

Forget about cheating, what about learning?

Jane Roberts

The Bulmer Foundation
(jane@advocatingchange.org.uk)

This paper will argue that academics need to re-focus on what really matters when developing policies to prevent plagiarism (used here in a broad sense to include unauthorised collaboration in assessment) and deal with its occurrence. Too often, institutions adopt an approach based the concepts of dishonesty and theft. A focus on learning, I will argue, can be fairer to students, more effective in terms of plagiarism prevention, whilst resulting in a system with strengthened resilience to litigation.

The topic of plagiarism and other academic offences in university assessment has been extensively studied in recent years. Published papers have revealed research findings on why students plagiarise (e.g. Saltmarsh 2004); how curricula and assessments can be structured in order to reduce opportunities for plagiarism (e.g. Carroll 2002); and institutional responses more broadly (e.g. Park 2004).

But plagiarism is not a new problem. In a study of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Simmons (1999) notes two broad discourses regarding authorship. Academic staff used the “individual author” model, whilst students’ model was conceived and practiced as “collective and collaborative”. Simmons notes some writing textbooks which explained the intrinsic worth of individual authorship and the links to learning and achievement, but the predominant characterisation was plagiarism as theft. Student discourses of the time accepted cheating as normal and transferred blame on teachers and real and perceived inadequacies in teaching.

In recent decades there has developed a substantial body of work on the changing cultural context of higher education, including globalisation and the shift in values associated with post-modernity (Harvey 1990). Several themes here are extremely relevant to the problem of plagiarism because they undermine the traditional academic approach to authenticity, including the authenticity of students’ learning and students’ work. According to Scott (1997), post-modern higher education is characterised by

- increased access to a diverse range of information sources
- commodification of knowledge
- individualisation of society
- student as consumer
- erosion of respect for traditional institutions such as universities
- cultural priority given to images and surfaces
- “accumulation of epistemological doubts” (Scott 1997: p.41).

It is perhaps not surprising that a focus on plagiarism as theft, and as inevitably dishonest, has been retained in an age when knowledge is increasingly commodified. Lunsford (1999) notes the discourse around “knowledge as a commodity that can be bartered in the academic marketplace - for grades, for tenure, for promotion ...”

Roy (1999), in a survey of academic staff at her institution, found two sets of responses to the question “why is plagiarism wrong or bad”? One set was based on

the concept of plagiarism as theft, so that the “wrong” was done to the original author of the text; the other focused on plagiarism as deception of the reader.

“If the writer is a thief and the reader is a dupe, the (postmodern) text does not get off easy either. The text, which we thought we could trust, has turned into intertext and mediates the deception. None of the responses in this study foregrounded the text, or logos. No one invoked the authenticity of the text itself, or the integrity of the message, things that might be damaged or undermined by plagiarism.” (Roy, 1999: p.59).

By implication, no-one mentioned the authenticity of learning either. Yet, this is surely at the heart of the matter for awarding institutions and for students. Plagiarism does real damage, but the damages mentioned by Roy are insignificant compared to the damage to student learning. Plagiarism corrupts the link between assessment and learning and surely this should be the main focus of our concern as teachers.

There are issues of process and practice in the disciplinary system that reinforce this view. Consider the following cases that I heard as Academic Conduct Officer in a former institution:

1. A Level 3 student shares a flat with a graduate who took some of the same modules the previous year. While she is out he copies some assignments from her computer and submits these as his own.
2. A student pays a recent graduate to write his dissertation for him.
3. A student hands in an independent study consisting mostly of text pasted from journals without indication that these are direct quotes, but with correct citations. When challenged she claims that she has done this extensively throughout her degree and received excellent marks for previous pieces of work (“none of my other tutors minded”). Indeed the integration of the quotes into a coherent whole shows good understanding of the topic.
4. A student is asked to visit a village and undertake an environmental audit. Instead he visits the website of a community that has done such work and reproduces this, with referencing but without explaining that no visit was made.
5. A first year student, rather disorganised and with poor entry qualifications, hands in a piece of work which is 80% cut and pasted from a website, without attribution - but includes no other references either. The plagiarism is evident from the font changes and inappropriate voice (“As an organisation we will ...”) and no attempt seems to have been made to disguise this.
6. A student hands in an essay well crafted until page 4, but then consisting of disparate notes, some of which turn out to be cut and pasted from journals without attribution. When challenged she says she ran out of time and handed in what she had completed, with the rough notes she was using to indicate what the content of the end of the essay would have been. It turns out there were difficult personal circumstances that would have justified an extension but she felt strongly that to request this would give her an unfair advantage over other students.

Table 1 analyses some aspects of these cases.

Table 1. Features of some plagiarism offences

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Did the student “steal” from the original author?	yes	no	yes	no	yes	perhaps
Was there an attempt to deceive the marker?	yes	yes	perhaps	probably	perhaps	probably not
Without a confession, can intention to steal or deceive be proved?	yes	yes	no	perhaps	probably not	no
Does the submitted work authenticate the student’s learning?	no	no	to some extent	no	no	to some extent
If undetected as plagiarism, would the mark be commensurate with actual learning?	no	no	no	no	no	nearly but not quite

I draw two lessons from this analysis. First, that plagiarism is not always the result of dishonesty and, even if it is, this can be impossible to prove. This means that institutional regulations which are framed in terms of dishonesty can be arbitrary and unfair, punishing the distraught and contrite but exonerating the plausible liar. I clearly remember interviewing each of these students and the one who was admitting their guilt most vociferously was student 6. The most morally reprehensible, in my opinion, were students 1 and 2, yet both maintained that they were innocent, in one case through two appeals and in the local press.

The law of the land recognises this difficulty and is carefully drafted to avoid having to establish intention for minor offences. If I am caught speeding, it is likely to be inadvertent, but I pay the same fine as someone who speeds deliberately. Universities are even less equipped than the courts to determine intention and, in my opinion should not attempt to do so. Indeed, this approach could be dangerous in this litigious age, where students and their parents can seek external remedies for perceived injustices.

Second, in each case, irrespective of the guilty or innocent nature of the offence, the common factor in each case is a potential for marks to be awarded in the absence of learning.

I therefore conclude that notions of theft, deception and dishonesty are beside the point and unhelpful. Plagiarism may or may not be a moral issue, depending the circumstances. However, the main focus of academic concern should be, not on issues of dishonesty or intention, but rather on the way that plagiarism undermines the authenticity of assessment and, as a consequence, leaves markers unable to determine the authenticity of learning. In every other aspect of assessment it is accepted good practice to mark the work, not the student. This should be the case for plagiarism also. Investigations should focus solely on whether there is evidence in the work of plagiarism or unauthorised collaboration. Penalties should be proportionate and escalate steeply from first to third offences. My former institution instituted a yellow card warning for first offences, red card fail module for second and

expulsion for third. Procedures should be supportive and signpost students to sources of advice on correct practice.

Most importantly, by focussing on the learning aspects of plagiarism we can, as teachers, perhaps ourselves learn to give more attention to designing out the possibilities for plagiarism from our assessments. Jude Carroll (2002) has written on this much more persuasively and authoritatively than I can hope to and I end with a strong recommendation that you read her excellent book before designing your next set of assessments. Or, if you are very short of time, the ASKe CETL at Oxford Brookes has a guide to reducing the risk of plagiarism in 30 minutes (ASKe 2008) - considering the time it takes to track down plagiarised sources you might decide this could be time well spent.

References

ASKe (2008) *Reduce the risk of plagiarism in 30 minutes!* [online] Available from: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske//documents/ASKe%20Plagiarism%202007.pdf>

Buranen, L. & Roy, A. (eds) (1999) *Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press

Carroll, J. (2002) *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education* Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development

Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell

Lunsford, Andrea A. (1999) Foreword: Who owns language? in Buranen and Roy, op. cit. pp. ix - xii

Park, C. (2004) Rebels without a Clause: towards an institutional framework for dealing with plagiarism by students *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28 (3) pp. 292-306

Roy, A. (1999) Whose words these are I think I know. in Buranen and Roy, op. cit. pp. 55-61

Saltmarsh, S. (2004) Graduating Tactics: theorising plagiarism as consumptive practice" *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 28(4) pp. 445-454

Scott, P. (1997) "The Postmodern University?" in Smith, Anthony and Webster, Frank *The Postmodern University?: Contested Visions of Higher Education in Society* Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press pp. 36-47

Simmons, S. (1999) Competing notions of authorship. in Buranen and Roy op. cit., pp. 41-51