

Lessons on Plagiarism: Issues for Teachers and Learners

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While student difficulty with academic referencing is not new, it is apparent that many tertiary students are not skilled in following referencing conventions, are confused about what does and does not constitute plagiarism in the eyes of academics, and are fearful of the consequences. This paper begins by examining the cases of a number of students at an Australian university who have been suspected of academic dishonesty. It examines the students' prior instruction on academic referencing, and their understanding of the plagiarism policy of the university concerned. It also examines the feedback that staff have given the students concerned and how useful that has been from the students' perspectives. While researching this topic, issues relating to how suspected plagiarism cases are handled emerged. This paper is an initial exploration of some of the issues that arise when handling referencing and plagiarism at tertiary institutions, which affect both students and staff.

plagiarism, referencing, plagiarism policy, academic dishonesty, cultural difference

INTRODUCTION

The current climate of heightened sensitivity towards plagiarism in our universities appears to be increasing the anxiety and confusion surrounding the issue. There has been recent discussion of how universities can improve the detection rates of plagiarism, and best deal with students who plagiarise (Zobel and Hamilton, 2003). However, there has been less examination of the students who have breached plagiarism policies because of a lack of understanding about acceptable and unacceptable citation practices, the students' perceptions of plagiarism, their skill in applying referencing techniques and their reactions to being part of a plagiarism investigation at tertiary level. This study is exploratory in nature. It examines the cases of two students who were sent to an academic adviser for assistance and clarification of academic citation conventions. An Academic Rights Officer who is involved with plagiarism investigations provided a third case study as well as insight into the complexity of the issues. Finally, from interviews, academic staff members of a university department also provided other perspectives to this investigation.

An academic adviser's perspective

One aspect of every academic adviser's work is to explain and clarify academic referencing conventions. The author has been told by a number of students of their confusion about referencing and fear of being accused of plagiarism. Many students clearly do not understand the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable use of source material when writing assignments. At the two extremes, some students over-quote but reference correctly, relying so heavily on texts that there is little or no evidence of their own thoughts on the topic, and few of their own words, while others show little understanding of the need to acknowledge sources at all, and attempts at paraphrasing are minimal.

While it is not an academic adviser's role to judge whether students have deliberately presented somebody else's work as their own or not, it is certainly the impression of this author that many students have a very poor grasp of academic referencing conventions and how to apply them. It was also apparent that the students in the case studies to follow were distressed by the investigation into their work and were keen to improve their understanding of referencing and plagiarism, improve their grades, and continue their studies. Why are students going through plagiarism investigation procedures when their problem seems clearly to indicate a lack of knowledge about referencing conventions? What effect does it have on students to be accused of plagiarism if they do not fully understand it and why is it happening?

METHOD

This paper will initially present two case studies: the first, a local undergraduate Humanities students, and the second, an international postgraduate student. Then a third case study, provided by the Academic Rights Officer, (a composite of a number of cases the officer has been involved in), will highlight some of the factors which typically contribute to the complexity of dealing with plagiarism. All of the respondents were interviewed in person, with follow-up clarification on the telephone. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were also conducted with a number of academic staff members, specifically because the school was recommended to the author as an example of a likely model that deals very thoroughly with academic referencing and plagiarism. All the interviews were conducted between July and October 2003. For the sake of anonymity and simplicity of language, all interviewees in this research will remain anonymous and be referred to as 'she'.

Case Study 1: Local Humanities Undergraduate

Student A is a second year, local Humanities undergraduate who had never before been questioned on her referencing. She was unaware of any problem until she received a formal letter from her lecturer (three weeks after submission of her paper) saying that she had breached academic conventions relating to citation, and informing her of the procedures which must ensue, as outlined in the University's Academic Dishonesty Policy; an interview with academic staff, possibly academic counselling, or other steps as deemed necessary. Two months later, Student A received a letter from the Head of Department inviting her to attend an interview in the presence of the lecturer-in-charge of the topic to resolve the issue. According to the Head of Department, it was the opinion of the assessor that the incorrect referencing was not a result of ignorance or misunderstanding of the conventions.

A week after the interview, the Head of Department sent her a letter stating that it was her opinion that the breaches were a result of ignorance and misunderstanding, and offered her the opportunity to resubmit the assignment. The Head also pointed out that the incident would be recorded on a register, which would be referred to if a further incident or accusation occurred in the future.

In Student A's assignment the following types of academic breaches were identified:

- Quotes were used without quotation marks but with accurate citation (4 instances).
- Quotes were used without quotation marks but with reference to the wrong source (18 instances).
- Quotes were taken from a source but not cited (13 instances).
- Paraphrasing was used, but without reference.
- Items were missing from the reference list.

Having been given an opportunity to resubmit, the student came to see an academic adviser to ensure that her new version met the requirements. This time, she overcompensated by referencing both within and at the end of the same sentences. Other errors suggested that this student did not pay much attention to detail when proofreading, and either did not recognise simple errors or did not proofread at all.

Of the whole process, Student A said,

It's so scary. I thought I was going to be kicked out. My tutor told me I wouldn't get kicked out, the worst that would happen would be that I'd fail the topic but I was still scared.

Despite the fact that expulsion is very unlikely in such a case, the fact that the policy states that expulsion is a possible outcome means that students may suffer severe distress as they await to hear the results of their investigation, fearing that their academic career (and plans for their future) may come to a shameful halt.

Case Study 2: International Student in Health Sciences

Student B is an international student of Asian descent in the Health Sciences. She submitted an assignment and waited for her lecturer to return it. She realised that some of her fellow students had had their assignments returned, others had not. The lecturer had said that she 'was busy'. After two months of waiting, Student B went to the lecturer's office and saw her assignment on her desk, marked 'F-plagiarism'. The lecturer then explained the referencing problems, showed Student B the University's policy on plagiarism, read part of it to her and gave her the opportunity to resubmit the paper, which she did, after seeking assistance on referencing from an academic adviser.

Student B had commenced her course a few weeks later than her fellow students and had missed out on background information about the course. She had not had any previous problems with referencing in her home country and had not realised that there were different referencing requirements in Australia. Student B said that each of her lecturers had mentioned referencing and had shown the students where to get information on it. They had not shown examples of correct practice, nor had they explained how to paraphrase. Plagiarism had been mentioned as a 'big issue' in Australian universities. Student B said she had looked briefly at the university's Academic Dishonesty Policy but had thought that she had understood what was required as she had not had any problem meeting the referencing requirements in her previous course in her home country, where (according to her) students were not required to cite sources in-text, but only supply a bibliography.

In nursing in [country withheld], the professor knows the information comes from other text books, just at the end of our paper, we make our reference list. We don't use in-text referencing...In my university's case, ... nursing should be based on text books. Nursing is a very scientific area, so we should use books from the library. This nursing course is more academic and cautious. [Our country] is more practical.

Student B's main complaint about the handling of her case was the amount of stress and extra work that the delay caused her.

I'm not upset by my mark, I'm upset by my late response. [If it had been earlier] I might have done my other assignments better. At that time I was doing another subject with the same lecturer – the problem happened with my other assignment too. I did every assignment twice...I had to do assignments all of my holidays.

Student B had to resubmit a total of five assignments due to lack of in-text referencing because her lecturer did not return her assignment promptly, nor alert her of the problems with referencing. Meanwhile, she had submitted four other assignments. Student B now understands what is expected of her regarding academic citation and believes that certain measures could be taken to help overseas students particularly

...a special lecture, compulsory for overseas students [on referencing and plagiarism]...I think there should be a time limit for lecturers to return work...students have a duty for submission, so should lecturers.

Case Study 3: Local Student from Non-English Background

Student C, a local student from a non-English speaking background was completing the final semester of her study for her undergraduate degree. At the same time, she was experiencing some very serious difficulties in her personal life. She was also in part-time employment. Student C received a letter from her lecturer to discuss an apparent breach of the university's Academic Dishonesty Policy. Student C sent a number of emails and calls to contact the lecturer but did not receive a reply so she waited, unsure of what to do next, getting increasingly stressed.

After one month of waiting, the student contacted the Academic Rights Officer, who discovered that the lecturer had experienced a personal tragedy, and had taken sudden leave, and that in the rush to reschedule lectures, delegate marking and so on, the plagiarism matter had been overlooked. The Head of Department was most apologetic, once aware of the oversight. A fortnight later, the lecturer was back at work. The Academic Dishonesty case was referred to the Head of Department as the lecturer was satisfied that:

the plagiarism (a paragraph that was indented but not referenced and was directly from a website) was a deliberate attempt to mislead the School...The meeting with the Head of School was difficult because the student felt under siege and was in an extremely distressed state as a result of the weeks of waiting, the nature of the allegations and the difficulties they were experiencing at home (Academic Rights Officer).

Perspectives of Academic Staff

The information gathered from interviews with academic staff offered new insights into the complexity of plagiarism issues. It also showed that while some authors (Briggs, 2003) see referencing as a skill that must be explicitly taught and learnt, some disciplines see it as an integral part of the profession itself. Therefore, how an Academic Dishonesty Policy is interpreted and carried out within a university may vary from department to department and from one staff member to another.

Professionalism

For some departments, academic honesty is strongly linked to the concept of professionalism. For example, law professionals are expected to be honest and to respect and uphold legal principles and policies. Law graduates are asked about their record of academic honesty before being admitted to the bar (their professional body). For this reason, some academic staff members go to considerable lengths to teach students to reference appropriately, with referencing exercises and discussions on plagiarism and the university's policy on plagiarism being incorporated into first year units so that no student can claim to be ignorant of the concepts. The university department has designated staff members whose responsibility it is to deal with suspected incidents of plagiarism that may arise. Staff members are aware of the plagiarism procedures and are required to register all instances of suspected plagiarism. Despite the above measures, there have still been

students within this department who have claimed they did not understand how to reference appropriately or understand what was regarded as plagiarism. One staff member said:

It really has been taught pretty thoroughly. ...It's hard ...to see how students could have good reason to say they don't know what plagiarism is or how it works, because if they don't understand then they are urged to ask to check with staff, and quite often, students do. (Lecturer D)

Interestingly, this lecturer expressed concern that she did not pick up as many cases of plagiarism as some other lecturers did.

There are some people it seems, who are better at picking up plagiarism than others...If people haven't referenced properly of course, I do think it is important. On the other hand, I'm more intent on picking up the content...I think also if you have a very good memory it might help. I feel a bit defensive ...picking up plagiarism is not one of my strong points, and if a student had me they might get to second year without [being pulled up]...I would hate to think that some students went on to plagiarise later [and I hadn't picked them up]. (Lecturer D)

Another lecturer reported that on occasions when she has found that students had taken shortcuts and deliberately plagiarised in the haste to finish assignments on time, her approach had been to tell them that they had now learnt something about themselves, that is, that under pressure they behave dishonestly, and that this may well be carried into their professional practice. She hopes that this will encourage students to consider seriously their actions and the possible implications for their futures (Lecturer F).

In other programs, the sense of professionalism may not exist to the same degree. Staff and students may not see upholding principles of academic honesty as being as critical to the students' future. McCabe, for example, suggests that business students are more likely to cheat than those in art or history courses. In the business culture, he says, "It's not how you achieve the result – it's whether you get the result" (Richardson, 2003, p.9). The consequences of taking risks in using someone else's work without appropriate acknowledgment may not seem so dire. Similarly, the need to teach about referencing conventions and to set out clear procedures in schools for dealing with it may not seem equally important across disciplines.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE THREE CASE STUDIES

The following issues arise from the three case studies.

1. How could Student A reach second year before being questioned on her referencing techniques when her work exhibited more than 35 breaches of citation conventions, and she said this particular piece of work was of her usual standard?
2. Student A said that referencing had been mentioned by several of her lecturers in the past but that none had explained it at length to give her the understanding that she now knew she was expected to have.
3. How can one lecturer view the work and decide that the plagiarism was deliberate, and yet another decided that it was a result of a misunderstanding?
4. Student B made the same breaches in four more assignments because she was not made aware of the first breach until after submitting four other assignments, making her to resubmit a total of five assignments (justice delayed amounting to justice denied).
5. Student B commenced her course a few weeks late and did not receive all the necessary information given to other students.

6. Student B was referred to the university's Academic Dishonesty Policy and information on referencing but nobody spent time explaining the content in detail to her.
7. Student B had different referencing requirements in the same program from her home country and had assumed that the requirements were the same in the same in Australia.
8. The time taken to resolve cases was unduly long.
 - a. Student A waited two months after being notified of the breach by her lecturer before being interviewed by the Head of Department.
 - b. Student B's lecturer failed to notify her of any problem with her referencing, and did not return her assignment. After waiting two months for her assignment, Student B finally approached her lecturer.
 - c. Student C's case took five to six weeks to resolve because it was overlooked when her lecturer had to take sudden and unexpected leave.
9. Students may not be aware of services provided by an Academic Rights Officer or may not feel comfortable in asserting their rights as students (for example, to get assignments returned to them in a reasonable time).
10. All students talked of the stress caused by waiting to find out what was going to happen next, while Student B spent her holidays re-doing her assignments.
11. The university's Academic Dishonesty Policy allows for two possible findings concerning plagiarism.
 - a. That plagiarism is a direct result of a deliberate attempt by a student to mislead (commonly referred to as a **deliberate** finding).
 - b. That plagiarism is a direct result of the student not understanding academic conventions when it comes to referencing (commonly referred to as a **misunderstanding of academic conventions** finding).
12. There is no allowance in the Policy for a finding of understanding the citation conventions or making an oversight due to stress, haste or lack of due care, as was the case of Student C.
13. Cases are handled differently by different staff.
 - a. Student A had many breaches and was found to have deliberately plagiarised by her lecturer, and then it was found by the Head of School that the breaches were a result of misunderstanding.
 - b. Student B had many breaches but it was handled (not very promptly) at the lecturer level.
 - c. Student C clearly demonstrated that she knew how to reference but had omitted to give one citation and the matter was (eventually) referred to the Head of Department, who found that the Policy did not really cater for an oversight due to stress, and decided that of the two options, a misunderstanding of academic conventions was better of the two options for this case.

A Moral or an Educational Issue?

Whether staff see plagiarism as a deliberate immoral act or are willing to consider that inaccurate or poor citation practices may simply be evidence of a lack of understanding of citation techniques or inexperience in negotiating a position in a discourse community (Rose, 1996) is likely to affect how sympathetic they are to the students who breach policy. It would appear that academic staff often assume that it is enough to direct students to where the university's Academic Dishonesty

Policy can be found, and to where referencing information is located, rather than take the time to explain, elaborate, give examples, and provide practice in using source material, selecting quotes, or paraphrasing.

It is often then presumed by staff that students have read the university's Academic Dishonesty Policy, have understood what plagiarism is (as defined in the policy), and fully understood the purpose and techniques of academic referencing (as practiced in Australia). Therefore, it is also assumed that any students who have not referenced correctly have made a deliberate attempt to pass off someone else's work as their own. Furthermore, to complicate matters, many referencing guides simply do not provide enough information or examples to help students to make, as Rose (1996, p.35) states,

...informed choices about when, where and how to refer to which existing literature in any field of study; they also, in their attempts to be comprehensive, are limited to offering only the most generalised advice.

The matter is often further complicated when staff do not offer good modelling of referencing in their handbooks. When students are not sure what is expected of them, they are often told to refer back to their unit handbooks for guidance. However, it is not uncommon to see inconsistent referencing styles in reading lists and other work put together by staff. If, as staff members we do not pay attention to referencing details ourselves, how can we penalise students for doing the same?

Staff members "often make assumptions about students' pre-existing referencing and other skills when students do not have them or have never had the opportunity to acquire them" (Mackinnon and Manathunga 2002, p.141). It would be reasonable to assume that, for example, many mature age entry students who have been working for a long time and have been out of school environment for most of their adult life would have little knowledge of academic citation practices when they write their first assignments. Many international students come from cultures where using published authors' works is a sign of respect and there is a high degree of shared knowledge (Matalene, 1985, cited in Chanock, 2003, p.24). Student B faced problems because in her previous course, it was assumed that all information came from textbooks, and as long as the information was correct and she included a bibliography that was sufficient to satisfy her lecturers. It is not safe to assume that students magically gain an understanding of academic writing conventions when they take on the identity of a student at an Australian university. Steps must be taken to teach all students, including those most likely to fall through the gaps, such as those arriving a few weeks late, those coming in the second or third year of their courses, and so on of the expectations of university writing and citation guidelines.

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. (Briggs, 2003, pp.22-23)

It should be pointed out that some academic staff members are obviously more sympathetic than others. For example, one staff member interviewed did not see first year students inadvertently breaching the university's policy on plagiarism as an issue. She saw counselling of such students as part of the educative process. For this staff member, the recording of the counselling of students was evidence of plagiarism procedures having been followed, so that staff members knew what had occurred and how it was dealt with, in case there was a future breach involving the same student (Lecturer F). However, some Heads of Department demand that all cases must be handled by them and one is cited as deliberately frightening students as a technique to stop them from doing it again, knowing that she does not intend to take the matter further (Academic Rights Officer).

We should bear in mind that recognising that appropriate referencing is a writing technique that is learned has implications for the university's responsibility to teach that technique, if the expectation is that all students will demonstrate that skill. The most effective way to ensure that all students receive instruction on these skills is to incorporate them into the pedagogical program (Briggs, 2003, p.22). Care should be taken to ensure that students who commence late or students who arrive to complete only a part of their program in Australia do not get overlooked.

Time and workload issues

Another identified factor which may account for how different lecturers deal with suspected plagiarism is the time and amount of work involved in chasing up original sources and checking students' work against the original works if they choose to adhere strictly to procedures outlined in the university's policy. Plagiarism cases tend to occur most, at times of peak pressure, when students are struggling to finish work before due dates, and lecturers are deluged with setting examination questions, marking and finalising grades. Where plagiarism procedures are clear, the whole procedure takes a matter of a few weeks. However, the most time-consuming part falls on the lecturer, who must trace the original works used by the student to determine if there is a problem with plagiarism or not. When staff are under pressure to mark large numbers of assignments, it would be easy to understand why some may choose either to ignore a minor breach or to simply deal with it individually without following strict procedure, rather than spend a week or so chasing up original sources for just one assignment (Lecturer F). Others, according to the Academic Rights Officer, prefer to pass a suspected breach of plagiarism case to their Head of Department for more formal resolution, and not risk being involved in a university scandal focusing on the mishandling of plagiarism, which may receive much media attention and which could cost them their careers.

Student reactions and their implications for staff

Many students react quite strongly to the suggestion that they have plagiarised. According to Lecturer F, some students are very angry, many are embarrassed, most deny having plagiarised, and there are many in tears.

These students are usually under great pressure. We have standards to maintain, and in that context, we try to (be) as fair and as open as possible, in terms of a supportive environment. (Lecturer F)

However, it was also suggested that in some cases, staff members who report incidences of suspected plagiarism have suffered from students subsequently giving negative feedback, affecting staff evaluations, critical to furthering an academic career.

Student attitudes towards plagiarism

It must also be appreciated that explaining the importance of appropriate referencing techniques in Australian tertiary institutions, taking time to demonstrate and giving practice exercises are not always easy, even for those staff who are dedicated to doing so. It has been the author's experience that in communication skills programs in some professional fields in which students do not generally perceive writing or communication as an important component of their future career, students tend to see the topic as boring, tedious and irrelevant. Some students switch off almost as soon as the topic is introduced.

It can also be difficult for lecturers to convey to students how seriously Australian tertiary institutions take academic dishonesty. Williams (2002, p.2) talks of the difficulty of discussing plagiarism with students in the first session with a new class.

One minute you are the caring, dedicated, nurturing teacher, the next it is the firing squad at dawn, metaphorically, if they fall foul of School policy on plagiarism.

It would be simplistic, then, to simply blame all academic staff for not taking enough time to explain the importance giving to referencing and academic honesty. Students must also be willing listeners.

CONCLUSION

In the opinion of the author, it is not reasonable for a university to punish students for breaches of a plagiarism policy if the skills required for understanding that policy have not been taught explicitly to all students, and the students provided with the opportunity to practise those skills and have them evaluated and commented upon by academic staff. It is also important for university staff to distinguish between breaches of the Academic Dishonesty Policy that are a deliberate attempt to use another person's work and to pass it off as one's own, and breaches which are a result of students' misunderstanding of citation practices and their inexperience as academic writers. Plagiarism policies need to allow for a range of reasons for breaches of policy, and to be equitable; there must be uniformity in how cases are dealt with across the university. In order to achieve this, universities must provide training for academic staff and teach students thoroughly about referencing and plagiarism as well as utilise staff within the university, such as academic advisers, who are already experienced in this area. Key staff should be identified in each university department to whom all breaches of policy can be referred so that a more uniform approach is taken. Trained staff are needed in each School who understand that academic citation practice is neither 'natural' nor 'universal' but something that must be taught and practised, and which may require a considerable shift in thinking about respect and authorship.

Staff members have an obligation to deal with cases within a reasonable time to reduce unnecessary stress on students while they await their fate. In order to reduce the considerable workload on academic staff in chasing up original works, students could be required to keep copies of their information sources until their work has been marked and returned, by which time any suspected plagiarism would have been identified, and staff could request to see cited works if required for checking.

Overall, this exploratory study has revealed how complex the issue of plagiarism is at universities. It also shows that funding must be set aside to plan and implement strategies that will address the problem in a more uniform manner across disciplines within universities, with the recognition that some plagiarism is deliberate but that much of it is done inadvertently through misunderstanding academic citation practices. We do not need to brand students as criminals when they have not fully understood the law. As has been discovered from this research, plagiarism is a very complex issue and has to be tackled on many fronts. There is clearly need for further research. The issues treated in this research are merely the tip of the iceberg.

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