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‘Ethics of assessment: plagiarism authenticity & ownership’

Dr. Janet Hargreaves

This has been written as a ‘provocation’ at the HEA ethics special interest group (November 2010) to open debate about the impact of the World Wide Web and subsequent similarity detection software on assessing the authenticity of assessed student work.

There are a number of factors that form the background to this paper:

Firstly:

- The ease with which academics can now produce their own papers electronically
- the instant, global accessibility of anything on the world wide web
- the ease of production of journals on line which has led to a proliferation in the number and range of academic papers
- the growth of university repositories where formally published and unpublished documents are made available, including full PhD texts.
- Individuals and institutions placing educational and promotional material on line
- Organisations taking ownership of the production of information relevant to their cause (political parties, charities, health agencies etc)

Secondly:

There has been a huge increase in the number of people studying at university and in the range of subjects available. Individual and government –driven aspirations for widened access to higher education relate to personal and collective notions of financial, social and industrial growth. Education has become a life long endeavour. For younger people it represents an extension of the period between childhood and full adulthood, and a perceived deferred gratification to the achievement of a fulfilling (and more financially rewarding) occupation. For older people it may represent one of a number of career changes through life which aspire to greater fulfilment and a better standard of living. On an international level migration is often linked to higher order skills and thus a university education is a prized route to safety and stability.

Higher Education is high cost and carries high expectations.

Thirdly:

A consequence of this change is that many occupations which were not university based now are, and that the level of educational achievement has risen decade by decade for the past 40 years. Taking the UK as one example, teaching, social work, the allied health professions midwifery and nursing have all migrated from apprentice/ work based disciplines to undergraduate and in some cases now postgraduate level for initial

qualification. Thus being a 'good' whatever now includes the ability to write and think critically about the practice of your chosen subject or career.

Being physically competent is no longer enough; expressing the underpinning of your competence critically in writing is also required.

Plagiarism:

I deal with cases of academic misconduct on a weekly basis but I find it hard to judge if there is 'more' plagiarism than a decade ago. There are more students so the actual numbers would be expected to rise. Because of similarity software such as Turnitin, we are also more able to match student submissions to anything available on the web so detection may be more prevalent. Finally lack of skills in managing the new technology may lead to more false positives by academic staff, and more genuine citation mistakes by students.

What is clear is that the opportunity to plagiarise is greatly increased, as is the ease with which material not produced by the student can be incorporated into their own text.

At Huddersfield we have just had our first discussion about requiring doctoral students to submit via Turnitin which led me to this reflection on the nature of ownership and authenticity.

Ownership and authenticity:

All the web contains is information: it's what we do with it, how we use and reconstruct meaning through it that matters.

I use words to convey to a reader my knowledge and my words are accepted as proxy for my intelligence (or otherwise!) they are the conduit through which I express my critical understanding, and my ideas.

So -when does the information I convey with my words become un-authentic?

Authentic means – 'conforming to the fact' 'reliable information – eye witness', 'not false or copied'

One might say that a painting is authentic if its provenance is know, or that a writer speaks in an 'authentic voice'.

Black, white and shades of grey:

As is always the case with ethics there can be fairly straight forward cases of black and white at the extremes, but the larger, more problematic and more interesting debate rests in the grey area in-between.

If I copy other persons' academic work, deliberately, with the intention to deceive the reader into believing that I have knowledge and literary prowess in a given subject this is clearly wrong – I cannot claim ownership and it's unauthentic.

If I write from scratch on a subject constructing my own unique text, critically selecting correctly cited appropriate literature from others this is generally right – authentic, genuine. I may not 'own' all the words and phrases, but I have not misappropriated them in a deceptive way.

But - - -

I am going to take 'phenomenology' as my grey area.

If I talk or write about phenomenology I am likely to discuss the lived experience of my research participants. Philosophically I will draw on ideas about what it is to be, and the concept of being in the world. It's likely that I will reflect on the extent to which I can separate my personal experience or bracket myself from the phenomenon I am studying.

For anyone who has read or engaged in phenomenological research this is a very familiar discourse without which it would be difficult for me to convince you that I know anything about phenomenology.

A simple search on our university search engine for 'phenomenology' yielded 64,182 hits for which, with one or two clicks of the mouse I could download the full text of scholarly papers on this subject. Opening out the search more generally to web pages on the subject, it yields 115,718 hits. How can I possibly write something 'authentic' about phenomenology? What does it mean for me to 'own' what I have written? If I can't, does this begin to challenge our notions of and assessment of scholarship?

Post script:

Our discussion took a number of directions – is the essay dead? And if so, do we have something better than exams to offer in its place. Do portfolio assessments have a role?

In response to the challenge that there are only so many ways that a writer can demonstrate their understanding of - for example - phenomenology, Peter Allmark offered the analogy of a familiar walk: the path may be well trodden and familiar, but each person who walks it does so in their own unique way. So how do we encourage students to each take that journey with fresh eyes, and how do we capture, and grade, the quality of their efforts.

Janet Hargreaves 15.11.10