Reducing the incidence of plagiarism in an undergraduate course: The role of education

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Reducing the incidence of plagiarism in an undergraduate course: The role of education

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Edith Cowan University

Plagiarism by students is an increasing problem at higher education institutions. However, the development of academic misconduct policies has done little to reduce the incidence of plagiarism as many incidents result from ignorance and poor skill development rather than intentional misconduct. Our purpose in embarking on this research project was twofold: first, to investigate student perceptions of plagiarism and its avoidance, and second, to develop learning materials that would educate students to be better able to avoid plagiarism in their work. The study consisted of two phases. Phase one consisted of four focus groups with undergraduate psychology students in order to determine their understanding of plagiarism, difficulties with avoiding plagiarism, and the process of learning to write without plagiarising. Phase two concerned the development and evaluation of learning materials, which consisted of three tutorials and a 'tip sheet'. The learning materials are flexible to different disciplines and learning modes, require minimal changes to units and assessment, and need little ongoing staff commitment. Thus, the proposed learning materials have a number of advantages over alternate methods of plagiarism reduction.

Introduction

Often referred to as cheating, copying, and falsification, plagiarism operates across all levels of academic communities (Carroll, 2004; Decoo, 2002) and is the most common form of serious academic misconduct. For instance, a recent North American study revealed that over 50% of both male and female university students reported involvement in some form of academic cheating (McCabe, 2004). Plagiarism and its detection are taken seriously within universities, and have become major topics of discussion within the academic community over the last 20 years (Decoo, 2002).

Forms of plagiarism engaged in by students include copying some or all of other students' assignments, cutting and pasting from other academic sources (ie, journal articles) and downloading assignments from the Internet without adequately acknowledging the source (Decoo, 2002; McCabe, 2004). In fact, one study demonstrated that more that half the undergraduate students in the United Kingdom reported that plagiarising

the Internet was acceptable (Szabo & Underwood, 2004). According to students, reasons behind plagiarism include the ever increasing competitiveness and pressures to achieve high marks, the knowledge that other students are 'getting away' with cheating, and considering plagiarism to be justified especially when written assignments do not change from year to year and obtaining other people's work is easy (McCabe, 2004). Students also report that there is not enough time to do everything they need to do so they perceive cheating to be necessary (McCabe, 2004). Research has demonstrated that incidents of plagiarism are related to a number of factors including personality characteristics of the student (eg, age, year level, Internet proficiency, morality, anxiety concerning marks and/or getting caught for plagiarising, procrastination) and academic discipline of study (Ashworth, Freewood, & Macdonald, 2003; Roig & DeTommaso, 1995; Underwood & Szabo, 2003).

Students' understanding of plagiarism is further complicated by their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, international students often have different cultural understandings concerning the sharing of knowledge, which can further complicate the transition to studying at an overseas university (Carroll, 2004; Chanock, 2004; Cohen, 2004; Croxford, 2001). Plagiarism is understood to be a concept that belongs to western culture and some students may never have heard of the concept in their own country (Chanock, 2004). In addition, international students from non-English speaking backgrounds often lack confidence in their ability to reproduce English in their own words and find the concept of referencing and paraphrasing confusing (Cohen, 2004). Thus, institutions need to develop preventative policies that are transparent and consistent (Park, 2003) and students and staff need opportunities to openly discuss, practice, evaluate, and become clear regarding their institution's policies on the definition, avoidance, and detection of plagiarism (Carroll, 2004).

Many universities do not implement adequate safeguards to eliminate or minimise situations related to plagiarism (Carroll 2004; McCabe 2004). Although students are often informed of plagiarism and its consequences according to the university's policy, plagiarism continues (Carroll, 2004; Decoo, 2002). Many students have difficulty defining their own ideas and differentiating between common knowledge and information that needs to be referenced (Carroll, 2004) and often the message received from faculty staff regarding plagiarism and its avoidance is inconsistent and ambiguous at best (McCabe, 2004). The lack of consensus between academic staff concerning definitions and forms of plagiarism has been identified in a number of studies (eg, Marcoux, 2002; Roig, 2001). In addition, the presence of a university policy regarding academic misconduct does little to minimise inconsistencies between staff. For example, academic staff members report a lack of familiarity with

academic misconduct policies and procedures and are not trained in the use of university policy regarding academic misconduct, or in its identification. Further, Burke (1997) surveyed academic staff and reported that more than half regularly chose to deal with incidents of plagiarism without referring to university policy. The inconsistency and ambiguity concerning plagiarism can leave students confused, afraid, and inhibited in their academic writing (Carroll, 2004).

Recent research has investigated the notion that, over time, students develop skills in order to avoid plagiarism. One study demonstrated that almost half of the students tested misidentified plagiarism in passages, largely because of misunderstandings concerning plagiarism and correct paraphrasing (Roig, 1997). Thus, many incidents of plagiarism are likely to result from ignorance and poor skill development rather than intentional cheating. Landau, Druen, and Arcuri (2002) tested methods of skill development in order to develop teaching methods that would decrease the incidence of plagiarism. Students were assigned to one of four groups. Students either received feedback on their assessments, or were provided with examples of plagiarism, or were provided with both feedback and examples, or received no instruction (control group). All students were then tested on their knowledge of plagiarism and completed a paraphrasing exercise. Students in the three experimental conductions performed better than the control group in their ability to identify incidence of plagiarism and those in the two groups exposed to examples exhibited reductions in the incidence of plagiarism.

At Edith Cowan University, the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences introduced an academic misconduct policy in 2003. This policy was introduced to ensure that students understood that plagiarism was taken seriously within the university and to clearly set out to students the procedures undertaken by the administration when students were caught plagiarising. To this end, an excerpt of the policy is appended to all unit outlines. However, the Faculty realised that the existence of a policy was not sufficient in and of itself to eliminate plagiarism. Further, it was thought that some students were being punished for plagiarism when their plagiarism resulted from ignorance rather than purposive misconduct. As a result, in September 2003, the Faculty's Curriculum Teaching and Learning Committee stated that Schools within the university are responsible for ensuring students are adequately informed about plagiarism and its avoidance, the process of determining academic misconduct, and the penalties issued.

In light of the Faculty's academic misconduct policy, we aimed to clarify students' understandings of plagiarism and assist them in their efforts to avoid it in their assignment writing. To achieve this aim, we investigated undergraduate psychology students' understandings of plagiarism and

constructed tutorial exercises to develop students' ability to identify plagiarism, identify study practices that lead to plagiarism, and develop practices to guard against plagiarism. These tutorial exercises developed during the project were then embedded and evaluated in the unit *PSY1101 Introduction to Psychology.*

PSY1101 is the first psychology unit students embark on if they are studying Psychology as a major, minor, or elective. As a result, enrolments for the unit are large. In the first semester of every year, over 400 students are enrolled in the unit on campus and over 100 students enrol in the print-based external mode. In the second semester of the year, enrolments usually exceed 70 students.

In addition to the usual trials and tribulations experienced by students making the transition to academic writing, students report that writing for psychology is especially difficult because of the particular style required, which often differs to that required of other Schools and Faculties. In the first semester of 2003, seven students enrolled in psychology units were reported to the Faculty for plagiarism, and four of the incidents occurred in PSY1101. However, the system of reporting cases of plagiarism to the Faculty was new and anecdotal evidence from lecturers, tutors, and our own experience suggests plagiarism is common in the unit. Further, anecdotal and recorded evidence suggests that plagiarism continues to be identified in second and third year assignments.

Method

The study consisted of two phases. Phase one comprised four focus groups with 13 undergraduate psychology students. First, second, and third year students were represented in the focus groups, and one focus group consisted entirely of international students. The majority of students were women and fulltime, although men and part-time students participated. The students were asked a series of questions to determine their understandings of plagiarism, the difficulties they have with avoiding plagiarism, and how they have learned to write without plagiarising. Example questions included: Define plagiarism for me? What are some examples of plagiarism? What difficulties do you have in trying to write to avoid plagiarising? How do you take notes to avoid plagiarism? How do you reference to avoid plagiarism? What have you learned/what do you know now about writing to avoid plagiarism that you wish you known in *Introduction to Psychology?*

The focus groups continued until data saturation. Phase two concerned the development of learning materials (discussed in further detail below).

The materials developed were evaluated with undergraduate psychology students, some of whom had participated in Phase one. Much like the focus groups in Phase one, the number of sessions was determined by the data. Phase two culminated in the incorporation of the student feedback in to the design of the learning materials, ensuring their applicability to the student cohort. In addition, the learning materials were then evaluated by canvassing for feedback from the unit coordinator, tutors, and the Faculty Learning Adviser.

Results

Phase one: Students' understandings of plagiarism

Defining plagiarism

On the whole, the students had a clear understanding of the main concept of plagiarism. One defined it as "... taking of somebody's intellectual thoughts and putting them in your own work where you haven't acknowledged them at all as coming from somewhere else and passing them off as yours". The students clearly understood plagiarism as using large sections of other people's work, either from books, journal articles, other assignments and so on, without referencing the source. It is "... like a cut and paste, an unacknowledged cut and paste".

While the primary concept of plagiarism was clearly understood, students expressed a lack of understanding concerning the subtleties of plagiarism. For example, first and second year students often defined paraphrasing as making small changes to the order of words in the original text, and spoke of deciding on the number of words from the original text that can be copied before the need to reference. One first year student stated, "Yes that's right, you remove some words and use others". In addition, some students, especially first year and international students, did not understand that paraphrasing meant that the original idea was not their work and consequently they had difficulty understanding the need to reference paraphrasing at all. Third year students did recognise the more subtle forms of plagiarism, suggesting that an understanding of plagiarism was developed through the degree. A third year student stated, "It's a long term process to get there".

Difficulties in writing to avoid plagiarism

The students discussed a number of difficulties that made avoiding plagiarism in their assignments a difficult writing process. Students shared their frustration in not being able to express ideas as clearly as the authors they were paraphrasing. One third year student expressed this idea, "... if [the original text] captures something so beautifully that would take you four paragraphs to write clumsily yourself, well I think

quoting is a good option provided you know how to quote properly and acknowledge it".

They felt that a lot of stress was created for students in not being able to directly quote within their psychology assignments, especially as some reported being penalised for not quoting in units from other disciplines. For example one student stated, "... gosh it would be grand if you could quote more ... It would be so much easier and the issue of plagiarism would get lifted a bit". Thus, paraphrasing was characterised as stressful, especially when the skill is new to the students and a difficult skill to master. Another student stated, "Yes, I think it could stress students out a lot that are really trying hard to acknowledge people's work properly but they don't know how to [do so] often".

An additional barrier was the difficulty in accessing clear information concerning plagiarism. Some felt not enough information was provided in their course, especially in the area of paraphrasing and referencing. The students stated that they would be helped by the existence of a clear rule, such as that used in the area of photocopying to meet copyright standards. A first year student expressed the concern by saying, "... what are we suppose to paraphrase? One hundred percent of the words, ninety five percent of the words?" The dearth of clear information concerning plagiarism and referencing was amplified by their experience of a lack of consistency across tutors and lecturers. A third year student stated,

> I think the consistency in tutors and lecturers is a big issue. Because some people are obviously more fussed about it than others in terms of exactness or numbers of words or amounts of translating, [or] accepting or not accepting quotes. There seems to be a lack of consistency for what you get from lecture material and tutors and feedback on your assignments.

The fear of being penalised for inadvertently plagiarising created additional pressure. A third year student thought that students are "... concerned that if they do it wrong they will be excluded or expelled or something". This statement also indicates a lack of understanding of the penalties outlined in the academic misconduct policy.

Strategies to avoid plagiarism
As discussed above, the students' understanding of plagiarism developed through the course of their degree. This development was also reflected in their growing understanding of the purpose of their study in terms of skill development and was reflected in their growing understanding of assignment preparation. First year students looked for specific information for assignments in a few articles and found it harder to reproduce ideas in their own words, while third year students focused on

extracting the essence of a number of articles and thus find it easier to paraphrase sources. However, about half of the third year students reported feeling that they struggled with the finer details of referencing.

The students recognised that practice helped them complete their assignments as they develop their writing skills. One student who reported having access to a previous student's work stated that being able to visually see how others had prepared their assignments had been an important learning tool for her. However, another stated that reading other people's work was not helpful as it increased the risk of inadvertently taking ideas and including them in their work. To overcome inadvertent plagiarism, one technique used by some students involved writing drafts by referring to notes rather than the articles to minimise the likelihood of using the structure, words, and ideas in journal articles and books.

In line with the change in focus over time, students' note taking skills also developed in order to avoid plagiarism. They stated that they had to learn to take notes to avoid plagiarising and that for some this had been the result of having problems initially in note taking where they became confused as to what was from the article and what was their own work. One student explained it as follows.

> I had to discover how to avoid this because when I was taking notes I was finding that early assignments I didn't do very well because I just use to put the reference and then [some] of the material I found and then when I went back to it I couldn't really remember if it was I who said that or if I had worked that out or whether they had said that.

A third year student stated that he had only recently learned to take notes in a way that distinguished between direct quotes lifted from references and ideas that he paraphrased in his own words. He thought that the technique

> ... would be a good thing to know straight away ... because that would be the biggest help, practical help to avoid this problem. I have been through two years of not knowing [and] not doing a good job at it. Not as good a job as I can now.

Students reported that they attempted to reference their work correctly in order to avoid allegations of plagiarism. Most students acknowledged that quoting meant taking verbatim text from another source, putting it in quotation marks, and referencing it both in text and in the referencing list. In terms of paraphrasing, the majority of the students still felt they

were not always clear on when and how often to reference, especially when using the same author in the one paragraph, so had learnt to just keep referencing everything and risk over-referencing. A first year student stated, "... always in-text reference every single bit of information you are getting. You in-text reference the whole sentence ..." whereas a second year student said "... once you have acknowledged that you have got an idea from someone then you can go on and discuss it without repeatedly referencing it". In addition, some felt that almost every sentence should have a reference because of their belief that they were not allowed to have their own opinion.

Student suggestions for course improvement

Some students reported that the current system is reactive rather than proactive and unfair, as they often found out their skills were sub-par via low assignments marks. However, most agreed that it was only by losing marks that students would take their errors seriously and incorporate the feedback into the preparation of their next assignment.

The students felt that a unit in the first semester of their first year of university study should explicitly include information on plagiarism. Further, they reported that the information needed to demonstrate and facilitate the practice of skills concerning the prevention of academic misconduct, such as time management, critical reading, note taking, paraphrasing, writing, and referencing. One student commented that students needed

> ... to understand it's not right and shown how to stop plagiarising. To be given lots of examples, like for example, here's a piece of work, here's where it fits into an assignment and discuss the process of turning it into your own words or whatever.

They felt that students needed the opportunity to practice the skills in the tutorial environment.

> A tute or an activity going through with a journal article ... Going through and getting the main points for the sections and brainstorming on how you could take notes on that, and how to reference that, and the final step would require you to write about (paraphrase) ... two articles for the assignment.

In this way, the students could practice the skills in tutorial time without being concerned about the loss of marks. Others suggested that the development of the appropriate skills could be assessed: "Exercises on just straight paraphrasing an article, [for example] small exercises worth 10 percent."

The students also identified instances when tutors and unit coordinators differed in their interpretations and expectations concerning plagiarism and its avoidance. The students felt that tutors and unit coordinators needed to be informed, perhaps via workshops, to ensure that they understood how to reference correctly so as to ensure consistency in their teaching with that of the lecturers. All tutors employed in the School of Psychology are required to complete a course on tutoring before being assigned tutorial work. However, the data from our study revealed the issues concerning plagiarism and referencing need to be further emphasised in the course, and that lecturers perhaps should also complete aspects of the course to ensure consistency at the School level.

Students who had completed the University Preparation Course felt it had been extremely useful. Via the course, the students learned how to research topics, construct essays, reference ideas, and extract information correctly from journal articles and other sources. They believed this information should be included as a component of the Psychology course, rather than as addition to the course as many students do not realise it is available or necessary until academic problems arise.

Finally, one student suggested that the information could be disseminated through the School's peer mentoring program (Chang, Cohen, Pike, Pooley & Breen, 2003). However, we feel that utilising the mentoring program in such a manner is outside its scope and, in addition, the School would be abrogating its responsibility to provide the information to students.

Phase two: Development and evaluation of the learning materials

Based on the above findings, we developed three tutorials and a 'tip sheet'. The Tip sheet (Appendix A) provides students with a practical guide on the definition of plagiarism and suggestions for its avoidance when writing for psychology. Information is outlined on the following six areas; time management, note taking, critical reading, paraphrasing, referencing, and practice. Quotes from the students involved in the initial focus groups are incorporated into the tip sheet, which was developed to complement the practical exercises to be carried out in tutorials at the beginning of semester with students enrolled in PSY1101 (Appendix B).

The tutorials consist of practical exercises that can be used within the tutorial setting. These exercises provide the students with the opportunity to define areas such as plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, and referencing. In addition, students learn how to read critically, summarise their findings, and to reference their writing accurately. The tutorials also provide an opportunity for questions, clarification, and for

peer and tutor feedback without the loss of marks. The tutorials are designed for implementation into PSY1101.

The design of the research included a number of processes whereby feedback was ascertained from students and teaching staff, which should ensure the applicability and usefulness of the materials to the students' needs. However, the final phase of this research will be the implementation of the learning materials into PSY1101. It is anticipated that students will be surveyed concerning the implementation of the materials. The data will be triangulated with the number of students found to have plagiarised the unit's assignments. This figure will also be compared with the number of incidents of plagiarism detected in the unit in previous semesters, enabling the efficacy of the materials to be evaluated.

Conclusion

The study culminated in three primary outcomes. First, we developed a better understanding of undergraduate psychology students' views on plagiarism. Second, we extended our understanding of the process whereby students grapple with writing assignments whilst attempting to avoid plagiarism. Third, we were able to suggest ways in which these understandings could be incorporated into the course to minimise the incidence of unintentional plagiarism.

The aim of the project was to reduce the incidence of plagiarism occurring in the School of Psychology by embedding learning materials concerning plagiarism into the course. Doing so ensures that students are adequately informed both about plagiarism and ways to avoid it in their first semester of study, ultimately reducing the incidence of plagiarism and increasing the standard of submitted work. In the past, we informed students about plagiarism, but failed to provide concrete examples of what constituted plagiarism and ways to avoid it. The development of tutorial materials that concretely illustrate plagiarism and its avoidance serves to explicitly educate students so they can avoid plagiarism in their writing. In this way, we are ensuring that students are fully informed and cannot claim that they did not understand the requirements of writing at university level.

Based on the findings, the project resulted in the development of learning materials appropriate for students enrolled in PSY1101. There are a number of advantages of these learning materials over other methods aimed at reducing plagiarism. First, the inclusion of the materials into an introductory unit is preventive rather than reactive. Second, providing all students with materials as a component of the course is a universal

rather than selective approach, providing appropriate induction for all students regardless of time and financial constraints. Third, the materials can be easily adapted to alternative teaching modes of delivery such as print based external and online modes. Fourth, the materials can be incorporated into units without changing the assessment, official unit outlines, and so on. Fifth, although the materials were developed for psychology students, the materials could be adapted to meet the needs of students in other schools and departments. And finally, once the materials have been implemented into the course, their advantages can be sustained without further staff time commitment. The same cannot be said for the provision of additional tutorials, workshops, and programs outside of class time.

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Appendix A: Tip sheet for academic writing

Introduction to academic writing!

We know that students find the transition to university academic writing a difficult process. Students also find writing for psychology units difficult because the School of Psychology requires a different style of writing to other Schools and Faculties. One difficulty students experience in academic writing is the avoidance of practices that are called academic misconduct, such as plagiarism. In our experience, many students have trouble understanding exactly what constitutes plagiarism, and often when they do understand it, they have trouble avoiding it. To help you in this process we have put together some tips provided to us from undergraduate psychology students like yourself.

Time management!

Time management is an essential skill as a student to guard against plagiarism. Many of the ideas presented in your psychology course will be new to you. Very experienced professionals will write most of your reading material, therefore you will need a lot of time to understand the topic before being able to write about it in your own words. A big tip is to start assignments as soon as possible. Leaving it to the last minute might have been okay in high school but this will rarely work at university. In fact, students who leave starting assignments to the last minute usually find they did not really understand the material so could not summarise in their own words. A student stated

> I think there is a time issue because to properly avoid plagiarism
> you need to have gone through the material so much so that you
> almost live and breathe it ... You can [then] write it in your own
> way and bring it together in your own terms. But if you haven't the
> time, there would be more likelihood of inadvertently plagiarising.

Most of the time you spend on an assignment will be on researching. Allow heaps of time to go to the library and find references. This is an area where most students don't spend enough time.

Critical reading!

Students told us that they felt when they first began studying they were looking for all the details when reading their articles and thus becoming overwhelmed. With experience and time they found they now read articles to find the *essence* of what the author is saying. However to do this entails a process which you will see includes our previous tips. In

this way they begin to identify the underlying concepts of what they are reading.

> I have to read them [journal articles] and think for a day, process it, analyse it in my mind.

Note taking!

Note taking is an important skill that needs to be developed to ensure correct assignment writing. Developing this skill will enable you to clearly and quickly distinguish between direct quotes and your own words that you have used to summarise ideas. When summarising ideas always put quotation marks around direct quotes in your note taking, so you will know what is a direct quote from references and what are your own words (paraphrasing). You do not need to write copious amount of notes from your articles. Students recommend reading each article and making note of keywords and main points, then starting to write the assignment based on these notes.

> ... if the paragraph is about group dynamics and bonding or something, I will just put 'group dynamics, bonding' and that's all.

> ... if you have understood the article you should be able to write something from those key notes ... It also gives you the opportunity to go back and re-read the article later and you find out whether what you thought they said is actually what you have, or [whether] you have to summarise it again if you didn't quite get it right.

Try to use your own words as much as possible, rather than the words the authors of the article used. This skill takes time to master, so do not expect that you will be an expert straight away. One student found the following questions useful when note taking.

> Who conducted the research? What was the purpose of the research? How was the research conducted? How were participants recruited? What measures were used? Were the methods sufficient and appropriate? What were the results? What did the author(s) conclude? Was the conclusion justified? Are there alternative interpretations of data? Are there limitations of research? Could the study be improved? If so, how?

Paraphrasing!

Paraphrasing involves reading an article, understanding the author's concepts, and writing the concepts in your own words. Students told us that when they start at university they really struggled with paraphrasing, especially when the journal article was concise and succinct, they could not see how they could possibly write it any differently. Don't forget to reference even when you're paraphrasing.

I read something from a text, I paraphrase it, I reference it

Referencing!

Referencing for psychology is very structured and follows a specific format, which is set out in detail by the American Psychological Association (APA) and can be found in the APA Manual. Psychology writing is different from other university writing in that it discourages adding direct quotations to your work. Students often find this concept difficult. At times it can become very stressful when learning new skills to avoid plagiarism but that an understanding of plagiarism was developed through the degree. As a third year student stated, "It's a long term process to get there".

Practice!

Finally, the students recommend working on writing skills, as being able to write well helps to avoid plagiarism. As noted above writing for university is very different to writing for school or work. Learning new skills always includes practice. This practising helps you to be able to put ideas into your own words and not just rely on quoting the authors words or moving one or two words around in sentences from your articles.

When students start a new assignment they get out their old ones so that they can use the tutor's feedback to correct writing issues. The feedback was considered very important and useful. Students reported they were able to see and understand where they had made errors and were able to use this feedback when approaching their next assignment. This way they can see where they need to improve and practice improving it.

Appendix B: Overview of tutorial exercises

Tutorial	Exercises
1st tutorial	Define terms such as plagiarism, paraphrase, quote, referencing Go through the tip sheet (Appendix A) in detail Group exercise – Instruct students to summarise (paraphrase) the tips in the tip sheet Give out a short article to read during the week with instructions to summarise the article using the tips in the tip sheet. (A good idea is to assign an article that students will use in their first assignment.)
2nd tutorial	Using notes taken on the article, share examples in small groups. Share some examples with whole class. Facilitate a class discussion of the process students under took, i.e., time management, critical reading (looking for concepts and understanding) Instruct students to revise their summary of the article.
3rd tutorial	Work in pairs to critical analyse each others' summaries, checking for direct quotes, paraphrasing, correct referencing, and possible examples of plagiarism. Class discussion to clarify issues, answer queries, and discuss the process.

Lauren was a Lecturer in the School of Psychology between 2001 and 2004. A significant component of her teaching involved coordinating *PSY1101 Introduction to Psychology* on-campus, externally via the print-based and online modes, and intensively during Summer School. Margaret was employed as a tutor for PSY1101 between 1999 and 2002.

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