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Current discussions of plagiarism in the university have taken something of a criminological turn. At the same time, there is a tendency to focus on technological solutions. Against these trends, we argue that plagiarism remains, fundamentally, a philosophical and pedagogical issue for universities, related to understanding the meaning of originality and using sources for different disciplines.

Toward this goal we place the notion of originality in its historical and disciplinary contexts, and question the view that it is a natural and universal quality of good writing. The practice of assessing undergraduate students on their ability to produce 'original' texts depends on a notion of originality that is unstable and uncertain. We examine a sample of statements about originality given to students and explore the nature of the demands placed on student writers in the internationalised university.

Keywords: *Plagiarism, originality, writing practices, using sources, diversity.*

Essay Writing and Plagiarism

According to systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985), a clause has a starting point (a Theme), followed by a comment about that topic (a Rheme). The Theme is, then, the point where the writer and the reader share common ground, and the Rheme is the conceptual place where the writer then proceeds to take the reader in the remainder of the clause. Even that new space, however, is composed of words and ideas which will not be particularly 'original'. Moving from the micro to the macro, how much originality can we expect in an undergraduate essay? Rapid technological advances coupled with changes in the social and cultural character of the university have put pressure on traditional academic values and practices. In other words, they have stretched the definitions of scholarship, learning, knowledge, independence, and originality that were believed to support teaching and learning practices. A variety of explanations have been offered for the fact that incidences of plagiarism in student writing have dramatically increased in the last five years, though this fact may be based more in perception than in reality, and accurate figures vary widely. In Australian studies, the incidence of plagiarism has been estimated at anything between 2% (reported in Buckell, 2003a) and 20% (Sheard, Markham, & Dick, 2003). In one North American study, respondents were asked to report whether they had themselves participated in 'written forms of cheating'. Between 48% and 55% of respondents from different year levels indicated that they had (McCabe, 2003) but the study leaves open a number of questions about what textual activities the category 'written cheating' includes. Moreover, given that definitions of plagiarism are often hotly contested, it may be wondered whether student perceptions of their own behaviour provide an accurate measure of plagiarism.

Regardless, the most commonly cited reason for the trend is the new ways of creating text afforded by computing technology. The availability of large volumes of information on a wide variety of topics through the Internet has undoubtedly made it 'easier' for students to cut and paste (Szabo and Underwood, 2004). Other research has highlighted the related factor of increased pressures on students (Sheard, Markham & Dick, 2003; Dawson, 2004). Others still have sought to trace the effects of a changing, more culturally diverse and more 'wired' student population on attitudes to writing and writing practices (Pennycook, 1996; Neustupný, 2002; Warschauer, 2002). There has been considerable attention paid to the ethical dimension of the question of plagiarism, including discussion of what motivates students toward 'cheating' and other aberrant behaviours. Considerable energy has gone into the development of means of detecting incidences of plagiarism, but relatively little attention has been paid to questions about the relationship between the assessment tasks in which plagiarism occurs and the increasing frequency with which it is occurring.

The pressures resulting from a cultural shift from 'elite' to 'mass' education have been accelerated and emphasized by the international student programs of universities in the last 15 years, particularly universities in English speaking Western nations such as the US, the UK or Australia. As with many practices within the university - both administrative and pedagogical - many assessment practices have been inherited from a time when universities served a markedly different function and cohort. We argue that the arrival of large numbers of international and non-English speaking background students (the cohort of students who most often bear the brunt of accusations of plagiarism), and the failure of many universities adequately to 'internationalise' curricula and pedagogy, has contributed to the 'problem' of plagiarism. One factor in the increase of plagiarism that has received very little attention, moreover, is the widespread adoption of written coursework assessment in Western universities - a relatively recent phenomenon (Berlin, 1987).

While new assessment practices obviously bring many benefits, they also pose a number of challenges. Since the 1960s, the university essay has served two purposes: as a 'tool of assessment' and 'an avenue to learning' (Hounsell, 1984, p. 103). Under this double burden it is perhaps not surprising that some undergraduate students remain uncertain about how to proceed with writing academically, and as a consequence make errors in judgment (Chanock, 2002; Chanock, 2003). This can often be the 'dark side' of the enterprise for the student in terms of understanding how to acknowledge other authorities, while at the same time producing an individual answer. It is also a 'dark side' in that, at the same time as the student feels the greatest pressure to perform, he or she may also feel the least freedom to experiment with different ideas and forms of expression, and also the greatest temptation to take short-cuts.

The student's will to learn through the experience—to write themselves into new understandings, as it were—remains a strong feature of the learning of those students who are committed to their study. In recent research into Information Technology students and plagiarism, it was found that postgraduates plagiarise less than undergraduates, the researchers concluding that, in addition to maturity (which may affect the student's sense of freedom to try out different positions), this was related to factors of motivation. It also appeared that the postgraduate students were more prepared to engage with the ideas in their studies (Sheard, Markham & Dick, 2003). It might be argued that the framing, assessment and teaching around certain assessment tasks, while not actually contributing to the incidence of plagiarism, does little to discourage it. To put it more strongly, in combination with other factors, such as availability of readily reproducible information and the extraordinary pressures to succeed, the particular nature of the 'essay' and the manner in which this assessment tool is administered can create an environment in which even those students who might otherwise be averse to 'cheating', plagiarise.

A wholesale rejection of the essay as a primary form of assessment at undergraduate level could lead to a drastic and immediate reduction in the incidence of plagiarism; however, it would be overly simplistic and impractical to suggest this with any seriousness. Nonetheless, it would appear worthwhile to examine more closely the ways in which student writing is framed, taught and assessed.

Framing, Assessing and Teaching Writing to Reduce Plagiarism

One way in which academic writing is defined is by way of policies on plagiarism. Whether our definitions need to be updated to keep pace with changes in culture and technology, our values re-examined, or simply re-affirmed (De Voss & Rosati, 2002), our universities appear committed to seeking stronger, more clear-cut, and more practical definitions in their ongoing battle against plagiarism by means of policies and procedures. To take examples from the web sites of a few Australian universities, plagiarism is: 'reproduction without acknowledgment of another person's words, work or thoughts' (James Cook University); 'taking and using another person's ideas and/or manner of expressing them and passing them off as one's own by failing to give appropriate acknowledgement' (Monash University); 'the presentation of other people's writing or statements (published or unpublished) as if they were your own' (University of Western Australia); or 'the appropriation, by copying, summarising or paraphrasing, of another's ideas or argument, without acknowledgment' (Australian National University).

Most of these definitions, to varying degrees, rely upon notions of ownership of words and ideas. Striking a balance between a definition that students can readily understand, and one that covers a variety of possible situations and actions, is at the heart of the matter.

Some universities go on to make distinctions between intentional and non-intentional plagiarism, the one falling under the category of cheating, the other seen as a 'milder' offence arising from 'from lack of knowledge or understanding of the concept of plagiarism, or lack of preparation, skill or care' (University of New England). However, determining intention can be extraordinarily difficult. An equally significant question remains as to whether equity, consistency, and most importantly, pedagogy, is better served by narrower, more generic definitions of plagiarism, or by broader and more discipline-related definitions. While it almost goes without saying that universities need to take a 'coherent' and 'consistent' approach to the issue (Park, 2004, p. 301), and that 'university wide' policies need to be made available to staff and students online, it is more likely students will encounter definitions of plagiarism within subject and assignment guidelines. These need to be approached with particular caution and with a firm focus on the practical. As Carroll (2003) argues, definitions 'need to move from words on a page to thoughts and shared understanding in people's heads', and 'students need opportunities to discover for themselves the local and relevant aspects of avoiding plagiarism that will usefully inform their academic practise' (p. 13). This learning is also related to developing an awareness of disciplinary differences, both in the extent to which writers refer to the work of others, and how they depict the reported information (Hyland, 1999).

In some, but not all modern university disciplines, the essay by its very name retains its original French flavour of a 'try' (*essai*) at something. As Hall puts it, 'the essay provided a kind of written discourse which allowed the author to think freely outside the constraints of established authority and traditional rhetorical forms' (Hall, 1989: 78). Titles of essays published in the eighteenth century not uncommonly contain the phrase 'an essay *towards*', for example, 'An essay towards a topographical history of the county of Norfolk' (Blomefield, 1810). To use a more modern phrasal verb, a student can *try on* different ways of talking and thinking about a topic in an essay within their new-found discipline; but the essay is now also the stage on which the student has to demonstrate to an assessor what he or she has read about a topic, what he or she knows about it and what he or she can 'do' with that knowledge.

However, anyone who works closely with students on their writing will attest that a particular source of difficulty for students of all language backgrounds is distinguishing clearly enough between their own ideas about a topic, and the views expressed by other authors. When the focus in lectures and tutorials is on learning, absorbing and discussing other 'expert' views rather than on forming and expressing one's own opinion (originating an opinion from personal experience or from out of the blue, as it were), the difficulty is understandable. This difficulty has a particular bearing on the issue of plagiarism. The injunction to students in assignment guidelines, or discussions of writing, to express *your own view* seems to link neatly with definitions of plagiarism which stress the importance of using 'your own words' or of formulating an 'original' response to a question or topic. That is to say, such definitions of plagiarism present a simple, binary distinction between original and unoriginal or 'copied' writing. This is reinforced when the need for students to do something other than simply regurgitate or summarise ideas and views expressed in textbooks, the lecture, or other sources, is highlighted. However, the assumption that in written work students are expected to produce original views or ideas about a topic—or their 'own' ideas—along with the assumption of a simple division between original and copied needs to be examined more closely.

Originality and the Student Writer

> *Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions … Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process*
>
> *Bakhtin, M. [1934-35] 1981, p. 294*

In most Western countries authors are regarded as the producers or originators of commodities (texts) which have economic value, and thus are seen as the 'owners' of these texts in law; hence the (Western) notion of the author's 'own words' (Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1995; Kress, 1985: 49). However, even in diverse fields of professional and artistic practice within 'Western' culture—from literature and art, to science, engineering, and computer and communications technology—it may be argued that the notion that an individual can be said to have had an 'original' idea, or to 'own' an idea, is subject to question. In academic writing the emphasis on citation and referencing suggests a culture of continuing and developing existing ideas, rather than a culture that seeks to break decisively with the past, or that only values the breaking of completely new ground. Moreover, principles of ownership on the basis of originality have yet to be established with anything resembling certainty in copyright law (Jaszi, 1994, 36-38).

As Kress (1989) argues, while written texts in educational contexts have the 'appearance of being the product of a single writer', out of the experience of other texts, a new text is produced to address the demands of a particular occasion, for example the requirement to write an academic essay or a paper for a journal (p. 47). To achieve originality of voice, 'if it is possible at all', argues Scollon (1995), [it] 'is possible only as a struggle to achieve that voice in an internal discourse of voices borrowed from society' (p. 22). There is a deeply ingrained belief in the connection between originality and 'authorship' in Western culture. (McFarland, 1985) While deeply ingrained (so much so that it seems 'natural'), this 'link' between property and origins can be shown to have been the result of the coincidence of a number of broad, but also relatively recent, social and cultural movements in the West. These include, most prominently, the rise of ideas of property and a 'property' owning class, and the development of printing press technology that made books a commodity and turned the poets, scholars, clerics and scribes who produced them into property owners.

In England, ideas of authorship and originality emerging in the eighteenth century fed into debates about copyright and intellectual property, and debates about property rights more generally—arising from the emergence of new classes around trade and commerce—transformed the way authorship was understood. (Woodmansee & Jaszi, 1994; Hart, 1999) Literary theorists such as Alexander Pope and Edward Young—whose epistle of 1759, *Some Conjectures on Original Composition,* is a powerful reflection of the changing ideas of authorship over the eighteenth century—played a part in reversing previously established hierarchies where imitation was held to be superior to originality in composition. The effects of this reversal can be traced in the copyright debates that continued over the course of the eighteenth century in English courts and parliament. These, in turn, were prompted largely by the statute of Anne in 1709, which limited the copyright of booksellers and printers and, as Rose (1994) puts it, 'established authors as the original holders of the rights in their works, thereby explicitly recognising for the first time the author as a fully empowered agent in the literary marketplace' (Rose, 1994, p. 213).

In the twenty-first century, we still live in the shadow of a Romantic conception of 'legitimate' writing as creative, imaginative, original composition that emerged out of this history (Pennycook, 1996; Vance, 1995). The shadow extends so far, in fact, that it has come to colour our understanding of texts such as technical reports, argumentative essays, even literature reviews, in which the expectation of originality, creativity or imagination might otherwise be understood to be very different (Angelil-Carter, 2000). The fact that the modern university began to distinguish itself from precursor medieval institutions at about the same time as these ideas about intellectual property and originality came to the fore has been identified as a factor which continues to exert influence on our expectations of both student and academic writing. (Becher, 1989).

Anxieties about originality in student writing, and the emphasis on 'moral' responses to plagiarism, give us some measure of just how deep the shadow lies (Briggs, 2003). Some distance from the Romantic notion of 'inspired' authorship, the present article is a case in point. It challenges the idea that 'ownership' and 'originality' are natural parts of written discourse. We, the authors of this paper, collectively assert the right to be recognised as the 'owners' and 'originators' of the words and ideas contained in it. But the fact that the two of us have worked at various times writing and revising different parts of the paper for a number of different contexts, including presentation at a conference and submission to a journal, makes it increasingly difficult to be sure who has 'originated' what, and whose words are whose. That said, awareness of the shadow and the fact that it is to a large extent culturally and historically arbitrary, should compel the academy to re-examine some of these expectations and to consider how they are 'transmitted' to students (see P. Richardson, 2004).

Assignment Guidelines and Assessment Practices

We are not suggesting here that it would be helpful to raise such legal, or copyright issues when discussing plagiarism with students, or even to raise philosophical problems about the origins and originality of ideas with all students. Copyright has at best limited relevance in the context of student writing, mainly because for the most part student essays are not competing in a marketplace of ideas with 'published' academic writing. Similarly, while philosophical discussion remains a core aim of higher learning, sustained discussion of the philosophical issues raised by plagiarism and writing would not be appropriate in all subjects. That said, any definition of plagiarism that contain injunctions to students such as 'use your own words' is, as outlined previously, potentially misleading. It is, however, exactly the sort of thing one might be tempted to write in the margin of an essay suspected of plagiarism. It's only a figure of speech, one might object—everyone knows the student doesn't have his or her 'own' words any more than his teacher does, and even if a student did have a 'private' language (literally, his or her own words) no sensible instructor would advise students to use this language in assignments. It is, however, very important to consider exactly what we mean when we use such figures of speech, and just as important to consider what students might think we mean when we use them. Despite the fact that 'originality' is in actuality required by the university only at doctorate level—and even here requirements are often now re-cast in terms of showing 'independent and critical thought' or making a 'significant contribution to the field' (Monash Research Graduate School, 2003)—undergraduate students are still regularly told that the best assignments will be characterised by 'originality' of some kind.

More likely what lecturers do want to see in undergraduate writing, along with clarity, brevity and precision, is not simply a 'conversion' of source material into equivalent—but different—phrasing, but summary (with some paraphrase) and dialogue with sources integrated into a coherent, organised answer to a specific question. Even more important then, markers want to see the student's own 'choices' about how to organise the material, define and answer the question, or discuss the different possible answers. Additionally, signs that the student has engaged with other writers and thinkers on a topic is expected. The notion of using 'one's own words', however, can readily be transposed into a potentially quite different notion of having 'one's own ideas'. There is potential for confusion between ownership of 'words' and ownership of 'ideas' as a result. To some writers, even many undergraduate students, the spirit of the instruction should be clear enough—distinguish what you think from what others think about a topic. In practice, many might see this as setting the near impossible task of thinking of something 'new' to say about well-traveled ground.

And when one begins to ask whether any of these kinds of 'originality' are expected, or are ever possible in academic research, the situation can only get worse for the student writer. Do lecturers actually expect students to be 'original'? Is this expectation of 'originality' applied consistently? Can it be? Are expectations the same across all disciplines? Do academics realistically expect to find—and are they able to identify—originality in the undergraduate essay? In what follows we examine briefly some examples of what some students at university have been asked to do in their assignments, and what has been said about their work by assessors. The examples are from Law, Literature and Philosophy. We have come across these in our experience as language and academic skills advisors. Our intent in discussing them is not to single out particular examples of 'unhelpful' practice, but to identify broader philosophical questions about originality in student writing that the current discussion of plagiarism, it is hoped, could encourage academics—if not also students, in some cases—to explore more deeply.

In a course guide for one law subject, 'originality' was identified as one of four desired assignment features, and originality was itself defined by reference to a series of points. First, there was the instruction that it is not enough to 'repeat the opinions of other writers' and that students should work to 'form their own opinion on the issue(s) in question. But such opinions should be based on research and reasoning'. Students were advised that footnotes are to be used 'where opinions of other writers are relied upon to support a student's argument'. A series of questions immediately arise. What is not clear is whether students are expected to be able to mount arguments *without* 'relying upon' the opinions of others. And if it is, is forming an opinion without 'relying' on others really originality? Where students do employ such reliance, if it is not 'enough' to 'repeat' the opinions of others, is this a point about a) how the opinions are presented linguistically, or b) how the student differentiates the opinions he or she holds from the opinions others hold? Presuming it's the latter, is *that* originality? But then how can you differentiate yourself if you do not include the opinions of others?

In an English Literature subject, essay guidelines included the warning to students that 'to reproduce a writer's words *verbatim,* however, without acknowledgement and without bringing anything of your own mind to them is simple plagiarism—self-defeating, intellectually dishonest, and quite unacceptable to the University.' This suggests, rather worryingly, that even if the student acknowledges their quotes they might not be safe from accusations of plagiarism. More positively, one might infer from this that the 'bringing anything of your own mind' suggests how the lecturer conceived of originality.

It may, however, just mean that the student is expected to 'reflect', or be conscious and mindful, in commenting on the texts they read and quote. Perhaps what is understood by the lecturer in this case is that the mind is not necessarily something the student 'brings' with him or her self to the text, but is something produced in interaction with the text in the process of writing. This is quite an interesting conception of originality, but may still not be explicated clearly enough for many students to grasp.

Perhaps the most interesting of these selected examples, given our earlier comments on students being asked to consider philosophical questions about originality, was found in a philosophy subject. In this course essay-writing criteria were segmented into 'Presentation'; 'Reading' (which includes 'bibliography and citation' and 'comprehension and exposition'); and 'Argument', which includes 'clarity', 'logical development' and 'originality'. It is telling that citation was presented as an element of 'reading' (as was 'exposition'), separate from logical development and also from originality, but the real questions arose from feedback to students on the essays they submitted. Of two essays which received quite a high mark for originality, a comment on the first stated: 'you argue well and make many intelligent points and observations … The other main point is lack of references'; and indeed the student includes only two references: *Encarta Encyclopedia* and a magazine article. Of the second essay, the marker complains: 'I wish you had written in clear simple language and developed your own thoughts … However, as we say, the essay shows evidence of reflection and research and is not devoid of insights'. Acceptable originality has, then, been detected in each of these opposing approaches (which, in Philosophy, one can easily imagine). It appears that, in the first, the student has mounted an argument which largely ignores sources, while in the second, the student has used sources but not, apparently, 'developed her own thoughts': so, both referencing and lack of referencing can give rise to the same assessed level of originality in a student essay. It would appear that the student aspiring to originality—and looking for unambiguous guidance as to how to get there—could indeed be in for a rough time of it.

Conclusion

To repeat, we are not suggesting a wholesale rejection of 'essay' writing as assessment. Nevertheless, cultural changes within and outside the university do force us to examine the assumptions underlying our practices, at least as much as we seek to understand the motivations behind student behaviour. A few obvious strategies can be outlined to take the focus away from 'originality'. One necessity is to take a developmental approach to teaching writing, with explicitly defined criteria for assessment (O'Donovan, Price & Rust, 2000). In particular, it would appear to be helpful to students not to suggest that they come up with their own 'original' ideas on a topic where it is patently impossible to do so, or where what is really expected is something different. More useful assumptions revolve around writing as thinking within and about a discipline, involving textual conversations with previous scholars. The process of students developing disciplinary literacy in the process of developing disciplinary knowledge remains absolutely central. It should be made clear that a large part of this is learning appropriate ways to introduce previous scholarship into a discussion: that is, it is not simply a technical skill of "knowing how to reference". It is about developing disciplinary understandings to the point where the student is in a position to ask about what really counts as evidence; how to discriminate between a good and a bad argument; and how to interrogate sources without a) idealising them, or b) being naively critical of them.

At a minimum, it must be acknowledged that few students arrive at university for undergraduate study with mastery of the writing skills they need to tackle the kinds of assessment tasks they will be asked to complete. (Bock, 1988; Chanock, 2002) What we know of student writing and how it best develops suggests that staged and explicit teaching of the genres and discourses expected within a course of study, using plenty of examples, is imperative. It hardly bears repeating that such explicit teaching can take a variety of forms, from including discussion of writing and research skills within a subject or course, or integrated programs within particular disciplines provided by language and writing specialists, to generic skills support classes or tutoring offered at a university or faculty level. It is not the purpose of the present discussion to examine the relative merits of these sorts of programs, save to note that an appreciation for differences in expectations about writing between disciplines, and even between subjects within a discipline, suggests that the more 'generic' the approach, the less successful it may be.

As has also been noted already, internationalisation and building acknowledgement of diversity into the curriculum is a significant imperative in relation to written assessment. If a student who at least shares a common first language with their lecturer might struggle to master the genres or discourse at play in a particular discipline, then a student who does not have this common ground faces a doubly hard task. The development of new approaches to curriculum, inclusive pedagogy and innovative but equitable assessment, must respond to changes in both the format and the availability of 'information', changes in technologies for writing, and changes in the cultural and educational background of students. Such development should be a priority on a par with developing and refining the means of detecting plagiarism and punishing offenders.

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