highlights the journey that lecturers can make as they come to appreciate more closely what academic integrity means for their students. By 'taking it personally' this lecturer was able to mend the psychological breach he perceived when his students fell into apparent plagiarism, and to uncover layers of meaning in the students' experience of writing at university, coming to understand in much greater depth their personal sense of uncertainty and alienation. In negotiating the complex territory between punitive and educational responses to plagiarism, he was able to gain personal insights into the students' experience as well as to contribute to their growing understanding and ability to participate in academic discourse, and to foster stronger relationships between the students and the academy.

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