An assessment strategy to help forestall plagiarism problems

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Abstract

Plagiarism is one of the focal points in all areas of education. The struggle to establish reasons why it is widespread and the causes of its existence has led to many academics, teachers and students searching for ways to overcome the problem. From an educator's perspective, many factors like poorly structured assessment criteria form the basis of the lacklustre attitude of some students. Most students have an aspiration to perform to the highest standards that they are capable of; however, factors like family pressures, poor time management practices, unexpected events and heavy workloads occurring in conjunction with over-assessed courses and coinciding assignment due dates are catalysts for plagiarism. It is apparent that those involved in education and research, no matter how young, need to be educated in how plagiarism can be avoided. This paper identifies the problems that underpin plagiarism, and suggests strategies by which we can assist students both to understand academic integrity more readily and to manage their research ethically. Teaching and reinforcing good practice at an early stage in the student's learning career are imperative to knowing what plagiarism is all about.

Introduction

Plagiarism has become an all encompassing concern in academia. Davis (2002, p. 2) describes plagiarism as "submitting work as your own that is someone else's", and Pyper (2003, p. 1) as "simply theft". To help lessen the incidence of plagiarism, students need to know that academic integrity is honourable and an expectation. Integrity is defined as "soundness of moral principle…; honesty" in *The Macquarie Concise Dictionary* (2nd edition). Academic integrity, then, is about studying and researching in an honest way. Plagiarism breaches this principle and sometimes creates an atmosphere of mistrust, deceit and unfair competition.

Plagiarism: the reasons why it occurs

Plagiarism is one of the biggest problems in academia at present. The media highlights the problem in many articles in various articles like "Dirty Marks" by Geoffrey Maslen (2003) and "For Some, Copying's Not a Crime" by Dorothy Illing (2003). "Dirty marks" argues that plagiarism is rampant in schools and universities and implies that the Internet has made it easier to engage in plagiarism. Illing's article draws attention to how standards of academic integrity and the systems that are meant to combat plagiarism vary, not only across institutions, but also within various fields of study, which is confusing to the staff and students.

There are many reasons why plagiarism can occur. At the start of a student's academic life, many newfound factors arise. University culture is a new experience which makes different demands on students' time as well as on their thoughts, their social interactions and their ambitions. The expectation is that they need to succeed at all these levels, and the lengths to which they will go to do so may include breaching the odd policy or two. Significantly, plagiarism has become the most significant of these from an academic point of view. Influences affecting university students' study habits are as varied as they are plentiful. The list grows as the students give their reasons for plagiarising, deferring examinations and missing classes. Factors that are often mentioned include:

- not fully understanding university culture
- inappropriate study skills:
    - poor time management
    - inadequate assignment preparation and writing skills
    - inadequate examination and test preparation skills
    - assignment tasks not clearly understood
- no control over submission dates of assignments that coincide
- poor quality teaching by lecturers
- personal life issues (family, work, health).

In some instances, students innocently commit plagiarism because they do not fully understand the implications of plagiarism. They do not know how to reference (use citations) or more broadly how to research information for an assignment and then utilise this correctly. Most importantly, often students do not understand:

- what academic integrity is
- what plagiarism is
- how to avoid plagiarism
- how to research honestly.

Many temptations exist, particularly online, for students writing assignments. There is an enormous amount of information available online and Green (2002, p. 83) states that "…the development of knowledge and the getting of wisdom all contribute to the accelerating pace of social and technological change". She also believes that the momentum at which the information revolution is speeding up will lead to the standardisation of recording, processing, storing and communication procedures. Papermills offer previously written papers that cover certain topics and students are able to download these at a certain price, depending on the popularity of the paper or its quality. However, there is no guarantee that the paper will be valuable in any way, or be exactly what the student needs (Fain & Bates, 2003, p. 3). There are unscrupulous students and tutors willing to sell

assignments, and some students will offer to write assignments at a price (Maslen, 2003, p. 18).

Advanced technology is making it easier for students to plagiarise. In today's electronic environment, there is the availability of many instruments that allow copying, for example, photocopy machines, CD burners, downloading of MP3 music files, copy/paste commands and the myth that everything on the Internet is fair game and free. It is imperative that students understand that copying is not permissible or tolerable in any learning institution. To implement this is difficult, and Victoria Laurie (2003, p. 14) summarises this situation by asking a pertinent question: "Are we creating a generation of people unable to distinguish between an original idea and a borrowed one?" Harris (2001, p. 11) describes unconscious plagiarism as "cryptomnesia" and feels that this is what occurs when ideas that have been heard or assimilated into one's "pool of thoughts can emerge under the guise of original ideas". The three reasons that he gives for this are that more people are working with information, the quantity of information that is being processed is increasing and information is available everywhere and anywhere. This is true not only for adults in the academic and work environment but also for children at home, at play and at school.

Educating students about plagiarism

Academic integrity needs to be addressed as early as possible in a student's educational life. This should occur whether learning takes place at school or at the higher education level; whether students are writing assignments, conducting in-depth research or participating in assessment for grades; or whether this engages the teaching skills of lecturers and tutors. For example, Helen Fone, a teacher at Gooseberry Hill Primary School in Perth, is teaching Years 6 and 7 students about plagiarism. Fone says that, even though young students find this a difficult concept, she hopes that they will have the idea well understood by the end of their primary school career (Laurie, 2003, p. 14). Two high schools in Queensland are also taking the matter seriously, and use *Turnitin*, a software package, to teach their students about plagiarism and how to avoid it. The benefit of this, according to English teacher James Cook, is that the students have realised the fairness in detecting plagiarism, and Cook quotes the students as saying "…it's created a level playing field; we simply had to do our own work" (Laurie, 2003, p. 18).

Regardless of whether students are afforded the luxury of being in an environment such as Fone's or Cook's classes, universities are responsible for containing the plagiarism problem at the onset of a student's tertiary education career. Measures need to be put in place to assist all those involved in assessment in any form. This includes the lecturers, tutors, markers, students, supervisors and so on. Besides the factors that influence student life at a university that were mentioned earlier, other key issues are that "…few students enter college fully understanding the relationship between plagiarism and the rules about quoting, paraphrasing…", summarising or referencing correctly (Wilhoit; cited in Gajadhar, 1998, p. 5).

While conducting research for her doctorate, Helen Marsden of the University of South Australia found that 81% of the 1000 students whom she interviewed admitted to plagiarising (Laurie, 2003, p. 17). It is not clear whether this statistic implies that the students were intentionally plagiarising or not. Weisz (2003, p. 2) states that staff members at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology believe that in 90% of cases plagiarism "…is [committed because of] lack of knowledge of correct protocol, rather than deliberate…". It is clear that, whether or not these

students have been exposed to the issue of integrity, plagiarism exists in higher education to a considerable extent, and needs to be addressed as soon as students enter tertiary education.

Promoting academic integrity

There are several ways in which plagiarism can be forestalled. Some researchers have made recommendations that they believe will work. *Core* (York University, 2003, p. 2), a newsletter of York University in Canada, highlights the work done by a working group on academic integrity. They expand on the following four points that will assist in promoting academic integrity:

- education
- prevention
- detection
- investigation.

The first strategy to be implemented is education, by which students are guided through a tutorial to improve their understanding of plagiarism and how to avoid it. The second strategy is prevention. This involves setting the structure of courses, assignments and assessments in such a way as to discourage plagiarism. Thirdly, detection is recommended and this can take on various forms, depending on the nature of the assignment or assessment. Some of the strategies that could be used are:

- software packages like Turnitin or even the advanced search technique in Google to identify any plagiarised text
- interviews with students or oral presentations to justify their arguments in their work to ensure that they have formulated their arguments themselves
- submission of draft copies of assignments to show adequate preparation
- annotated bibliographies to show that students have researched thoroughly and are familiar with the sources to which they refer.

Lastly, there needs to be an investigation of plagiarism. When plagiarism is detected, various investigative strategies are necessary to determine the extent to which plagiarism has occurred, and the seriousness of the discipline to be implemented, following the procedures in that particular institution's policy. It is hoped and anticipated that the first three strategies will be effective enough to limit the number of investigations that may be necessary.

Also, Don McCabe and Gary Pavela (n.d., pp. 1–2) have devised the "ten principles of academic integrity". They believe that this is the starting point in creating and fostering a belief system that will inspire students to be as honest as they possibly can in their academic writing and in encouraging lecturers to write courses, assignments and tests that will be rigorous and motivating. These ten principles are:

1. Affirm the importance of academic integrity.
2. Foster a love of learning.
3. Treat students as ends in themselves.
4. Promote an environment of trust in the classroom.
5. Encourage student responsibility for academic integrity.
6. Clarify expectations for students.
7. Develop fair and relevant forms of assessment.

8.   Reduce opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty.
9.   Challenge academic dishonesty when it occurs.
10. Help define and support campus-wide academic integrity standards.

These points are not pitched exclusively at the students, but include also the strategies that academic staff need to observe. Point 6 emphasises a pertinent issue, in that, if there is not a clear and fair understanding of what assignments and other forms of assessment are aiming to achieve, then students will not be able to study to their full potential and reap the maximum benefit from their studies.

Task requirements should be structured in such a way that plagiarism can be avoided. James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) researched a range of sources, and gathered the strategies into a "three point plan". This plan will "make expectations clear to students; design assessment to minimise opportunities for plagiarism; and visibly monitor, detect and respond to incidences of plagiarism" (2002, p. 44). These researchers show in their studies that the assignment and assessment tasks should be well structured and clearly articulated so as not to lead students into the trap of plagiarising. This trap can be unknowingly set if the student feels that certain factors in preparing for an assignment are not robust and encourage plagiarism because the questions are the same each year, the questions are vague and not understood clearly or there are no criteria which can be followed.

Assessment and assignments

Where assessment is focused purely on content, students are often unable to demonstrate or practise critical analysis or to put forward points of view based on research. Rather, such a content focus encourages the duplication of facts, thereby creating an ideal situation for plagiarism. Poorly structured questions in assignments or tests and examinations that are too vague, too verbose, too old or too clumsy will not inspire students to be creative or foster a yearning to investigate topics further (Wilson, 2003, p. 7). Plagiarism is encouraged, as research shows students practising many clever tactics when they realise that the questions in examinations will often be repeated. One example is smuggling the question paper out of the examination room and distributing it to students who have deliberately deferred (Illing, 2003, p. 28). James, McInnis and Devlin (2002, p. 12) recommend that lecturers examine an "outstanding example of a carefully designed" assessment plan by Stuart Palmer from Deakin University which is integrated with teaching and learning skills. This plan includes "the use of assessment in first year as a foundational tool to establish student study habits and skills" (Palmer; cited in James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002, p. 12).

Students are not necessarily aware of what plagiarism encompasses. Often they are simply instructed to read the policy in the handbook and thereafter expected to sign a declaration stating that the assignment that they are handing in is their own work unless appropriately cited. The research reported in this paper suggests that this approach is likely to be unsuccessful, and that the core problem lies in the fact that the students do not understand the concept of plagiarism and, most of all, how to deal with it. Knowing what plagiarism is and developing the skills to avoid it are fundamental to teaching staff and students alike. The ability to paraphrase, summarise and reference accurately are the essential building blocks to avoiding plagiarism.

Addressing plagiarism

Some teaching staff are addressing the problem of plagiarism in their courses. Lecturers are attempting to include instructions on paraphrasing, summarising and referencing in the course structure itself. In some cases, students may simply be given an assessment policy statement that clearly informs students of the penalties if plagiarism is detected in student work. In the interests of best teaching and learning practice, a set of procedures is needed that will assist students to engage with plagiarism and thereby foster a clear understanding of all the implications. This will naturally take on any form that will suit each individual institution. One suggestion that has been mooted at Central Queensland University (CQU) is that a foundation course be created that is compulsory for all students to complete successfully before embarking on any further study at the university. Another option is for students to participate in formal instruction about plagiarism during orientation, and to complete the assignments that accompany such a course of instruction.

Steps and orientation

In 2004, the completion of an assignment has been required of the students studying every course in the Skills for Tertiary Education and Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at CQU, and such a requirement could be utilised during Orientation Week by all new enrolments to CQU. To ensure the assignment's success, an evaluation process specific to the assignment has been conducted at the completion of the STEPS course. The assignment encompasses researching plagiarism itself. This research enlightens students about plagiarism, paraphrasing, summarising and how to reference according to the Harvard (author-date) style. It is also intended to ensure that students understand the meaning of academic integrity at CQU and how student plagiarism can be detected. Importantly, the students have been made aware that CQU is serious about dealing directly with such indiscretions as plagiarism. It is also hoped to establish whether students consider an honour code valuable or if the present declaration that accompanies each assignment is seen to be sufficient in upholding appropriate standards of integrity and honesty.

The structure of the assignment requires students to examine documents online that relate to plagiarism. These documents include the policy on plagiarism at CQU, the referencing section in the Communications Learning Centre website, a dictionary and several universities' sites about plagiarism. From these sites, students are required to record the information necessary to reference correctly, the author or sponsor, the year the site was created or updated, the title of the document to which they will be referring and the date that the website was viewed. The sites' web addresses are supplied on the assignment. Questions are set on plagiarism to encourage students to investigate definitions of and reasons for plagiarism; to find out what paraphrasing and summarising are and how to apply these techniques; and to be aware of the expectations at CQU and of how to avoid plagiarism. Finally, students are required to give an explanation as to what they think that the declaration means. The purpose of this exercise is to ensure that students understand what they are signing and how important academic integrity is.

Foundation course

The assignment that the STEPS students complete could be implemented as a foundation course for all new enrolments at CQU. This course could involve

teaching the topics that have been shown to be catalysts for plagiarism more vigorously and in more detail. These topics could include: the meaning of plagiarism; paraphrasing; summarising; participating in group activities appropriately and thereby avoiding plagiarism; how to earn their grade in group work; how to assess peers in their groups fairly; how to collaborate without colluding; referencing properly and learning how to master the author-date and footnoting styles required at CQU; and how to validate resources and sources on the World Wide Web. As the course is formally developed, more topics will spring to mind depending on the needs identified in the trial in which the STEPS students have been involved.

To add to the policy at CQU, it is hoped that first time offenders will be given the opportunity to revisit the assignment set on plagiarism, and that they will be able to resubmit the flawed assignment, *albeit* with a reduced grade as a result.

Conclusion

Because of the importance of academic integrity in universities and other educational settings, and as plagiarism becomes more prevalent, best practice in learning institutions will involve taking up the responsibility of guiding students and staff through a process that will minimise plagiarism. Course designers will have to re-examine the structure of the subject matter and reassess the goals and objectives of these courses to ensure that they do not encourage plagiarism. A more favourable assignment submission system could be created, as well as an assessment process that would demonstrate accurately, and as honestly as possible, what the students have mastered in their studies. Best teaching and learning practice and academic integrity will be achieved if students are aware that the teaching staff have considered their input and research valuable, and if the outcomes create students who can honestly say, "I did it my way, and it is right!".

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