

Plagiarism

Introduction

The issue of plagiarism is not new; however increased ease of access to electronic material via the web is always a concern among the academic community. Although there is no direct evidence that students electronically cut and paste material into assignments, or purchase essays from 'cheat sites', the potential for these kinds of problems exists.

It is perhaps worth noting that good practice in dealing with plagiarism is also good practice in terms of learning, teaching and assessment more generally. Setting the same assessment questions year after year, allowing for little individual input and resorting to unseen examinations are not conducive to real deep learning but, unfortunately, characterise many students' experiences.

Further, it isn't good enough to say that students "shouldn't do it", whatever 'it' is, and institutions have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that it doesn't happen or is dealt with appropriately if it does.

For a comprehensive approach to plagiarism Carroll and Appleton's "Plagiarism: A Good Practice Guide" is an excellent start¹. The proceedings of the recent conference organised by UUK² will provide much valuable information.

What is plagiarism?

It is difficult to give a simple, widely applicable definition as different disciplines and institutions may have varying traditions and conventions and what might be considered 'common knowledge' and thus not need referencing by an expert in a subject is different from the novice first-year student. However, a widely shared understanding is that plagiarism occurs when someone tries to pass off someone else's work, thoughts or ideas as their own, whether deliberately or unintentionally, without appropriate acknowledgement.

It is important to recognise that plagiarism does not just apply to written work - whether essays, reports, dissertations or laboratory results - but can also apply to plans, projects, designs, music, presentations or other work presented for assessment.

Why is it a problem?

It's cheating! Or, to put it more formally, it is a form of academic misconduct or dishonesty - along with cheating, collusion and fabrication. However, it is seen as being particularly pernicious because it undermines the whole basis of scholarly academic values, and undermines academic standards and the credibility of awards.

Plagiarism also demotivates students who see their efforts as being undermined by the unfair advantage gained by others. Tutors who fail to deal with it make this situation even worse but some institutions' procedures and regulations may be so onerous and draconian that no action is taken or local arrangements are developed - leading to possible inconsistent and unfair treatment.

Whilst plagiarism is not new, the ready availability of material on the internet and the explosion of information in some areas have raised perceptions that students are making extensive use of 'copy and paste'. Large classes and teams of markers also make it harder to detect plagiarism and collusion.

A final issue is that, with the growing diversity of students in higher education - whether by age, educational background, disability or national origin (including international students on exchange programmes) they may have different understandings of what plagiarism is and not understand what conventions apply and why.

How do we avoid plagiarism?

Many students claim to understand plagiarism but then do not know how to avoid it. They need proper, timely training and information. Information skills, referencing and time management are amongst the areas which need to be addressed, ideally by the use of examples, case studies and exercises and within the context of their own subject.

Students should be provided with clear guidelines on what is acceptable and the institution's procedures and regulations for dealing with cheating. Telling them about it during induction is probably the worst time as they are already suffering from information overload. It needs to be built into assessment briefs, course (not university) handbooks, on the student intranet, and linked to study skills materials and support. In the wider context, information literacy needs to be inculcated at an early age or coping strategies (e.g. over-reliance on Google) become deeply ingrained.

Lecturers should look to design the opportunity to use, or reward from, plagiarism out of their assessment. Assignments should be changed each year - and not just the trivial changing of names which students easily spot! Ideally each student should experience the assessment as being unique to themselves with the task being individualised through their application and use of knowledge and skills. Assignments based primarily on facts and "tell me everything you know about . . ." are more likely to be available on the growing number of essay sites on the internet.

Rather than just assess the final product, consider building in stages where you can monitor progress, give feedback and check on the authenticity of the students' work - without necessarily giving marks at each stage.

As well as pointing out the need to avoid plagiarising on assignment briefs, have students sign a declaration that it is their own work when handing in. Having regulated hand-in and hand-back procedures

also reduces the likelihood of students acquiring others' work and copying it. Students often feel that an 'honour system' is the most likely to deter many forms of misbehaviour.

There is probably the need for a lot of staff development in most higher education institutions around assessment and how to design out opportunities and rewards for plagiarism.

Detection

Although it is clear from JISC projects and reports that electronic detection will not solve the problem, it does help staff to identify plagiarism, thus allowing them to concentrate on the issue of prevention. An excellent publication³ from the CAA Centre at the University of Luton describes the current state of software development in this area and compares the effectiveness of five products including the "Turnitin" material produced under the aegis of JISC⁴. All are commercial products. The survey is too large to cover in detail but here are some of the conclusions.

- The review from an academic user perspective confirmed the functions of electronic detection service/software as limited to detecting instances of material cut and pasted from the Internet, instances of collusion and reliance on capture techniques for detecting text books and paper-mill submissions.
- The survey identified the main sources of plagiarised material encountered by academics as coming from textbooks and theses. Work cut and pasted from the internet was ranked second as a source.
- The most common trigger that arouses academics' suspicions of plagiarism in assignments is a change of writing style within text and differences in syntactic structure and in the use of terminology.
- Most academics do not use any dedicated electronic detection software or services, although most responded that they are aware of electronic detection software/services.

It was noted that there is not a single service or software tool that will detect all sources of plagiarised material encountered by academics.

However, whilst the use of, or threat of using, electronic detection systems may deter students, these should be seen as part of an overall approach to plagiarism and not the solution.

Taking action

If you discover or suspect plagiarism you must deal with it; it is cheating! It is important to have clear procedures and regulations and be fair, consistent and transparent. In particular, disciplinary procedures for dealing with plagiarism and other acts of academic misconduct should be separated from the credit awarding procedures of Examination Boards (see Carroll and Appleton for further discussion of this issue).

Plagiarism was traditionally detected and dealt with within Arts Faculties but institutions, rather than individual tutors, courses or Faculties/Departments should have a clear policy for dealing with plagiarism, a tariff of responses and clear criteria against which to judge the action to be taken. These criteria might include the degree of intent, the level of study and background of the student, whether this was the first occurrence, and the extent of the plagiarism. It is important to keep good records, particularly on modular courses where no one person may have a good picture of what an individual student is doing. There is some concern that penalties for student plagiarism are inconsistent between institutions and JISC has instigated a report studying this issue⁵.

Briefing papers are designed to provide a condensed discussion on issues and topics related to teaching and learning in the physical sciences. Each guide focuses on a particular aspect of higher education and is written by an academic experienced in that field.

References

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