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A Closer Look at Plagiarism within the Context of Student Academic Writing in an Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Students using 'cut-and-paste' and paraphrasing tools to present the work of others as if it was their own is a significant problem in higher education. This *Briefly Speaking* argues however that the problem is largely misunderstood to be a legal rather than educational issue, with a resultant neglect of educational responsibilities. Further, it argues that the moral outrage associated with the issue of plagiarism makes it difficult to move beyond current police-catch-punish approaches, which have long been found to be ineffective. As generative AI becomes ubiquitous, ever more thoughtful educational initiatives are needed to develop students' knowledge and writing practices.

Keywords: Assessment, doctoral degrees, graduate attributes, qualification standard, supervision

Introduction

Plagiarism is a highly emotive issue for both academics and students. Researchers report that their participants describe it as "an illegal act" (Teixeira and Rocha, 2010), "one of the most severe breaches of academic integrity" (Clarke *et al*., 2022), "intellectual theft" (Vehviläinen *et al*., 2018, Hsiao, 2015), and even "deviant behaviour" (Poltorak, 1995).

Sadly, plagiarism is poorly understood, and the moral charge attached to the issue makes it difficult to have conversations about what it is and how it might best be responded to. This issue of *Briefly Speaking* calls for significant shifts in how institutions and academics think about and tackle plagiarism in the higher education sector[1].

Current initiatives to address plagiarism typically include workshops being offered that teach students about the technical aspects of referencing; students being expected to sign declarations of originality for each assignment; the use of text-matching software being obligatory; and students being warned about the punishments imposed on those who are found guilty of

[1] While this piece includes mention of paper mills and AI, the focus is on incidents where students submit work that includes text lifted from elsewhere in ways that are not considered acceptable in academic writing.

plagiarism. These are all ineffective and incidents of plagiarism continue to increase. In their 21-country study, Clarke *et al*., (2022) found that 62% of students cheated in one way or another. Lin and Wen (2007) and Ives *et al*., (2017) reached similar conclusions in their national studies. Unfortunately, despite its prevalence, plagiarism is a widely misunderstood issue.

Plagiarism *vis à vis* copyright

Plagiarism is often conflated with copyright (Adam *et al.*, 2017; Mphahlele, 2020). Copyright pertains to the ownership of a product, such as texts, videos, and music, where permission and royalty payments are necessary before others can replicate these materials. Failure to follow the required legal processes can result in court cases, fines, and even jail time. Copyright is a legal matter and is very rarely relevant to student writing.

Indeed, the way in which copyright pertains in a university is typically the duplication of texts beyond that covered by 'fair use' legislation, such as when an academic or student duplicates a whole textbook, or when someone downloads books and articles from illegal sharing sites such as SciHub or Libgen.

Plagiarism, unlike copyright, is not a legal matter. It is an educational one. Arguing that plagiarism is an educational issue is not to underestimate its importance. Students need to have a personal engagement with knowledge if they are to build their own understandings and achieve that which higher education offers. Even if they have not broken a law, when students cut-and-paste from the internet to cobble together assignments, they have missed an educational opportunity. If students repeatedly rely on plagiarism to complete their assessment tasks, it is unlikely that they will come to enjoy the transformative relationship with knowledge that is at the heart of higher education (Ashwin, 2020).

Passing off the work of others as if it is their own allows students to bypass the challenging meaning-making tasks required in the academy. Such behaviours may get students the marks or even the qualifications that they seek but will not enable a transformative relationship to knowledge. Regular acts of plagiarism prevent students from engaging with knowledge for themselves, and it limits the taking on of reading and writing practices valued within their fields of study. It is thus important that institutions and academics respond appropriately to plagiarism whenever it occurs in the academy. But first, it is important to understand what it is.

Defining plagiarism

Students are often incorrectly told that plagiarism is when 'the words and ideas of others are used without attribution'. To this confusing definition are added warnings about the dire consequences that will meet them if they do indeed use the words and ideas of others without attribution. They are also typically expected to sign statements of originality that indicate that they have included attribution to all words and ideas that were not their original thoughts and to attach these statements to their assignments.

Such actions instil fear in the students who are very unsure about the reading and writing requirements that they encounter in a university. It is highly unlikely that they would have encountered such requirements at home or school. Besides the mental health issues and the neglect of educational responsibilities that such approaches encourage, these interventions are also singularly ineffective (Vie, 2013; Clarke *et al*., 2022). This is because the focus on plagiarism in such approaches foregrounds mistrust and absents the

induction of students into where and why references are used in their fields - and why they should bother to learn how to take on such practices.

Plagiarism is far more complex than 'the use of the words and ideas of others without attribution'. Indeed, students are constantly confronted in the university by texts that use the words and ideas of others without attribution. Textbooks, for example, translate the complex concepts of a field of study into simplified, more readily accessible terms for learning purposes. Textbooks rarely ascribe such concepts to their originators. In the odd case that references are included in textbooks, they are usually offered as reading lists rather than for the purposes of attribution. Course guides and lecture notes distributed by academics to students often do the same. There is generally scant or non-existent referencing in such texts to indicate where the ideas have come from. This is also true of the content of lectures given by academics and the PowerPoint slides that they use.

It is rarely clarified why it is entirely acceptable to use other people's words and ideas without attribution in some cases but not in others. That many students are repeatedly told that they 'have to reference to indicate where their words or ideas come from' is thus at odds with many of the texts that they are exposed to, especially in their early years of study.

A closed book examination is another pedagogical space where using the words and ideas of others without attribution is generally deemed acceptable. On occasion, academics may expect students to memorise references to specific texts and to repeat these in the scripts they hurriedly write during their time in examination halls (such as the title and specific act number of a play being cited in a literature examination) but generally in a closed book examination, students are expected to explain ideas, terms and concepts without giving any attribution as to the sources from which they came to understand this content.

Telling students that plagiarism is using the words or ideas of others without attribution is thus entirely at odds with the everyday practices that students encounter in the academy.

Compounding the problem that most texts students are exposed to fail the common definition of plagiarism is that the craft of academic referencing is often taught by people who are outside of the field in which such referencing practices are used. A once-off workshop run by a librarian or a writing centre consultant as part of an orientation programme is not unusual. Such workshops often unwittingly reinforce the problematic ideas that (i) the main reason that researchers include citations in their texts is to avoid plagiarism, that (ii) all words and ideas that come from elsewhere should be referenced, and that (iii) referencing is a technical matter of applying referencing styles, such as Harvard or APA, to citations.

What constitutes expected writing practices by researchers (and conversely what is deemed unacceptable) varies significantly by field. In many fields within the Natural Sciences, for example, it is perfectly acceptable to simply report on the methods used without indicating where the researcher got their ideas from. Indeed, many methods sections in journal articles are so standard as to require no referencing at all, despite these methods being copied by the novice researcher from a recent reading or from observing a more senior researcher. In contrast, in many fields in the Social Sciences, the researcher might include a great many references in the methods section to build a case that justifies their methodological decisions. This is particularly where methodological approaches or theoretical frameworks are contentious, and references are used to ensure that the reader finds the

researcher's decisions to be credible. The use of citations thus emerges from disciplinary norms and the kinds of statements that require a reference differs by field (Zhang *et al*., 2021).

If plagiarism is not the use of the words and ideas of others without attribution, as students are often told, then what is it? It is the use of words and ideas of others and presenting these in ways which, *within that field or area of research,* suggest that *they are the author's own* (Sutherland-Smith, 2008). This is why the re-telling found in textbooks and course guides and closed book examinations is acceptable. In such cases, there is no intention by the author to present the words and ideas as if they were their own. The reader is expected to know that such *teaching and learning texts* are a re-telling and to know that they should not assume that the author of the textbook or course guide developed the words and ideas that they are sharing. For it to constitute plagiarism, there needs to be a positioning of words and ideas in the text that come from elsewhere in ways that suggest that the author wants the reader to believe that they have developed them personally.

Unintentional plagiarism

Sutherland-Smith's plagiarism continuum (2008) indicates that students can fall foul of disciplinary citation norms, and thus be guilty of plagiarism, in a range of ways. Some of these can be unintentional because the student is not yet familiar with the expectations of referencing. They do not know how to use citations to strengthen their claims or to position their work within a school of thought or for any of the other peculiar reasons that citations are used in knowledge communication in the academy.

Unfortunately, threats of punishment for plagiarism are rarely matched with educational awareness raising as to where and why other works in academic writing are cited. Students are warned not to plagiarise, but they are not empowered to use references in discipline-specific ways.

What is worse, because these citation norms are not evident in the teaching texts that students are generally exposed to in the undergraduate curriculum, it is hardly surprising that they are unfamiliar with the norms that they are being expected to demonstrate in their writing.

As Angelil-Carter indicates in her book, *Stolen Language* (2000), learning to write academically is a bit like trying on new clothes. You need to be exposed to a wardrobe of possibilities and have the chance to try them on before you can wear the clothes with comfort and ease. This requires that there are multiple opportunities for students to be exposed to research texts and to practice crafting such texts with supportive developmental feedback[2]. Large class sizes and a focus on completing a content heavy syllabus often reduce opportunities for such pedagogical exchanges. Understanding assessment purely as the measurement of learning, rather than as a place of learning, exacerbates these problems (McArthur, 2016).

There are several activities that can help students take on the citation practices of their field. At a bare minimum, students need to be exposed to research texts that model the discipline-specific citation practices that they are expected to demonstrate in their own assignments. Asking students to write academic texts that follow the citation norms of a field without their ever

[2] Numerous decolonial scholars suggest that such explicit induction into the norms of academic writing practices has the simultaneous benefit of opening such traditions up to critique (Eaton, 2022; Connel, 2007).

having been exposed to such texts is at best unfair and at worst perverse.

Undertaking an analysis of two or three research texts (articles or book chapters) with students is one way of sensitising them as to where and why citation happens in the specific field. Students can identify the claims that the author makes in the text and then begin to see how references are, for example, used to substantiate the claims. While there are several such pedagogical interventions that can foster an understanding of discipline-specific citation practices (and thereby decrease the likelihood of unintentional plagiarism), these are rarely infused into the curriculum.

Furthermore, some institutional policies actively work against such scaffolded induction into the citation practices of the field. Besides defining plagiarism as the use of others' words and ideas without citation, a very flawed understanding as has been argued here, some policies require that every incident of plagiarism must be formally reported. This is impossible to implement (Mphahlele, 2020). The following examples of feedback by academics on student writing all alert the student to the need for a reference:

"You are stating this as fact – but how does your reader know this? Why should your reader believe this?"
"Who says this in the literature?"
"Show your working or alternatively cite the studies with the formulae you are drawing from."
"How do these ideas link to previous research?"
"This is a direct quote, so you have to put the words in inverted commas and include a page number with the reference."

The above comments are all given on student texts that, according to some institutional policies, should be reported for plagiarism. Such policies undermine the work of academics, ignore their educational responsibilities, and turn an ordinary learning process into a potential disciplinary proceeding.

Intentional plagiarism

But what of those students who intentionally plagiarise? Many students will simply cut and paste from multiple texts, produce a hodgepodge of other people's words and ideas, and submit this as if it was their own. Undoubtedly, there need to be consequences for such behaviour to prevent it recurring. But such consequences should be aligned to the understanding that what the students have done is missed an educational opportunity. They have not broken the law. They have broken the (rarely articulated) agreement that the university will provide educational opportunities and students will engage with these towards their own intellectual development.

Students who intentionally plagiarise seek shortcuts and strive to receive marks for work that they have not done. This is indicative of an understanding of their studies as a commodity rather than as an opportunity for intellectual growth and personal expertise. Given how strongly evident are such commodified understandings of higher education within the university and within society at large, it is unsurprising that these understandings are so evident among the student body too, leading to an undervaluing of intellectual endeavour (McKenna, 2022).

Addressing instrumentalist understandings, which see university education as a set of tasks to be completed with the least intellectual and emotional effort possible, is an extremely challenging pedagogical responsibility. It cannot be attended to through a once off workshop or an add-on course. Conversations about the need for personal engagement with texts, ideas, and concepts should permeate every part of the curriculum if the educational problem of intentional plagiarism is ever to

be addressed. Students need to be convinced that while plagiarism (and the use of AI programmes) can produce assessment 'products' with ease, there is benefit to their doing this work for themselves. Students need to see that personal engagement with powerful knowledge requires intellectual challenge and many tough moments, but it will equip them with understandings that they will draw on for the rest of their lives. It will form the basis for a life of ongoing learning.

This is what Boler (1999) refers to when she speaks of 'pedagogies of discomfort.' Students and academics need to be willing to engage with challenging and ambiguous ideas and concepts that will not always be easy, straightforward, or comfortable. Students need to understand that despite reductionist ideas of higher education as 'training', there is wonder in learning and there will be powerful returns on undertaking the tasks set for them; tasks designed to build their knowledge base and their critical thinking.

Zembylas (2017), drawing on the work of Gilligan, Boler, and others, calls for an 'ethic of care' to accompany the 'pedagogy of discomfort' so that we are always attentive to students' needs and concerns, even as we help them to engage with challenging tasks. Coming to curriculum design and pedagogical approaches from the dual understandings of a 'pedagogy of discomfort' and an 'ethic of care' requires a very different response to plagiarism.

Academics need to be able to defend their assessment tasks and to articulate the benefits that students will accrue through completing them. If students can cut and paste from the internet or use artificial intelligence to complete the tasks set for them, it is critical to explicitly articulate where and why they should or should not do so. Implementing educational approaches that foreground the normative value of the tough intellectual work expected of students is no simple initiative. Students need to be convinced that the effort required of them will provide long term rewards.

In a higher education context where every piece of assessment is high stakes and failure can lead to exclusion, it is perhaps unsurprising that many students cannot risk intellectual engagement and thus outsource the endeavour to artificial intelligence or the more traditional forms of plagiarising from the internet or buying assignments from paper mills.

The current police-catch-punish approach to plagiarism is far simpler to implement than engaging in ongoing conversations with students about the purposes of higher education and the merit of intellectual effort. It is labour intensive to provide low-stakes opportunities for students to practice their efforts and to receive feedback on the same. The challenges associated with such approaches mean that it is unsurprising that moral outrage and severe consequences for students caught plagiarising remain the dominant approach, despite the failure of such approaches to bring about change.

None of this is to say that there should be no educational consequences for plagiarism. Indeed, qualifications should not be conferred based on assessments that are not the work of the students submitting them. But such consequences might be less frequent if education is foregrounded over the current, ineffective police-catch-punish approach.

The most common mode of policing for plagiarism in contemporary universities is the use of software (Mphahlele, 2020). This has also been ineffective, and arguably increases incidents of plagiarism as students see their role as appeasing the software rather than learning to write in field appropriate ways.

Misuses of Turnitin and other text-matching software

Many academics are under the misapprehension that Turnitin identifies plagiarism. But it does not.[3] It can identify matched text, but it cannot identify copied ideas. Students thus turn to paraphrasing tools to change enough of the wording to trick the software. Because students have essentially been shown that the goal is to get past the software, rather than telling them about the benefits of engaging with reading materials and crafting their own ideas, this trickery is an expected result.

Even in the case where the software does identify matched text, only a human being can determine if this is indeed plagiarism because the software is, as yet, unable to identify if the matched text is presented in ways that, within that field or area of research, constitute an unacceptable attempt to present them as the authors' own. Many common phrases are highlighted and counted within the similarity index. For example, the words "This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master's degree" was flagged on a recent report as matched to elsewhere, as was "School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences, University of Witwatersrand".

Some fields, such as Law and Accounting, have numerous stock phrases that successful students are expected to use proficiently. In some cases, the software has been programmed to disregard these, but in others it flags them as copied.

> …including Business to Business (B2B), Business to Customer (B2C), Customer to Customer (C2C) …
>
> …inadmissibility of evidence due to it being considered hearsay…
>
> Causing death by careless and inconsiderate driving…
>
> As per memorandum and articles of association…

The above comments were all flagged in Turnitin reports and yet are acceptable and even expected phrases within specific fields.

Furthermore, Turnitin is not without error in disregarding properly referenced direct quotes even when instructed to do so. If the referencing style requires indentation of longer quotes or any unusually formatted direct quotes, these will often be flagged as matched.

> "The similarity index does not tell if any of the work is plagiarised" (Turnitin Student Guide[4])
>
> "The similarity index is not an assessment of whether the paper includes plagiarised material" (Turnitin Feedback Studio[5]).

Many academics, departments, and even whole institutions set a percentage on Turnitin's similarity index as an acceptable limit for students to achieve prior to submitting their work. This is not only ignorant of what Turnitin does, but it gives students two messages:

1. Some plagiarism is acceptable, but it must be kept under the limit set by the lecturer.
2. To avoid getting a high score, you should rework any wording flagged by the software

[3] Turnitin makes clear in various blogs and on its website that it cannot detect plagiarism. However, it does not make this explicit on their main page or in their marketing materials. This is perhaps unsurprising given that many of their sales are based on this misapprehension. Turnitin absolves itself through its agreement with universities from litigation by those who may suffer the consequences of such misunderstandings.

[4] https://help.turnitin.com/Resources/PDF/understanding_the_turnitin_similarity_report-a_student_guide.pdf

[5] https://help.turnitin.com/feedback-studio/canvas/plagiarism-framework/teacher/the-similarity-report/interpreting-the-similarity-report.htm

and resubmit it until the score is within the required bounds. This will still be plagiarism, but academics do not care about paraphrased plagiarism; they are only concerned with a similarity score produced by a piece of software.

Furthermore, the number of false accusations resulting from the misuse of similarity software has led to many universities, such as Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Stanford, banning the use of the programmes.

Newly introduced AI detection software has an even greater chance of producing false positives (Dalalah & Dalalah, 2023; Weber-Wulff *et al*., 2023; Sadasivan, 2023) and duplicates all the problems associated with the police-catch-punish approach to run-of-the-mill cut-and-paste plagiarism[6].

Artificial Intelligence

Many argue that now that there are Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Bing, academia is moving into a post-plagiarism world (Eaton, 2023). LLMs can produce almost any text instantly based on prompts written by users. Even the free version can produce most current undergraduate written tasks. Attempts to replicate the police-catch-punish playbook in regards the use of AI are doomed to fail.

Students need to be empowered to use AI in responsible ways. Importantly, students need to understand that AI software cannot tell the truth and it cannot lie – it simply produces the most likely next word, sentence, or paragraph based on its pattern recognition of the billions of texts in its vast database. Many of the texts produced are formulaic and even banal in structure and content thanks to the corpus of texts on which it was trained. And it is by flagging such patterns that AI detector software attempts to identify text that is possibly AI generated.

But the astute student knows that all that is needed to bypass the AI detection software is to prompt the programme to "use a more literary style" or "make this writing more alive and interesting". Students who can afford the paid versions of LLMs and who have the critical literacy practices required for such gameplay have already learned how to train the programme on their own writing style based on their prior assignments and thereby ensure that all future AI generated writing is a mimic of their own style. Trying to stay "one step ahead" of such gameplay is not only impossible, but also educationally unsound as it addresses the symptoms and not the cause (Kramm & McKenna, 2023). As AI detectors become more sophisticated, students and others will simply develop new hacks. Academics encourage such trickery through the police-catch-punish approach.

At the time of writing, there are various codes of conduct and policies being developed in relation to AI. Reflecting on these is beyond the scope of this *Briefly Speaking,* but there are concerns that these responses will miss the point in many of the same ways in which the responses of universities and academics to plagiarism have done. The police-catch-punish playbook is an ineffective and educationally unsound response to plagiarism, and it will be for AI too.

Students need to understand how LLMs and other Generative-AI work and, therefore, to bring criticality to

[6] It should also be noted that, as with text-matching software, AI detectors are more likely to produce false positives in the case of second-language speakers of the medium of instruction (Liang *et al*., 2023).

their engagement with that which is generated by such programmes. Every aspect of life will be affected by AI and so it is critical to ensure that students are equipped to use it ethically, responsibly, and with criticality. Whether or not students have used AI to produce text will be less relevant than whether they can critically evaluate and contextualise that text. Students will need to be equipped to engage with AI actively rather than as passive consumers.

A forward-focused curriculum will nurture the human attributes of compassion, ethics, empathy, creativity, and identity in a world in which knowledge as information can be far more rapidly produced by software than by a person. Those universities that remain focused on verifying the product they sell through detecting student use of AI will not only be left behind, but they will also have failed to prepare students for an AI future in which higher education needs, more than ever before, to serve the good of the public and the planet.

Conclusion

Current approaches to address plagiarism in higher education institutions do not work. The confusing definitions of what constitutes plagiarism and the dire warnings given to students are at best ineffective and at worst a neglect of institutions' and academics' educational responsibilities.

There is a need to carefully reflect on the learning opportunities provided for students and to consider educationally sound ways of ensuring that the students come to enjoy transformational relationships to knowledge with powerful levels of criticality.

Similarly, there is a need to re-visit the purposes of higher education and ensure that teaching and assessment in higher education align with these purposes.

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