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The Accidental Plagiarist: An institutional approach to distinguishing between a deliberate attempt to deceive and poor academic practice.

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Abstract

There is a distinction in the literature between what is regarded as ‘intentional’ plagiarism involving a deliberate attempt to deceive (by the ‘committed’ plagiarist) in order to gain unfair advantage and ‘unintentional’ plagiarism that is associated with poor academic practice stemming from ignorance or misunderstanding of requirements (the ‘accidental’ plagiarist). Clearly, whilst neither should be condoned the former is decidedly less acceptable than the latter.

Further, an analysis of explanatory variables for incidence of plagiarism that have been highlighted in the literature indicates a grouping under three key themes: Pressure, Academic Input, and Personal Factors, lending support to the view that plagiarism is seen as a ‘coping mechanism’ or as a rational response to the circumstances in which the student finds them self. The implication being that the majority of plagiarism is committed by accident and unintentionally. Thus if steps can be taken to support these students (teaching of academic skills, design of assessment and use of JISC) then we can be assured that any remaining plagiarists are ‘committed’ and plagiarise in the full knowledge that it is wrong and are fully aware of the consequences of being caught.

Working from this premise, two Schools (Newcastle Business School and School of the Built Environment) from the University of Northumbria are currently undergoing a process of academic debate and discussion in an attempt to provide a working distinction between deliberate plagiarism and poor academic practice. Once defined, this would set in process a series of both short (agreement on penalties and the formative use of JISC) and long term actions (embedding critical thinking and academic integrity). Having defined our boundaries and working with our students it is intended to monitor and evaluate the impact of the strategy, as it is implemented, specifically with respect to the actions and activity of our ‘accidental plagiarists’.

This paper, therefore, focuses on establishing the theoretical position of plagiarism against academic practice; establishing the strategic context within which academic consultation and debate took place; on how acceptance and support was gained from academic colleagues within the two different Schools, on how we

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disseminated the changes to students and the tools and processes developed to support both groups.

Introduction

This paper is based on the premise that students use plagiarism as a coping mechanism or as a rationale response to the circumstances in which they find themselves and that, in consequence, much plagiarism is committed by accident. Working from this premise, two Schools (Newcastle Business School and School of the Built Environment) from the University of Northumbria have gone through a process of academic debate and discussion in an attempt to provide a working distinction between deliberate plagiarism and poor academic practice. The process has been supported by greater emphasis on the teaching of academic skills, on providing student information on plagiarism and the penalties that will be applied and on promotion of the formative use of JISC. This paper, therefore, focuses on establishing the theoretical position of plagiarism against academic practice; establishing the strategic context within which academic consultation and debate took place; on how acceptance and support was gained from academic colleagues within the two different Schools, on how we disseminated the changes to students and the tools and processes developed to support both groups.

Why plagiarism is an issue

Plagiarism is widely regarded as being difficult to define but is usually accepted as posing some type of a threat to our notion of academic integrity and to the 'values and beliefs that underpin academic work' (JISC, 2005). Academic integrity is widely regarded as a core value underpinning university life for both staff and students. It is about the honest presentation of an individual's thoughts and practice; the implication being that reference must be made to the work that informed a given position or understanding of a subject; showing how that work helped in the development of the person's understanding, ideas or knowledge (RMIT, 2005).

Plagiarism challenges academic integrity as it involves 'the presentation of the work, idea or creation of another person, without appropriate referencing, as though it is your own' (RMIT, 2005). Carroll (2004b, p 250) expressed the view: 'By plagiarism, I mean passing off someone else's work, intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit'. It is important to draw attention to the distinction in the literature between what is regarded as 'intentional' plagiarism involving a deliberate attempt to deceive in order to gain unfair advantage (cheating) and 'unintentional' plagiarism that is associated with poor academic practice stemming from ignorance or misunderstanding of requirements (Devlin 2002, p 3). There is evidence to suggest that whilst neither should be condoned the former is decidedly less acceptable than the latter. To this extent, it has also been noted that 'Both intentional and unintentional plagiarism is unacceptable though the approaches to tackling them and the consequence for the student are necessarily different' (JISC, 2005) with the suggestion that the former is more serious as it undermines the 'integrity of UK awards and qualifications' (Carroll 2004a p 3).

Evidence on the Extent of Plagiarism

Before considering the size of the problem it is necessary to dispel a couple of myths. Firstly, and most importantly, there is a perception in some quarters that plagiarism is largely a cultural phenomenon and that it is particularly associated with students from 'Confucian heritage cultures' (Graham & Leung 2004). Although the authors do note (p 29) that

Students who are learning and writing in a language that is not their own may lack skill and confidence, and some copying of text may be underpinned by an intention to 'imitate' rather than an intention to 'deceive' (a distinction highlighted by Angelil-Carter, 2000, p 11).

Despite this, research suggests that it is not possible to say that international students are any more likely to plagiarise than domestic students. What is apparent, however, is that they are more likely to get caught (Leask, 2004).

Secondly, we assume that students adhere to the same academic values and standards as staff, however, as pointed out by Carroll (2004b), without being taught, students do not intrinsically hold the same values about academic integrity.

Carroll (2004a, p 1), citing the work of Park 2003, p 271, notes that 'plagiarism is doubtless common and getting more so'. Graham and Leung (2004, p 30) administered an anonymous questionnaire to 779 undergraduate students in one Department at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and discovered that '32% of students admitted having copied the work of others' and '25% allowed other to copy their work'. They report to 'not being surprised' at these figures as they were consistent with data from other institutions. Allan *et al* (undated, p3) reporting on results from the use of the TurnitinUK detection service, noted that evidence from one, unnamed, university is that generally 10% of all assignments appear to show a similarity index of more than 25% (that is, matched to other uncited sources). Carroll cites the 2002 CAVAL study in Australia which found that '8.8% contained more than 25% of unattributed web based material' (2004a, p 4). She also draws attention to the development within academic writing on the subject, of an unofficial bench mark of 10%, although she does warn that this figure might actually appear optimistic in the case of the UK.

Work from within our own university indicates similar findings. Loughran (unpublished *mimeo*), found that

...a clear majority of students cite each of not understanding the rules, plagiarism happening unconsciously and easy access to materials as either sometimes being the reason or being the common reason for plagiarism...

[also]

... working with others on individual assignments, copying a few paragraphs, making up project data and passing off the ideas of others are each seen as being common place by a large proportion of the survey respondents.

In the light of this, Loughran notes that the challenge and focus for academic staff should be on 'reinforcing the seriousness of these practices' and to providing adequate advice to overcome the apparent ignorance of students.

Explanations for plagiarism

If it is accepted that at least 10% of all submitted course work might be plagiarised, it is useful to consider possible explanations for its occurrence and the extent to which it is intentional or otherwise.

Beasley (2004, p 28) identifies three types of plagiarists:

1. *accidental*: lack of understanding, the student was unaware that it was wrong (Dennis 2004) thus demonstrates poor academic practice
2. *opportunistic*: aware of this being ‘wrong’ but does so due to some source of pressure (see factors mentioned below) or in the belief that it will result in higher marks (Dennis 2004)
3. *committed*: intentional (pre-meditated) cheating via misrepresentation.

JISC (2005) notes that ‘studies ... show that the bulk of plagiarism can be attributed to students who do not understand academic requirements, thus the majority of students are accidental plagiarists’.

Table 1 below provides a summary of the explanatory variables for incidence of plagiarism that have been highlighted in the literature. It has been possible to group these under three key themes: Pressure, Academic Input, and Personal Factors.

TABLE 1: Main Explanatory Variables

AUTHOR	STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PLAGIARISE WHEN:		
	THEY ARE UNDER PRESSURE	THEY PERCEIVE A LACK OF ACADEMIC INTEREST	THERE ARE PERSONAL FACTORS
Graham & Leung (2004)	They face a heavy workload and/or a number of deadlines	They simply don't know how to undertake the assessment They have no 'intrinsic interest in the subject (it is	There is peer pressure to 'share' materials

		boring or somehow 'pointless') and they only have to pass the module	
Dennis (2004)	They have poor time management and are unable to cope or keep up as a result	Their tutor appeared not to care They only needed to pass the module not learn the material	Paraphrasing was felt disrespectful
JISC (2005)	They are facing workload related stress are unable to cope		
Carroll (2004a)	They are juggling work and studying They face simultaneous assessment deadlines		They are writing in a second language There is a fear of failure
Szondi & Martindale (2004)	They are under time pressures	They lack technical knowledge The lack skills required to assimilate ideas It is easy to plagiarise	Their prior education did not prepare them They hold different values of personal integrity They fear failure

These findings lend support to the view that plagiarism is seen as a 'coping mechanism' (Dordoy, 2002, Graham & Leung 2004, JISC 2005) or as a rational response to the circumstances in which the student finds them self. The implication being that the majority of plagiarism is committed by accident and unintentionally. Thus if steps can be taken to support these students (teaching of academic skills, design of assessment and use of JISC) then we can be assured that any remaining plagiarists are 'committed' and plagiarise in the full knowledge that it is wrong and are fully aware of the consequences of being caught.

Carroll (2004b, p 253) draws attention to the reasons why academics tend to opt for pragmatism rather than application of regulations and procedures, top of the list was 'the time it takes to pursue a case' as well as 'feeling it isn't fair to punish if students haven't been taught the skills'. By far the best approach, therefore, is to educate students away from plagiarism on the grounds that it is easier and less frustrating than spending time and effort trying to prove that it has taken place.

In his study of Northumbria University as a whole, Dordoy (2002, p 1) noted that academic staff are guilty of making presumptions about students having the same cultural understanding as themselves, thus staff do not explain what they consider obvious, i.e. why plagiarism is unacceptable, 'much plagiarism happens because students don't understand the rules and don't perceive the lifting of a few sentences as wrong, hence be sure to teach the rules'. He also pointed to the fact that students may actually have a 'different moral code' from academics. This is reinforced by Allan *et al*, (undated) who suggest that students need to be taught these academic values rather than simply being informed of the rules. Carroll (2004a, p 5) notes that it is necessary to place 'emphasis on teaching and on valuing students' learning rather than on detecting and dealing with offenders'. This emphasis on teaching quality and the learning experience of our students is important as it focuses on intrinsic motivation factors. In this respect it is interesting to note the comments of Dordoy (2002) 'if the university sells itself as a business and people only come to get a bit of paper – then plagiarism will always be a problem'. It is also argued that for some students, appealing to them to adhere to a moral standard may be a waste of time, thus it is appropriate to reinforce the 'moral value' message with the risk factor (of being caught and of the level of penalty) that is high enough to act as an effective deterrent.

The context of change at Northumbria

Whilst most academics at Northumbria would probably agree with the definitions of plagiarism, there is inconsistency and variable 'local practice' not only between but also within academic Schools with respect to identification and subsequent action. Carroll (2005 p 9) notes that often a blind eye is turned because of the consequences not only for the student but also for the member of staff in terms of workload (staff are expected to become 'self taught detectives'). Without doubt, a contributory factor is student numbers and associated pressure to turn marking around within deadlines. In addition, some of this inconsistency stems from concerns over the application of the University ARNA regulations which are viewed as 'harsh' (the same procedure is followed for inclusion of 'more than a single phrase' (ARNA Appendix I, Section 3.2 (i)) as for an essay copied in entirety) and the perceived formality of what the regulations refer to as an 'informal meeting' (Section 4.1.1). There was also evidence to suggest that staff also feel uncomfortable embarking on a campaign of detection and punishment when they cannot be sure that the student understood what they were doing (unintentional) or that they were adequately forewarned of the measures that would be taken (intentional). More often than not faced with such a situation, a member of staff might often make some adjustment to the mark (of varying degrees of severity) and add a comment as to the importance of referencing on student feedback (Carroll 2004a p 7).

These issues are compounded by the fact that ARNA does not accommodate the distinction between plagiarism and poor academic practice although, as pointed out by Hartwright (2005) the regulations do suggest that ‘there is a distinction between not meeting standards of academic practise and plagiarism’ indicating that work falling into the former ‘will be marked at a lower level’ (Section 1.3), however this distinction, and associated penalty remain undefined.

In the light of the foregoing, it was felt appropriate to initiate an internal debate that would consider some of these issues by reference to the approaches taken in other academic institutions and that would result in a strategic response to reduce the incidence of plagiarism. These discussions were set against the following *caveats*: Piecemeal action is rarely effective and the emphasis from the literature is, overwhelmingly, on ‘a holistic, coordinated, institution-wide approach to plagiarism’ (JISC 2005, Carroll 2004a); that ‘detering is far more effective than detecting’ (JISC 2005); and that, whatever procedures and penalties were eventually agreed for use within the Schools, transparency in action was seen as critical.

Therefore, it was considered important to establish a number of key principles:

- All staff must be able to agree on a definition of and distinction between plagiarism and poor academic practice. This interpretation must be both acceptable and workable and, once agreed, our common understanding must be communicated to students giving time for their input into the process.
- The agreed definition, interpretation and application of penalties must be fairly and consistently applied in a totally transparent manner.
- Students must be taught about academic integrity, and be given opportunity to practice, good academic skills (supported by staff willingness to advise on the Harvard method of citation and referencing).
- Staff should be given time and support to develop ‘plagiarism proof’ methods of assessment.
- Staff who suspect plagiarism should be adequately supported through the process.
- Students should see that those who cheat are caught, but also, that they are treated fairly and transparently.
- All work with respect to academic standards, integrity and plagiarism will be enhanced and supported through efforts to promote and engender the skills of critical thinking and independent learning. It is felt that students displaying these skills are considered less likely to resort to plagiarism.

To facilitate debate, a discussion paper was prepared establishing the theoretical justification for a distinction between plagiarism and poor academic practice. This paper was circulated to all staff within both the Business School and the School of the Built Environment. In addition to covering relevant literature, this paper proposed where this distinction between poor academic conduct and deliberate plagiarism should be drawn and suggested an associated structure of tariffs. Further, a leaflet was prepared ‘How not to plagiarise – a guide for students’.

It was felt that these issues were of such importance that they needed the endorsement and support of all academic staff. To achieve this, in the Business

School, the paper was initially sent to selected colleagues with a particular management interest and role as well as to the Library and Study Skills. Their suggestions for improvements were incorporated and a redraft was then circulated to all academic staff inviting comments. Further, all staff were invited to a school wide meeting held on 28th February 2006 at which the proposal were discussed. This meeting was also attended by a senior member of staff from academic registry.

There was broad agreement with the principles and, following debate, agreement was reached over the distinction between poor academic practice and plagiarism and with the penalties to be imposed. Following this meeting the paper and student information leaflet were approved by the Business School Learning and Teaching Committee and were discussed with and endorsed by a representative of the Students' Union. These proposals were then taken forward to the School of the Built Environment and at the time of writing are still under debate. Again, however, it is felt important that all staff should have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

The proposals stem from acceptance that some types of plagiarism are regarded by academics as less serious than others and that these types should be and are being treated differently. As already noted, the definition of plagiarism is clearly a complex and ambiguous process (Yakovchuk, 2004). Evidence shows that academics disagree over when plagiarism becomes poor academic practice, thus reaching agreement on consistency in interpretation is seen as a major break through.

The purpose of this approach is to ensure that our students are in a position to clearly understand how plagiarism is defined and, more importantly, why it is unacceptable within an academic community that maintains certain standards with respect to academic integrity and places value on the quality of the degree that it awards. Within the Business School, this process has started with the introduction of the new Academic Practice module that is taken by all first year students (with a few exceptions) and with a module on Intellectual Development and Career Management that is now included in the completion award programmes. However, the knowledge gained from these modules is only effective if students are given the opportunity to practice academic skills within a range of subject specific modules. It is apparent from a number of sources (Graham & Leung, 2004 and JISC 2005) that providing students with opportunities to identify plagiarism using subject specific examples is an effective technique to employ. Addressing this, School of the Built Environment has introduced a level four module, Sustainable Development which combines an introduction to sustainability themes with academic skills including correct referencing.

This process is being facilitated within the Business School firstly by distribution of the leaflet to all staff and students and secondly by the production of a 'school' guide to the University endorsed system of Harvard referencing that uses subject specific material. Following the debate, a number of staff have provided students with access to the JISC TurnitinUK service to be used as a formative self-submission tool. The purpose here is to move students from a culture of 'locate, copy and paste' towards the development of a culture of 'analyse, critique and synthesise' (Allan *et al*, undated). This, as already noted, cannot happen unless

students are both taught about academic integrity and, importantly, given opportunity to practice and apply the concepts.

As noted, there was healthy debate over the application of penalties. In common with those in use elsewhere, to work, the system that has been adopted does rely on the maintenance of a central record of all cases of plagiarism with information on the incidence and action taken (Carroll 2004a p 9). Consideration was also given to the legal argument put forward by Saunders (2005):

...institutions must... have transparent procedures for deciding whether plagiarism has been proved and for deciding on the penalty... [and] be able to demonstrate that proper steps have been taken to explain the rules and their implications.

The structure of tariffs for use within the Business School is produced in Table 2. This structure is currently under debate within the School of the Built Environment. From this Table it can be seen that whilst examples 1 – 4 strictly constitute plagiarism (Dennis, 2004), it is agreed that the first two be treated differently from examples three and four. It is expected that major incidents of plagiarism (or subsequent minor incidents) would be dealt with, as present, in accordance with the ARNA regulations. However, the Schools are now in a position to treat differently a first minor incident. This would involve a clear indication of the mark adjustment resulting from the poor academic conduct; the student should be informed of this (either in a conversation or by e-mail); referred to the Study Skills Centre and a note this effect placed on the student file. In the event that plagiarism/poor academic practice occurs in a subsequent assessment period it would be necessary to check that there were no prior incidents recorded on the student file. It was recognised that a more prescriptive approach does remove the ability to act with discretion, but that it achieved a more transparent outcome. The table of penalties is now included in programme handbooks and on programme ePortal sites.

At the time of writing we have yet to see whether a system that has been adopted by staff within one school will prove culturally acceptable within another. Further, we are, as yet, unaware if this approach will have an impact on plagiarism within the Schools. It is recognised, however, that the structure of tariffs should be revisited, particularly as greater emphasis is placed on the development of critical thinking and independent learning.

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TABLE 2**Mapping the extent of plagiarism**

Examples taken from Devlin 2002 (using materials from Carroll 2000 based on an exercise in Swales and Feak 1994) and from Dennis 2004 (using an exercise from Swales and Feale 1993) *You will see from this Table, that whilst examples 1 – 4 strictly constitute plagiarism (Dennis, 2004), it is proposed that that the first two be treated differently from examples 3 and 4; and that first minor transgressions be treated differently to second minor transgressions or to first major transgressions*

	EXAMPLE	CLASSIFICATION	OUTCOME
1	A student copies verbatim from a source without acknowledgement	Plagiarism	First minor – one or two short paragraphs of copied text with no citation. Recorded conversation (placed on student file) with the student and referral to study skills centre, reduction by 7 – 10 marks from total for piece of assessment. First major (or second minor in a subsequent assessment period) – in accordance with ARNA regulations Appendix I
2	A student copies from a textbook or web page making small changes - e.g. replacing a few verbs, replacing an adjective with a synonym; acknowledgment in the bibliography at the end of the work	Plagiarism	First minor – one or two short paragraphs of copied text with cosmetic changes, no in-text citation but acknowledged in bibliography. Recorded conversation (placed on student file) with the student and referral to study skills centre, reduction by 5 – 7 marks from total for piece of assessment. First major (or second minor in a subsequent assessment period) – in accordance with ARNA regulations Appendix I
3	A student cuts and pastes material by using sentences from the original but omitting one or two and/or putting one or two in different order; no quotation marks; with in-text acknowledgments and a bibliographical acknowledgment.	Strictly Plagiarism however, to be treated as patch-writing and Poor academic practice	First Incident – recorded conversation (placed on student file) with the student and referral to study skills centre, reduction by 0 – 5 marks from total for piece of assessment. Second Incident - recorded conversation (placed on student file), resubmission of corrected work and mark for assessment capped.

	EXAMPLE	CLASSIFICATION	OUTCOME
4	A student composes material by taking short phrases of 10 to 15 words from a number of sources and putting them together using their own words to make a coherent whole with in-text acknowledgments and a bibliographical acknowledgment	<i>Strictly Plagiarism</i> Patch writing from multiple sources Poor academic practice	Referral to Study Skills Centre. In the event that the student fails to provide evidence of their own reasoning, or to develop a logical argument in their work, normal marking criteria would apply.
5	A student paraphrases material by rewriting with substantial changes in language and organisation; the new version will also have changes in the amount of detail used and the examples cited. The source material is acknowledged in the text and the source is cited in bibliography	Not Plagiarised	No action needed
6	A student quotes material by placing it in italic font and/or using quotation marks with the source cited in text and in the bibliography.	Not Plagiarised	No action needed

