



Assessment Series No.10

## A Briefing on Plagiarism

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## **Generic Centre Guides and Briefings**

Welcome to the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre's series of Assessment Guides and Briefings. They aim to provide a series of overviews of important issues and practices in the field of assessment for the higher education community.

The Assessment Guides are intended for colleagues with particular roles and for students, as their titles suggest. The Briefings are primarily intended for lecturers and other staff involved in supporting learning.

The Assessment Series is a snapshot of a field in which development is likely to be rapid, and will be supplemented by specific case studies produced by the LTSN Subject Centres.

The series was developed by Brenda Smith and Richard Blackwell of the LTSN Generic Centre with the support of Professor Mantz Yorke. Experts in the field were commissioned for each title to ensure that the series would be authoritative. Authors were invited to approach the issue in their own way and no attempt was made to impose a uniform template.

The series editors are grateful to colleagues in LTSN Subject Centres and other senior colleagues who refereed the series, and of course to the authors for enabling its publication.

We hope that you will enjoy the Assessment Series and find it interesting and thought-provoking. We welcome your feedback and any suggestions you may have for future work in the area of assessment.

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## Introduction

In a case entitled *Did She or Did She Not?* Shapira (1993) describes a student who apparently lifted paragraphs without acknowledging her source (in this case, an eminent author). When challenged, the student responded that it was not her intention to plagiarise or cheat that this was the first time she had done such an assignment, and that she did not think she was guilty of wrongdoing. The case study describes how the lecturer believes it to be plagiarism, prevaricates, and in the end, awards a slightly lower mark than would have been the case. The lecturer therefore implied the student's actions were poor academic practice. Like most examples where plagiarism is involved, the bare bones of the story provoke plenty of questions: Was this an example of poor academic practice as evidenced by the lower mark? Was it significant that no one ensured the student understood how to acknowledge and cite source material if that is what happened? Whose responsibility is it to determine a fair punishment, the lecturer's? Was the action this lecturer took fair? If the student felt it was unfair, could the decision be defended? These kinds of questions are certainly back on the academic agenda.

It is probably a heightened fear of cheating coupled with a growing interest in the development of software tools to detect plagiarism that has resulted in wide ranging review of current academic practices (see, for example, Culwin and Lancaster, 2001 and Carroll and Appleton, 2001). Coupled with this trend, there is a growing interest in why students plagiarise and frequent media attempts to find out the extent of the problem as Carroll, has repeatedly experienced. Statutory bodies such as the QAA (2000) have encouraged a regulatory approach to lessening the chances of students gaining credit for work that is not their own. Also many authors have explored ways of redesigning courses to lessen opportunities for plagiarism (Carroll and Appleton, 2001; Gajadhar, 2000).

This paper concentrates on two aspects of this debate. It argues for clearer, more complete definitions of plagiarism and makes a case for accepting the research on assessment for student-centred learning as a significant help in lessening the impact of plagiarism. Whereas electronic detection may seem an answer to cheating in exams and assignments, it may be neither the best nor the most problem-free solution and could even lead to a culture of suspicion detrimental to student learning. We suggest starting with student learning and, in particular, with ensuring students receive clear and complete guidelines as to what constitutes plagiarism, how it is defined at disciplinary level and what actions are taken in the event of a misdemeanour being identified. This paper also advocates that academic staff should be encouraged to review the links between plagiarism, assessment and classroom actions and we offer suggestions as to how this might be done.

## The Difficulties of Defining Plagiarism

If staff can be certain that their students understand the meaning of plagiarism, they can surely feel easier about expecting them to comply with rules and recommending consequences if they do not. The Oxford Dictionary definition of plagiarism is *'to take and use another person's thoughts, writings, inventions etc. as one's own'*. A 'suits all needs' definition is usually augmented as in this example:

*'Plagiarism' can be defined as the attempt to gain advantage for yourself – academic advantage, financial advantage, professional advantage, advantage of publicity – by trying to fool someone, such as a teacher, an editor, an employer, or a reader, into thinking that you wrote something, thought something, or discovered something which, in actual fact, someone else wrote, thought, or discovered. Plagiarism is sometimes defined, aphoristically, as 'literary theft'* (McNaughton, 1995).

This new version has much to commend it in that it addresses the student directly, uses real language, expands the definition beyond a narrow classroom context and reminds the students that plagiarism concerns more than just using someone else's words. Including a reference to intention would strengthen it further. Some definitions do so, for example:

*Plagiarism is the verbatim use of another's work as if it is the student's own work. If students take the writing of a published author and present it as their own, this constitutes plagiarism. Sometimes this is done unintentionally because of poor research habits; sometimes it is quite deliberate. In either case, plagiarism is unacceptable.*

(Faculty of Education, University of Sydney, Australia).

It is also helpful, when defining plagiarism, to clearly differentiate between cheating and poor academic practice. Some definitions seem to imply a continuum of behaviour as in this somewhat dated example:

*The spectrum is a wide one. At one end there is a word-for-word copying of another's writing without enclosing the copied passage in quotation marks and identifying it in a footnote, both of which are necessary. (This includes, of course, the copying of all or any part of another student's paper). It hardly seems possible that anyone of college age or more could do that without clear intent to deceive. At the other end there is the almost casual slipping in of a particularly apt term which one has come across in reading and which so admirably expresses one's opinion that one is tempted to make it personal property.*

(Martin and Ohmann, 1963).

Students who weave together blocks of text, citing each source correctly and adding little if any of their own words have probably written a very poor paper but they have not plagiarised. Many students find this distinction hard to grasp so suggestions in the next section about teaching them to use the definition are important but clearly signalling the distinction in a definition would help.

So, in summary, it is suggested that all definitions should mention intent. Where there is room for more than a minimal definition, it would be useful to remind students of their responsibilities for either citing a source correctly when the work is used unchanged or reconfiguring the work using acceptable academic practices. This could involve paraphrasing, summarising and modifying, thus underlining the difference between plagiarism and poor practice. Linking plagiarism with writing skills such as paraphrasing is probably only effective when there is space and time to explore these issues as they, in turn, probably require defining and explaining, at the very least with students who are just starting their academic careers.

Moving slightly away from the issue of defining plagiarism for students, there remains the issue of helping academics clarify their own thinking about the often-complex matters that surround plagiarism. It is probably not helpful to share this level of thinking with students, despite the current push towards greater transparency which we both endorse (overtly later in this paper). Students can be disempowered if they feel that they are being asked to operate in areas of ambiguity and disputed meanings yet being punished when they get it wrong. However, it is helpful to remind academics that these are often not straightforward matters. In our experience, a 'definition' exercise is always more fruitful when done with colleagues or peers, seeking consensus, rather than done in isolation. Rooting the discussion in a particular discipline can also mean an easier agreement.

One problematic area in all disciplines concerns so-called common knowledge. In many definitions, facts that are part of everyone's daily life are exempt but transplanting this idea to a disciplinary context can prove less clear cut. When, for example, is a person "allowed" to know some fundamental theory in their discipline – when they arrive at university? When they graduate? When they get their PhD? It will help students if academic staff make clear to them when they must cite ideas, authors and work and when they can consider themselves sufficiently "inducted" into the discipline to legitimately know these things in their own right. What constitutes common knowledge will change depending on a student's level and the context in which it is expressed (e.g. external publication or a departmental seminar, at two extremes of the spectrum for a postgraduate student).

Academics will also need opportunities to discuss conventions in their discipline. Biologists, Computer Scientists and Historians have, in our experience, very different takes on what is and is not acceptable in student work. The first step is for each discipline to be clear about what it expects before seeking to inform students, probably best done through actively teaching the skills and through modeling acceptable behaviour. The next section covers these matters.

## Helping students use definitions of plagiarisms

Students will best understand what constitutes plagiarism if they actively work with whatever definitions they are offered. One easy way to achieve this (and to encourage discussion) is to ask them for examples or provide your own. “Jane lifted six paragraphs from the Web the night before her essay was due because she was pressed for time and when challenged, she says she believed that information on the Web was free.” Did she intend to plagiarise? Did she in fact plagiarise? “John bought an essay from a commercial supplier” Did he intend to plagiarise? “Abu and Raphael did the work together and each handed in the answers as his own work” Did their collusion constitute plagiarism?

The current literature on plagiarism offers fertile ground for useful quotes. Here are three we have used with students:

*“It’s difficult when you start out in academia, you could not be sure what it means to be a student. So when I first started I was again unsure about what to do in terms of references and that sort of thing. So you could say that in some of my essays I did things wrong unknowingly because I didn’t reference it right. But that was something to do with my lack of experience in academia.”*  
(Ashworth et al 1997).

*“There were those times where I had 3 or 4 papers to do in the same week and I went and found one from your sight (sic). I always looked up more information and changed it around a little. It’s not like I wasn’t doing any work or using this to cheat, it was a helper.”*  
(A student responding to a Bulletin Board discussion on whether using others’ essays which were available free on the web might be cheating).

*“I had this really good idea. I thought of it but then about six months later, I found it in a book. So my supervisor said I had to cite this book. But I thought of it. That was MY idea. I didn’t cite the book and so far, nothing has happened.”*  
(Communication to Carroll)

Another memorable activity for students is to watch staff modelling the behaviours expected of students. In the context of ‘writing workshops’ for postgraduate students embarking on a thesis, for example, modelling a good example will easily trigger dialogue around the issue of plagiarism. In our experience, it is less helpful to model ‘unacceptable’ practice because the number of ways to *not* meet requirements is very large indeed. Students might, however, enjoy generating a checklist of unacceptable practice(s) themselves. Undergraduate students usually find one exercise insufficient and need guidance and feedback at several points in their academic career. Numerous studies confirm students’ confusion in these matters (see, for example, Ashworth et al, 1997).

When academics explicitly teach students how to avoid plagiarism, it is certainly helpful to record such activity and point out explicitly to students that you have dealt with these matters. It is probably useful to include information about how the institution deals with breaches of academic regulations. A study by Norton et al (2001) highlights the link between students' behaviour, their perceptions of the relative seriousness of different modes of cheating and their understanding of punishment and penalties should any cheating be detected. As student diversity in Higher Education increases, so too does our certainty that students bring different conceptions, expectations and cultural mores. It follows, therefore, that we need to present and explain 'the rules' of engagement in the learning process and prepare students for the experience of assessment.

Finally, the larger the project, the more important it is to ensure students are clear about expectations because it seems that sometimes, the rules only get invoked for high value tasks. In a case that reached the High Court in 1995, a student successfully argued against punishment for plagiarism in a dissertation resulting in a third class degree with the following:

*"I was given no advice or guidance about the format and layout of a project this size and was certainly not told about the need for footnotes or how to refer to source material used. I am trying to argue it could not have been plagiarism because I did not intend it and I referenced the book as I had always done."*  
(Charter, 1995 quoted in Miller et al 1998)

The following extract is from a lesson designed to teach students how to paraphrase. It is included not because the instructions are clear [note: some of the statements seem to mix up copying, rewriting and cutting and pasting others' words] but because it attempts to share with students the beliefs and values that underpin the requirements we place upon them:

*Only use someone else's writing when you want to quote precisely what they wrote. If this is not your goal, USE YOUR OWN WORDS. This avoids any ambiguity about who wrote it. After all, you do not want someone to accuse you of plagiarism. You need to learn how to write in your own style. You may be influenced by authors that you find clear and easy to understand, but your writing needs to be YOUR writing. Mimicking someone else is not a productive exercise. You just learn to cut and paste. An instructor who is reading or grading your work is interested in YOUR understanding of an idea. I am not interested in your ability to copy explanations from the textbook. I know that the author of the book understands it, which is why I picked the textbook. I need to know if YOU understand it.*

*Understanding and learning is more than just replaying something you have heard. Writing is a valuable exercise that tests your ability to explain a topic. I often think I understand something, until I try to write it out. This is an important part of learning'.*

(Van Bremmer, 1995, emphasis in the original text).

## **Making time for teaching students**

Often the teachers who are most worried about plagiarism are those most challenged to deal with it by giving time to defining and understanding. Academic staff, burdened with large classes or whose focus is away from teaching towards research may well wish that others do the work. Those who teach subjects which traditionally have a high demand for facts, formulae and information may argue that time spent teaching the rights and wrongs of academic conduct is not time well spent. Yet these are just the instances when plagiarism is a real risk and needs to be treated seriously. When staff present these arguments (and they often do), we suggest they balance their reluctance with anxieties about levels of plagiarism occurring and with the knowledge that people best placed to deal with it are the people in the departments which report the highest levels of suspicion. Changes at departmental level will encourage consistency. Changes made at the level of the individual academic may lessen the opportunities for students to submit work that is not their own, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The next section argues that the literature on teaching and learning shows that making it less likely that students plagiarise will also make it more likely they will learn.

## **Looking for other solutions**

It is possible to cite a number of things academics currently do quite unwittingly and unintentionally that make plagiarism seem a pragmatic option for the student. Why *not* cheat when offered essays that ask them to gather and present information that they know is just sitting there on the Web? Why should an individual student do their own work when asked to do the same problem as others in the class, or when asked to solve the same case study that was used last year? Why make an effort when everyone in the group gets the same mark regardless of who does the work? These things are not difficult to change. A review of courses and programmes for obvious opportunities for plagiarism is often fruitful and could result in departmental agreement about, for example, how often courses must change or the balance of learning outcomes that require collecting (as opposed to analysing) information.

Whereas formerly, teachers could have some idea about what the recommended booklist contained, no one can keep up with an electronic source which allegedly grows by several million pages a day. Happily, there is no need to attempt this. Instead, academic staff could place greater onus on the skills of analysing and evaluating information rather than just finding it (Breivik, 1997).

Sometimes, changes to assessment need be no more onerous than asking to see several drafts of a piece of work. We might ask students to seek out resources, assemble relevant information then analyse and evaluate it. This would make full use of students' ability to plunder the Web and the library, and develop key skills such as organisation, judgement and selecting evidence. Other possibilities include asking students to analyse recent newspaper articles, thereby using materials in the public domain but using them in different ways that allow for assessment of a range of skills other than information retrieval and presentation.

Whilst there is much merit in reconsidering the design of courses and coursework, another place to start might be in reviewing assessment and in particular, group assessment. The department might inspect what task students are asked to do in groups, list how that is assessed and check what provision is in place for recording individual effort. Asking for electronic submissions in addition to hard copy would allow the judicious use of electronic detection tools for collusion. Sometimes, making group based assessments less susceptible to copying is as easy as offering clear instructions, as was demonstrated by a recent well-publicised case that involved students in a UK university who were found to have colluded in a computer science assignment. The proposed punishment outraged the students, attracted national newspaper coverage and prompted a threat of court proceedings. The students claimed they had been encouraged to work together and engage in peer learning on various tasks and projects. They were adamant that, because the distinction between working together and submitting together was unclear, they had been treated unfairly. The case was settled quickly internally though little public information is available as to how the situation was actually dealt with.

Some changes seem to us less likely to simultaneously lessen plagiarism and encourage learning, in particular reverting to unseen exams and cutting out group work. The arguments about exams as a reliable and valid measure of learning are beyond the remit of this paper. However, the link between plagiarism and coursework, especially coursework involving groups, is often discussed when academics meet to share concerns about the growing number of students who plagiarise. Group work probably encourages collaborative/peer learning and, when well designed, can promote deep learning by actively engaging students in the learning process. The goal of higher education is to support and enable the development of the independent learner (Boud, 1995), something groups (paradoxically) can achieve. We would argue that assessment in general and groups in particular are less problematic if the criteria allow for group and/or individual effort and if students understand how they will be assessed.

Formalised ways of encouraging and documenting collaboration are possible and need not be onerous. Where collaboration is encouraged, clear guidance on what will be assessed and how learning must be documented will help students meet requirements for individual effort. Some of our own research and development work indicates that students are capable of distinguishing who contributed and who did not contribute to project outcomes (e.g. Butcher et al 1995, Heylings and Stefani, 1997). Assessment of the process as well as the product of any task can act as a motivator to involvement rather than freeloading (Boud, 1995). An experimental tool for assessing student effort asks students to log electronically the way they completed a project and how they wish it to be judged (Stefani, Clarke and Littlejohn, 2000). Because entries are dated automatically, student entries can be tracked. Whilst this does not rule out the possibility of plagiarism, it does mean that students make some of their learning processes public. By agreeing with students how criteria will be used and how assessment judgements will be made, students can be encouraged to feel some ownership of the assessment criteria. Price et al (2000) confirm the importance of actively involving students in applying assessment criteria if they are to use and understand them. This is not easy to achieve.

Research on student understanding (Orsmond, P. et al 1996 and 1997) indicates that staff and students have very different conceptions of what is expected or what is meant by published or documented assessment criteria relating to assessment tasks. Actively involving students means making real efforts to move beyond their (often-silent) agreement. Because students often either don't ask questions or don't tell us they do understand, it may take considerable effort to ensure students understand but the payoffs for plagiarism may be great. Cole and Kiss (2000) show that students cheat less when they see tasks as worth doing, they can see that the assessment is linked to their learning, and they are clear about the expectations we have of them.

## Looking over the Horizon

Suggestions for lessening plagiarism need not take large amounts of academic time but they may challenge academic values and beliefs. Arguments about promoting student learning through, for example, peer and self assessment and student-designed assessment criteria do not seem sufficient to encourage the more traditional to adopt new ways of assessment. A recent survey showed support for peer and self-assessment was very low. As staff developers, we find this interesting because we have seen, over the past ten years, a growing willingness to adopt new methods for teaching. Resources relating to teaching and learning have never been higher, with conferences, accessible journals, the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the LTSN Generic Centre. Induction courses relating to teaching and learning are welcomed in some places and accepted in others as unavoidable – in contrast to former active resistance. However, with some notable exceptions, assessment seems relatively untouched. We have both had the experience of working with academic staff who seem almost desperate to hang on to ‘traditional’ assessment techniques. In many instances, where there has been a change in the teaching to include for example, group work projects, the assessment strategy has not been changed significantly to reflect the change in student learning (Stefani 1998). Staff often say that they have no control over the assessment procedures used in their departments.

Linking so called new methods of assessment with strategies for lessening plagiarism might increase adoption of the former however, there are signs of the opposite happening. Often, we hear colleagues speculate that a fear of plagiarism might provoke a return to traditional methods such as unseen exams and individual project work. Yet graduates need to be able to make objective judgements about one’s own and others’ work (Boud, 1995) and to do so, will need support from academic staff to develop these skills and to know whether they have, in fact, gained this ability. If we move in the direction of making assessment meaningful to our students, cheating will never be entirely eliminated - Higher Education is hugely imperfect, as is life! We were, after all, students ourselves once upon a time, were we all so saintly? But we can do more to develop assessments that do not encourage (however inadvertently) plagiarism by accepting the findings of the research on student learning. In this way, we do not encourage (however inadvertently) an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion by relying too heavily on detection tools.

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The Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) is a network of 24 Subject Centres, based in higher education institutions throughout the UK, and a Generic Centre, based in York, offering generic information and expertise on learning and teaching issues that cross subject boundaries. It aims to promote high quality learning and teaching through the development and transfer of good practice in all subject disciplines, and to provide a 'one-stop shop' of learning and teaching resources for the HE community.

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