Assessment Matters: Academic Integrity

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INTRODUCTION

Internationally, researchers report a widespread increase in student plagiarism (Emerson, Rees & Mackay, 2005). Ease of copying from internet sources is an important element in this increase, but there are numerous contributory factors. While acknowledging that there are instances of deliberate plagiarism, our concern here is to look at the ways in which teachers can help students to develop appropriate referencing habits and promote a culture of academic integrity. McGowan (2005) suggests that we need to revise our own usage of the word “integrity” emphasizing its etymological derivation from “integer” and argues that teachers need to think of education around integrity as part of the essential integration of students into academic life, and therefore as something that requires a deliberate and purposeful induction (p.3). Emerson, Rees and Mackay (2005) argue that a “deterrent system” will not help those who neither understand the underlying principles for referencing nor have developed the competencies to navigate its practices (p.2). In both respects major educational work is needed.

Studies suggest that no single strategy will minimize plagiarism, but that there are a number of elements that need to work together towards achieving this goal. Dunn, Morgan and O’Reilly (2004) suggest that staff and students need a clear knowledge of institutional and faculty plagiarism policy, that students need practical and personally meaningful education about plagiarism and appropriate referencing, and teachers need to consider designing assessment tasks and processes that minimise the possibilities for plagiarism. Finally, there needs to be efficient ways of detecting plagiarism. The focus is on the educational strategies that teachers can employ.
In educating students about plagiarism, written explanations do not seem to be enough. McGowan (2005) observes that plagiarism advice, frequently couched in punitive language, is often embedded in the mass of information thrown at students in the first few weeks. Students may not read written guidelines and there is the inevitable gap between instructions and practical application. Academics forget that tasks such as integrating or synthesizing ideas are not straightforward for students and even the seemingly innocent injunction to “put ideas into your own words” is fraught with hazards for the novice learner who is still trying to manage generic and discipline-specific academic language. Additionally, many students are grappling with academic complexity when English is not a first language. Equally baffling for many learners is the importance of one’s own work alongside paeans to the benefits of collaboration.

Consequently, students need practical exercises and hands-on sessions to learn appropriate referencing and citation of sources, methods of integrating source material into a discussion, ways of distinguishing paraphrasing from plagiarism and collusion from collaboration. Ryan (2000), quotes the case of a lecturer from Oxford Brookes University who works with the students on plagiarism in the following way:

I begin by discussing with the students why we need a good range of vocabulary when paraphrasing. We then discuss what kinds of things we should always keep and not substitute, so that plagiarism is avoided. I then get the students to write down in their own words a definition for plagiarism, and then a definition for syndication. Definitions are then compared, and on an OHP, with feedback from me, we produce a satisfactory negotiated definition of these terms.

During the session, the students have 8 questions to consider in guiding this work:

1. What do you understand by the term plagiarism?
2. What do you understand by the term syndication?
3. If you want to copy the exact words from another writer into writing, how do you avoid plagiarism?
4. If you change the words you have read, by paraphrasing the ideas of another writer, how do you avoid plagiarism?
5. How much should you use acknowledged quotes from other writers in your writing?
6. What else do you need to do in your writing if you are going to introduce the ideas of another writer through paraphrase?
7. Why is it very important to make an accurate bibliography in your writing?
8. How can you let the reader know, directly or indirectly, whether you agree or not with another writer’s ideas when you quote them? (2000, p.56)
These questions invite the students to engage in detail with some of the basic elements of appropriate referencing.

Another strategy is to show students a range of writing samples and get them to identify different kinds of plagiarism such as cutting and pasting from the internet or books, paraphrasing without acknowledgement, and interweaving words from a source with the writer’s own words. Students can then be asked to rewrite the relevant sections in ways that avoid plagiarism. McGowan (2005) also argues that students need to be allowed to practise and experiment and make mistakes with referencing and citation in a formative way before they are faced with the possibility of punishment. This learning period allows students to deepen their insight into the principles of academic integrity and develop the required skills and competencies in a safe context.

Just as important as the practical application is the process of helping students to understand the principles underpinning the insistence on academic integrity. It is not enough to tell students once why it is important but the ideas need to be discussed regularly and returned to often. Course booklets may do well to include an explanation of the reasons for our (apparently pernickety) insistence on academic conventions. McGowan (2005) cites a section from the University of Melbourne’s website on assessment which very simply outlines the reasons for appropriate academic referencing:

One of the central purposes of Australian higher education is to produce graduates who are independent thinkers, able to critically analyse information and ideas. This means that during your time at university in Australia you will be asked not just to become familiar with the ideas of scholars and experts but to examine these ideas closely and to decide how much or how little you agree with them. You will learn to form opinions about ideas and to communicate these opinions verbally and in writing. These opinions must be based on evidence and one common source of evidence is the ideas of others. You are likely to find yourself using the ideas of one scholar to analyse and perhaps criticise the ideas of another. This is considered excellent scholarly practice in Australia.

There are two reasons, then, why Australian University students are expected to acknowledge the source or origin of the words of scholars they use in their assessment tasks. The first is that you need to let readers know where you found your ideas so that they can check to see they are reliable and valid ideas for the point you are making.

Secondly, you need to make it clear which ideas are yours and which are those of others.

In a study that should be of relevance to our own context, Emerson et al. describe an education programme around plagiarism that accompanied the introduction of Turnitin in a particular paper at Massey University in which they talk of “providing the educational scaffold” for appropriate referencing (p.3).

A SUMMARY OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IS OUTLINED HERE

Context

The educational programme described below was integrated into the course curriculum and pedagogy, and a single assignment for each student was submitted through Turnitin. The assignment, a report (1200-1500 words) on a topical issue related to science and ethics, conformed broadly to the pedagogical principles outlined by Carroll and Appleton (2001) for deterring plagiarism. It required students to relate the issues discussed in the assignment both to a local, New Zealand context, and to the specific material on ethics taught within the course.

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The following education programme for Part 1 of the project was conducted two weeks before the assignment was due:

1. A 50 minute lecture in the main lecture time on using secondary sources in general and APA referencing in particular. Part of the lecture included a definition of plagiarism, reasons why it was ethically unacceptable, and how to integrate sources into a text. Ten minutes of the lecture were spent discussing and illustrating the differences between quotation and paraphrasing, and methods of effective paraphrase.

2. That same week, students spent a compulsory two-hour tutorial working on APA referencing. This included interactive exercises that were designed to illustrate the differences between paraphrasing and quoting. During this week tutors talked the students through the purposes of the project and answered any queries or concerns.

3. The following week students engaged in a guided peer review exercise on the assignment, with directed questions and discussion focused on each student’s use of sources.

4. Students also had available to them a 10-page chapter in the study guide on integrating sources and using APA referencing.

The detection device employed was Turnitin, a system for detecting electronic copying. We also used Turnitin as a data collection tool, for the purposes of identifying and categorising plagiarism problems.

DESIGN OF ASSESSMENT TASKS

• The most important theme here is the need to require evidence of ongoing individual engagement with the assessment task.

• Try to modify assessment tasks each year so that students cannot copy the work of previous students.

• Set sub-tasks that require students to show their process steps on assessment tasks and indicate individual findings, for example, drawing up an annotated bibliography, marshalling the evidence for and against a position.

• Be careful not to overburden students with assessment as this may put them under pressure to plagiarise.

• Break up assessment tasks into steps.

• Try to include some oral components to assessment tasks.

• Avoid surface tasks requiring little more than reproduction of material.

• Include a meaningful individual component to group work.

TIPS: REDUCING PLAGIARISM THROUGH ASSESSMENT DESIGN

Opportunities for students to plagiarise can be reduced by designing assessments that cannot be fulfilled by the incorporation of plagiarised content or work produced by another student. Whilst the redesign of existing assessment may initially seem an onerous task, the benefits for both students and lecturers will be realised not only in reduced instances of plagiarism but also in other areas of academic and student practices.

When redesigning assessments the following should be taken into account:

Assess the process - asking students to submit work-in-progress reports, review notes, drafts or revisions are all strategies that will help students to manage their time more effectively and avoid any last minute panics that might lead to plagiarism.

Personalise the assessment - adding context to an assignment by inviting students to draw on their own experience, to select a personally relevant research topic within a theme, or specific framework will encourage original work.

Harness the research process - requiring students to provide written reviews or photocopied extracts of the sources used “is helpful in showing students what plagiarism means and how to use sources properly.” (Brown & McDowell, revd Duggan 2003)

Emphasise the value of analysis - designing assessments that move beyond asking students to find the 'right answer' to requiring them to analyse, evaluate and synthesise the work of others.
Create a supportive environment - using formative assessment tasks to provide regular feedback and helping students understand that learning from their mistakes is a valuable part of their academic experience.

Discourage the use of pre-written assignments - changing elements of the assessment task each year or specifying particular types of resources that must be included in the analysis reduce the possibility of submission of a paper.
REFERENCES


Make a space at your place for teaching.