Academic Integrity: An Awareness and Development Issue for Students and Staff

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Abstract

University plagiarism policies aimed at assuring academic integrity provide for increased vigilance and disciplinary procedures to deal with transgressions. Many policies also include guidelines to teaching staff to ensure that students are adequately informed about the meaning of plagiarism and its consequences, and about methods of citing within the particular referencing system in use. However, the experience of academic advising has indicated that receiving such information is insufficient for students who, for a variety of reasons, inadvertently lapse into plagiarism. This is particularly the case for international students for whom English is a second or additional language. A simple and not excessively time-consuming strategy is proposed for academics to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn not only the mechanics of what they are required to do, but also the reasons for the requirements and assistance in learning the language for fulfilling these requirements. The strategy involves, firstly, the induction of students into the concept of evidence-based learning as the essential characteristic of university learning, teaching and research, and secondly, the application of a tool such as genre analysis for mastering the language of their discipline. This is an awareness and development issue that is particularly important for international students whose time within the English-speaking Australian university environment may be limited to three or four years. The proposed strategy has the potential of becoming a powerful mechanism for reducing the incidence of inadvertent plagiarism, as well as raising the overall standard of written work for an increasing range of students.

Key words: inadvertent plagiarism, academic integrity, genre analysis, international students, English as a Second Language, academic staff development

Preface

This paper is the outcome of reflective practice. It arises from my experience over a decade and a half as an academic adviser for university students and staff, and draws on a conceptual framework based on genre theory and functional grammar. In dealing with the day to day demands of responding to the reading and writing needs of students, and to specific teaching and assessment issues of academic staff, I have also drawn on a prior body of knowledge gained from a range of language learning theories and practices and developed in the teaching of English as a second language and German as a foreign language. In addition, my reflections on the theories and practices of my work have been enriched by insights into the complexities of cross-cultural communication through having been, myself, a learner of English as a second language during my early teens, while retaining and developing my first language, German, to a level of academic teaching and research. Thus the proposal developed in this paper is based, not on an empirical study, but on an amalgam of my theoretical insights and personal experiences as a teacher and a learner, and the application of these in my academic advisory work.

Introduction

Although much is has been written about plagiarism and the increasing urgency for detecting and deterring academic dishonesty and wilful cheating in tertiary institutions, the less obvious and perhaps more widespread issue of unwitting plagiarism has so far been largely neglected in the literature. Learning how to 'avoid plagiarism' is an issue that affects many students in their transition to tertiary study. It is of particular significance for international and other students for whom English is a second or additional language. This paper is a step towards filling the gap identified in the literature, by proposing that the problems experienced by students in transition can, and should, be addressed by the use of an appropriate teaching strategy as an integral part of mainstream academic teaching practices.

The current trend for addressing plagiarism issues by many universities is through renewals of their plagiarism policies and guidelines that set out both disciplinary and educative principles. The main focus of these documents is typically on increased vigilance, together with well publicised disciplinary procedures, aimed at reducing dishonest or fraudulent behaviour. The additional focus on educative principles is generally to provide training in the mechanics of citation and referencing. Access to training and resources for plagiarism-avoidance has become readily available within tertiary institutions and online. So, too, have resources that assist academic staff in modifying their teaching and assessment practices in order to minimise the occurrence of plagiarism (see, for example, Carroll, 2002; AUTC, 2002 (section 3); JISC, 2005).These publications and many of the tertiary staff development websites and plagiarism policies have included exhortations for teaching staff to provide 'clear' referencing guidelines, carefully designed assessment tasks and formative feedback to students.

However over more than a decade of my work as an academic adviser for students and staff, it has become obvious that 'clear guidelines and feedback to students' are often insufficient to dispel the confusion that surrounds the concept of plagiarism. Staff continue to express their disappointment and frustration that students who have been told to write 'in their own words', and who have been given plagiarism definitions, rules about attribution and the required referencing system, still present unattributed material that is copied or downloaded from elsewhere.

Staff are particularly puzzled by blatantly obvious cases where the students innocently provide full reference to the plagiarised material and also sign statements attesting to their 'own work'. Students, on the other hand, frequently express their dismay and confusion, also documented in the literature (e.g. Ashworth et al. 1997), at finding that they have failed to satisfy the required standards and that they simply do not know how to avoid inadvertent lapses into plagiarism. So what has gone wrong?

Why Does Inadvertent Plagiarism Persist?

Firstly, there is the fear factor. Students new to the university are given large amounts of information in the first few weeks of their first semester. Typically among this is the university's information on rules and warnings regarding plagiarism. For many there is a sense of doom in this information that is couched, not in the language of learning but the language of crime and punishment. Without understanding what the reasons are for the rules of citation and attribution that they are asked to embrace, and without having command of the appropriate language for presenting evidence in the form of citation, they may quite understandably feel as though they are surrounded by traps that will ensnare them unexpectedly at any time. The problem is that fear is a poor basis for learning. Research on the role of emotions in learning would suggest that students who set out with confidence and self-esteem are much more likely to be successful at mastering the academic conventions (see for example Ingleton, 2000; Ingleton & Cadman 2002; Archer et al. 1999).

Secondly, we need to invoke the concept of 'active learning' which proposes that genuine understanding results not from simple exposure to new information but from the learner's practical engagement with it (Cannon & Newble, 2000). In a learner-centred environment, it is insufficient merely to *tell* students about citation and referencing conventions or to *refer* them to the course handbook. Newcomers need a period of induction during which they can learn, by trial and error, and with guidance in a 'safe' learning environment, to understand the underlying principles and values of academic writing and to develop the language and skills for writing appropriately for different purposes within their various disciplines (McGowan, 2003). This is particularly the case for many international students, as the English language proficiency scores that allow entry into Australian universities are no guarantee that a student is capable of applying language that is appropriate for this task in their specific disciplines (Ingram, 2005).

The negative purpose of 'avoiding plagiarism' has in recent times been softened by substituting the concept of 'valuing integrity'. However, these words also have a moralistic and value-laden tone. So for example, the University of Newcastle's *Academic Integrity* website states that the university 'supports the values that form the basis of Academic Integrity, namely: honesty, fairness, trust, responsibility and respect' (accessed 20/06/05). This suggests that plagiarism, seen as a lack of integrity, is equated with dishonesty and other reprehensible behaviours. The University of Newcastle has followed the lead of Oxford Brookes University (Carroll, 2004) in appointing Student Academic Conduct Officers whose role it is to ensure that there is a fair and equitable assessment of, and response to, reported cases of 'academic misconduct' in the form of dishonesty, cheating, collusion or fraud. However, for students new to the academic language and culture of our universities, the danger of inadvertently slipping into 'dishonest' or 'fraudulent' behaviour, and of being accused of lacking integrity, represents a considerable threat. For them it would be helpful to formulate integrity in a more positive way, so that it becomes something to be aspired to, rather than the lack of it being something to be avoided (McGowan, 2005).

I suggest that a more persuasive perspective on the concept of integrity can be found by turning to the origin of the word. The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (1966-1992) gives its derivation from *integer:* "denoting a whole quantity"; *integral*: "making up a whole, made up of parts which constitute a unity"; and hence "integrity". In this interpretation of the word, academic integrity could be seen in the sense of a person's integration into the academic tradition of research and scholarship. If this aspect were highlighted in the academic induction of students, the 'training' in academic conventions that follows would probably make more sense to them, and certainly be more encouraging and conducive to learning.

The norms and values, and associated rules of conduct that have been developed within the academic tradition of scholarly activity and research are not self-evident. To trace and recall all the writings that have in some way combined to influence their thinking is not something that comes naturally to newcomers. The concept of inducting students into evidence-based learning from their first year has been gaining momentum since the Boyer Commission's (1999) proposal. Melbourne University lists 'an atmosphere of intellectual excitement' and 'an intensive research culture permeating all teaching and learning activities' as the first two of its nine principles guiding teaching and learning (James & Baldwin 2002). Brew (2003) confirms the value of 'bringing teaching and research together within academic communities of practice' and makes the point that research-based learning should not be confined to students who are future academics, but 'that for all students, no matter what their ability or study motivation, the pursuit of professionalism embodied in the quality conception of scholarship can be a useful foundation for whatever the student engages in when they graduate' (Brew, 2003: p 16).

An Awareness and Development Issue for Students and Staff

When embarking on university study, students need to understand that they are entering a new 'culture', and becoming part of a 'community of scholars'. They are about to take their place within a research tradition in which they need to learn that their thinking and writing in fact draws on evidence of prior research and the thoughts and writings of others; that their own writing may in turn be drawn on by their readers in future scholarship and research; and finally, that the evidence-based tradition has developed a set of norms and conventions that make it possible for readers to duplicate the research steps they have taken and re-visit the evidence that supported their argument.

In practice, when students write essays and other assignments, they are from the outset expected to abide by the norms that have been established within the academic tradition of research and scholarship. But there is no reason to assume, without explicit induction, that they know *why* they are required to do so. The fact that in writing an essay they are engaged in what Boyer called the 'scholarship of integration' is not generally apparent to them. It probably is not always clear in the minds of staff either (Chanock, 2004). Ask any first year students, or indeed many lecturers, about research in their courses, and they are unlikely to describe their learning and teaching as having more than a passing link with research. Yet, as Hunt points out, '…offering lessons and courses and workshops on 'avoiding plagiarism' -- indeed, posing plagiarism as a problem at all -- begins at the wrong end of the stick'. He compares it to 'looking for a good way to teach the infield fly rule to people who have no clear idea what baseball is' (Hunt 2002).

This, then, is an awareness and development issue for staff as well as students. Lecturers need to learn to play their part in helping students to realise that 'in undertaking tertiary study they place themselves in a research tradition' (McGowan, 2005 p.292), that they are entering into an 'academic community of practice' (Brew, 2003), and that in such a community all members are, as Brew puts it, 'responsible for the maintenance of the community of practice or inducting newcomers into it, for carrying on the tradition of the past and carrying the community forward to the future' (p12).

Student Induction

The University of Melbourne's website on 'Assessing Student Learning' contains an explanation of the reasons for the rules of citation that is enlightening for students. It addresses five difficulties encountered by international students. These are: unintentional cheating, paraphrasing, quoting, acknowledgments, and finally, the reason for the requirements of citation and attribution: "Why do I have to use these complicated methods and rules?" The answer to this final question is given as follows:

> 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.
> http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/intstuds.html

A persuasive text such as this, available on a student website, would be an excellent resource for all lecturers in laying the foundation for their students' successful apprenticeship into a 'new game' with 'new rules' (Leask, 2004), by which they achieve their integration into the academic tradition of research and scholarship.

For new students, and those from non-English speaking backgrounds in particular, an induction into the concept of scholarly, research-based writing involves not only an apprenticeship into the conventions of citation and referencing, but also requires time to learn the language of their specific discipline (McGowan, 2003, Crisp, 2004). This paper proposes a focus on language development for minimising unintentional plagiarism as part of the induction strategy. It is an approach that is based on 'genre analysis' as a self-help tool for students to learn both what is required by academic conventions, and also how to achieve this requirement through a writing style that is characteristic of their discipline. Students need a starting point for moving on from using 'their own' words, which may be an informal style or the inappropriate translation of a culturally foreign language choice, to searching out and applying the language that is typically used within their new discipline. They need to engage in 'active learning' to help them recognise how their *reading* can inform their *writing*.

The task of inducting students into the writing styles, or *genres,* of their current disciplines does not need to be a daunting task for the academic teacher. Most academics will have gone through the process of learning the writing style of their discipline without even being aware of it. The basis of their writing would have been their reading. From this they would gradually, unobtrusively, over time, have absorbed the structures, logical development, sentence patterns and word choices that typically occurred in their readings, and they would have noted what was inappropriate and to be avoided. Not all students have that capacity, or indeed the time, to absorb the *language* of what they read at the same time as dealing with the *content*. For many international students the time they spend within the English-speaking Australian university environment may be limited to three or four years. The key to the self-help strategy, then, is to make this a conscious focus in order to accelerate a process that, for some, over a longer period of time, tends to develop subconsciously.

I therefore propose that a little time might be set aside during lectures or tutorials early in a course or program, to provide an initial focus exercise carried out on a short article from the students' reading list that is representative of the *genre*. The exercise consists of three simple steps: (i) to read for content, (ii) to identify the structure, or stages of development of the text and (iii) to extract the language items that typically occur in each of these stages. This is a process that has been researched, developed and documented under the concept of *genre analysis* (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, Swales 1990, Halliday & Martin 1993, Cope & Kalantzis 1993, Christie & Martin 1997). It is an heuristic approach, where students learn to deduce for themselves, from the structures and language items used in the readings they encounter, what is obligatory, optional or inappropriate within the particular *genre*. In writing their own assignments, students are then encouraged to follow the 'stages' of their models and to re-use language items that typically recur during these stages.

A textbook on writing research reports by Weissberg and Buker (1990) is based on this process and provides a useful illustration. It contains numerous examples, from a variety of disciplines, of each of the stages of a research report. From these, the authors identify at each stage of the report, what may be deemed obligatory or optional steps. They then highlight the recurring words, phrases and sentence structures that are not only *permitted* but also *expected* to be used within the research report *genre*.

In the language development strategy proposed here, the exercise of *genre analysis* that students undertake in the first instance, when repeated a number of times, will serve to alert them to the stock phrases that are the hallmarks of their *genre*. The strategy is to encourage students to discover these language items within their readings and to *re-use* them to express *their own content*. In providing an initial focus exercise in this way, and a safe environment, with feedback for students using their reading to develop their academic writing, lecturers would effectively provide a period of apprenticeship into the conventions and *genres* of their disciplines.

Staff Development

The term 'development' appears more appropriate here than 'training', as the latter conjures up the notion of jumping through hoops, or learning a few tricks in a mechanical fashion. The first step for staff developers would be to provide academic staff with information and activities that would lead them to recognise that they may be in the best position to provide students with opportunities for analysing their readings within their core lectures or tutorials. This would require overcoming their resistance to taking on what appears to be 'extra' work. Initially it may indeed mean some extra work, but the payoff in the long run should mean that much time is saved in counselling individual students who don't understand why the plagiarised work they have submitted is unacceptable.

It is not always easy to remember what it was like not to know or understand something once we have learnt or mastered it ourselves. As teachers, we need to develop the skill of 'de-familiarisation', that is, making the familiar 'unfamiliar' again (O'Regan, 2005). It means we need to re-trace the steps that we took to get to the mastery we have, in order to put ourselves in the shoes of our learners. Many of us find it difficult to recall the moment at which the notion of being in a scholarly research tradition finally became clear to us, or what it was that triggered this understanding. It is even more difficult to recall how intuitively we developed a mastery of formal written language (as distinct from more informal spoken varieties), and even different versions of formal language for different purposes or different audiences. A first step in a developmental approach would be to help lecturers to reflect on their own induction into the academic norms, values and language.

The next step might be to show how international students, and indeed all students from diverse cultural backgrounds, will benefit from guidance and feedback by their lecturers on the nature of language that can be re-used, in other words, language that is 'common property' in any specific discipline. One must learn to recognise that it is simplistic to expect that a student who is at home in several other languages and cultures will include in their cultural and linguistic experience all the idiomatic and genre-specific expressions that a native speaker of English has accumulated over a lifetime. We are also oversimplifying when we tell students to use 'their own words', for, as Pennycook (1996) points out: 'All language learning is to some extent a process of borrowing others' words' (p.227). The fact is that there are standard word sequences for introducing or commenting on quotations, such as: 'many writers agree that*…*' or 'according to Jones et al,' or 'Smith claims that…' which students can only learn from their readings. In addition, different text types or 'genres' use expressions, even whole sentences, that have become the trademark of those particular types of texts. For example many formal letters will use the words: 'I write in response to your communication of …'. In a higher degree thesis we can often find the words: 'The purpose of this study was to examine the…'; or, in describing a scatter plot in a statistics course we may find the words: 'There is no linear correlation between the (x and y axes)'. Students are expected over a period of time to develop appropriate skills of re-using these 'trademark' phrases, or even complete sentences, as in the last example, for each type of text and discipline they are studying. International students can be shown how to accelerate their acquisition of these by paying particular attention to the language of their readings as well as their content.

However, in my experience of working closely with staff in the area of professional development, the suggestion that a language focus be part of core teaching has not been readily accepted by lecturers in the Faculties. In a climate of rising student-staff ratios, and with the growth of internationalisation of Australian universities, lecturers have little time to spare to engage in additional work. Many already feel pressured by the requirement to lift their teaching skills while maintaining their discipline-specific research output, and are understandably reluctant to face the prospect of dealing with student language, a field in which some argue they have little or no expertise.

The challenge now is to persuade overloaded lecturers to recognise that appropriate communication skills for their chosen field are an essential attribute to be developed by their students; and that the integration of an explicit focus on academic values and discipline-specific language into the core curriculum could be achieved without an excessive time commitment, and even without the need for linguistic or grammatical terminology. The approach described here, if applied early, is set to pay educational dividends in the long run. It is a means for helping students help themselves to accelerate their mastery of the language and conventions necessary for the achievement and maintenance of academic integrity.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has dealt with academic integrity as it affects that group of students who do not intend to cheat or fraudulently present the work of others as their own, but who find that they inadvertently use the language and content of their sources in a way that leaves them open to accusations of plagiarism. To some extent this applies to most students who are new to academic study, but it is a particularly threatening situation for many international students and for the staff who need to assess their work. A strategy has therefore been proposed that would assist the smooth transition of new students into an understanding of the research culture they have entered and to gain a tool for developing the appropriate language for the requirements of their various disciplines.

By removing the fear factor for those with no intention of cheating, the strategy of practising genre analysis as part of the core curriculum has the potential of becoming a powerful mechanism for reducing the incidence of inadvertent plagiarism as well as raising the overall standard of written work for an increasing range of students. However, while the strategy has been tried and found useful in individual consultations and small group workshops, its acceptance by mainstream academic staff remains a challenge. Further work is needed to implement the integration of a genre based language learning approach into the core curriculum and to evaluate its effectiveness in reducing the incidence of unintentional plagiarism.

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