

Thinking about plagiarism: ethical dilemmas of the Internet era

Food for Thought

I do not have a formal presentation as such, but I have been given 5 minutes in which to draw together some of the points made by the other speakers to encourage discussion in the open forum that follows. As an academic developer I will try to look at the themes of preventing plagiarism from the standpoint of academic staff.

Jude Carroll, who has been working in this area for Oxford Brookes University in the UK, has an exercise in her workshops which helps us think about these issues from the lecturer's perspective. She asks us to consider an academic who has taken home 30 essays to mark. They have decided to work from home in order to minimise interruptions but their peace is shattered when, after marking the first dozen or so papers, they find a paper that they are pretty sure is not the student's own work. Carroll's question is not "what would you do in this situation?" but, "what prevents the academic from acting? What would make the academic take this further rather than just write "ref" in the margin

Each of today's speakers, it seemed to me, was trying to answer this question from their own perspective. What is preventing us from acting on plagiarism? How most people answer this question can be summarised by two responses.

The first response is that there is a lack of confidence in the willingness of the institution to support academics who pursue plagiarism. That is, academics are unsure of the university's policies, how appeals committees work and how to present a convincing case that justifies the amount of time that it takes to pursue plagiarism. Interestingly, in today's presentations, this was an issue that was highlighted by the students' representative rather than the lecturers. Students want a system that deals with student cheating that is consistent across the university. However, Rebecca also argued that this system needs to be fair and not penalise students for poor writing or a lack of awareness of the academic conventions. Students want a university that educates them, not one that tries to catch them out.

The second response to the question is the approach taken by the majority of our speakers today. Many academics are unlikely to act because they see it as not fair to penalise students who may not have been taught appropriate academic writing skills. Alistair Pennycook summed up this view in the concept of students learning to write “in their own words”. Many of our speakers explored what it means to be original as an academic writer, particularly in the face of new technologies such as the computer and the Internet. Dale described our students as members of the ‘copying generation’ and Joyce explored the implications for authorship by asking us to consider aspects of institutional plagiarism.

In looking at what the difficulties in developing as student writers means for lecturers, I’d like to reinforce something that Dale Spender said. She argued that the way forward in preventing plagiarism is through redesigning student assessments. The easiest change a lecturer can make to influence the student attitude to plagiarism is not through a new technology but in how we assess our students. Research shows us that plagiarism can be prevented through simple things like varying the assignments each year, having multiple assessment tasks and reviewing draft material. As Dale described it, by making assessment more integrated and authentic so that it tests higher-order skills, such as problem-solving and applying knowledge to the workplace, encourages students to take a more creative approach to their assignments and, as a result, it is unlikely that there will be a preexisting answer they can use to meet the assessment requirements of the subject.

Each of our speakers today declined to define plagiarism, with some suggesting that it is not a helpful concept for dealing with student writing. They all described plagiarism as either fuzzy or messy or difficult to quantify. If it is difficult for academics to describe the conventions required in academic writing clearly, it can be little wonder that student have similar difficulties when it comes to producing their assignments.

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