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Hiding in the shadows: risks and dilemmas of plagiarism in student academic writing

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Abstract

Effectively dealing with plagiarism in student academic writing poses considerable dilemmas for teachers in all educational spheres. Ineffective management of student plagiarism issues also poses risks to academics and may contribute to the often untenable situations we, as teachers, face when dealing with student plagiarism issues. In this paper I describe the issues eleven tertiary academic members of staff face at South-Coast University[1], Victoria, Australia, when dealing with student plagiarism in the classroom. My research indicates that not only is it difficult to reach an agreed definition of plagiarism, but plagiarism is a multi-layered phenomenon encompassing a spectrum of human intention. The aim of this paper is to encourage policy-makers and academic teaching staff to acknowledge the concerns about uniform and equitable implementation of plagiarism policy.   Collaborative re-thinking of plagiarism is needed to reach a workable solution. Until we, as teachers, openly discuss plagiarism in academic writing with our students and amongst ourselves, we risk compounding the problem. Plagiarism then, indeed, will remain a dilemma for us all.

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is not only difficult to detect and eliminate, it presents one of the greatest challenges for teachers to reach an agreed definition of the term. The development of

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[1] The names of persons and institutions are pseudonyms for privacy reasons.

plagiarism can be traced back to the 1710 English <u>Statute of Anne</u>. This Act legalized an author's claim of proprietary rights over his literary work, as he was in the position of 'father' or 'begetter' of the work and the text itself was the 'child'. Thomas Mallon (1989: 6) explains that a '<u>plagiary</u> had been one who kidnapped a child or slave'. He argues that plagiarism, from the Latin term <u>plagium</u>, is 'theft or literary adoption of the thought or works of another' and concludes that a plagiarist is 'a thief in literature; one who steals the thoughts or writings of another' (Mallon 1989: 11). The concept that words could be kidnapped or misappropriated with legal recrimination, saw the birth of ownership or authorial rights over literary work and with it, the notion of plagiarism. In university environments, plagiarism is regarded as an 'offence', deserving punishment. As Peter Jaszi (1994: 9) points out:

The stakes are high in disciplinary actions against students accused of intramural offences against authorship. Indeed, our institutions underline the seriousness of these proceedings by giving them the form, as well as some of the content, of legal actions for violations of copyright law.

Plagiarism is defined distinctly in each institutional context. As the research was conducted at South-Coast University, its plagiarism policy is examined in this paper.

The Study

The aims of the study were to explore the perceptions of plagiarism by eleven EAP teachers at South-Coast University. Specifically, these EAP professionals teach an introductory writing subject in the Faculty of Business and Law. A further aim was to probe the EAP staff's attitude to the university plagiarism policy and their experiences in its implementation.

Data Collection

Data was collected during Semester One 2002, from the eleven EAP staff who teach the subject 'Writing for Academic Success' at South-Coast University. The subject is a preparatory academic skills unit for first year international students in the Faculty of Business and Law. Its aim is to prepare students for academic writing tasks such as case study reports and research essays as well as legal and business citation methods. The subject is offered at three campuses within Australia, two metropolitan and one rural, as well as partner institution campuses in Indonesia and Malaysia. Data was collected by questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires were distributed to staff by internal mail and e-mail. Questionnaires contained mostly closed questions requiring yes/no or multiple-choice responses. This design was adopted to make the document short and quick to answer, thus encouraging staff to take the time to complete it. Staff returned questionnaires via mail. From the overall questionnaire responses a list of ten interview questions were drawn up.

Interviews

Ten semi-structured questions formed the basis of interviews as these questions focus on individual perceptions of plagiarism, definitions and teaching strategies to overcome plagiarism. Teachers were asked the same questions, in the same order for interview consistency. Interviews were intended to last approximately 40 minutes but some ran longer due to lengthy responses. Interviews and were tape-recorded then transcribed.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, both interview transcriptions and survey responses were examined. An initial reading of interview transcripts gave a general impression of responses. Interviews were then coded using the N*Vivo computer software program (http://www.qsr.com.au), which allows rich text documents to be coded and comparisons across transcripts to be made. Patterns of response may emerge which are then coded as 'nodes' or 'themes' across texts. In this study, common issues for teachers about plagiarism were sought and they are identified as 'elements' in this paper. These 'elements' are then related to comments presented by teachers and researchers from around the globe.

South-Coast University's Plagiarism policy

At South-Coast University the regulations clearly state that student acts of plagiarism may be punished in a range of ways such as failure of the piece of assessment, the entire subject, or the ultimate 'academic death penalty' (Howard 1995: 788) of expulsion from the university.

Regulation 4.1 states:

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's ideas or expressions without appropriate acknowledgment and presenting these ideas or forms of expression as your own. It includes not only written works such as books or journals but data or images that may be presented in tables, diagrams, designs, plans, photographs, film, music, formulae, web sites and computer programs. The University regards plagiarism as an extremely serious academic offence. The penalties associated with plagiarism are severe and extend from cancelling all marks for the specific assessment item or for the entire unit through to exclusion from your course.

The university treats the act of plagiarism as an offence, a term from criminal law meaning 'a criminal act of wrong'. The penalties are clearly meant to be punitive in nature and breadth of scope. The regulations explain that South-Coast University views plagiarism in terms of protection of authorship and ownership of 'works'. The explanation follows regulation 4.1 (1) at sub-section (2).

Regulation 4.1 (2) states:

Students should also be aware that there are laws in place to protect the ideas and expressions (i.e. the intellectual property) of individuals and/or groups and their right to be attributed as the authors of their work. These are known as 'copyright' and as 'moral rights' and are included in the <u>Copyright Act</u>. Plagiarism offences may also be breaches of the <u>Copyright Act</u> .

The University accepts intellectual property rights through introducing sanctions against violators of authorship attribution. The regulations at South-Coast University are quite clear about plagiarism. Plagiarism is deemed to be an offence, punishable by a range of options, in line with provisions of the <u>Copyright Act</u> 1968. As the university regulations are unequivocal, what problems are there associated with implementing plagiarism policy?

Plagiarism policy: the dilemmas

Difficulties were ascertained at interview with eleven staff members of the Faculty of Business and Law at South-Coast University in Melbourne, Australia. South-Coast University is a medium-sized institution, with four campuses locally and two offshore campuses in South-East Asia. The Faculty of Business and Law is represented on each campus and the interviewees are employed as both contract and sessional teaching staff. All teach a first year undergraduate subject on academic writing for business. Email and voice-point interviews were conducted with staff in the offshore settings. Despite regulation 4.1, some consider that plagiarism is 'not that black and white' (Gemma). A major dilemma emerging was the differing viewpoints about the element of intention.

Intentional versus Unintentional plagiarism

(i) Unintentional plagiarism

Some teachers felt that a distinction needed to be made in official policy between intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Plagiarism being only those acts that were deliberate copying or deception- such as downloading papers from commercial sites or opening an attached email essay from a friend on another campus and submitting the essay as original work. Consensus opinion was that these deliberate actions should suffer the full weight of university penalties under the regulations. There were other acts considered not deliberate, therefore were unintentional plagiarism, and should not be punishable offences. Comments by Dave characterized the essential differences between these actions. He said:

Where a student deliberately takes an essay from an Internet papermill site and hands it in, then <u>that's</u> plagiarism. But where you've got kids with poor referencing skills and you know…no earthly idea of academic conventions and they just copy stuff out of the textbook, then that <u>shouldn't</u> be considered plagiarism in my book. Those kids need help to understand the way it's done, that's all. They don't necessarily intend to cheat (Dave's emphasis).

A number of academics share Dave's view. Alastair Pennycook (1996: 204) refers to 'good and bad' plagiarism when explaining the contrasting writing styles of some of his students from Hong Kong. He considers 'it is important to understand the cultural and historical specificity of notions of ownership and authorship' (203).

The idea of categorising plagiarism on a continuum is shared by Rebecca Moore Howard (1995, 1999). She contends that the key difference is intention and says 'If the plagiarism was not intentional…was it engendered by an ignorance of citation

conventions? By a monologic encounter with unfamiliar words and concepts? (1999: 797). Christopher Hawley (1984:35) believes that sometimes plagiarism may be merely a case of 'unacceptable documentation' or 'sloppy paraphrasing to verbatim transcription with no crediting of sources'. Danielle De Voss and Annette Rosati (2002:6) agree and consider that 'students aren't necessarily evil or unthinking, but instead they're learning to negotiate and do research in new spaces'(De Voss & Rosati, 2002). To these academics and staff like Dave and Kate at South-Coast University, students who copy from texts but do so unintentionally are learning to negotiate the 'new spaces' of the academic discourse community they seek to join.

Academics such as Gardiner, 2001; Hawley 1984; Howard 1995, 1999; Larkham and Manns 2002; Martin 1992, 1997 and Pennycook 1996 advocate investigating the intention of the plagiarist. A closer examination of intention indicates that many of the cases classified as plagiarism, may be erroneous. Other teachers at South-Coast University believe all acts of copying are plagiarism, and intention is therefore automatically proven.

(ii) Intentional plagiarism

Luke and Claire consider all acts of plagiarism should be punished stringently. Claire said: 'Saying that there is such a thing as unintentional plagiarism is a bit of a cop out, really. I mean, how do you know what a student really intended?'. Luke was most adamant. He said:

When they copy verbatim from the textbook, if I'm particularly shocked by what I see, then I'll usually write the word PLAGIARISM across the page, usually across the text itself. In some cases I'm able to prove where it's come from and I share that with the student with great glee. I don't think they're as naïve as they pretend to be.

The view of plagiarism as 'intellectual murder most foul' which represents a 'clear and present danger to intellectual liberty' (Mirsky 2002: 98) is also shared by many in the academic community. In Shelley Angelil-Carter's work on plagiarism in South Africa, a teacher describes plagiarism as 'the scourge of academic life' (Angelil-Carter 2000: 3). Judy Le Heron (2001) characterized plagiarism as a synonym for cheating and learning dishonesty and Augustus Kolich (1983:145) contends, 'the worm plagiarism spoils the fruit of intellectual inquiry and reason, and starves the seeds of originality that foster such inquiry'. Similarly, Edna Loveless (1994: 10) claims that academic plagiarism is 'the cardinal sin of academe' and Ellen Laird (2001: 56) considers plagiarism as an 'academic felony' where keeping 'rhetorical fingerprints' of her students' writing on file is warranted.

At South-Coast University nine of the eleven teachers considered that some writing could be considered strictly as plagiarism, under regulation 4.1, but lack of intentional wrongdoing by the student meant plagiarism was not the issue. Two teachers maintain that all acts of plagiarism are intentional, as students are aware of the policy and know that copying texts is punishable under the regulations.

All staff at South-Coast University believe that 'minor' plagiarism should be handled by individual staff, although there is no agreement on what constitutes 'minor' acts of plagiarism. Most teachers consider it 'more effective' (Angie) if cases of plagiarism are dealt with by the teachers and not through formal academic processes including committee hearing. This causes considerable difficulty for uniform application of plagiarism policy throughout the university and even within the same faculty.

Detecting plagiarism: the risks

One key concern for universities and academic institutions is detection of plagiarism. The interviewees did not regard detection of plagiarism as a problem. All were of a mind that they were experienced enough to be able to detect instances of plagiarism in their students' writing. Kate encapsulated the attitude in the following interview extract:

Kate: Well you just know when the writing isn't theirs.
Wendy: How do you know?
Kate: Oh, well..there's just a thousand little give-aways, you know…like the sophisticated vocabulary that suddenly appears in contexts that are totally inappropriate
Wendy: Anything else?
Kate: Yeah… the fluent grammar…. idiomatic use of phrases that in no way relate to their oral skills. I mean…you just <u>know</u> it's not theirs.

Kate, like her colleagues, believe they can detect plagiarism in their students' work. In addition, most are comfortable using Internet software such as CopyCatch (http://www.copycatch.com), Wordcheck http://www.plagiserve.com or Plagiserve (http://www.plagiserve.com) as detection tools. South-Coast University is also considering subscription to Turnitin.com plagiarism detection software (http://www.turnitin.com). This company provides a general search of Internet resources and a cross-peer check. Teachers submit all the class essays and all are checked against global databases, as well as against each other. Cross-campus plagiarism can be monitored using such devices. Jani said that this would be 'a great help'as an instance occurred in 2002 where students attended different campuses of South-Coast University, but shared a house. They decided to swap essays. Jani said:

I knew it wasn't Henry's, but no-one else on this campus had the same essay. It wasn't until I photocopied it and sent it to the other campuses asking if anyone had seen the same piece of work that I found out that Mark, the guy at Riverside campus, had the same one in his class…I couldn't believe it!

Not all teachers interviewed were in favour of using electronic detection devices. Some believe it is breaching student rights. Angie said, 'After all, it's their work and…well…why are we sending <u>all </u>the class work to this site? Shouldn't it just be the suspicious ones?' (her emphasis). All were confident in their professional ability to

detect plagiarism but they expressed other reservations about implementing university plagiarism policy.

(i) Negative academic image

One problem interviewees identified, and supported by the literature, is that academics do not want to walk into the shadowy realm of plagiarism and reveal any flaws in their teaching practice. Gemma commented, 'I know they'll think that I'm mothering the students and just say I'm not tough enough with them. I'm not sure how, but I know they'll twist it to be my fault'. This reveals the extent of fear a sessional teacher embraces. Gemma does not regard herself as an integral part of a team and is reluctant to act so her position could become even more tenuous. Angie, a contract employee said:

It's hard when others in the unit always give the impression of being so in control. I mean, you know…they'd never let anything as awful as plagiarism happen in their classrooms, and if it's found in mine, well...doesn't it just seem that I am the weak link in the chain?

Christine Pelton was a high school teacher in Kansas who failed 28 students for plagiarism. The School Board insisted she reverse her decision and she resigned in protest when the Board 'usurped her authority', and consequently, 'the students no longer showed her respect' (Brandt, 2002: 39). Similarly, a professor who pursued cases against plagiarists received 'harassing telephone calls, eggs were thrown at his house…and people hissed when he walked into the auditorium'(Schneider 1999: A5). These cases indicate extremes where academic status was lost through pursuit of alleged acts of plagiarism.

Five members of staff felt that if cases of student plagiarism were detected in their classrooms, it could be interpreted as a degree of professional negligence on their part. These teachers were aware of media reports where university staff had been sacked over student plagiarism allegations. They did not want to engage in activities that could discredit their academic performance, or affect career opportunities. They preferred to deal with plagiarism unofficially or ignore it. Conversely, two teachers believed that plagiarism was entirely the students' choice and did not reflect on their teaching performance at all. They were comfortable in reporting cases of plagiarism. The other four teachers were unsure about negative aspects of reporting cases of plagiarism, but said they would not report plagiarism officially because they did not feel the committee responsible would deal with the instances adequately. Therefore, of the eleven staff members, only two felt comfortable in officially reporting suspected student plagiarism in their classrooms. Clearly, procedures require examination to ensure they are able to be implemented equally by all staff and are equitably applied in the interests of students.

(ii) Burdensome administration

Heavier workloads, large classes, increased pressure to publish, lengthy grant application processes and overwhelming administration have encroached on teaching time. When academics balance priorities in entering exam grades against pursuing plagiarists, many do not have time for the often lengthy chase. Detection of plagiarism is only the starting point. Verifying plagiarism, collating and presenting evidence to the responsible committee takes an inordinate amount of time. Nola, a senior female lecturer, estimated it took her fifteen hours to prepare evidence for the relevant for a case of alleged student plagiarism. When the committee found that plagiarism had not been conclusively

proved, and 'warned' the student but gave no penalty, Nola said she would not pursue cases formally again as she felt 'undermined' in the process. Sherri Whiteman (2001: 26) writes that following up plagiarism consumed an 'astonishing amount of time'. When the student was 'warned' she 'finally gave up…and returned to my grading a more cynical educator'.

The issue of staff perception of the formal university process and its outcomes in dealing with plagiarism cases must be addressed. No follow-up advice or counselling for staff was initiated by South-Coast University where committees decided staff allegations of plagiarism were 'not proven'. Most teaching staff felt bitter or 'undermined' by the outcome and alienated in the process. They said they would not pursue formal process in future.

(iii) Pursuing plagiarists: is it really worth it?

Nine of the eleven academics interviewed felt that the time, effort and 'sleepless nights' when deciding to take a case of student plagiarism through the correct channels was not worth the effort. As Tomi, a new staff member intimated, 'What does it get you in the long run? Some committee or other lets them off and you don't come out smelling of roses…Why bother?' Similar sentiments are found in the literature. As Alison Schneider (1999: A2) reports:

Professorial confidence has been shaken in the effectiveness of university judicial panels and scholars claim they're getting shafted by the system. Guilty verdicts are being overturned. Administrators, fearful of lawsuits or bad publicity back down when challenged by litigious students.

Additionally there is a reluctance by senior academics (Young, 2001; Zobel & Hamilton, 2002) to acknowledge openly that plagiarism can happen in any classroom. Fear of what

might emerge contributes to this reticence to leave the shadows and shed light on plagiarism issues through open discussion. Some academics fear that allegations may result in student complaints about their teaching methods. Jani, a junior academic, who sought formal proceedings for a case of alleged plagiarism, found that the student counter-claimed poor teaching by the young academic. The student claimed she had been virtually forced to plagiarise because the level of teaching was so poor. Documentation held by Jani clearly indicated this was not the case, but she said such a counter-claim was 'off-putting'. She remains unsure whether such unsubstantiated counter-claims may affect her chances of promotion.

Nine of the eleven staff linked student plagiarism inquiries to potential for tarnishing their professionalism as teachers. Two teachers, however, continue to direct their students' attention to university plagiarism regulations without further action. They claim they have performed their duties. They do not want to open the debate or facilitate any discussion in the shadowy realm of plagiarism for the fear that it could risk career success. Liz said she was advised by a senior academic that the 'hassle' of taking a case of plagiarism through formal channels would be a decision that she would regret. After 'agonizing about it for a couple of days', she decided reluctantly to 'let it go'. Similar cases at other institutions have been reported. Professor Jerome Perry, at North Carolina's State University was advised by colleagues that 'it was futile and that I would ultimately be humiliated' (Schneider 1999: A6). Professor Perry was cross-examined about his teaching and grading methods and his relationships with students. As a result, he lost confidence in the university system and a 'frayed' relationship with the university developed (Schneider 1999: A6).

The teachers interviewed expressed fear of humiliation in front of colleagues if cases of plagiarism were not upheld at committee level. This was one of the strongest incentives for staff not to follow formal policy mechanisms and procedures in dealing with plagiarism. There was concern that the system 'fails the staff', by not affirming their

decisions at committee level. Therefore, some indicated that it was better to 'handle things yourself'. One senior academic observed that pursuing plagiarism was not worth it because research was the key to promotion, not teaching. His view was that the pursuit of research dollars was valued more by departments and promotion committees than pursuing plagiarists. He said, 'There's no point. On the scale of things, it just doesn't count' (Charles).

(iv) Risks for the university: teachers as judge, jury and executioner

Nearly all teachers interviewed felt that past experience of colleagues indicated that the relevant university committee would 'let the students off' (Liz). At interview, all teachers related stories about colleagues who pressed for preliminary plagiarism hearings. In all instances, the committee considered the case against the student was not sufficiently proven. The staff interpreted these outcomes as a vote of no-confidence by the committee in their professional capacities to detect plagiarism within their own classrooms. Angie said:

It stunned me…because when you saw these two essays and the ten paragraphs out of fifteen that were the same…it was pretty amazing for that decision to be made. I mean how could that be true? …Their [the students'] innocence was pretty dodgy and they'll spread the word to other students…so we lose again…It's unstoppable then.

I am not suggesting that the relevant committee's process or procedure was incorrect, nor indeed, am I implying that the decision made by the committee was wrong. What I am stressing is that the staff perceived due process to be a waste of time. There is an important distinction to be made. It is the perception of staff about the risks and dilemmas of plagiarism detection and action that the faculty and responsible department need to consider, when reviewing the effectiveness of plagiarism policy implementation. Without exception, staff members felt it was 'better to do it yourself' (Luke). Two

members of staff gave an example of the effectiveness of taking matters into their own hands with respect to plagiarism.

Kate taught 'Writing for success' at the central campus in Melbourne, and Luke taught the subject at a satellite campus some 100 kilometers away. Luke suspected plagiarism in the first assignment and sent a photocopy to other campuses asking if any of the teachers recognized the work. Kate recognized it as an essay she had corrected. The essays were identical. Kate and Luke interviewed each student. Kate's student said she had loaned her essay, sent as an email attachment, to Luke's student 'to look at' and had no idea he had copied it. Luke's student maintained it was his own work. Luke informed his student that they essay did not match his writing style, his lexicon usage or grammar patterns. The student admitted he had downloaded the email essay. Both students received a zero grading for the essay. Both Kate and Luke felt vindicated and considered a fair decision had resulted, without the formal 'hassles' of reporting. They felt justice had been served and were satisfied with the outcome. They added that their prompt resolution of the situation would be noticed by other students and 'the word would get round' to take plagiarism offences seriously.

The broader issue is, of course, that when individual members of the Academy take the law into their own hands, formal due process is ignored. This can lead to inconsistency of outcome, and inequity for students and staff. As Schneider (1999: A6) says many academics think they are 'better off playing outside the rules than by them'. My research indicates that a growing form of underground disciplinary proceedings is emerging, in which teaches allege and condemn students for plagiarism by summary trial. Teachers may be aware that students could inform the relevant departments of the practice, but appear prepared to take that risk.

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Conclusion

Clearly, plagiarism is a multi-faceted issue. One key observation emerging from this research is that whilst teachers operate collaboratively in the preparation and delivery of writing preparation programs, they approach issues of plagiarism within those programs individually. The concerns staff raised about negative collegiate responses to involvement with plagiarism inquiries and lack of confidence in existing university structures require careful re-consideration by institutional policy-makers and departments. As teachers we must decide either to ignore plagiarism completely or we must decide collectively to tackle this difficult and sensitive issue. One step towards overcoming plagiarism in tertiary environments is to push back the shadows of plagiarism through enlightened dialogue amongst academics, students and policy-makers. Until such debate is risked, plagiarism remains a dilemma for us all.

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