Chapter VIII
International Students and Plagiarism Detection Systems: Detecting Plagiarism, Copying, or Learning?

Lucas D. Introna
Lancaster University Management School, UK

Niall Hayes
Lancaster University Management School, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the question of plagiarism by international students (non-native speakers). It argues that the inappropriate use of electronic plagiarism detection systems (such as Turnitin) could lead to the unfair and unjust construction of international students as plagiarists. We 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. It calls for a move away from a punitive legalistic approach to plagiarism that equates copying to plagiarism and move to a progressive and formative approach. If taken up, such an approach will have very important implications for the way universities in the west deal with plagiarism in their learning and teaching practice as well as their disciplinary procedures.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of academic integrity within higher education has received considerable attention in the literature over recent years (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Deckert, 1993; Dryden, 1999; Harris, 2001; Howard, 1995, 1993; Kolich, 1983; Lathrop, 2000; Myers, 1998; Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1995; Sherman, 1992). Much of this literature, coupled with the considerable anecdotal evidence amongst colleagues within our own and other universities, suggests that plagiarism is
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on the increase. O’Connor (2003) describes one recent Australian study that spanned 20 subjects and six universities. This saw 1,925 essays being submitted into Turnitin, an electronic detection service that compares electronic work submitted with the 2.6 billion publicly available pages on the Internet, and to all the essays previously submitted to Turnitin for checking. This study found that 14 percent of essays “contained unacceptable levels of unattributed materials.” Further, unacceptable levels of plagiarism were found to be present in all six universities and in over 70 percent of the subjects. The report also highlighted that what was detected electronically is just the tip of the iceberg, as Turnitin did not cover most books, journals, paper mills, and so on (O’Connor, 2003).

In relation to the literature that has considered why students plagiarise, Carroll (2002) has suggested that most students are unsure what plagiarism is. She argues that this lack of understanding of what is and what is not plagiarism contributes to students plagiarising unintentionally. Furthermore, Angelil-Carter (2000) claims that there is also a lack of clarity across a university about what constitutes plagiarism and a discrepancy in the way plagiarism is detected and enforced (Biggs, 1994; Ryan, 2000; Scollon, 1995). Others have highlighted the growing staff student ratio as being implicated in the rise in the number of cases of plagiarism. They suggest this results in staff having less time to deal with students as individuals and hence less opportunity to talk through issues regarding writing practices (Angelova & Riazantszeva, 1999; O’Donoghue, 1996). Carroll (2002) also argues that the move from examination to coursework and project based assessment has resulted in not just over assessment, but students experiencing continual pressure to attain high marks (Carroll, 2000). Others suggest that poor time management by students, or the institutions setting simultaneous deadlines is a major contributing factor (Errey, 2002).

The purpose of this chapter is not to revisit these arguments about the increase (or not) of plagiarism or why students find themselves plagiarising. It is our view that many of these papers and arguments deal with a rather oversimplified view of plagiarism, especially with regard to international students (i.e., non-native English speakers). The purpose of this chapter is rather to explore the complex interaction between cultural values, writing practices and electronic plagiarism detection systems as depicted in Figure 1.

The central argument of this chapter is that the inappropriate use of electronic plagiarism detection systems (such as Turnitin) could lead to the unfair and unjust construction of international students as plagiarists, with obvious devastating consequences. This “inappropriate” use that we refer to flows from three sets of interrelated assumptions or misunderstandings:

a. A misunderstanding of the writing practices used by those who write as novices in a non-native language.

b. Inappropriate assumptions about the way “plagiarism” or plagiaristic forms of writing (such as copying) are valued in other cultures.

c. A dualistic view of plagiarism that does not take into account the practices and values referred to in (a) and (b) above.

We would argue that plagiarism is not a simple phenomenon. It is not a simple choice between

![Figure 1. Conditions that mediate the construction of international students as plagiarists](image-url)
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