Chapter III
Controlling Plagiarism: A Study of Lecturer Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Plagiarism is viewed as an increasing problem in the academy. When plagiarism is discussed it is often in personal negative terms that refer to the “lazy” modern student. Previous studies have suggested that the largest cause of plagiarism is ignorance on the part of the student. This paper examines lecturers’ knowledge of, and attitude to, plagiarism, how they pass their knowledge on to students, and the lecturers’ knowledge of disciplinary procedures. This examination teases out the lecturers’ responsibility for continuing student plagiarism. It was found that academics are unsure of their definitions of plagiarism, have varied attitudes towards different types of plagiarism and do not effectively teach how to work with a text to avoid plagiarism. We suggest a wider discussion of plagiarism in the academy, extending beyond how to deter and catch plagiarists, and the writing of policy statements, to preventing plagiarism though education of both student and academic.

INTRODUCTION

Cheating and plagiarism are behaviours that are regarded as malpractice in academic work. Suspicion can result in investigation and possible repercussions; for the academic this can result in loss of research reputation and employment, and for the student loss of course credits, suspension or expulsion. In spite of such possible repercussions, plagiarism occurs and according to the vice-chancellor of Umeå University, Sweden, Professor Göran Sandberg: “In today’s Web-based world
cheating in education is unfortunately common” (Sandberg, online, authors’ translation).

A common view held by both students and academics is that many students plagiarize out of ignorance (Harris, 2001; Hult & Hult, 2003). Plagiarism exists outside of the academic community. Students may begin their university studies believing that plagiarism is appropriate behaviour in the academy in the way they have seen plagiarism elsewhere. However, if it is the case that ignorance of plagiarism continues beyond the initial weeks of a student’s first semester of study, is this a result of lecturers being unclear as to how they wish students to view plagiarism and how to avoid it, or is it because the distance between the faculty definition of plagiarism and the students’ perception of plagiarism is too great, or is it an interaction of these factors, or perhaps it is a result of faculty themselves being unclear as to what plagiarism is? This paper examines lecturers’ knowledge of, and attitude to, plagiarism, how they pass their knowledge on to students and their knowledge of the disciplinary procedures for suspected plagiarism in their university. This examination aims to tease out the lecturers’ responsibility for student plagiarism and its apparent rise in the online world, and an online questionnaire was devised and distributed. The questionnaire was piloted prior to the study and a couple of minor changes were made based on pilot feedback. The study is an extension of Eriksson (2005).

The Participants

The participants were 62 salaried academics from Umeå University, Northern Sweden, who answered the questionnaire. Umeå University is a 1960s university. Founded in 1965, it is the fifth largest university in Sweden. Three professors, four readers, 27 senior lecturers, 12 lecturers, 14 PhD students and two people who provided no job category, responded to the questionnaire. The largest group of participants came from the faculty of medicine (22), followed in descending order by the faculty of science and technology (15), the faculty of social sciences (14), the faculty of arts (7) and the teacher education faculty (7). The reported numbers of years of teaching experience reported by the participants were: 0-5 years (13), 6-10 (8), 11-15 (4), 16-20 (10), 20+ (12).

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire is presented in Appendix A and collected personal information about the participants before proceeding to collect information on the following four broad topics:

1. Defining plagiarism: the questions in this topic aimed at capturing the range of definitions within the academy as to what constitutes plagiarism and how different academics delimit plagiarism. These questions asked for free-text answers and did not prompt the respondents to consider anything in particular as plagiarism.