Preface

Sometimes an editor just gets lucky. A collection of 16 articles by different authors, gathered together as chapters in one volume, can easily turn out to be a disappointment. Perhaps the quality of the articles is not up to scratch, or the articles do not gel together to form a coherent whole.

I am delighted to say that I am confident that neither of these faults is apparent in the current volume. Whilst some chapters have a distinctly different flavour to others, they all directly address the issue of online student plagiarism in a scholarly and professional manner, and the problems and solutions discussed within these pages range over a wide variety of possible contexts. Together, the authors contributing to this volume have managed to provide a comprehensive examination of all of the major issues of concern to researchers and practitioners in this increasingly important area.

Taken as a whole, the chapters that make up the body of the book display an interesting tension—between those authors who accept, almost as a basic tenet of faith, that existing values regarding plagiarism are vitally important, and between those who think there may be some value to be had in considering the current generation’s attitude towards copyright issues—as, for example, in the widespread acceptance (especially amongst the young) of free downloading of music tracks and videos.

Within each group there are further tensions; for example between those who believe that emphasis should be placed on education and prevention and those who believe that greater benefit can be had by emphasising detection and punitive action. It is tempting to call the first group idealists, and the second group realists, but such categorisation is perhaps unduly simplistic, and many would classify themselves as somewhere in the middle. Equally, there is tension between those who believe that our current views on plagiarism should be relaxed a little (if the categorisation is to be continued, perhaps people with such views could be labelled pragmatists?), and those who believe that our outlook requires some more fundamental overhaul (futurists?).

I would not dream of attempting to apply, in any sort of rigorous fashion, such categories here to the authors of the different chapters in the book. As they say in all of the best texts, such categorisation will be left as an interesting exercise for the reader. However, the chapters have indeed been grouped, into six sections, to help in finding one’s way around.

Section I consists of three chapters, laying the basic groundwork: an introduction, a study of student attitudes, and a study of lecturer attitudes about plagiarism. Section II examines two particular case studies of methods to deal with plagiarism, both from universities in the UK. All three chapters in Section III examine the politically sensitive issue of handling plagiarism amongst international students and those for whom English is a second language.

Section IV contains two chapters, both of which deal with a very specific topic; Chapter IX deals with plagiarism at community colleges, and Chapter X covers the hot issue of the use of cheat sites which provide essays, reports and papers for a fee. Section V, the largest in the book, consists of four chapters, all based around the theme that prevention is better than cure. Finally, Section VI contains
perhaps the two most controversial chapters of all. The first is a clarion call for greater consensus and fairness. The second looks at a possible future where our underlying assumptions about plagiarism may be challenged.

To start at the beginning, with Section I: the first chapter, “Student Plagiarism in an Online World: An Introduction,” serves as a basis for the rest of the book. It attempts, in a scholarly but informal and easy-to-read fashion, to describe the extent of the problem, detail some of the major issues, and list some of the Web sites used by students in their acts of plagiarism, and some used by academics to detect such acts.

The chapter then outlines some of the techniques currently being used to prevent or solve the problem and concludes, perhaps controversially, by suggesting two promising, but very different, solutions. The first involves using technology to detect plagiarism before it occurs; the second, handling plagiarism by returning more control back to academics.

The second chapter, “A Student Perspective on Plagiarism,” by Craig Zimitat, of Griffith University in Australia, critically examines data from nearly 1,500 native English-speaking undergraduate students, mostly enrolled on a full-time basis in degree programs, at all year-levels, across four major academic groups.

There are some real gems in here, including the fact that some 36 percent of students admit to helping friends to write their assignments. Some 57 percent admit to giving their notes to friends to help them with their assignment tasks. The bulk of the article looks at the students’ recognition of plagiarism and paraphrasing and at their abilities and confidence in academic writing.

Zimitat’s conclusions, that teachers need to improve the writing skills of their students, and to ensure that their students are familiarised with the conventions of the institution that relate to the use, manipulation, and transformation of knowledge, set the groundwork for much of what follows.

What about lecturers’ attitudes to plagiarism? Chapter III is by Erik Eriksson and Kirk Sullivan, of Umea University in Sweden. “Controlling Plagiarism: A Study of Lecturer Attitudes,” examines lecturers’ knowledge of, and attitude to, plagiarism, how they pass their knowledge onto students, and the lecturers’ knowledge of the disciplinary procedures for suspected plagiarism in their university.

This examination teases out the lecturers’ responsibility for student plagiarism and its apparent rise in the online world. They found that academics are not sure of their definitions of plagiarism, have varied attitudes towards different types of plagiarism, and do not effectively teach how to avoid plagiarism. They suggest a wider discussion of plagiarism in the academy that extends beyond how to deter and catch plagiarists, to preventing plagiarism though the appropriate education of both student and academic.

Next, there are two particular case studies. First in Section II, in their chapter appropriately titled “Dealing with Plagiarism as an Ethical Issue,” Barbara Cogdell and Dorothy Aidulis of Glasgow University in Scotland describe the range of approaches that are being developed in biology at the University of Glasgow to try to minimise the incidence of plagiarism by developing the students’ ethical skills.

They describe in detail a level 3 workshop designed to improve scientific writing skills and a postgraduate workshop focused on research ethics. Although mainly teaching using traditional methods, they are now making increasing use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) Moodle to supplement courses, especially in the area of ethical training.

In “Working Together to Educate Students,” Frankie Wilson and Kate Ippolito describe how another British institution, Brunel University, dealt with plagiarism in 2004, when it instigated a “zero tolerance” approach.

To complement what many might regard as a tough—perhaps too tough?—line, a working party was established to share best practice in deterring plagiarism among academics, student support professionals,
and the students’ union. This group decided to create a programme to enable students to effectively learn about plagiarism and how to avoid it.

The bulk of the chapter details the development of this programme, including the principles that underpinned it and the teaching and learning materials that were developed. The chapter also reports the results of a pilot study of this programme and the methods so far used to roll it out across the University. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the Brunel approach and a look to the future.

Plagiarism often has been seen to be an especially serious problem amongst international students for whom English is a second language and who may have been brought up with different cultural traditions and ethical values. The next three chapters address this issue head on, beginning with Teresa Chen and Nai-Kuang Teresa Ku’s chapter “EFL Students: Factors Contributing to Online Plagiarism.”

Chen and Ku, from California State University, report on a survey study that investigates English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students’ experiences with online plagiarism and the factors associated with these practices among the students. Two hundred and thirty-five English majors from four universities in Taiwan participated in this study. Based on the findings from the survey, the chapter presents the students’ perspectives on plagiarism and, with reference to these students’ input, provides suggestions on ways to prevent students from online plagiarism.

Ursula McGowan, from the University of Adelaide, points out in her chapter “International Students: A Conceptual Framework for Dealing with Unintentional Plagiarism” that students for whom English is an additional language are easily recognised for inappropriate use of extraneous sources.

Many tell-tale signs may alert the assessor to the possibility of inappropriate use of source material. If appropriate checks confirm the suspicion of plagiarism, the assessor faces a dilemma: was there an intention to deceive, or was the act of downloading done innocently, from lack of knowledge of the expectations, lack of skills in referencing, or lack of appropriate language?

This chapter teases out these concerns, and presents a possible solution by introducing a conceptual framework which places student learning at the centre of deliberations, and in which the inappropriate use of sources is understood to be part the process of induction into the culture and language of enquiry of the academic environment.

Lucas Introna and Niall Hayes from Lancaster University in the UK argue in Chapter VIII, “International Students and Plagiarism Detection Systems: Detecting Plagiarism, Copying or Learning?” that the inappropriate use of electronic plagiarism detection could lead to the unfair and unjust construction of international students as plagiarists. They argue that the use of detection systems should take into account the writing practices used by those who write as novices in a non-native language as well as the way “plagiarism” or plagiaristic forms of writing are valued in other cultures.

The chapter focuses on a technique seemingly frequently used by international students: copying from some online source, deleting a few words, and substituting others with synonyms. It then moves on to look at algorithms which are often used to detect such plagiarism, and looks at their commonalities and differences.

In conclusion, they call for a move away from a punitive legalistic approach to plagiarism that equates copying to plagiarism and move to a progressive and formative approach.

To open Section IV, a return to a more traditional audience: in “Plagiarism at the Community College,” Teri Maddox, from Jackson State Community College, examines plagiarism by community college students and suggests that the diversity of ages, backgrounds, races, cultures, abilities, motivations, and personalities such students bring with them to the classroom present both problems and opportunities for teachers.
Are community college students that different from university students? Probably. Are the teaching and learning strategies that community college faculty should use to combat intentional and unintentional plagiarism different from those that university faculty should use? Probably not.

The area of contract cheating has not, as yet, received much examination in the literature. Self-reporting of contract cheating tends to be much lower than for other forms of plagiarism, typically ranging from 3 percent to 5 percent. But this low level is perhaps to be expected, given that it is commonly considered to be an even more serious crime than the “copy-and-paste” variety of plagiarism. In Chapter X, “The Phenomena Of Contract Cheating,” Thomas Lancaster and Robert Clarke look in detail at the whole area of contract cheating.

In a particularly interesting table, they list no fewer than 42 sites which provide to the needs of contract cheaters, classifying them as either auction sites, discussion fora, essay mills, feed aggregators. Of course, by the time this book is in print, many will have disappeared, and many others will have taken their place.

Lancaster and Clarke, from UCE Birmingham in England, point out the difficulty of catching plagiarists using such sites and express their strongly-held belief that more thought needs to be directed to assignment design, and more tutors need to be aware that some original coursework submitted by their students may not be the results of the labour of those students.

The next four chapters, which make up Section V, all are guided by the oft-repeated cliché that prevention is better than cure, and concentrate on methods which might be used to prevent—or at least greatly reduce—the problem. In their chapter “Minimising Plagiarism by Education and Prevention,” Martin Dick from RMIT and Judithe Sheard and Maurie Hasen, both from Monash University, provide an excellent reminder that time and effort expended to prevent plagiarism can repay itself many times over in terms of time and effort (and stress) saved in detection and policing.

While the chapter is based on a series of eight focus groups conducted with information technology students at an Australian university, the responses and lessons drawn would seem to have universal applicability.

In Chapter XII, “Plagiarism, Instruction, & Blogs,” Michael Hanrahan describes the CBB Plagiarism Project, which promotes the responsible use, re-use, and re-purposing of its resources so instructors and librarians can address the problem of plagiarism at the level of local institutional practices, values, and concerns. CBB here stands for the Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin, the three colleges involved in the development of a Web site to act as a clearinghouse for information on plagiarism.

Hanrahan, from Bates College, believes that the decision to publish content by means of a weblog has in retrospect leveraged a technology that has unexpectedly provided a reflective tool and medium for engaging plagiarism.

Some researchers and practitioners have put forward the idea that the most effective solutions lie primarily in a redesign of the methods of assessment, so as to make them less amenable to plagiarism. In their chapter “Minimising Plagiarism by Redesigning the Learning Environment and Assessment,” Madhumita Bhattacharaya and Lone Jorgensen, both from Massey University in New Zealand, argue that teachers will need to change their approach to assessment.

They suggest that both processes and products will have to change in order to ensure the authenticity of students’ work. Consequently, the authors propose a model for the design and development of assessment tasks, and the learning environment, to prevent plagiarism.

Along similar, but slightly different, lines, in Chapter XIV, “Expect Originality! Using Taxonomies to Structure Assignments that Support Original Work,” Janet Salmons, from Vision2Lead Inc., argues that educators can take steps to prevent plagiarism by designing assignments that expect learners to respect others’ ideas and strive toward creating their own original work.
She argues that educational taxonomies, including the cognitive and affective domains of bloom’s
taxonomy, and her own taxonomy of collaborative e-learning, can serve as conceptual frameworks for
designing assignments that 1) expect learners to present original work; 2) provide opportunities for
learners to develop new ideas through meaningful online interaction; and 3) value learners’ ideas while
respecting published authors’ intellectual property.

To finish, Section VI consists of two very different perspectives. In his chapter “Substantial, Verbatim,
Unattributed, Misleading: Applying Criteria to Assess Textual Plagiarism,” William Decoo, from the
University of Antwerp, in Belgium, argues that both individuals and institutions handle cases of alleged
plagiarism very differently in terms of disclosure, assessment, and decision-making.

The consequences therefore will vary greatly. A trivial instance, if highly publicized, may destroy
a student’s career, while a case of massive copying may be kept completely quiet and end in tacit ex-
oneration. For the sake of justice, an allegation as serious as plagiarism requires the establishment and
the wide acceptance of more solid criteria. Using the American-based Office of Research Integrity’s
definition of textual plagiarism, this chapter examines some of the variables to consider and suggests
ways to achieve greater consensus and fairness in cases of alleged plagiarism.

Readers will undoubtedly have strong opinions about the final chapter, which concludes Section
VI and provides a fitting end to the book. The chapter, “Students and the Internet: The Dissolution of
Boundaries” by Jon Ramsey, is quite unlike any other, in both format and content.

Ramsey, of the University of California in Santa Barbara, looks bravely to the future: are we perhaps
witnessing a possible dissolution of boundaries? As he himself says, “...(t)he traditional aspirations of
academia need not be lost in translation if we look creatively for points of connection with the world in
which the students operate daily--in particular, the myriad technological interconnections that increas-
ingly inform students’ understanding of information and ideas...”.

Many will disagree with his outlook, but careful consideration of his thoughts as outlined in this
chapter make for an interesting discussion. What better way in which to end?

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