The various incarnations of an online academic integrity module, or whose responsibility is it anyway?

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Abstract In the development and delivery of a faculty-based online academic integrity module designed to orient a diverse student cohort to the Faculty's expectations regarding the use of evidence and referencing convention, a number of questions began to emerge out of the continual problematics surrounding its implementation. This paper will provide an overview of the changing design and location of the module since its inception in 2007. The authors reflect on the four incarnations of the module: (i) the compulsory embedded module; (ii) the compulsory disembedded module; (iii) the voluntary disembedded module; and (iv) the voluntary embedded module. In unpacking each of these incarnations, the discussion will address the specific sets of problems that the faculty faced in developing a solution to the 'problem of student plagiarism' in the faculty, and reflect on these problems in relation to the question of whose responsibility it is anyway.

Key ideas

- An educational approach to fostering academic integrity can be conceived in multiple ways.

- Unintentional plagiarism is often conceived in terms of the individual students' cultural naivete and skill deficit, ie. a problem with the student.

- This tends to involve a representation of the student as a rational autonomous learner whose needs can be met by explicit instruction in the requisite skill.

- This assumes that skills can and should be taught, and that students will be able to transfer them to a variety of situations.

- Conceiving of skill in this way often precedes the outsourcing of this teaching to 'skill specialists' or learning advisors.

- Something is lost in the persistence of this conception, particularly when the solution is proposed as an 'inoculation' rather than a 'booster' – as risk management rather than pedagogy.

Discussion Question 1 If not simply a problem of skills deficit and cultural naivete, how else might the problem of academic integrity be conceived?

Discussion Question 2 When might we say that educational approaches are merely risk management strategies?

Introduction

This paper reflects on the development and delivery of an academic integrity module in one faculty over a period of three years. The module was initially proposed as an educational solution to the 'problem of student plagiarism' in one of its schools and within 24 months had become a cornerstone of the Faculty's Plagiarism Prevention Policy. Designed to introduce students to the more technical aspects of using evidence and referencing correctly, the module underwent four incarnations as its designers responded to specific practical and political problems that surrounded its inception and implementation. These incarnations include: (i) the compulsory embedded module; (ii) the compulsory disembedded module; (iii) the voluntary disembedded module; and (iv) the voluntary embedded module. The module as 'solution' presupposes that the problem of student plagiarism is one of skills deficit and cultural naivete, and therefore functions as a kind of individual 'booster' for academic integrity practice. A problem with this kind of 'educational approach' emerges when, in the compulsory incarnations, this kind of module is mistaken for 'inoculation' and may be used against a student who is facing a plagiarism case. Here the module functions more as a risk management strategy than a pedagogical tool. The paper argues that educational approaches need to interrogated for their political function, and that responsibility for academic integrity must be a shared and mutual obligation of students and staff. Responsibility for academic integrity should not be relegated to the learning advisor, an online module and the individual student.

The faculty

The Faculty is large and involves teaching across six campuses. The students are from a diversity of backgrounds and enter both undergraduate and postgraduate courses via multiple pathways at all levels of study making it difficult to target meaningful transition support for specific cohorts.

The problem

In late 2006, the initiating School formed a Working Party to consider the possibilities of addressing the growing instances of plagiarism amongst students. Of particular concern was the high instance of 'unintentional plagiarism' and the claim that students simply did not understand the expectations of using evidence and referencing correctly. Drawing on the suggestions provided by researchers in the area of academic integrity (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Carroll, 2004; CHSE, 2002; Vuori *et al*, 2004; Walker, 1998), the Working Party recognised a case for teaching students the purpose of sourcing and using evidence to support arguments, and making explicit the related skills that allow them to do this effectively. In doing so, the Working Party aimed to minimise the gap between a teacher's often uncommunicated expectations and student misinterpretations of avoiding plagiarism. The deliberations resulted in providing an educational scaffold for students to acquire the skills of academic integrity as they relate to plagiarism. Embedding it in a subject and making satisfactory completion compulsory provided the faculty with the means for ensuring a large proportion of students completed the orientation.

The module

The eLearning module was built by the authors of this paper using the learning module tool in Blackboard Vista and consisted of a learning sequence as follows:

- Introduction to the module and resources
- Author-Date (Harvard) Referencing Guide 2007 – pdf document
- A link to streamed voice scripted presentation
- Text version of presentation
- Online Quiz
- Online Student Feedback Survey

Implementation and metamorphosis in four ACTS

This section describes the four incarnations of the academic integrity module according to its development, implementation, evaluation and problematic/s.
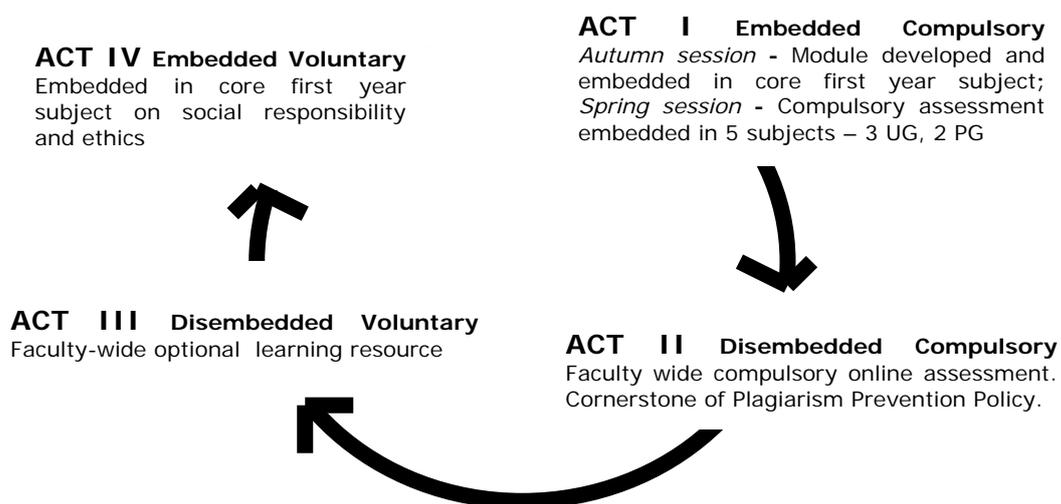
ACT IV Embedded Voluntary
Embedded in core first year subject on social responsibility and ethics

ACT I Embedded Compulsory
Autumn session - Module developed and embedded in core first year subject; *Spring session* - Compulsory assessment embedded in 5 subjects – 3 UG, 2 PG

ACT III Disembedded Voluntary
Faculty-wide optional learning resource

ACT II Disembedded Compulsory
Faculty wide compulsory online assessment. Cornerstone of Plagiarism Prevention Policy.

Figure 1: Implementation and metamorphosis in four ACTS

ACT I Embedded Compulsory (Autumn/Spring 2007)

In Autumn 2007, the eLearning module was successfully piloted as an ungraded, mandatory assessment activity inside one first year core subject for the major undergraduate degree program. Students were oriented to the module through a demonstration inside their first lecture. The Learning Developer provided lab seminars to support students who were having difficulty passing or wanted to ask questions. This time with students was also used successfully to identify error patterns in student responses and address the ambiguities in the wording of questions that created confusion for students. Final subject results were withheld

for those who did not satisfy minimum requirements (90% pass mark) and those students were notified that they had to attend a seminar to get their subject results released.

Concerns regarding the reach of the instruction and assessment, however, led to its subsequent embedding in a further four subjects at the undergraduate and postgraduate level in the School. In the name of inclusivity and equity, this development was proposed to ensure that as many students as possible had some exposure to the instruction and assessment in the module. However, successful implementation at the School level was dependent on the cooperation from Subject Coordinators as it created an additional administrative load which had a negative impact on Subject Coordinators' workloads.

Thus, although it worked well in the one subject where the subject coordinator was heavily involved in the module's development, the extension to other subjects was less successful because of its impact on the time of subject coordinators. Making the module a compulsory element of assessment required a level of policing that coordinators were not prepared to absorb into their existing workloads.

Reflections from the team

The extension of this module across the School was partially one of risk management; that is, the School was looking for a solution to ensure that students caught plagiarising could not claim simply that 'I didn't know'. The extension, thus, took what was working well as a pedagogical tool and transformed it into a risk management strategy. Had the module just been left inside the one subject where the subject coordinator was heavily involved, it would have continued to be successful, and it would have reached a great number of students.

ACT II Disembedded Compulsory (Autumn/Spring 2008)

Given the lack of support for the embedded module across the five subjects, the Working Party proposed disembedding the module from the degree program entirely and making it an independent formal online orientation for all students entering the faculty. In a large faculty with a diverse cohort, multiple degree programs, multiple entry pathways and multiple campuses, a compulsory online orientation module seemed both a practical and pedagogical solution to 1. the persistent problem to students' claims to ignorance about plagiarism, and 2. the need to ensure that this 'skills' teaching did not interfere with the workload of faculty staff.

In 2008, after deliberation with key personnel and a Faculty grant to support administrative and learning tasks, the eLearning module was transferred into its own independent elearning site and improved with a professional appearance based on a website design template incorporating images, icons, image and text rollover options and Faculty branding to highlight the integration of the module as an academic resource for students studying in the faculty. The quiz question set was expanded to allow for randomisation and included disciplinary examples from all Schools. The minimum satisfactory requirement was reduced from 90% to 80%.

Concurrently, a Faculty *Plagiarism Prevention Policy* was created that articulated the responsibilities of Faculty staff and students in the implementation of the module to support the prevention of plagiarism. The Policy affirmed the Faculty's commitment to academic integrity and ethical conduct. The Policy applied to all students commencing in 2008 onwards including those studying at postgraduate level, and those entering with advanced standing.

The administrative burden now fell to the Faculty who employed a casual to manage the administration of the module. Despite attempts to relieve subject coordinators of the administrative responsibility, the Policy stipulation that grades would be withheld if students did not satisfactorily complete the module, in the end, implicated the subject coordinators. A meeting with the Heads of School at the end of the session resulted in not withholding any grades, because nearly 10% of the student cohort (several hundreds) either did not complete the module or did not meet the minimum satisfactory requirements.

In a post-mortem meeting, a number of issues were unearthed: (1) the lack of a systematised database to administer students; (2) the issue of withholding grades and associated administration (students needing to follow up with sub-deans after a 'Withheld' result, these students having to attend a seminar in the next session, the delay in the grades being released etc.), and (3) the issue of determining who takes the responsibility for academic integrity (or in this case, administration for an academic integrity module).

Reflections from the team

This leads to an important point of discussion. According to what rationality did academic integrity come to take the form of a disembedded module aimed at 'plagiarism prevention' rather than, say, a series of designed and embedded tasks that encouraged integrity as a social and cultural responsibility?

The initial conceptualisation of academic integrity as a problem of 'skill' naturally preceded the outsourcing of responsibility for this kind of teaching to the learning developer; such a conception, thus, relinquished responsibility for academic integrity 'teaching' from the subject coordinators with only responsibility for the administrative burden of the outsourced module remaining - a most unnatural consequence indeed.

The module is a useful orientation tool for students, but it is not a solution in itself. And it would appear that this incarnation entails insurmountable problems for the Faculty.

ACTIII Disembedded Voluntary (Autumn/Spring 2009)

With the practical complications of making the module compulsory at the Faculty level, in 2009 the disembedded module was made voluntary rather than compulsory. This involved the module content being transferred to an open online site where students could access it at their leisure. Students were made aware of the module in their subject outlines. Approximately 50 students completed the module in 2009 whereas at least 1500 students completed it in 2008.

ACT IV Embedded Voluntary (Spring 2009/Autumn 2010)

Meanwhile, the Working Party was advised to come up with a sustainable model that would address the concerns unearthed in previous iterations. It was during this time when discussions on a new degree were under way, with the Faculty proposing a new compulsory subject at first-year level, where no advanced standing were possible. This provided an avenue for the eLearning module to be integrated within the subject, as the learning objectives of both the module and the subject were synergistic. The need for managing student data was addressed. The Working Party also deliberated that without having the ability to police, there is not the option to penalise the student if they get less than a minimum requirement. Therefore, the Working Party recommended that the module is a learning opportunity provided by the Faculty and students must take responsibility for their learning. As every assessment will be compulsory in the new subject, students will have more exposure to the module than previously and this will give them an awareness of techniques to improve their written work. Therefore there will be no pass mark or mark fixing. Their mark is whatever they attain in the quiz (assessment task).

Discussions have begun and, not surprisingly, already they have begun to centre around the issue of administration and support.

Tensions and responsibilities

Tracing the incarnations of the module, it is possible to identify a series of problematics and tensions that the faculty faced in achieving its goal of providing an educational approach to academic integrity in a such a complex and dynamic environment. Fundamentally, there is a tension between how one should conceptualise the student – as in deficit and requiring support or as the 'always already' independent learner. It is the tension between these two discursive subjectivities that are produced for students that produce the conflicting rationalities that feed into the conceptualisation of these kinds of solutions, and confuse their development and implementation. So how do we work with these tensions as well as the practical tensions they create about who is responsible for academic integrity?

Questions that need to be discussed include:

How does the notion of 'inclusivity' produce the identity of students as learners? How does it frame the responsibility of the University? And how does this relate to the compulsory/voluntary conundrum?

Why is academic integrity so readily conceived as a problem of skill and cultural naivete? And how does this relate to the embedded/disembedded conception?

When do educational approaches simply become risk management strategies? And how does this relate to the inoculation/booster perception of interventions?

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