Plagiarism, ethics and education: where to now?

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Abstract Agreement within tertiary institutions about the most effective ways to deal with plagiarism continue to be fraught with tension. Institutions often opt for multiple means of deterrence, including electronic and human detection; revamped policies and procedures to increase deterrence and instigating an overall increased awareness of academic integrity issues within the academic community. One approach focuses on ethics as a vehicle in overcoming plagiarism. Universities add compulsory 'ethical' units or segments within existent subjects to 'cover' plagiarism and other issues of academic integrity in programs. However, how is this approach operating in practice? Are students sustaining notions of ethical practice throughout their courses of study and into the workplace? This session seeks to tease out some of the current 'ethical approaches' to plagiarism and collaboratively examine what appears to be working or not working and why. In particular, common academic practices will form a focal point for discussion, in terms of the notion of ethical engagement with students.

Key Ideas

- The term 'ethics' is as widely interpreted and as problematic as the term 'plagiarism' in its application within universities.
- 'Ethics' is used as a political and ideological band-aid for issues of academic integrity – sounds good in theory but may achieve little in practice.
- Sharing ideas/ practices about 'ethics' and plagiarism management may promote deeper engagement with notions of ethics more broadly.

Discussion Question 1 How are we integrating 'ethics' in plagiarism management within units, courses and teaching approaches?

Discussion Question 2 What is working/not working and what will it take to improve ethical approaches to plagiarism management?

Introduction

Agreement within tertiary institutions about the most effective ways to deal with plagiarism continue to be fraught with tension. Institutions often opt for multiple means of deterrence, including: electronic and human detection; revamped policies and procedures; and instigating increased awareness of academic integrity issues within the academic community. One approach focuses on ethics as a vehicle in overcoming plagiarism. Universities add compulsory 'ethical' units or segments within existent subjects to 'cover' plagiarism and other issues of academic integrity in programs. However, how is this approach operating in practice? Are students sustaining notions of ethical practice throughout their courses of study and into the workplace? This paper seeks to tease out some of the current approaches to plagiarism and collaboratively examine what appears to be working or not working and why. In particular, common academic practices will form a focal point for discussion, in terms of the notion of *ethical* engagement with students.

Provocations

Example 1

There is a distinct air of indifference about the young woman who is shown into the office. She is here to answer an allegation of plagiarism, and in advance of our meeting I have reviewed the documentation before me—a copy of the assignment instructions, the lecturer's letter of accusation, the assignment upon which highlighter pen and annotations indicate the web sources from which at least 90% of the assignment has been copied verbatim. After greeting her, ascertaining that she understands what the university means by the term plagiarism, and explaining the investigation process, I ask her to describe how she had gone about preparing the assignment in question. By taking notes from books in the library, she says, and then going back home to write up the essay. 'So,' she suggests, 'the only thing I can think of is that maybe I forgot to put in one or two of the references.' I ask whether she ever uses online sources, such as journal databases or the internet. 'No, only if I need to look up a word I don't understand, mostly I just use books from the library.' At this point I show her the highlighted, annotated essay and ask how, given what she has just told me, the essay she submitted contains so much directly copied material from websites. She looks surprised and mumbles something about not having realised, before asking in an almost palpably superior tone, 'So, do you want me to resubmit it or something?' When asked to explain why she had lied about the assignment preparation, she shrugs her shoulders and looks disinterestedly toward the ceiling. I raise a concern about the ethical responsibilities of staff and students, pointing out that ethical attitudes and conduct are especially important for students in the teacher education program. She replies that she's not that interested in education anyway, and that she'll probably change into a different course next semester.

Example 2

Another young woman arrives at an appointment later during the same week. She too is here to answer an allegation of plagiarism. She appears anxious and visibly distressed, and her eyes are reddened and swollen from crying. Before the office door is closed, she opens the conversation with an admission that she understands that what she has done 'is completely unacceptable'. As with other students whose cases I am investigating, I ensure that the accusation and the terms are understood, that the process is explained, and that the student has an opportunity to provide an explanation of their preparation of the assignment. This particular student is clear about what happened, and weeps intermittently as she describes a situation in which she currently holds five part-time jobs (including one that requires her to be 'on call' overnight, 7 nights per week), in addition to full-time studies, and a recent illness that has severely impacted on her ability to manage multiple demands. 'Still,' she says emphatically, pointing to the now opened file containing her essay, 'there is no excuse for that.' She goes on to discuss her career and study aspirations, the intersections between her work and subjects she is studying, and her disappointment at having compromised something that she sees as integral to the kind of person that she is. 'This is who I am, this is what I want to do with my life—I'm not someone who cheats and turns in dodgy stuff just to get through, I'm someone who really cares about my studies.' Some weeks later, after the matter has been concluded, I receive an email from her, thanking me for showing concern, and informing me of steps she has since taken to change her circumstances in order to prioritise her studies.

These two incidents provide an interesting provocation for considering questions of ethics and plagiarism in university contexts. At one level, the role of university policy and procedures is called into question. In the cases described above, the students had been provided with information about plagiarism in their respective subject outlines, had been advised about how to avoid plagiarism by lecturers, were aware of the university policy on plagiarism, and understood that plagiarism is considered unacceptable conduct that may attract penalties such as failing grades or exclusion from the university. As Evans' (2006) work suggests however, access to and understanding of such information does not necessarily prevent plagiarism, as in the cases of the two students who provide the provocation for this paper. While this in turn raises questions about the efficacy of university policy in preventing plagiarism, it highlights too the disciplinary and procedural function of policies that formally document institutional ethos and regulations, and provide a mechanism for issuing penalties for non-compliance. These mechanisms form part of the 'official channels' to deal with plagiarism which, as Brian Martin (2008) claims, 'may give only an illusion of justice'. As Chris Anson points out, increasingly there is a tendency in higher education institutions to interpret plagiarism 'through a lens of criminality, producing elaborate documents and procedures designed to punish offenders and legally safeguard themselves in the process' (Anson, 2008, p. 140).

At another level, the examples above highlight connections between plagiarism, prevailing and contradictory discursive norms of the 'ethical subject' of higher education, and the ways in which 'giving an account of oneself' (Butler, 2005) is negotiated in response to those discursive norms. While it is important to acknowledge that what is known about the reasons that students plagiarise

‘represents only the public transcript’ (Robillard, 2008, p. 31), the examples above illustrate an interesting connection between these two students’ orientations toward discursive norms of university study *and* to the circumstances of being accused of plagiarism. The first student provides a misleading description of her process of assignment preparation, and is either unable or unwilling to engage with the ensuing questions about her goals as a student or her personal views on the ethical dimensions of what has transpired during our meeting. For this student, resolution of the situation draws on instrumental and disciplinary discourses of compliance, as indicated in her question about whether she will be required to resubmit a revised assignment. Resolution of the ethical questions posed is similarly instrumental—that is, a proposed change of program that alleviates the need to respond to the expectation that she might/should engage with the ethical issues raised during the meeting.

The other student, however, describes her actions in terms of what she sees as a failure to appropriately negotiate an ethical dilemma. The calling into question of her discursive intelligibility as an ethical subject that takes the form of an accusation of plagiarism is thus experienced as a traumatic sense of failing herself, her chosen professional field, and those with whom she works and aspires to continue working. The connections that she makes between self and the social brings to mind Judith Butler’s contention that:

> The ‘I’ does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks. In an important sense, this matrix is also the condition for the emergence of the ‘I,’ even though the ‘I’ is not causally induced by those norms (Butler, 2005, p. 7).

For this particular student, the ‘I’ who studies is one with ethical obligations that simultaneously align with and are overtaken by discourses of hard work, sacrifice, community service and meritocratic achievement. The ‘I’ who fails in some way in accomplishing themselves within the terms of discursive norms is in turn confronted with the paradox that:

> a subject produced by morality must find his or her relation to morality…Even if morality supplies a set of norms that produce a subject in his or her intelligibility, it also remains a set of norms and rules that a subject must negotiate in a living and reflective way (Butler, 2005, p. 10).

Perhaps not surprisingly then, resolution of the situation for this student is seen as a matter of working on and making improvements to an already (albeit flawed) ethical subjectivity. The imperative to undertake this subjective work may have been catalysed by the allegation of plagiarism, but it is initiated by the student, who makes an explicit connection between the purpose of university study, the norms of ethical conduct, and the kind of person that one is and might become.

The juxtaposition of these two examples is not intended to denigrate one and elevate the other, nor is it to suggest that simple binaries of good/bad, desirable/undesirable, and so on, be unproblematically employed in maintaining hierarchies of student attitudes and conduct. Rather, it is to highlight the ways that competing and contradictory discourses of higher education are implicated in re/producing the normative frameworks upon which students draw in what Foucault refers to as ‘techniques of the self’, described as ‘procedures…suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it to a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or

self-knowledge' (2000, p. 87). Lars-Erik Nilsson's study of students' positioning themselves as moral agents in discussing plagiarism when negotiating academic writing tasks found that they linked rights, duties and obligations and 'in that process they link actions to acts. Together they form what Foucault (2000b) calls the ethical substance of their talk' (p.99). Nilsson found that students positioned themselves as 'honest, and hardworking individuals trying to find solutions to complex problems rather than as individuals with little respect for academic rules for writing' (p.102). The two student provocations offer a glimpse of competing discourses at work, as each in different ways accepts, transgresses, contests and re/negotiates norms of university participation. The differences in the students' responses reflects, we would suggest, the complex and contradictory ways in which discourses of academic ethics are themselves embedded within competing frames of instrumental disciplinarity, on one hand, and on the other, ethical subjectivity. In the following sections, then, we turn to more specific questions of institutional approaches to plagiarism, in order to query how ethical lenses might be more fully brought to bear in institutional discourse.

Institutional approaches to plagiarism

Analysis of the discourse universities use in their policies and mission statements about plagiarism can provide an insight into an institution's approach to issues of academic integrity. Tim Atkinson (2008) studied the language of university mission statements in the United States of America from the viewpoint of 'discursive institutionalism' to analyse the ways in which 'actors use language and symbols to structure their environments through 'discourse practices' (2008, p.361). His study of university mission statements indicates that higher education institutions need to question their 'static cultural-cognitive patterns' and critique whether they serve 'to promote higher education ideology or work against discourse that promotes organizational change and evolution' (Atkinson, 2008, p. 361). A number of universities in Australia espouse ethical approaches to higher education study, or claim that their graduates will develop notions of ethical practice during their studies, in their graduate attributes policies. Language in policies claims that high educational standards are maintained and graduates will enter various professions with some degree of ethical understanding. However, many current plagiarism policies tend to locate plagiarism within the disciplinary framework of academic misconduct. The notion of ethics is not specifically addressed, nor is it possible to clearly ascertain the links between discourses of academic ethics and ethical subjectivity. Universities tend to have tools to deter students from plagiarising (such as anti-plagiarism software; student honour codes or zero tolerance provisions) (Liddell& Fong, 2008) as well as a range of penalties for students who have been found 'guilty' of plagiarism (Sutherland-Smith, 2008). However, mere detection does not appear to result in a deterrence of plagiarism and adoption of more ethical approaches for some students, as illustrated in the first provocation. In fact, the 'graduating tactics' tied to the consumer attitude of some students may encourage subversive acts of cheating (Saltmarsh, 2004, p.445). This is also known as the 'instrumental view' of tertiary study, whereby students will undertake whatever means necessary to gain certified degrees or diplomas from higher education providers (Mainka, Raeburn & Earl, 2006). Although some research has indicated that the 'threat' of increased detection has resulted in a drop in the number of cases of plagiarism reported (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006; Zobel & Hamilton, 2002) this does not mean that the spectre of detection is an ongoing and 'sustainable' educational approach.

Learning must occur and be seen to occur as an 'ethical' practice to promote sustainable academic integrity (Atkins & Herfel, 2006; Cogdell & Aidulis, 2007). In short, researchers argue that taking a holistic view of plagiarism appears to be more likely to open institutional discourses surrounding ethical practices within academic writing and ethical subjectivity. Ranald Macdonald and Jude Carroll (2006) contend that universities should re-evaluate their resourcing and emphasise 'scholarly, academic practices' rather than 'channelling all the institution's energies into deterring through detection and punishment' as 'the latter approach is not the basis for a healthy learning environment whilst the former at least contributes to it' (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p.244). Creating 'scholarly academic practices' and a 'healthy learning environment' through, amongst other things, institutional processes, procedures and discourses is essential to the development of an ethical academic being. Whilst Macdonald and Carroll acknowledge that it is too early to tell whether these initiatives are educationally sustainable in the long-term, they consider that there has been 'a significant impact on the way the institution as a whole deals with the issue' (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p.236). When added to previous research that indicates that merely adopting honour codes, written statements of intention on submitted assignments and demanding that staff be vigilant have little significant effect on plagiarism generally (Leming, 1993), clearly universities need to move towards more sustainable alternatives. At the same time, universities must be serious about how they intend to implement 'ethical action' when tertiary budget resources are continually strained so that student academic support services are cut (Atkins & Herfel, 2006, p.3). How much does it cost to embed and implement ethical approaches to learning and are Australian universities prepared to meet those costs?

Plagiarism through ethical lenses

If plagiarism is seen as an issue of learning and teaching, located within the policies and processes surrounding learning relationships, a more sustainable approach to plagiarism management may result. Stephen Sterling's (2004) notion that 'sustainable education is essentially transformative, constructive and participatory' (p.35), is useful in reconceptualising plagiarism as a learning and teaching issue within an ethical framework. Therefore, reviewing the learning and teaching nexus in terms of its 'qualities of relationship rather than product' (Sterling, 2004, p.43) means transformative approaches are needed to reduce academic dishonesty. In terms of plagiarism, 'sustainable education' means engaging the student and the institution in discussion about plagiarism management philosophies and practices (Atkins & Herfel, 2006; Mason, 2001). As John Atkins and Bill Herfel appropriately ask, 'Perhaps a threshold has already been crossed in Australia whereby economic efficiency has overtaken education integrity. The question needs to be asked whether this transition is reversible and, perhaps more pragmatically, whether current practice is sustainable' (2006, p.10). What constitutes sustainable practice, we believe, is a key issue. We argue that unless ethics is a founding notion of holistic approaches to plagiarism management within institutions, that quick-fix solutions offer only a temporary band-aid, or perhaps disguise issues of academic dishonesty within institutions. Therefore, we have two main questions to centre our discussion:

> How are academic institutions integrating 'ethics' in plagiarism management within units, courses and teaching approaches?

What is working/not working and what will it take to improve or implement ethical approaches to plagiarism management?

There is no conclusion to this discussion. As the provocations clearly illustrate, the ways in which universities frame ethical discourses, develop procedures to handle different ethical subjectivities and monitor these changes is an ongoing process.

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