Highlight:

Reflections on an issue of student diversity: unintentional plagiarism among international students

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature to suggest that the rates of plagiarism without intention to deceive are higher among international students. In this article, I reflect upon the literature and my own experience and practice, to explore the possible reasons for this. When taken together, these findings suggest that a pedagogical approach to academic literacy development, embedded within taught programmes, is likely to offer an inclusive solution for plagiarism prevention.

Introduction

Throughout academia students are typically drawn from a diverse range of geographical and cultural backgrounds; each with their own unique circumstances, and each potentially bringing with them an individual set of requirements. In recognition of this diversity, universities have a moral and legal obligation to "protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all" (Equality Act, 2010). Accordingly, at the heart of Keele University's mission, is the core value of Equality and Diversity. In line with the Equality Act (2010), this value takes account of the nine protected characteristics (i.e. age, disability, gender, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation), though morally, it extends far beyond this to anticipate issues relating to the individual learning needs of students; their expectations; and how their previous experiences may influence these. The desired outcome is to create "a diverse, inclusive and professional academic community that respects individuals and enables them to strive for success…." (Keele University, Our Vision 2020). The aim of this article is to explore how the concept of plagiarism raises an issue relating to student diversity, particularly with respect to international students.

"Unintentional" plagiarism and cultural concepts

Plagiarism is an example of academic misconduct that is recognised throughout higher education in the UK (HEA, 2014), and at Keele University, is defined as "the unacknowledged use by a student of someone else's work being presented for assessment as if it were the student's own" (Keele University, Regulation 8). Within some disciplines, such as my own in Postgraduate Medicine, for example, the consequences of academic misconduct may extend beyond the University, and constitute a breach of professional misconduct; the outcome of which could, in its

most serious form, result in the School informing the student's employer and/or professional regulatory body. Given the potentially devastating consequences, we – as a department, are particularly keen to develop ways in which we can apply pedagogical approaches to prevent plagiarism. This is by no means a straightforward task, however, because plagiarism is a multifactorial phenomenon, and the lack of a universal consensus around its definition and clear, universally-accepted guidelines for the process of plagiarism detection, begins to offer a glimpse into potential problems around student expectations (Gu and Brooks, 2008; Hayes and Introna, 2005). It should perhaps be no surprise to learn, therefore, that published reports (HEA, 2014), and our own anecdotal observations at departmental level, indicate that the majority of plagiarism cases seem to be attributed to a misunderstanding, rather than a deliberate act of cheating. This raises an important issue relating to student diversity because there is a growing body of literature to suggest that the rates of plagiarism without intention to deceive are higher among international students (e.g. HEA, 2014; Pecorari et al., 2003).

As an undergraduate student in the UK in the 1990s, plagiarism was not a concept that I can recall being introduced to explicitly in my taught classes, though I did experience a rude awakening that helped to shape my understanding in a less direct way! During a group discussion, the course tutor read out a sentence from my assignment submission that he "was *very* impressed with". Much laughter ensued before he finally explained that the "joke" was on me; I had paraphrased the sentence from an article that he had written, without referencing the source material! This was by no means an intentional act of plagiarism, and though paraphrasing of one short sentence may not be sufficient grounds upon which to trigger a formal academic misconduct process, it serves to illustrate how a lack of understanding about academic writing conventions has the potential to manifest as an incident of plagiarism.

In the Western World plagiarism is accepted to be morally wrong (Kolich, 1983), but in some other parts of the world, plagiarism is ill-defined, if at all. One could easily imagine, therefore, how the concept of appropriate attribution might be even more confusing for an international student with very different, or little, expectations about "what plagiarism looks like". There are anecdotal reports, for example, of students from cultural backgrounds in which it is thought to be complimentary to copy sections of work (i.e. "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery") (Chuah, 2010). It has also been suggested that, in some cultures, students may feel that it would be disrespectful to cite a well-known source because it would suggest that their professor is unfamiliar with the work (Divan et al., 2015). Similarly, upon receipt of formative feedback on her written work, an international Masters Dissertation student once told me that she was anxious about referencing sections of her work that offered critical insights into limitations of the studies in question. She felt that in her culture, this would be viewed as a direct insult to the author, and that this practice would not be encouraged. In order for such a student to adapt to - and develop their understanding of - Western academic conventions, they must first reflect on, and challenge, their own cultural values and previous educational experiences. From the perspective of a teacher, this can be a daunting process to facilitate; it requires a great deal of sensitivity and a clear pedagogical approach. With careful design, however, it seems that this can be achieved via an inclusive approach to academic writing development; by providing guidance to all students about how to formulate

written arguments in an objective way; by explaining our expectations about attribution and referencing from the outset; by providing clear and timely formative feedback; and by using specific examples to illustrate key concepts. By explaining and discussing these points with the Masters student described above, I was able to allay her concerns about referencing (the final outcome was pleasing too; she passed the module with a high grade). I now take a much more inclusive and proactive role in plagiarism prevention by embedding the pedagogical approach to academic writing development within a series of dissertation writing workshops.

Academic literacy and plagiarism

In addition to incomplete paraphrasing, another form of plagiarism can arise from the use of a writing strategy termed "patch writing", which Howard (1993) defined as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes". This strategy is thought to be synonymous with the novice writer who may be able to assimilate information but who hasn't yet developed techniques to express the concepts in their own words (Pecorari, 2003). This raises a particular issue of diversity for international students for whom English is their second language, as some may lack the confidence and/or competence with their English language skills to express ideas in their own words. Subsequently, such students would be at a much higher risk of defaulting to patch writing, and potentially falling prey to accusations of plagiarism. Indeed, there are references to this issue in the literature (e.g. Howard, 2000), and I understand that we have encountered several instances of plagiarism in our own department that were attributed to this cause. In this case, it would usually be necessary to look beyond an inclusive pedagogical solution, towards one that offered a reasonable adjustment to teaching and support, to address this issue.

At Keele University, such adjustments would typically take the form of individual tutorial sessions via the English Language Unit, and would sometimes include additional support with academic writing, including plagiarism awareness, referencing, vocabulary and grammar. This approach, however, would typically be generic in that it would lack subject specific content. It is generally noted that, whilst students usually find this somewhat useful, they will commonly return to the subject tutor for more specific guidance (e.g. Gorska, 2013). In response to this conundrum, Divan et al. (2015) suggest that an academic writing development programme that is embedded early on within the subject discipline might be the solution (indeed, their report suggests a reduced rate of plagiarism among their international students following this intervention). To this end, we have recently developed, and are running a trial, of a similar programme within one of the Master's degree programmes in Postgraduate Medicine. The programme is open to all students and involves them undertaking a short, (non-assessed, optional) online module, when they first enrol, that is supported by an online resource containing study skills material, and involves submission of a short literature review for formative feedback. This process not only permits the formative use of Turnitin for developing plagiarism awareness (a "top tip" suggested by the HEA, 2014), but it also enables the tutor to provide formative feedback that addresses the individual needs of UK and international students on the programme. Ultimately, it is hoped that this proactive approach will not only help to develop academic literacy but will also result in reduced numbers of international

students inadvertently falling prey to allegations of plagiarism. It also has the potential to be used as a remedial tool, later on in the programme, should a student find themselves referred for academic misconduct for plagiarism.

Conclusions

There is a strong suggestion from the literature and my own observations described above, that an early pedagogical approach to academic writing might offer an inclusive solution for plagiarism prevention, particularly for international students with differing cultural expectations and/or linguistic requirements. Until the incident arose with the Masters student that I described above, I had never considered how culture could impact on a student's perception of plagiarism. It is possible that other colleagues do not either; at least not until an incident of plagiarism arises and is referred to the academic conduct officer. Should we (do we?), as a University, offer staff development training for prevention of plagiarism, that includes an element of cultural awareness?

Acknowledgments

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