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How universities and university people deal with plagiarism is articulated in universities' plagiarism policies. Universities, policies and people are all located in a bigger context, one which is being increasingly shaped by global issues. Some global issues of particular relevance to plagiarism are associated with the Internet and its attendant values and practices, Westernisation and notions of individualism versus collectivism, and contested constructions of the concept of 'author'. Within this dynamic milieu, individual universities attempt to formalise appropriate policy statements. The policy of one Australian university is analysed here and suggestions offered regarding possible directions for research which seeks to reconcile plagiarism policy and practice with the global tides buffeting universities and those who work in them.

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Abstract

How universities and university people deal with plagiarism is articulated in universities' plagiarism policies. Universities, policies and people are all located in a bigger context, one which is being increasingly shaped by global issues. Some global issues of particular relevance to plagiarism are associated with the Internet and its attendant values and practices, Westernisation and notions of individualism versus collectivism, and contested constructions of the concept of 'author'. Within this dynamic milieu, individual universities attempt to formalise appropriate policy statements. The policy of one Australian university is analysed here and suggestions offered regarding possible directions for research which seeks to reconcile plagiarism policy and practice with the global tides buffeting universities and those who work in them.

Introduction

Plagiarism is unquestionably one of the most troublesome issues ruffling academia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And not only academia. The issue has erupted from within universities into the public arena and the popular press, bringing with it levels of emotion seldom associated with academic matters. While plagiarism, and its more positive counterpart, academic integrity, are variously presented as being criminal, educational, unequivocal, or complex, universities grapple with ways of dealing with it; ways that become codified in universities' policies.

One of the aspects of being part of any kind of institution is the fact that, in theory at least, one's behaviour within that institution is directed and constrained by the policies articulated by that institution. The university at which I work exemplifies this principle only too well. If I access the university's policy web site (The University of Adelaide 2005a), I encounter a diverse array of policies designed 'to steer the conduct of individuals' (Taylor et al. 1997, p.1), of the staff and students who make up the university community. Some of these have little impact on the daily life of those individuals, for example the policies relating to such things as the *Art and Heritage Collections* or *Gifts and Bequests*. Some, however, bear heavily on the day to day happenings of both staff and students and are highly significant to the way individuals engage with their work and with each other. One of these is the policy relating to plagiarism (The University of Adelaide 2005b) and it is this policy I focus on here.

While the policy has been developed within and applies specifically to the university and those who work and study here, neither universities nor their policies exist in isolation. There are always bigger contexts shaped by numerous educational, political, economic, cultural, technological, ideological and other influences, sometimes at considerable variance with each other. These contexts provide a milieu in which policies are developed and implemented and in which they follow their trajectory, comfortably or otherwise. In order to gain some sense of where a policy has come from, what its life may be, and where it might be going, it can be useful to consider something of that wider milieu.

The Big Picture Context

The context for the university's plagiarism policy is a global one, in the sense that it involves 'economic, cultural and political …supranational connections' (Taylor et al. 1997, p.55). One significant component of this global context is the Internet, a facility primarily concerned with the 'directed and selective transfer, dissemination and retrieval of information' (Burk 1994) and which 'facilitates the exchange of intellectual goods embodied in easily reproducible form' (Schlachter 1997). Not only is its information available and reproducible, the Internet has profoundly affected the way people interact with each other, allowing the development of communities which have little to do with physical location, but all to do with shared interest (Wellman 2002), the site of interaction being the Internet itself.

Different forms of collaboration have become possible, too, in the ways people engage with and produce text. An Internet text is seldom a discrete entity, often incorporating hyperlinks to a range of documents with multiple authors, thus calling into question the whole notion of individual authorship (Thompson 2002, Price 2002, Ede & Lunsford 2001). This can result in what Howard (1995) calls 'free-form collaborations', through which sometimes anonymous contributors to a draft or a discussion can shape a writer's thinking and contribute invisible hands to the writing process. More specifically, specialised pieces of software are profoundly changing the whole nature of writing. Nilsson, Eklof and Ottosson (2005) report on packages that summarise text, organise information from sources and produce mind maps. It is a vexed question, the extent to which the end user of such software can claim to be the sole author of the ultimate product.

The nature of the Internet has allowed the access to and retrieval of material that is not only text based. Schlachter (1997) referred to the 'early Net users and the under-thirty [now the "under forty"] crowd' who have had, for much of their lives, ready access to software that allows them to download their individual choices of music and compile their own selections. The extent to which this occurs has varied with cultural attitudes and practices, a recent report (Caslon Analytics 2005) claiming that the rate of software piracy was 96% in China, 91% in Russia and 60% in India. The values underlying these statistics are becoming more globally acceptable, engendering an increasingly pervasive belief that everything on the Internet belongs to, is accessible by, and should be free to, all (Beiderman 1999, Schlachter 1997).

Another dimension of the contextual milieu is the development of Western capitalism, which 'has become a reference point' for the policy options of nation states generally (Taylor et al. 1997). Demstez (2002) sees the general move to 'capitalist-style economies' as bringing with it 'private ownership of resources to a previously unattained level of importance in the world' (p. S653). This notion of individual, as opposed to collective, ownership has been applied to all manner of things, including ideas and words. The issue of individual ownership of ideas is not a recent one. Thomas Jefferson was writing of it in the early part of the 19th century:

> *If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of every one, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.*
>
> *That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation.(Jefferson 1813)*

Nearly 200 years later, others are still echoing this sentiment, though rather less poetically. Martin (1994) claims that the notion of ownership of intellectual property is 'characteristic of the system of capitalist individualism', while Maxwell (2004) raises the question of 'whether information developed through the scholarship process should be considered property or not', given that 'information content, unlike property, can be enjoyed by many people without the loss of any single individual'. This view, however, does not take account of the dilemma posed by the economic reality that many people 'get paid for the work we do with our minds' (Barlow 1994). Individual payment for such work requires individual identification with its production. The collectivist model just doesn't fit. Or rather, it doesn't fit our current conception of ideas as property and the individual ownership of those ideas, with its economic implications.

Cutting diagonally across the attitudes and practices associated with the Internet and the political moves towards capitalism, is yet another contextual issue. This is a philosophical one, namely the contested notion of 'author'. Pennycook (1993) asks 'what happens to plagiarism if we take seriously such notions as "the death of the author"?' Ede and Lunsford (2001 p.354) maintain that this issue 'is hardly resolved', while Price (2002) suggests that 'the author' is 'one of the most thoroughly questioned entities in recent scholarship' (p.93).

The sources of this postmodern dilemma are associated with realisations of the complexity of subjectivity and the notion of 'distributed selves' (Ede & Lunsford, 2001, p.254), that 'knowledge does not exist in itself… but exists only in cultural practice, constituted in communities of practice' (Couros 2000), and linguistic realisations such as 'all communication between individuals is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-ownness"' (Thompson 2002). The purity and clarity of an individual author's voice is no longer regarded as absolute. And this has considerable implications for how we think about and deal with plagiarism.

So it is within this conflicted and dynamic global context that the University of Adelaide's plagiarism policy sits. Some of the tensions inherent in this context are evident in the policy while others are totally ignored.

Plagiarism Policy

There have been significant attempts to look broadly at plagiarism policy and practice in universities generally. The ACODE (2005) Academic Integrity Project, for example, has comprehensively collated and documented aspects of policy, practice and particular initiatives within 42 institutions in Australia and New Zealand. This paper takes a case study approach, focussing in detail on the policy of one of those institutions. Given the conclusion by the ACODE team that, across all those institutions, 'the findings were largely uniform', this analysis and its implications may well apply to others of those institutions as well.

Price (2002) in her analysis of plagiarism policy statements notes that they are usually written anonymously, not attributed to any particular author. Further to that, she observes that when a subject is identified it is the policy itself, 'as if [it] were its own author, speaking itself into being' (p.100). So it is with the Adelaide policy, which is apparently authorless, although it has been 'authorised' by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost and there are three contact names for anyone 'requir[ing] assistance'. Not just the policy, but the university itself has been personified and given anthropomorphic agency, as in 'The University expects', 'The University provides', 'the University's commitment', 'The University regards', the University keeps a central register', 'the University has reasonable grounds for believing'. This personification of an institution has a number of effects. One is to give the claims an aura of importance, supported as they are by 'the University'. A further effect is to render the subject inaccessible. How does one engage with 'the University'? Yet another effect is to provide a sense of inclusiveness and ownership. If those reading the policy are staff and students of the university, then maybe they, collectively and individually, constitute 'the University' and so identify with the various statements made in relation to 'the University'.

The essential nature of plagiarism and the student's role is often unclear in the language of plagiarism policies. Typically students are either 'positioned as cheaters', the issue being essentially 'an ethical one' or they are 'positioned as learners', the issue being 'a pedagogical problem' (Nilsson, Eklof & Ottoson 2005, p.2). Plagiarism is seen as being driven by two possible motivations, 'an absence of ethics or an ignorance of citation conventions' (Howard 1995, p.788) and the policies are required to perform two major, conflicting, tasks, 'adjudication' and 'explanation and teaching' (Price 2002). Both these discourses, plagiarism as crime requiring punishment and plagiarism as ignorance requiring education appear in the Adelaide policy. The former is realised through statements referring to 'allegations' of plagiarism being 'committed', the 'detect[ion]' of sufficient appropriate 'evidence' resulting in a 'charge' being laid. The accused student will be given a 'fair hearing', with the right to the support of an 'advocate' during the hearing of their 'case'. If, on 'the balance of probabilities', the allegations are deemed to be upheld, the plagiarism 'will incur penalties' of an appropriate form.

On the other hand, plagiarism is also discussed by the policy as a pedagogical issue which has an 'effect on student learning'. The policy acknowledges that plagiarism may be the result of 'a lack of skills in academic writing and that it is important that the university provide 'a learning environment that encourages the development of academic skills'. This is the language of education rather than crime, punishment and legal process.

One perspective on plagiarism is that it is a function of 'a set of conventions (some quite explicit, some not) associated with one's academic discourse community' (Price 2002, p. 104). These conventions are not fixed and absolute, but are dynamic and organic, emerging and developing within and across time, place and culture (Price 2002) and taking a particular form within the communities of practice comprising universities in Australia at the beginning of the 21st century. From this perspective, successful academic writers consciously or otherwise internalise these conventions, enacting the accepted 'rules and strategies for citing source texts, for acknowledging debts to previous scholarship, for separating what we can claim as our own ideas from the intellectual property of others' (Hull & Rose 1989, p.152). Students may be seen as apprentices who need to be inducted into the trade (Martin 1994). In order to function within the 'research-led, evidence-based culture of academic endeavour' (McGowan 2005a, p.287) students need to take on the ways in which the academic community pursues those endeavours.

Something of this discourse, of integration into the conventions of an academic community, is evident in Adelaide's plagiarism policy. 'Academic integrity' is identified as 'an essential component of scholarly activity', which 'applies to all University students and staff' in an 'environment that upholds' this integrity. Plagiarism is constructed as something which applies to all members of the academic community, not just to students. The 'accepted academic conventions' are seen as applying to all:

> *When submitting works for publication or for research grants, it is the staff member's responsibility to uphold the discipline standards of academic integrity in relation to the work of others. (Adelaide 2005b)*

One of the issues associated with plagiarism policies is that, as well as writing themselves, there is often an implicit assumption that they will effect themselves. Price (2002) refers to the 'curious habit' of plagiarism policies of assuming that 'the possession of the document is tantamount to absorption of its meaning' (p. 102). Experience and research suggests that knowledge about plagiarism is not the same as skills in eschewing it. A survey carried out by Errey (2002) indicated that, while students 'may know that plagiarism is wrong' (p.17), there is questionable value in trying to 'convey avoidance of plagiarism merely by talking about it as a universal concept' and that 'decontextualised official warnings did not help' students to develop the necessary skills. Similarly, Brown and Howell (2001), in their study, observed that 'the Warning passage is likely to be ineffective as a tool to modify actual cheating behaviour, as it is ineffective even in changing responses to a questionnaire'. McGowan (2005b) draws on her extensive work with students to conclude that '"clear guidelines and feedback to students" are often insufficient to dispel the confusion that surrounds the concept of plagiarism'.

The Adelaide policy does not, in fact, imply that the simple fact of its existence is sufficient; that all students need to do is to read and obey the requirement to avoid plagiarism. It has a whole section devoted to 'Responsibilities', identifying what should be done and by whom. While the 'Faculty/School/Discipline' is merely charged with the responsibility of providing relevant information, 'All staff involved in teaching' are required to do more than provide information. While staff are to 'Inform students' as to the rules of assessment, to 'provide information' (and, indeed, 'warnings') specifically about plagiarism and ensure that each course guide 'will contain information on the requirements for citation', they are also charged with responsibilities and with implementing a prescribed process for developing relevant skills.

Staff are required to 'Provide resources and feedback, as appropriate, to assist students to practise and learn the academic language and conventions required'. The student, too, is given responsibility to 'Seek assistance with their learning and assessment tasks if they are unsure of appropriate forms of attribution'. So, there is at least an acknowledgement of the need for a process of skill development and some indication of how that might be realised.

One of the specific concerns associated with the avoidance of plagiarism is just what is taken to be common knowledge; what does not have to be cited. This is very discipline- and genre-specific (Errey 2002; Price 2002). The study by Errey (2002) identified one of the major causes of plagiarism as being 'poor understanding of the difference between public knowledge, which does not need citation, and specifically owned knowledge, which does' (p.18). The closest the Adelaide policy comes to dealing with this issue is its definition of 'Public Domain' as 'a work that is available to most people and free to be used without the requirement for permission or payment of royalties'. This is not a very helpful statement in that it simply flags the idea that life is not always simple and that there may be some areas for which the proposed rigorous citation conventions do not apply. The areas referred to in the policy are alluded to in terms of permission and royalties; the even more problematic issue of what does or does not require acknowledgement is not really addressed.

And this raises the matter of the complexity and intrinsic lack of clarity relating to plagiarism. As well as seeking a boundary line that defines 'common knowledge', that is knowledge that is considered to be generally known and accepted within the discipline area, there are other grey areas as well. Price (2002, p.98) identifies the issue of 'ideas that have come from sources other than texts, for instance, peer reviews or class lectures', while Howard's (1995, p.800) list of 'sources you should cite' includes 'friends, family, classmates, and tutors who gave you ideas for your essay or who made suggestions for improvement'. The Adelaide policy does not address the issue of the nature of sources, which should be acknowledged and which not, and how one might distinguish between them.

In fact, the policy refers to plagiarism as though it were a simple, unproblematic phenomenon, essentially as 'presenting works in any format, without appropriate attribution' or 'Paraphrasing sentences or whole paragraphs without due acknowledgement'. Martin (1994) suggests other variations, the 'plagiarism of secondary sources', and more subtly, 'the use of the structure of the argument of the source'. A major difficulty for those seeking to come to terms with the notion of plagiarism is its intrinsic complexity (Thompson 2002; Nilsson, Eklof & Otosson 2005; McGowan 2005b). Perhaps it is, as asserted by Rebecca Moore Howard, 'inherently undefinable' (Price 2002, p.89).

Research Directions

All this suggests considerable potential for research associated with aspects of plagiarism policy; the potential to illuminate areas of ignorance. Some of these represent 'blank spots', in Wagner's (1993 p. 16) terms 'questions already posed', to which answers, or at least adequate answers, have not been found. Some blank spots have to do with the nature of academic knowledge, concerning those contextual issues of knowledge as property and property as having individual or collective ownership. Maxwell (2004) expounds on this dilemma in relation to universities:

> *the institution vacillates between a system that treasures the information commons (seeing its participants as engaging in activity that is both communal and cumulative) and one in which both the institution and its employees act as self-interested individuals in a market economy inhabited by competitors and consumers.*

The studies that have been carried out into staff and student attitudes towards plagiarism, indicate widespread confusion and misunderstanding (for example Brown & Howell 2001; Errey 2002; Howard 1995; Price 2002). It would be useful, in relation to formulating and implementing an appropriate institutional policy and associated practice, to investigate such attitudes within the institution concerned. It would also be valuable, in relation to practice, to take up Martin's (1994) and Hunt's (2002) suggestions of devising assessment tasks which rendered plagiarism irrelevant or unlikely. Research needs to be carried out into the kinds of assessment tasks which possess these qualities.

Given that issues associated with 'common knowledge' have been identified as a major area of confusion, it would be useful to explore the kinds of knowledge accepted as 'common' in different discipline areas and how students may develop an appreciation of how to identify such knowledge and distinguish between commonly- and specifically-owned knowledge and how to deal with both.

As well as blank spots, there are also a whole range of plagiarism policy blind spots, that is aspects for which 'existing theories, methods and perceptions actually keep us from seeing phenomena as clearly as we might' (Wagner 1993, p.16). Sometimes it is policies themselves which render us blind to other possibilities. One such engendered blindness is the obscuring of the complexities associated with plagiarism (Price 2002). Some blind spots have to do with the complex nature of plagiarism itself. In spite of the difficulties it would create or expose, the problematic nature of plagiarism, in its many dimensions, offers a rich field for exploration. What are its many diversities, how have these developed and what are some of the practical and pedagogical implications of the complexity?

The Adelaide policy states unequivocally that 'All plagiarism is unacceptable'. Statements like that allow no space for, in fact they render invisible, any other view. They deny the possibility of anything other than absoluteness; the possibility that there may be, in Pennycock's (1993) terms, '"good" and "bad" plagiarism (and various gradations in between)' (p.124); that practices currently labelled as 'plagiarism', for example the 'patchwriting' described by Price (2002), may actually represent a stage in the process of developing competence in academic English. Issues such as these are worth uncovering and exploring.

While many universities are grappling with issues of plagiarism, Oxford Brookes has been at the forefront of endeavours to deal with those issues. Jude Carroll last year published a report of that university's five-year response to 'the growing level of concern in higher education about student plagiarism' (Carroll 2005, p.1). A working party had been set up in 1999 and initial investigations revealed 'inconsistent practice' within the institution which, Carroll claims, 'was matched by equally varied and ad hoc activity across the sector' (p.2).

Seventeen of what came to be called Academic Conduct Officers (ACOs) were appointed, their prime responsibility being to 'defend academic integrity' (p.2). In practical terms, this meant finding 'ways to teach students their responsibilities for upholding academic regulations and conventions' (p.3). Despite many and varied approaches being implemented and the veritable army of enforcers, after five years Carroll still has to own to 'low levels of skill shown by many students', pointing to a 'need to continue and widen the number of initiatives' (p.3). There are still students who 'fail to comply with regulations due to confusion or ignorance' as well as others 'who know what they must not do, yet do it anyway' (p.4). Carroll concludes her report by identifying the continuing need 'to view the problem as complex', affecting 'staff and students and the world at large' (p.4). While much has been attempted, it appears there is still much to be done.

The world context for university plagiarism policies is a turbulent one, with global currents and tides eddying around and across each other in confounding ways. Nor are those policies unitary documents; they typically embody several, sometimes competing, discourses, and ignore others. Universities have implemented a range of practices, both preventative and reactive, to address issues of plagiarism. Yet plagiarism continues.

The interplay inherent in this situation provides a rich ground for further research. It is interesting to speculate how the various forces within and without the policies and the institutions will ultimately play themselves out. There may be movements to places now unthinkable. Perhaps we will come to believe, as Wilks (2004, p.12) suggests, that 'plagiarism and text reuse that prosper are no longer treason, but the new establishment'

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