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Academic Integrity: Plagiarism and Cultural Difference

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Overview

Plagiarism has become a major issue in Western academic institutions, and the idea of "plagiarism" is not universal. The reasons given for why students plagiarise range from lack of management skills, beliefs, values, stress, social and peer group pressure. Park (2003:480ⁱ) notes that international students have been described as "persistent plagiarisers". In defence, some (Burnett cited in Park 2003) consider international students as generally "unintentional plagiarisers", having inadequate understanding of citation and referencing skills, or lacking in understanding what plagiarism in fact is. This paper looks briefly at the recent recognition of contributions that cultural traditions might be making to the problem of plagiarism, and to the fact that plagiarism is essentially a construct associated with specifically western notions and values.

The 'western construct' of Plagiarism

According to Russikoff et al (undated)ⁱⁱ the admonition "don't plagiarise!" might obscure complicated western communal values having economic, cultural and political ramifications. Rose (1994 cited in Russikoff) traces the beginning of copyright law to 1710, when English law decreed that authors and publishers were entitled to financial reward by copyright. By this fact, the incentive for intellectual effort is linked to both financial remuneration and professional standing, through attribution. Such values may not be shared by cultures in which a 'received' wisdom from great scholars is passed down verbatim (as a mark of respect) and in which attribution and remuneration in such scholarly transmission is redundant. This is further complicated by the fact that many cultures have not only emerged from traditions in which ownership of personal property was discouraged, but also those in which the notion of intellectual property had little acceptance or recognition. Schmitt (in Carroll and Ryan 2006:66) highlights the significance of these facts:

It is clear that (plagiarism) assigns ownership of words to individual writers. What is not clear is how the western academic community expects students who do not own the words of their discipline to meet the requirements of academic assignments while (learners) are still in the process of acquiring the language of the discipline.

A further useful review of the cultural influences on the incidence of plagiarism is presented by Keenan and Jemmeson (2003)ⁱⁱⁱ but it is important to consider Biggs' (2005:129) reminder that western students also find plagiarism a new concept at tertiary level and that they do not necessarily see it as a moral issue.

A different view: Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) Students

Marton and Saljo's (1976) work described "deep" and "surface" learning styles which has sometimes been misapplied to students from the CHC educational system (those from China, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong). Louie (in Carroll and Ryan 2006:17ff^{iv}) gives an excellent account of the essence of CHC education, and Brennan and Durovic (2006)^v indicate the extent to which CHC education tends towards encouraging deep rather than surface learning.

Writing to learn: acculturation into the disciplines

According to Schmitt (in Carroll and Ryan 2006:69) requiring the use of "own words" from undergraduate (first year) students is questionable when knowledge in the discipline is hardly their own and skill in appropriate language is likely to be underdeveloped. She argues that learning to write and making use of academic sources, is an acculturation process, relative to a specific discipline; one which requires students to expend time learning key concepts, theoretical underpinnings and values in the pursuit of critical language. One possible way of allowing space to do this might be to encourage students to engage in an un-assessed, "write to learn" exercise, in which they receive feedback but no grade, as the first step towards "learning to write" in a discipline-appropriate way. Schmitt suggests a staged approach to writing development is evidenced in student writing, aligned to a familiar continuum: no citation, over-citation and finally appropriate citation.

Suggestions for minimum input around teaching plagiarism-avoidance

Although Ryan (2000:56)^{vi} suggests that the following should be included in any programme aimed at reducing plagiarism among international students, her advice is relevant to all learners:

1. Discuss what is meant by plagiarism and give real examples
2. Explain the difference between paraphrasing and plagiarism
3. Demonstrate to students how to paraphrase, synthesize and weave other sources into their own work
4. Show students how they are supposed to meet referencing requirements and why they are required
5. State where syndication is not permitted, describing what it is and why it is unacceptable
6. Explicitly state the consequences of not complying with rules against plagiarism and syndication.

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ⁱ Park, C. (2003) "In Other (People's) Words: plagiarism by university students - literature and lessons". *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28 (5) 471-489.

ⁱⁱ Russikoff, K., Fucaloro, L. and Salkauskiene D. () "Plagiarism as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon" <<http://www.csupomona.edu/~jjs/2003/RussikoffFucaloroSalkaus.pdf>> Accessed: 19 August 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Keenan, C. and Jemmeson, P. (2003) "International students and plagiarism: a review of the literature". <<http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/cap/documents/Plagiarism%20and%20International%20Students.pdf>> Accessed: 18 August 2009.

^{iv} Carroll, J. and Ryan, J. (2006) *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. Tonbridge: Routledge.

^v Brennan, L. and Durovic, J. (2006) "Plagiarism and the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) Student". Dr Linda Brennan. Swinburne University of Technology, Australia <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/conference/apeic/papers_pdf/brennan_0512_edd.pdf> Accessed: 18 August 2009

^{vi} Ryan N, J. (2000) *A guide to teaching international students*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.