

Shameless!

Reconceiving the Problem of Plagiarism

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In our last issue, Justin Zobel and Margaret Hamilton argued for new measures to tackle plagiarism and its corrosive effects on staff and student morale. Here Robert Briggs responds that a moralistic attitude towards plagiarism is unlikely to tackle the problem in a coherent way, and that new thinking about plagiarism and pedagogy is required.

There's been an awful lot of hysteria lately over the increasing incidence of plagiarism in student assignments. No doubt much of the anguish over the issue derives from recent public reports on 'soft marking' of fee-paying students and on students being awarded degrees despite having been caught submitting – shamelessly – somebody else's work as their own. These reports have been followed by firm statements from university administrations that plagiarists will not be tolerated and that responses to plagiarism will be swift and unswerving.

In this respect, Justin Zobel and Margaret Hamilton's piece in the November issue of *Australian Universities Review* (2002, pp.23-30) is just one example of the call to take the issue of plagiarism seriously and to punish its perpetrators appropriately. It seems to me, however, that the rush to condemn acts of plagiarism risks riding roughshod over a problem that may turn out to be a far more complex – behaviourally, ethically, conceptually, and even linguistically – than has been previously granted.

For instance, it strikes me as significant that there aren't really any ready substitutes for the word 'plagiarism'. In *The Angus & Robertson Dictionary and Thesaurus in One Volume* sitting on my desk, the entry for 'plagiarise' lists the terms 'appropriate', 'borrow', 'crib (Inf.)', 'infringe', 'lift (Inf.)', 'pirate', 'steal', and 'thieve' as its synonyms, while the set thesaurus for Microsoft Word 97 offers to replace 'plagiarism' with 'copying' (which the thesaurus also lists as the meaning of 'plagiarism'), 'lifting', 'stealing', 'illegal use', 'breach of copyright', or 'bootlegging'. In both cases the alternatives can be separated roughly into two groups, depending on the terms' moral charge. Thus 'copying' and 'borrowing', as morally neutral terms, describe the essential act constituting plagiarism, but without sufficiently indicating the inappropriateness of that act. What is inappropriate about plagiarism, of course, is that it constitutes not simply the 'copying' of someone's work or ideas but rather the unacknowledged copying of such work and the subsequent submission of that work as one's own. Hence the use of terms like 'stealing' and 'cheating' in order to underscore the seriousness of the 'crime' – stressing the immo-

rality of the act in order to encourage all right-minded students not to acquiesce to what might appear to be the easier way. Accordingly, Zobel and Hamilton begin their discussion of strategies for managing student plagiarism by depicting plagiarism (by definition) as a species of cheating: 'Cheating, and particularly plagiarism – in this context, the inclusion of someone else's work in an assignment without acknowledgment – is hardly a new phenomenon, but in modern universities it is exceedingly common' (2002, p. 23).

What I want to suggest here, though, is that the moralising tone of such terms as 'stealing' and 'cheating' is not only heavy handed with respect to some cases of plagiarism but may actually frustrate attempts both to detect plagiarism and to prevent its occurrence. If that is the case, then the problem of plagiarism might be better addressed by minimising the moral attitude underpinning the campaign against plagiarism than by continuing to paint plagiarists purely as shameless 'cheats'. This is to broach an issue that simply cannot be recognised in the rush to condemn plagiarism, since it is an issue of which such condemnation may in fact be partly the cause. As a necessary and not just preliminary stage in raising that issue for discussion and debate, then, a couple of points – the first contextual, the second more general – need to be made about the way in which the problem of plagiarism is characterised, even before anyone attempts to 'solve' that problem.

First, the scope for plagiarism and, indeed, what counts as plagiarism vary, as Zobel and Hamilton point out, from discipline to discipline (2002, p.23). Deliberately copying another student's programming assignment and making superficial changes in order to pass it off as one's own is probably not the same, in terms of research input and learning outcomes, as 'unconsciously' drawing from arguments outlined in a journal article or website and failing to indicate that these ideas are someone else's. Likewise, students who pay for assignment solutions are not to be judged alongside students who use another person's wording in their essays without employing quotation marks to indicate a direct citation. In the humanities, plagiarism often arises within far more ambiguous sce-

narios and is more often connected to questions of precise referencing than is the case in the examples (occurring within computer science) which Zobel and Hamilton discuss, and much of what I have to say about the issue of plagiarism arises from the specific nature of academic practice within the humanities.

If I go on to raise questions about plagiarism which Zobel and Hamilton may overlook, therefore – particularly questions to do with some notion of appropriate referencing – it is not necessarily in order to criticise their work, which focuses primarily on deliberate acts of deception, but rather to add to their significant discussion by outlining the extent to which important issues may be ignored in the widespread moralising over plagiarism. Nevertheless, in the same way that Zobel and Hamilton's strategies for managing student plagiarism can be effectively deployed across different disciplines and departments, the points raised here may have something to add to the problem of managing plagiarism outside the humanities, too.

The second point concerns the possible objection that removing the morality which underpins policies against plagiarism thereby effaces the ground for seeing plagiarism as a problem. Put simply, if plagiarism is not taken as morally wrong, if it is approached in morally neutral terms, then the act of plagiarising is seemingly reduced to an (innocent) act of 'borrowing' or of 'mimicking'. In that case, there would be no reason to see plagiarism as a problem at all. But to challenge the morality driving the condemnation of plagiarism isn't necessarily to deny the existence of a problem, nor is it simply to ignore questions of propriety and conduct. Addressing the issue of plagiarism while at the same time challenging the conventional (moral) wisdom delimiting that issue is a process that can be made in the name of what I prefer to envisage, rather, as 'ethics'.

To put it far more crudely than I would like, the significant difference lies in the respective ways in which morality and ethics (to continue to use those terms) approach the question of judgement. Morality is all about general foundational principles which direct action, while ethics focuses on highly contextualised practices and decisions, seeing all decisions and practices in terms of their many, potential and not always foreseeable consequences or outcomes. Morality operates in the name of an unswerving Right and Wrong, while ethics is driven by a sense of responsibility to others in need – to others whose desperateness may even call for responses that contravene established procedure or consensus. Morality, accordingly, is at its grandest in the moment of judgement, applying well-known principles to determine the appropriate course of action, and evaluating acts in terms of their adherence to such principles. Ethics, by contrast, is geared towards problem-solving, seeing situations as far from certain, and speculating, without reference to ready-made answers, on the possible consequences of courses of action.

The most crucial point in this context, though, is that whereas morality's gaze is directed primarily towards acts, ethics is concerned with capabilities and attributes. The significance of this point lies in the way in which morality sees an act such as plagiarism as the deliberate undertaking of a person who possesses – as all human subjects supposedly possess – an innate or, at least, fully acquired capacity to know what constitutes appropriate moral behaviour and to act accordingly. People, in other words, armed with the knowledge of what's right (which is either intuitive or at the very least learnt at an early age) are able as a result to act morally. And if people don't act morally, therefore, it is because they must be motivated by something other than the desire to do what's right – by the desire, for instance, to get a good grade without putting in the requisite effort.

To put it in these terms is to exaggerate the distinction in order to indicate what's at stake in the move from a 'moral' to an 'ethical' approach to the problem of plagiarism. Of course, moral codes are never so inflexible as to take no account whatsoever of the specific circumstances of morally dubious acts. Likewise, it would be wrong to see the pragmatic work of ethics as completely uninformed by principle.¹ Nevertheless, the distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics' serves to demonstrate the extent to which morality's focus on acts (and their presumed, underlying intentions) encourages a moralising response to seemingly immoral behaviour – a response which is perfectly encapsulated by the very familiar charge that such and such a person 'should know better'.

The problem with this moral assessment of behaviour, then, is that it presumes not only that people have knowledge of what constitutes appropriate behaviour but also that they are capable of acting on the basis of that knowledge. In actual fact, however, things are far more complex. The radical contention of what I've been calling 'ethics' is that comportment is a skill or aptitude, too, and that, as such, it is tied to the specificity of particular contexts of practice.² In a sense, this argument is widely recognised by academic staff, insofar as higher education has been increasingly reconceived over the last few decades as involving the cultivation of professional skills rather than the provision of knowledge. Certainly, it's not too hard to see the practices of citing, referencing and commenting on published materials as techniques that can be employed more or less skilfully or effectively in given situations. And in the case of the essay, which still constitutes the primary form of assessment in humanities study, it is precisely the unsuccessful or 'inappropriate' deployment of such techniques that often constitutes the ground for making the charge of plagiarism. From this example, though, we can see that the charge of plagiarism presupposes the ability to appropriately deploy the range of techniques suited to a specific task and commanded by the context.

The moralising approach to plagiarism can all too easily focus on the act of plagiarism without considering the extent to which the avoidance of plagiarism, even in the knowledge that plagiarism is 'wrong', depends upon the prior acquisition of a particular competence. The significance of this point is that the problem of plagiarism might be effectively approached as a learning problem, and in this case as a writing problem, rather than as a moral one.

Crucially, providing guidelines on how to cite references isn't enough to address the problem in this case, since such a strategy again presupposes that the avoidance of plagiarism can be reduced to the mere application of a rule. This is especially true insofar as these guides often provide advice merely on how to cite references, not on how to use them. What is therefore needed, of course, is a program of training in the art of essay writing – and if this point seems so straightforward and so obvious as to be hardly worth the argument, it is nevertheless deceptively so. While it might be easy enough to recognise that some instances of plagiarism may stem from a lack of ability, the moralism behind the charge of plagiarism can actually get in the way of detecting and minimising plagiarism and can (thereby) create a great deal of extra work for academic staff. This is so for the following reasons:

(1) By reaffirming the idea that learning is primarily a matter of acquiring knowledge, which serves as the basis for effective action (in the form of completed assignments or 'desired outcomes'), the depiction of plagiarism as a moral issue can actually encourage plagiarism. Within the humanities plagiarism often happens when students, faced with the fear that they haven't provided enough of their 'own ideas', try to play down the extent to which their essays derive from borrowed material. More often than not, what's really expected of these students is some demonstration of an ability to sift through a body of published ideas and to piece together a selection of discussions and arguments relevant to the topic, with the aim of reaching a conclusion of some kind. Some sort of originality is expected here, of course; crucially, though, what is expected is not so much an originality of ideas or argument, produced by so-called 'free' thought, but an originality that is generated as an effect of a particular set of research and referencing techniques as they are put to use in a specific context.³

However, it is difficult for students to grasp this much more limited and circumscribed notion of originality when advocates of the moralising view of plagiarism insist on depicting the use of published materials in terms of acts of borrowing. The moralistic notion of plagiarism buys into the idea that

research primarily involves the borrowing of someone else's ideas in order to support one's 'original' argument, rather than taking the form of an explicit commentary – be it descriptive, critical, transformative, speculative or whatever – on a whole body of work on the topic at hand. In short, the moralistic condemnation of plagiarism views ideas and arguments as owned by completely self-sufficient, sovereign subjects ('my own ideas', 'someone else's ideas') rather than as the result of a whole set of disciplinary procedures and investigations as put into operation by a specific, but by no means homogeneous, disciplinary community.

To be sure, the conceptions of learning (as the acquisition of knowledge) and writing (as the presentation of original ideas) which sometimes lead students to plagiarise are no doubt far too institutionalised to be transformed simply by advocating a different approach to the problem of plagiarism.⁴ However, the possibility of shifting those pervasive notions may be opened if students can be made to understand that what's wrong with plagiarism is not simply that one has stolen 'someone else's' work but rather that such an act demonstrates that one has yet to master the skills of the discipline.

The non-moralising view of plagiarism, in other words, may enable students to recognise that 'getting away with' plagiarism, in the sense of not being caught, isn't necessarily going to help their grades, since even apparently original ideas aren't worth much unless students have sufficiently demonstrated

how those ideas have been developed in response to a specific body of published work. In fact, the reason for seeing the issue of plagiarism in terms of questions of propriety at all has more to do perhaps with a recognition of the 'appropriateness' of procedure than with principles of honesty. That's not to say that honesty or any other moral principle has no place in the argument; rather, it is to underscore again the extent to which the ethical competencies that apparently animate the desire to produce 'one's own' work may actually arise as an effect of the process of mastering the relevant research and writing techniques. To that extent, then, these competencies are perhaps most identifiable in the form of something like professional pride.⁵

(2) In accordance with the idea that plagiarism constitutes a deliberate act which is to be judged by a moral authority, the emphasis in strategies for managing plagiarism tends to fall on departmental detection and disciplinary hearing. This emphasis on departmental response to an existing problem, while no doubt increasing the likelihood of identifying instances of student plagiarism, does little to prevent plagiarism from occur-

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ring in the first place, except insofar as it acts as a deterrent. In addition, this emphasis can create a great deal of extra work for academic staff in the form of added plagiarism detection duties, a workload which could be effectively decreased if those students whose plagiarism stems from difficulties in learning the appropriate research and writing skills were identified earlier in the process and dealt with accordingly.

There are two points that can be noted in this respect. Firstly, the recognition that appropriate referencing constitutes a writing technique rather than a moral principle allows for the requisite skills training to be incorporated within the pedagogical program, while helping at the same time to constitute such skills as learning objectives for which students must (eventually) take responsibility in accordance with the pervasive ideal of independent learning. In this way, the emphasis with regard to plagiarism detection can be partly moved from departmental detection to student self-detection, which may help to cut down some of the work involved in dealing with plagiarism.

Secondly, the constitution of plagiarism as a learning problem can be a means of making visible the significant amount of labour that is currently spent explaining to students why their referencing needs improvement – labour which remains largely unrecognised by university management. For the most part, pedagogical (as distinct from moral) responses to the problem of plagiarism are undertaken on an ad hoc basis, with academic staff advising students, one-on-one, on how to improve their referencing and writing. As the amount of students needing assistance has increased over the years, so has the amount of time spent individually tutoring those students. One strategy for making this labour visible, then, might be to create spaces for students to undergo systematic training in the relevant techniques. Most universities already have established ‘language and learning’ centres to help those students who are encountering difficulties in the transition to tertiary study or in mastering academic modes of composition. It wouldn’t take much, other than a change in attitude towards plagiarism, to institute a mechanism for sending students who have been ‘caught’ plagiarising – students, that is, who appear to be experiencing difficulties in researching, referencing and writing – on compulsory training in learning, research and writing skills. Linking the management of plagiarism to such resources can therefore help to minimise the incidence of plagiarism whilst also properly accounting for the labour which goes into training students.

(3) The charge of plagiarism, when framed by a moralistic attitude, effectively constitutes an attack on the moral fibre of the student, which runs the very real risk of preventing students from recognising or conceding that their research, writing and referencing skills need improvement.

What is at issue here is the extent to which the moralising over plagiarism can overlook the complexities of the issue in

such a way that the significant learning problems that contribute to the incidence of plagiarism are sometimes ignored. Once a student is branded a cheat, for instance, his or her every action or comment is thereby opened to cynicism. One example that can be drawn from Zobel and Hamilton’s discussion, which might allow us to recognise the potential for a moral judgement to reduce the act of plagiarism to an act performed by those who know better:

In a typical case, a student [defending themselves against the charge of plagiarism] would argue that since the [computer] programs were required to produce the same output, it followed that they must be identical, down to details such as spelling errors in the documentation – an argument about as sound as insisting that two buildings with the same number of doors and rooms must have the same colour of carpet. (2002, p.28)

To someone working inside the discipline or profession of computer programming it is undoubtedly obvious that different programs designed to produce the same outcome need not be identical. But is it necessarily obvious to someone who is only starting to familiarise him- or herself with the underpinnings of the discipline? Once again this is not to suggest that Zobel and Hamilton are wrong to see the student in question as having plagiarised, since it is hard to imagine, to be sure, how anyone could think that even the spelling errors must be the same. The point is merely to demonstrate how the certitude underpinning charges of plagiarism can lead to a failure to appreciate that plagiarism may have other causes – such as a fundamental misapprehension about the nature of work in the discipline – than the wilful desire to deceive. In this way, moreover, it is possible to see that the approach to plagiarism within the humanities presented here is not necessarily irrelevant beyond the limits of that department.

It’s true: ‘some students cheat’ (Zobel and Hamilton 2002, p.23). But not all plagiarists are cheats. While it would be clearly disingenuous to pretend that no student has ever tried to find a shortcut to a high grade, that doesn’t mean that the complexities of plagiarism can be reduced to its status as a moral problem. Not only is it possible to recognise that many instances of student plagiarism in the humanities (and beyond) may stem from a lack of an ability to conduct research and to cite references properly, but this fact is also a fairly straightforward and, in many ways, widely recognised one. To that extent, there’s no need for plagiarism to be seen always in terms of crime and shame. It is not just a case, however, of distinguishing between ‘accidental’ and ‘deliberate’ acts of plagiarism, and of reserving our moral judgement for the latter. The problem with the moralistic attitude underpinning policies of plagiarism is that such moralism is so institutionalised – and so easily offended – that we are prone to forget the very straightforward and obvious idea that plagiarism constitutes a

learning and communication problem, too. The learning and communication issues bound to the problem of plagiarism are probably far too nuanced to be sufficiently addressed in any one response that problem. Nevertheless it is perhaps only when we see acts of plagiarism as truly shameless – as amoral before they are immoral – that we might be in a position to begin to address that problem in all its complexity. **■**

Notes

1. Both Minson (1993) and especially Hunter (1989; 1993; 1994) are key figures in the study of ethics as praxis. In particular, Hunter's work on schooling and the humanities has done much to reconceive the ethical self as a particular configuration of ethical competencies which are constituted by specific technologies of person formation, such as those deployed by humanistic education. Both Minson and Hunter draw heavily from Weber (1948) and Foucault (1977; 1986; 1991) in formulating their arguments.

2. There are, of course, many different types of essays which may each serve many different functions. Rarely, however, does unit assessment call for an essay that is not written in response to a select body of published arguments. Even at advanced stages of research – for instance, at the level of doctoral research – what is expected is not an original argument detached ('free') from existing research and arguments. Rather, the originality of a research project derives from its contribution as a response to an existing body of writing on the topic.

3. In this paper I'm more concerned with laying the conceptual 'foundations' for approaching plagiarism as a learning and writing problem, rather than with outlining specific pedagogical techniques for overcoming that problem. Still it can be seen from the emphasis on technique and training that the teaching of ethics, as it were, can be facilitated through exercises and activities which closely mirror ethical practice. In other words, teaching practices that promote effective and responsible use of published work – as distinct from mere acknowledgement of that use – may encourage students to recognise themselves as members of an intellectual community, whose role is to contribute to an existing body of knowledge by way of responding to and commenting on arguments and ideas that are themselves circumscribed by specific contexts of investigation. In teaching even a 'key' concept of a discipline, for example, I require students in tutorials to familiarise themselves with that concept firstly by identifying those passages in the set readings that define or use the concept in question, and then by explaining, through interpretation, commentary and exemplification, not the concept as such but rather the selected passage discussing that concept. As a practice, this method of learning concepts not only mirrors the practices of citation and commentary that form the kernel of responsible referencing, but it also underscores the extent to which ideas – even 'key' concepts – depend for their significance upon a specific context of investigation.

4. By the same token, it would be wrong to see such mastery and such professionalism as completely removed from issues of moral consideration, since the ability to creatively synthesize a select body of research on a given issue embodies a number of ethical dimensions.

Not only does such an ability incorporate a respect for procedure and community-sanctioned conventions, but it may also cultivate an intellectual modesty, a kind of ethical self-effacement, which entails a recognition of the limits of one's expertise, insofar as that expertise is informed by a necessarily limited review of a body of ideas.

5. Although the issue of shame and pedagogy is too complex to discuss here, it should be conceded that there is probably a place for a certain form of 'shame' in pedagogy. With regard to the specific question of plagiarism, though, I think it would be helpful to distinguish, if at all possible, between pedagogical and punitive uses of shame. By mentioning the issue of shame in relation to the charge of plagiarism, I'm attempting to demonstrate only that a moralistic attitude, which would expect shame on the part of a 'guilty' student, can often be not simply ineffectual but even counter-productive.

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