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Let Them Plagiarise: Developing academic writing in a safe environment

By Chris Ireland and John English

Abstract

This paper considers part of a first year module which has a focus on referencing and plagiarism. In designing the approach to plagiarism education a consideration of learning theories, particularly learning styles and social constructivism, helped in reaching the conclusion that some students may need to experience plagiarism in order to appreciate what it constitutes. As a result, students write an early formative essay on which they receive feedback, mainly but not exclusively, on referencing and plagiarism. As part of this process students learn about why we should not plagiarise and while discussing feedback are encouraged to explain their own understanding of plagiarism. A focus on academic writing is maintained for four weeks until a second formative assignment is completed. The approach has been well received by the students, many of whom indicated that they did not share the institution's understanding of plagiarism prior to entering university.

Introduction

The issue of plagiarism has been widely debated in recent years and in the light of this growing concern, Dahl (2007) has noted that institutions have adopted a variety of approaches in an attempt to address the problem. As recently as 2006 Macdonald and Carroll declared that the response to the problem of plagiarism was largely through "detection and punishment" and called for a holistic approach, emphasising the need for a greater focus on learning. Such a holistic approach is promoted in the framework provided

by JISC (2006) in which “six themes of action” form the basis of “the development of a sustainable model of practice” regarding plagiarism. One of the themes in this framework, entitled “Teaching the Skills”, provides general advice concerning how students might learn how to produce plagiarism free work. Commenting on this general theme JISC (2008) explains that

> “core instruction relating to information literacy development can be haphazard or assumed. It is vital, therefore, that all students are provided with appropriate and timely instruction with opportunities to practice in a supportive environment that allows them to learn from their mistakes.”

This statement clarifies the need for HEIs to establish a focus on learning as part of a holistic strategy towards plagiarism. The question remains as to what this might mean in practice. What is clear from JISC (2008) is the need to ensure that the instruction students have regarding information literacy development is considered carefully and the statement probably reflects what has often occurred with the focus on plagiarism in many HEIs, that is to say, the instruction may not be appropriate or timely, it may not take place in a supportive environment and it may not allow students to learn from their mistakes.

This sentiment resonates with the tutors of the module which forms the focus of this paper, since it has developed underpinned by principles which accord with the ideas promoted by JISC (2008). This paper will explain how the approach taken to academic writing has developed but will particularly focus on plagiarism education and why we believe that allowing students to experience plagiarism may be an important part of this education.

Learning about plagiarism

The importance of developing a focus on learning and plagiarism has been emphasised by a number of authors. Dawson (2004:135) argues that universities need to ensure that students are able to "actively learn to be competent learners" emphasising that a lack of competence in "scholarly citation and referencing" and a number of other study skills, including "time management, effective reading and note-making … is clearly a significant factor in the motivation to plagiarise." Carroll (2002) and McGowan (2005) suggest an apprenticeship period providing time for students to participate in activities designed to help them incorporate the writing requirements of their discipline. McGowan (2005:292) further argues that this apprenticeship should, for motivational purposes, begin by focussing on the positive reasons for citation and referencing as opposed to the negative threats attached to plagiarism avoidance. Carroll (2006), when discussing how and when the topic of plagiarism should be introduced to new students, emphasises the importance of the timeliness of instruction, suggesting that plagiarism is often claimed to have been covered during induction but that students do not remember a great deal of information provided during this period. She further argues that students need to be involved when they are learning and need the opportunity to "experiment". The ideas promoted here clearly align with JISC's "Teaching the Skills" theme.

It seems that the considerations which need to be made with regard to plagiarism education should be no different to the pedagogical considerations for any other topic. In fact, it may be argued that since the potential consequences of not understanding plagiarism are more serious than the potential consequences of not understanding a

disciplinary topic, then greater consideration needs to be given to how best to help students understand plagiarism.

Individual differences and learning about plagiarism

An important consideration in an approach to plagiarism education is the recognition of individual learner differences. While individual learner differences may comprise a variety of factors, important considerations in the context of plagiarism education are prior learning experiences and learning styles. Much of the literature relating to individual learner differences and plagiarism is written in the context of international students; however, with a student population in the UK which is becoming increasingly diverse, insights made by those considering international students may be more widely applicable.

Writing in the context of international students studying away from home, Mattisson (2010:173) emphasises the need for tutors to appreciate that students may have developed a different understanding of plagiarism and that familiarity with practices in the student countries of origin is important before considering accusations of plagiarism. Support for this is provided by Bikowski and Broecklman (2007) who explain that some students may think that by producing a paraphrased version of an author's idea they are ruining the original and say that in many countries citation is not expected by undergraduates with the concept of ownership of words being a notion with which many students raised in non-western cultures will have difficulty. A further difficulty might arise when students from one particular culture might see providing help to a fellow student as a duty and therefore see nothing wrong in such action (Cordeiro, 1995). This last situation highlights the construct of collectivism which is often highlighted as a contrasting cultural

foundation (e.g. Brennan and Durovic, 2005; Alfred, 2009) to the prevailing characteristic of individualism in the 'West'. This tends to be reflected in assessment where students are usually expected to complete assignments individually. However, despite these observations, Montgomery (2010:30) warns against over generalising, referring to learners as having their own "personal learning 'culture'".

Individual differences are highlighted by Carroll (2008) who, writing in the context of UK Higher Education, explains that both international and domestic student understandings of plagiarism are likely to be equally as varied. These understandings will have been developed in a variety of environments and will have developed from the individual experiences of the students both inside and outside the classroom. Some students may enter Higher Education with little understanding of plagiarism and others may have an understanding which is similar to their institution's. However, the likelihood is that many students will find that their previously acceptable writing practices are unacceptable in Higher Education (McCune, 2004; Sinclair, 2006) and that rather than being rewarded for these practices they are punished (Ryan and Hellmundt, 2003).

While knowledge of prior learning relating to plagiarism can help to ascertain student understandings of plagiarism on entering Higher Education, knowledge of learning styles can help course designers determine the types of activities in which students might engage in order to best gain an understanding of plagiarism. Despite the potential which a knowledge of learning styles has in plagiarism education most of the available discussion of learning styles in the plagiarism literature highlights how learning styles developed by groups of international students, and particularly those from Asia, may impact on their propensity to plagiarise (see Brennan and Durovic,2005; Handa and Power, 2005). However, Montgomery (2010: 124) doubts the usefulness of attempting to associate

particular learning styles with particular cultures. Indeed, it may be more useful in the context of plagiarism education to consider how knowledge of learning styles can help in the design of activities.

The position taken by the tutors on the module discussed in this paper is that it is important to recognise that a variety of evolving learning styles may be exhibited by students and that as a group they will therefore require a range of activities in order to learn about plagiarism. Taking account of the suggestions that students should be able to "learn from their mistakes" (JISC, 2008), "experiment" (Carroll, 2006) and serve an apprenticeship (Carroll, 2002; McGowan, 2005) it would seem that a good starting point for some students might be the opportunity to produce some academic writing and gain some feedback which might include comments regarding plagiarism. This idea is also supported by those who take a social constructivist view of learning. Such a view sees individuals creating shared understanding through "interaction, practice, and above all, through feedback" (Carroll, 2009). Given the likelihood that students will arrive with a variety of understandings of plagiarism then it seems vital that institutions provide opportunities for practice and feedback which involve interaction with staff and peers.

Encouraging a more critical approach when learning about plagiarism

A further influence on the approach described in this paper which is underpinned by social constructivism has been an attempt to take a more critical approach to plagiarism education. This is derived from the debate over approaches to the development of academic writing, which considers whether a critical or pragmatic approach to the development of students' academic writing should be taken. As with much of the academic

writing literature the discussion takes place in the context of English for Academic Purposes which particularly considers the needs of non-native speakers. However, as with previously discussed topics, there is no reason why this debate should not extend to the needs of native speakers who may be as unfamiliar with the writing requirements of the academy as their non-native speaking peers, particularly when considered in the context of widening participation.

Briefly, a pragmatic approach to the learning of academic writing presents conventions and rules to which the students must conform. They must learn them and accept them without question. They then have a framework for writing at university. In contrast the critical approach allows the students to challenge these norms and allows them to consider the desirability of following writing conventions. These approaches are generally seen as opposing paradigms; however, recently critical pragmatism has been promoted as a possible reconciliation of this dichotomy. Harwood and Hadley (2004) suggest such an approach in which students investigate conventions in order to ascertain the extent to which writing conventions are followed. An alternative to this approach which seems to be underpinned by similar principles would be an approach based on academic discussion. Telling students that plagiarism is unacceptable and promoting passive acceptance of the convention, a pragmatic approach, may encourage students to adopt the idea but with no guarantee of a deep commitment to the principle, particularly if they do not fully understand the reasons. However, if students are given the opportunity to explore the concept, to see how plagiarism operates in different contexts and to listen to discussion then they will be able to discover why the academy takes the subject so seriously and indeed why Clark (1992), herself an advocate of critical pedagogy, reserves plagiarism as an academic writing convention which should remain unchallenged. This is supported by East (2006) who explains that one of the difficulties students may have in learning about

plagiarism avoidance is that if they are not encouraged to take a critical approach to the topic the students may not be in a position to appreciate why the academy places such high importance on its avoidance.

Having explained why learning needs to be carefully considered when planning a plagiarism policy, the particular approach adopted with a group of new undergraduates is now discussed. The approach consists of a number of activities, however, the particular focus is on a formative essay and on the feedback provided to students on this essay.

The development of the approach

We had realised in 2005 that we were not doing enough to help the students learn about plagiarism or for that matter, a number of the skills required for study at university. Until this time new students were offered six weekly hour long skills session. The first week was always well attended (over 50 students) but by week six attendance had dwindled to less than 10. The sessions included one on plagiarism which followed a common format of asking students to consider whether various pieces of writing had been plagiarised from an initial paragraph which they had been asked to read.

We were fortunate that a new module was planned as a starting point for Personal Development Planning and we were able to plan the incorporation of skills development during the initial development of the module. The module includes a large number of short assignments and activities which students incorporate into a portfolio of work which they then use as the basis of reflection as the module develops.

It had always been our intention to have an early focus on academic writing and as a result we included a series of activities, including two on referencing and plagiarism, which built up to the submission of a 1000 word formative assignment during week 4 of the first term. The end result was the production of documents relating to applying for a placement position for which the related written assignment asked the students to justify the design of their CV, drawing on their research over the same period.

This format operated for the first two years of the module. During this time a large number of the students completed the report successfully and the feedback provided was on a range of assignment writing issues. However, a small but worrying number of students had not incorporated the messages about referencing and plagiarism despite the instruction seeming to be relevant and timely; carried out while the students were preparing the assignment.

In considering how we were going to move forward we were helped by feedback from two areas. Firstly, we spoke informally to some of the students who had written unacceptably during both years that the format existed. A consistent message was that having been accused of plagiarism and having been able to discuss the issue in this context had helped them realise what they needed to do in the future. In some cases student understandings developed prior to university seemed to take precedence over the messages we had been delivering about plagiarism. Also, the results of an internal survey of the 2007 induction programme revealed that many students felt that they wanted to begin their studies sooner, feeling there was a great deal of spare time during the induction period. These insights helped inform the redesign of the first four weeks of the module.

The redesigned module now has two shorter pieces of writing each of 500 words. The first assignment, set on the Tuesday of Induction Week and due three days later, is treated as a formative assessment, being used to help develop the writing processes for the second assignment which is due as previously, in week four.

The topic of the first essay, work placement, draws on the fact that many of the students decide to study this course because of the work placement opportunity in the third year. The assignment brief is distributed with some simple instructions to follow and a list of three relevant sources to be used. The instructions provide details of how to cite but plagiarism is not mentioned at any point. The submission is via Turnitin only and the tutors assess the submissions using GradeMark. The assessment of the essays focusses on a range of issues relating to writing and not only on referencing and plagiarism.

During the week following submission the students are provided with opportunities to have feedback on the assignment in a variety of ways in an attempt to account for the possible individual differences mentioned above.

As with most other written assignments, individual written feedback is provided on each essay and in many cases the Turnitin report is used to support points. As well as using Turnitin to highlight potential plagiarism it can be used to focus on other aspects of writing (Davis and Carroll, 2009).

For those who write the best essays the feedback is also, with the permission of the authors, anonymised and made available to the whole cohort via the university virtual learning environment (VLE). As Heinrich (2007:275) explains the feedback of individual students can be useful to the whole group and this can be facilitated easily using a VLE.

During tutorial while the students begin the next element in the module portfolio, volunteers receive oral feedback on their assignment in front of their group. This enables students to see how some of their peers have written and highlights both positive and negative aspects of writing. However, each volunteer is asked what they previously understood plagiarism to be so that the whole group is able to see the potential for misunderstanding the issue as seen by HEIs.

The activities relating to plagiarism and writing continue as previously but now take place in the context of the students having received feedback on a formative assignment and experienced some discussion of plagiarism. These activities consist of an interactive lecture which uses voting pad technology, similar to one described by Bombaro (2007), and two quizzes provided via the VLE. These take place before the second formative assignment is submitted in week four.

Evaluation of the approach

The approach described here cannot yet be fully evaluated as students have not reached their final year of study. However, the incidence of potential plagiarism during the assignment in week four fell considerably with only two student requiring feedback about this.

Following receipt of feedback on the second formative assignment the students are invited to complete a short questionnaire about the module which includes a number of questions about the approach taken to writing and plagiarism.

Sixty-four students of eighty-one who completed the questionnaire indicated that they had heard of plagiarism before attending university. However, of these sixty-four all but two indicated that their understanding had changed during the first five weeks at university.

All the students were asked to rate which activity of six presented to them had contributed most and which least to their understanding of plagiarism. The results (see Table 1) showed that each of the six items had been selected by students as being either most or least useful. This may support the view that the approach caters for differences between learners. Also, the apparent usefulness of the activities peaks around the middle with activities which are presented in weeks two and three of teaching (items 3-5 in Table 1) being rated as adding most by 55 out of 68 students who responded.

It seems clear that by the submission of the second written assignment in week four a large number of students were already confident in the development of their writing with plagiarism not mentioned in feedback. It may also be the case that many students felt confused following the feedback on the first written assignment, particularly if their previous understanding of plagiarism had been challenged. This confusion may then have been clarified when the subsequent activities were completed.

Table 1 Which of the following has added most / least to your understanding of plagiarism?

Item	Most	Least
1) Written feedback on the Baseline Assessment (placement essay)	6	16
2) Oral feedback in tutorial on the Baseline Assessment (placement essay)	4	14
3) The plagiarism lecture which used the voting pads	16	7
4) The Plagiarism Test	29	6
5) The Referencing Competency Test	10	10
6) Feedback on the Academic Report (covering letter)	3	14
7) None of the above	0	0

Conclusion

Given the diversity of our students, allowing them to write, possibly plagiarise and experience their own feedback and that of others might be the most appropriate starting point. Such an approach provides the basis that some students may need in order to engage with other activities aimed at helping them move towards the institution's understanding of plagiarism. The available evidence presented in this paper suggests that taken as a whole the activities described have had a real impact on how the majority of the

students perceive plagiarism. One student commented in the final reflection of their module portfolio:

> “A major problem for me at the start of university was how everything from an external source had to be referenced. This showed in the first essay I completed as I did not use the referencing system correctly. Nevertheless, after having several interactive lectures on this I overcame my initial problems.”

While finding the right balance between providing warnings about plagiarism and encouraging students to think about why we follow particular writing conventions is not easy, reflections such as this reassure us that an approach to plagiarism education which draws on critical pragmatism and learning styles has real merit.

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