Chapter II
A Student Perspective of Plagiarism
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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an Australian study of native-English speaking, undergraduate students’ engagement in plagiarism-related behaviours, their knowledge of plagiarism and their academic writing skills. Students were surveyed to: (1) estimate the incidence of plagiarism behaviours; (2) examine students’ self-reported academic writing skills; (3) their knowledge of plagiarism; and (4) their ability to identify plagiarised work. Across all three undergraduate years, approximately 90 percent of students believed that direct copying of text or ideas without acknowledgement constituted plagiarism, whilst around 5 percent were unsure if it constituted plagiarism. The majority of students (80 percent or more) claimed never to have plagiarized. About 80 percent of undergraduate students said they possessed the skills of note-taking, paraphrasing, citing, referencing, and so on, but barely half of students in each year group reported confidence with these skills. Students were able to distinguish between clear-cut cases of plagiarism and paraphrasing when presented with either different writing processes or different work samples, but they were less able to distinguish between “borderline cases.” There are clear implications for classroom practice. First, students need the opportunity to practice and develop their academic writing skills, in the context of articulating their understandings of their own discipline. This requires teachers to recognise that academic writing is a developmental skill and to learn how to improve the writing skills of their students. Second, in this process, teachers need to ensure that students are inducted into the conventions of the academy that relate to the use, manipulation and transformation of knowledge.
INTRODUCTION

Key studies in the U.S., UK and Australia confirm that academic plagiarism is increasing in higher education. In cross-institutional U.S. studies, the proportion of students admitting to academic misconduct, characterised by use of unacknowledged text in written assignments, has increased three-fold since 1999 (Centre for Academic Integrity, 2005). From these studies, it appears that students who admit to plagiarism commonly admit to other academic misconduct. In another self-report study involving four Australia universities, Marsden (2005b) surprisingly found that acts of plagiarism were admitted to by 81 percent of undergraduate students. More objective technical analyses of nearly 2000 assignments submitted by students across six Australian universities (O’Connor, 2003) have demonstrated that 14 percent of papers contained more than 5 percent non-attributed text. It can be determined that plagiarism was committed by about 14 percent of students in that study. The extent of plagiarism in written assignments is not clear in the self-report studies, but less than 2 percent of analysed assignments in O’Connor’s study contained 40 percent or more of unattributed text. Overall, it would be reasonable to expect that at least 10 percent of academic work (JISC, 2005) submitted by students might need close scrutiny because of plagiarism issues.

There appear to be multiple factors contributing to the increase in plagiarism. Across universities and disciplines, there exists a wide variation of definitions, policies, and practices that leaves considerable scope for confusion around the issue of plagiarism (ACODE, 2005; McCabe & Drinan, 1999; Pecorari, 2006). In the higher education sector generally, issues such as the increasing diversity of the student population and increasing class sizes makes the teaching of writing more challenging and the monitoring of assessment more difficult and decreases the potential chance of detection; increasing casualisation of the academic workforce hinders professional development programs focusing on learning and teaching issues, and increasing research pressures on academic staff may challenge their abilities to respond adequately to the increasing diversity of skills of the student population. More fundamental though is the finding that academic staff, like students, have diverse views on plagiarism. Staff members’ working definitions of plagiarism are influenced by their personal views, as well as their disciplinary context (Flint, Clegg, & Macdonald, 2006; Macdonald & Freewood, 2002). The diversity of views on plagiarism is matched by the diversity of ability amongst staff to distinguish between paraphrasing and plagiarism Roig (2001). When asked to paraphrase text in Roig’s study, some academic staff generated a product considered by peers that clearly represented plagiarism. Solving the “student plagiarism problem” is not possible without due consideration of the “teacher plagiarism problem.”

New technologies play a key role in plagiarism both in terms of providing mechanisms for detecting plagiarism on the one hand and of fueling access and opportunities for plagiarism on the other hand (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Marshall & Garry, 2005a; Park, 2003; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). Nearly 60 percent of students enrolling in Australian higher education are of the “Net Generation” and have grown up in a technologically rich environment copying, manipulating and “mashing” text, audio and video from the Internet in ways not previously imagined. Their social use of information derived from the Internet is at odds with the way in which the Academy views appropriate use of information (Prensky, 2001). Students certainly use new technologies, and as they progress through their degree programs they use learning technologies to a significantly greater extent (Zimitat, 2004). Students do not appear to be able to adapt their technological skills for the purposes of academic work (Katz, 2005; p. 7), and many teachers may not be able to adequately help them in this enterprise.
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