Chapter VII


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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the incidence of unintentional plagiarism among international students whose native language is not English. Terminology widely used in plagiarism policies and in the literature indicates an overriding view of plagiarism as an offence. I have developed a conceptual framework to present an alternative position. The framework provides a matrix for tracing the progress of an international student’s induction into the culture and language of academic research. Based on insights from this framework, undergraduate students would be regarded as apprentice researchers who require guidance in developing skills and language for scholarly writing. During the early phases of their apprenticeship, students would be shown the use of genre analysis for “harvesting” genre-specific language. Feedback on instances of inadvertent plagiarism would be non-judgmental, constructive, and formative. I suggest that this approach should be adopted in the core curriculum so that all students can benefit from an academic apprenticeship and so avoid unintentional plagiarism.

INTRODUCTION

In the online environment of today, downloading information from Internet sources and re-using it in an undigested way has become commonplace among students. The evident increase in plagiarism associated with this practice in universities located in Australasia as well as North America and the United Kingdom is generally deplored in educational literature (McCabe, 2005; Park, 2003). The attention that has in recent times been given by the media to some extreme examples of plagiarism incidents, in particular those involving international students, has caused some Australian
universities to review their plagiarism policies and procedures for sanctioning unacceptable conduct (Devlin, 2006). They do so in the hope of reducing the occurrence of deceptive student behaviour and avoiding media scandals. However, there are question marks over the effectiveness of policies and procedures in reducing the incidence of plagiarism or cheating.

At the heart of a perceived rise in plagiarism is the dual reality of higher education in the 21st century: the ubiquitous availability of online resources on the one hand and a phenomenal increase in international student numbers on the other.

**Ubiquitous Availability of Online Resources**

The first reality is that online resources have become a permanent fact of life. Successive intakes of today’s “net-generation” students who cannot remember a world without the Internet have embraced the ever-increasing variety of online tools, from search engines to learning management systems, from e-mails and discussion boards to webinars, wikis, podcasts, streaming, and more (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). However, the runaway pace of online advances that have made copy-and-paste technology a matter of course has also resulted in the inappropriate use of this facility within the academic context. As the incidence of plagiarism cases detected continues to rise, tertiary institutions and individual academics are challenged in their traditional role of guarding and promoting intellectual integrity and upholding academic standards.

**International Student Numbers**

The second reality that now must be faced in many countries is that, in this era of the internationalisation of education, growing numbers of students are studying in a foreign country and in a language that is not their own native tongue.

Higher education institutions in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australasia are particularly sought after as destinations where students seek to gain both educational qualifications and improved proficiency in English. In Australia, the number of international students has been growing over the past decade, to the extent that they now form a sizeable proportion of the student population (Australian Government, 2004). In my own university, an internal report stated that in 2006 upward of 20 percent of students enrolled were international students, with some classes containing as many as 75 percent to 99 percent, and that by far the majority of these students originated from China and other Asian countries (Bain, 2007). For these students, still adjusting to their new cultural environments, and uncertain of their competence to meet unfamiliar learning demands, the Internet is a ready resource to be utilised, not only for content but also language that is more sophisticated than that of the English classrooms of their past. In the absence of skills for producing academic English to express their own views, and without the necessary knowledge of academic conventions, these students fall all too easily into the “trap” of plagiarism.

**Concern and Purpose of this Chapter**

Concern arises from the fact that assignments written by students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) are easily identified if extraneous sources are used inappropriately. An EAL student’s sudden burst of flawless, sophisticated prose within an otherwise basic, perhaps somewhat laboured or grammatically flawed text will alert an assessor to the likelihood of plagiarism. A quick Google check may confirm this suspicion, and the assessor then faces a dilemma, as it may be unclear whether there was an intention to deceive or whether the unacknowledged material was used innocently. A
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