

PLAGIARISM, VALUES AND COMPUTING: DIFFERING CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS OF ACADEMIC WORK IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper presents research in progress of a funded project that seeks to understand the relationships between plagiarism, cultural values and expectations and computing. It reviews the current understanding of this area and proposes an integrative model for understanding this complex phenomena. The paper then highlights issues of concern in two of the early stages of the research and describes how they will be studied. It ends with a description of the research that will be presented at the conference.

1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of academic integrity within higher education has become increasingly important in the recent years. In terms of research and publications a number of high profile cases of alleged plagiarism that have been reported (for example, Kock, 1999; Kock & Davison, 2003) and many professional bodies are creating explicit guidelines and procedures on plagiarism (AIS, 2003).

Plagiarism is also a growing problem within teaching activities, especially essay writing. For example, O'Connor (2003), reports a recent Australian study covering twenty subjects in six universities that found that around 14% of essays reviewed by an automated plagiarism checking system "contained unacceptable levels of unattributed materials". Many other studies report similar results. As a result, there have been many attempts to address the problem of plagiarism and universities have updated their disciplinary procedures to successfully 'prosecute' plagiarists with penalties ranging from awarding 0 for that work, through to failure for that year or, in extreme cases, expulsion from the university.

In relation to the literature that has considered why students plagiarise, Carroll (2002) suggests it is because most students are unaware of what plagiarism is. Furthermore, there is often considerable discrepancy between universities about how plagiarism is detected and enforced, with concerns raised that the effects of growing numbers of students results in fewer opportunities for one-on-one interactions about essay writing. This is coupled with increased numbers of international students, for whom the language of the university (English in our case) is a second or even third spoken and written language.

Another presumed contributory factor, that applies to all students not just international ones, is the way in which writing practices have changed with the introduction of the internet and electronic access to journals and books. Whereas previously students would, at the very least, have to retype materials from other sources, nowadays they can simply cut and paste relevant pieces of text into their own essays. Thus the wider availability of electronic materials is likely to have an effect on writing practices. An understanding of how students use such sources nowadays is needed in order to address these writing practices. Do students plan their essay structure then seek supporting evidence for each stage of the argument, or to they locate references about the topic and seek to paste them together to form a coherent argument?

In conjunction with the increased availability of electronic sources is the increased availability of automatic plagiarism detection tools (such as <http://www.submit.ac.uk>). These tools automatically compare student essays against a library of electronic resources including online journals and internet pages. They report the proportion of copied text in the student essay using a colour indication of how severe the problem is, see Figure 1. (It is worth noting that, with conventions for how to cite sources, most students will match at least partially with other sources through common citation of sources. As a result, evaluating the reports is an active, discretionary rather than automatic process).

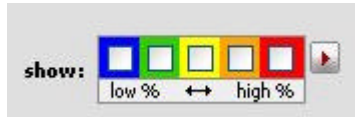


Figure 1 Colour coding used in plagiarism report

Though much of this literature has highlighted some important facets of the problem of plagiarism, it is very much rooted in western contexts. Research at Lancaster University (Hayes & Introna, 2004; Introna, Hayes, Blair, & Wood, 2003) has indicated that there are complex interactions between cultural values about plagiarism, computer mediated writing practices, institutional practices in teaching and learning and plagiarism detection. These are summarised in Figure 2.

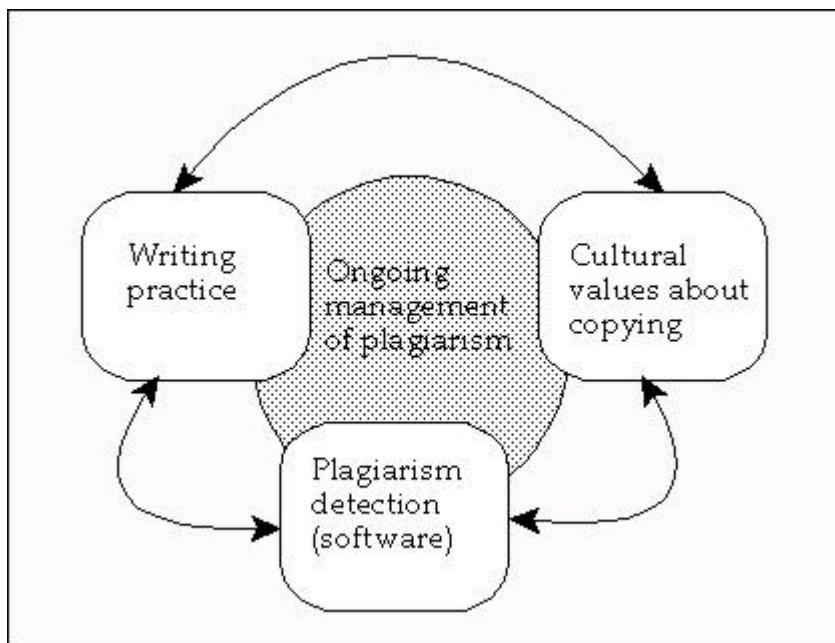


Figure 2 Model of plagiarism

This paper presents research in progress which argues that the management of plagiarism will only be effective if an integrated approach to these complex interactions is acknowledged. As a consequence any effective interventions needs to understand and address all of these areas. The paper reports on ongoing work in two parts of the model: to understand cultural values about copying and the current status of ongoing management of plagiarism.

This research and the changed practices it aims to introduce will be of direct benefit to universities that seek to recruit and retain international students. In an increasingly global world (Walsham, 2001) universities can expect to face an increasingly diverse student population that comes from around the world. However, without a better understanding of the differing expectations of the students and universities, studying abroad risks becoming an increasingly unpopular option for students which can have important financial consequences for the viability of many universities.

2 TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF PLAGIARISM

2.1 Cultural values about copying

Much of the traditional debate about plagiarism has viewed it rather dualistically: if a text contains 'copied' material then it is either intentionally copied (which would be considered cheating) or it was unintentionally copied (which would be considered as evidence of sloppy writing practices).

The literature suggests, however, that the uses made of texts by international students are not so straight forward. For example, international students may include many copied fragments—which would be deemed plagiarism in the UK—in a way that is not seen as cheating or even sloppy writing practices in the student's home country.

For example, Turner (2000) claims that the authority of the teacher and the subservience of the student is common place in the Chinese educational context. Thus the norm is for the teacher to speak and the students to refrain from asking any questions. Further it is unusual for the teacher to ask any questions to the students during the class, and if questions are asked they normally require factual rather than opinion or argument based responses. Similarly, students are encouraged to take verbatim copies of anything written on the whiteboard rather than to take their own notes. In such a context, the exact reproduction of the teacher's voice (or notes) might well be seen as necessary to succeed.

In other contexts, cheating is often thought to be prevalent. This might be because of the large numbers of students taking particular options, or there may be the belief that teachers assist students in exchange for better student evaluations which can assist with their own career progression. In such circumstances, cheating or helping other students do better might be seen as a legitimate response to an already unfair system.

Further issues arise when students are learning to write essays in a new language. In such cases, one might expect the students to hang onto the words of their sources rather more closely than those of an accomplished writer. Thus the mimicking of words from sources might be seen as the first steps in the progression towards gaining an individual academic voice, rather than a deliberate attempt to cheat.

2.2 Ongoing management of plagiarism

On the institutional teaching and learning side, there is increasing realisation that students do not, by default, know what is meant by plagiarism (indeed, most only come to learn of the term when they receive notification of a formal allegation of plagiarism from the University's administration). This would suggest that more time needs to be spent making students aware of what the academic expectations of the university are, in terms of originality, citing sources etc.

This process of being clearer about what is expected of students is also problematic for academic staff as many of these values and expectations have not been explicitly articulated previously. For example, the notion of self-plagiarism (Samuelson, 1994), whereby an author reuses parts of one paper for another purpose, is hardly uncommon in academia (even without consideration of copyright assignment issues). Similarly, it is important to develop a shared sense of differing expectations of what is considered acceptable within an institution, so that students are not discriminated against based on their choice of option.

3 RESEARCHING CULTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES AROUND PLAGIARISM

This section outlines the research design associated with this research for understanding the differing cultural and organisational expectations of academic work and plagiarism.

3.1 Cultural values about copying

According to UKcosa (the (UK) Council for International Education) (UKcosa, 2004) international students make up approximately 37% of taught postgraduate students in the UK, with 22% of these studying business and management topics. As a result, the study is based on business and management studies at two leading institutions with large numbers of international students. Table 1 gives details of the make up of the current year's students. As can be seen the largest groups of students in both institutions are Chinese, Indian and Greek, which closely matches the patterns for the UK as a whole.

Institution / Course	Size	UK	China	India	Greece	Others
London School of Economics and Political Science MSc ADMIS : Analysis, Design and Management of Information Systems	160	13 (8%)	32 (20%)	11 (7%)	15 (9%)	89 (36 countries) (56%)
Lancaster University MSc ITMOC : IT, Management and Organisational Change	34	7 (20%)	7 (20%)	2 (6%)	10 (30%)	8 (7 countries) (24%)
Lancaster University MSc Management	81	11 (14%)	45 (55%)	8 (10%)	6 (7%)	11 (8 countries) (14%)
Total	275	31	84	21	31	108
Percentage		(11%)	(31%)	(8%)	(11%)	(39%)

Table 1 Student profile (2004/5)

The investigation of cultural values about copying takes place in two stages. First, the project will be studying the expectations and experiences about cultural values from samples of current students at the two universities. Second, there will be field studies organised through the British Council, to a selection of the overseas institutions that send students to these courses.

For current students a variety of research approaches will be adopted, including the use of existing survey instruments about educational values. These ask students about various issues like whether they have ever copied materials and submitted them as their own work, whether they have received substantial unpermitted help or written an assignment for another student. As the same time they are asked for their evaluation of whether this is judged to be a problematic behaviour.

This quantitative data is then fed into focus group discussions with small numbers of students from each country. The use of aggregated survey data has been shown to be helpful for starting discussions about such sensitive issues ("Although you would not cheat in this way, many students from your country claim to have done so. Why do you think that is the case?"). These focus groups will provide qualitative data that will provide contextual information to complement the quantitative data from the surveys.

In addition to the usual issues of questionnaire design and focus group planning, special care is needed in the case of students telling researchers about ethically problematic practices like cheating (Mlcakova & Whitley, 2004). Moreover, if there are cultural norms towards telling the teacher what you think the teacher wants to hear, there is a need for particular techniques to generate recalcitrant respondents (Sørensen et al., 2001).

The field studies will involve visits to a series of overseas universities which typically provide students to the two UK universities in the study. Here, the current students will be asked to complete the same kinds of surveys and focus groups as the students in the UK. The teaching staff will also be asked about the expectations they convey to their students who are going to study overseas.

3.2 Ongoing management of plagiarism

The study of ongoing plagiarism management practices is also a two-fold activity. It involves a survey of practices in teaching and learning. This will help with the sharing of best practice across institutions that face many similar problems. It will also help achieve buy-in for the later dissemination stages of the project.

Alongside this data collection will be an assessment of how many allegations of plagiarism are actually proven. This will provide useful data about the extent of the problem and, perhaps more importantly, about the kinds of issues that prevent the case from being proven (for example, if the student handbook does not have the correct academic year on the cover, the student might reasonably not read the handbook). To this extent, the project will also seek to sit in on as many such disciplinary hearings as possible to study the arguments / explanations given by students who are alleged to have plagiarised.

4 EXPECTED RESULTS

At ECIS we expect to present the first results from this research project. This is likely to include the results of the first surveys of student expectations about plagiarism and some initial findings from the overseas institutions. We also expect to be able to report on the kinds of ongoing plagiarism management practices in place in the UK.

We will also expect to present the outline for the next stages of the work (looking at writing practices and automated detection tools) as well as the dissemination strategies for this work.

This research seeks to address a widespread problem in the university sector. Although the initial fieldwork will be focussed around two UK universities teaching international students about business and management studies topics, we hope that the results will widely applicable to other universities in other countries and to a broader range of subject matter (Lee & Baskerville, 2003).

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