

## Thinking about Plagiarism

### Academic Board Forum

21 April 2004

Let me begin by acknowledging the contribution of Peter Kandlbinder of the University's Institute of Interactive Media and Learning to the preparation of this presentation. Peter drew my attention to some of the resources on which I've drawn.

I must say at the outset that I prefer to think in terms of good academic practice rather than plagiarism. It seems to me that notions of good academic practice are taken for granted and rarely articulated. Without a clearly stated context for the consideration of poor academic practice it's no wonder that students are confused by referencing rules and bewildered by what appears to be a pernicky approach to the compilation of bibliographies and the use of quotation marks. It follows that my preference is for an approach that relies on the promotion of academic integrity rather than on deterrence through the enforcement of penalties, although regretfully I acknowledge that a mix of both approaches is necessary.

- i. *Are we preparing and benefiting graduates for their post-university experiences in the Internet era?*
- ii. *Are we advancing research in this area?*

#### **Background: popular culture**

These are two questions that I've been asked to address from the perspective of the humanities and social sciences. But before I do this I'd like to share some ideas related to academic honesty/dishonesty with you. First of all, a quote from one of the greatest poets in the English language: 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different' (Eliot, 1932: 143).

And now some recent references from popular culture (or at least the ABC and the Good Weekend) that have a bearing on the topic being discussed. I don't know who here saw a program on Shakespeare's sources last weekend. The authorship of Shakespeare's plays and poems has been contested for years in lit crit circles but questions are now being asked more widely. In the program it was argued that the real author of many of Will's plays was in fact Christopher Marlowe. The evidence included Shakespeare's alleged abilities (or lack of them) in reading and writing, the exile of Marlowe to Europe following a murder in England, documents suggesting that the Duke of Walsingham acted as a go-between in bringing Marlowe's manuscripts from Italy, attributing their 'authorship' to Shakespeare and having them published, the setting of so many of Shakespeare's plays in Italy when it was known that Shakespeare was not widely travelled, and finally what were termed 'parallelisms' or similar turns of phrase and sentences in the works of both Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Another reference came to mind occurred as I watched 'Song for George' a tribute featured George Harrison's son on guitar, Ringo Starr on drums and Eric Clapton as well as other groups and performers still left standing from the 1960's. All the songs in this concert were composed or written by George Harrison. There was though no mention of 'My Sweet Lord', a song that George Harrison claimed to have written although a court case determined that it owed much to a song written, arranged and sung by the Chiffons. Other references that have come to mind in recent weeks include the Helen Dermidenko incident where a writer of a prize-winning novel in

Australia claimed to be someone other than she was. In a similar vein a member of the Durack family prominent in Western Australia claimed to be an indigenous Australian artist.

You might well ask: what do these references have to do with academic honesty/dishonesty? The answer is plenty really. They highlight the fuzziness and messiness of authorship. With the benefit of distance they also allow us to take a more dispassionate look at questions of academic honesty, to recognise that the sky remains up there although inappropriate or mistaken attribution of authorship has occurred. They provide some perspective on an issue that closer to home sometimes engenders such passionate responses as moral outrage on the part of teachers to shame, embarrassment and depression on the part of students.

### **Background: universities**

There are two more references that I would like to make, both from universities. The first is the forced resignation of the Vice-Chancellor of one of this country's largest universities some years ago because of academic dishonesty that occurred when he was a junior academic. The second is the current dispute over sloppy record keeping or the falsification of records, depending on the points of view of those directly involved in the case still under investigation in a university in Sydney. This case has been widely reported in the press and is alleged to have been a contributing factor in the resignation of a Vice-Chancellor a few weeks ago.

### **Authorship**

The integrity of authorship and its attribution is then a concern, not only for students and their scholar teachers, but also for poets, playwrights and musicians. That is, for all those who rely on what has gone before them and who locate themselves within particular traditions and cultures. Although it has been argued that the notion of the individual author as a creator of original works is a 'relatively modern invention' (Woodmansee cited in Howard, 1995: 789) the Roman poet Martial is purported to have used the Latin word 'plagiarics' meaning 'kidnapper' to include the theft of words as well as slaves (Howard, 1995: 789). It was the invention of the printing press and the dissemination of texts that made it possible to earn a living as a writer and created the economic conditions that encouraged the development of copyright laws in the eighteenth century. At the same time the spread of education and improved literacy rates in the UK and Europe created a demand for texts and enabled the development of the profession of writing. It is the development of the computer that is challenging the notion of the author as the individual creator of original works. For example, in the hypertext world readers can make changes to a text without leaving any trace and the text remains unfinished: originators and plagiarists are replaced by author/editors or 'those who write sentences and those who restructure materials' (Holland cited in Howard, 1995: 790).

### **Plagiarism**

What is plagiarism? There is of course no commonly agreed definition or understanding of this behaviour. One comprehensive typology of academic dishonesty distinguishes between behaviours that at UTS we label as plagiarism. This typology includes

- cheating, for example copying in a test or unauthorised collaboration on an assignment
- fabrication, for example making up sources for a bibliography or faking the results of an experiment

- plagiarism, for example submitting a bought paper, handing in a paper written by another student, failing to properly attribute quotations, submitting a paper for credit without permission
- facilitating academic dishonesty on the part of another person
- misrepresentation, for example falsely claiming to have submitted a paper
- failure to contribute to a collaborative project
- sabotage for example removing materials from a Closed Reserve folder (based on Pavela, Hollinger and Lanza-Kuduce, and Stern and Havlicek cited Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002: 16-17).

Here plagiarism is a sub-set of academic dishonesty.

There is a view of plagiarism that admits different levels of seriousness depending on intent and extent. The continuum of intent to cheat extends from 'deliberately representing the work of others as ones' own' to 'the work of others accidentally without acknowledgement' and the continuum of extent of plagiarism from 'extreme: another student's essay handed in as own' to 'minor: misuse of quotes, paraphrasing and/or referencing conventions' (Devlin, 2003: 45). These continua are designed to assist teachers in dealing with plagiarism.

Another view of plagiarism suggests that it takes three forms: cheating, non-attribution of sources and patchwriting (Howard, 1995: 794). This last form is often transitional and used by learners unfamiliar with the ideas and words in a source. For some students it is an effective learning strategy. In a very spirited paper that explores the discourse of plagiarism and uncovers metaphors of gender, weakness, collaboration, adultery, rape disease and property, Howard (2000) argues for speaking specifically of fraud, insufficient citation and excessive repetition rather than plagiarism so that we can focus on issues of pedagogy rather than issues of morality or sexuality.

## Conclusion

Let's return to the two questions asked at the beginning:

- i. *Are we preparing students for their post-University experiences? Maybe yes and maybe no. By introducing students to the conventions of scholarly communication within their fields of study and practice (and by articulating those conventions not only at the most instrumental levels of acknowledging sources and respecting the integrity of data in its myriad forms but also at the conceptual levels of ways of knowing and validating knowledge within these fields) we are certainly reinforcing the ethics of sound scholarship as the basis of life after UTS.*

But there remains the question of whether those ethical standards are those of the workplace. Martin (1994: 38) presents an interesting perspective and distinguishes between the 'competitive plagiarism' found in scholastic and intellectual circles and the 'institutionalised plagiarism' found in the popular press and large bureaucracies. He argues that too much attention is given to competitive plagiarism which should be treated as a common or 'inadvertent problem' and dealt with as 'a matter of etiquette rather than theft' (Martin, 1994: 45). On the other hand institutionalised plagiarism receives little attention but focuses on the unequal distribution of power and the intellectual exploitation of subordinates in organisations. Examples of this form of plagiarism include ghostwriting in the popular press, political speechwriting, the writing of routines

for comedians and by lining press releases (Larkham & Manns, 2002; Martin, 1994). It occurs in government as well as corporate bureaucracies. Yet it hardly rates a mention. In another life I wrote 'ministerials', replies to correspondence received by a government Minister and signed by the Minister. Here in the organisational side of UTS, policies, reports and documents are written but authorship is seldom acknowledged. Martin (1994) suggests that this form of plagiarism deserves more attention although there are vested interests that are likely to prevent this happening. In preparing our students to deal with institutionalised plagiarism not only do we need to deal with matters of etiquette but also with matters of strategy, tactics and the politics of organisational life. We also need to make sure that our students' critical senses are finely honed and that they are able to tolerate the sometimes contradictory and ambiguous approaches to plagiarism.

- ii. *Are we advancing research in this area?* Probably not yet. There is an increasing body of research on academic practice, including plagiarism, much of it originating in the US almost fifteen years ago (for example McCabe, 2003). Although interesting in its own right some of this research is not applicable to the context of higher education in Australia. Some of the research focuses on tests, examinations and term papers and some focuses on the impact of honour codes on students' understanding of academic honesty (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). The continuous assessment common in Australian universities poses a different set of challenges to students and their teachers and it is an unusual university in Australia that requires students to sign an honour pledge on admission. With this University's focus on practice-focussed education institutionalised plagiarism might be a fruitful area for research and one that could be almost national in scope through the ATN. After all it was the University of South Australia that hosted the inaugural Conference on Academic Integrity last year.

## References

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