21st century plagiarism: The factors, the players and the improvements we can make

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Abstract

'Plagiarism' is a common cry from educators who are teaching Non English Speaking Background (NESB) students, particularly students from Asia. Plagiarism can be modelled as the overlap of five dimensions: class and content factors, personal factors, academic skills, cultural, and language elements. By using this model we can explore factors influencing student plagiarism and discuss possible roles subject tutors and learning advisors can play in these areas to improve the learning environment for students as they tackle plagiarism.

Introduction to plagiarism

Traditional perceptions of plagiarism are changing as the ideas underpinning plagiarism stretch to support an increasingly diverse student body. Tertiary education institutions need methods of viewing plagiarism that are free from cultural bias, intent and emotion. We need to analyse and model the factors influencing plagiarism in order to help educate students and staff, to change institutional perceptions, and to eventually decrease the number of plagiarism cases.

Increasing amounts of investment in terms of finances, technology, time and energy are being spent in an attempt to combat an increasing plagiarism problem. Plagiarism detection websites, such as Turnitin, are flourishing: Turnitin calculates that it receives a new user every 20 seconds (Turnitin, 1998-2005). We would expect that this investment by institutions, staff and students would result in a fall in plagiarism cases, yet plagiarism appears to be on the increase worldwide (Park, 2003). Park cites increases in America, the UK, South Africa and Finland, increases that appear to be within the last 30 years (Martin, 2005). With rising plagiarism cases, institutions often assume students are becoming more dishonest. Contrary to expectations, some writers premise that students "do not have a genuine intention to cheat" (Lahur, 2004, p. 3; see also McKeachie, 2002). If this is correct, the focus of plagiarism investment may be missing the mark. Investing in reducing plagiarism must be focused foremost on 'educate and prevent' before 'find and punish'.

Institutions and students have different perceptions regarding plagiarism, but both have a role in preventing plagiarism. When institutions centre on detecting and punishing plagiarism, students will be penalised, even when the student may have wanted to produce academically correct work. This corresponds with Ashworth's findings that students perceive plagiarism penalties to be unfair (cited in Martin, 2005), exacerbating the differences in the perceptions staff and students hold regarding plagiarism. Lipson and McGavern's (1993) survey of MIT students and staff in 1992 found that half of the undergraduates "were confused about what constitutes academic dishonesty" (p. 5) and that teaching staff viewed academic dishonesty more seriously than students. Alongside this, students and staff perceive plagiarism to be a student problem, so students can feel that the penalties are unfair, but that they have sole responsibility to reach academic standards. However the responsibility does not

rest entirely on students: there is much work that institutions can do to prevent plagiarism. Finally, it is important to note that views on plagiarism are changing. Plagiarism is increasingly being viewed as a series of paradigms, which acknowledge its cultural basis and its difficult definition (Hannabuss, 2001; Kuiper, 2005; Singh, 2003; Thomas, 2004).

The definition of plagiarism is much more complex than we initially think. The definitions may encompass ideas on intent, quantity, and referencing difficulties. Definitions are often controversial because they imply knowledge or intent on behalf of the student (Myers, 1998). The definitions cross a wide range of situations (Park, 2003) and the context is bound in the past. Thomas points out that plagiarism has evolved, stating that "historically not every manifestation [of today's plagiarism cases] has been considered wrong" (Thomas, 2004, p. 421). Resolving the definitions of plagiarism can increase staff and students' discussions about plagiarism, but it does little to assist institutions in improving academic integrity. For example, Evans and Youmans (2002) found that definitions of plagiarism are similar between different NESB groups, but the cultural issues beyond these definitions affect what students will actually do.

What constitutes plagiarism is part of the cultural weave of western academic writing and research, but not necessary that of other countries. With the arrival of students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), ideas on plagiarism have been challenged and are changing. Park (2003) states that "it must be taken into account when dealing appropriately with plagiarism by students from different cultural backgrounds, grounded in different notions of respect for authority and different traditions of academic writing" (p. 473). Not all researchers agree that international students are more likely to plagiarise. Alam (2004) uses self reporting to conclude that NESB and domestic students plagiarise equally; this conclusion is based on NESB students and domestic students having the same understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, a contradiction of anecdotal evidence and discussion by, among others, Maizey (2001), Ryan (2000), Taniar and Rahuyu (1996), and Thomas (2004). Indeed NESB students are shown to have a lower grade point average, which is associated with a higher incidence of plagiarism (Baskett, Collings, & Preston, 2004; Bretag, Horrocks, & Smith, 2002; Love & Simmons, 1998).

The debate about the extent to which plagiarism is cultural or language based for NESB students clouds other aspects involved in the debate, such as class management and personal issues. This paper seeks to expand plagiarism into a model of five critical dimensions. The five dimensions are: class and content; personal and personal-political; academic skills; cultural perspectives; and language and literacy.

Background

Creating the plagiarism model

The model seeks to expand our understanding of plagiarism and what causes it. The plagiarism model explores five dimensions which can cause plagiarism. There is a tendency to narrow plagiarising behaviour into one or two dimensions, particularly language and cultural aspects, and to focus on these areas to improve student behaviours; however, plagiarism consists of a number of interrelated dimensions which all need consideration. For each dimension I have examined plagiarism where the student wants to make changes or where the institution can make changes.

The plagiarism model was initially created by analysing plagiarism case studies within the institute (see Figure 1).
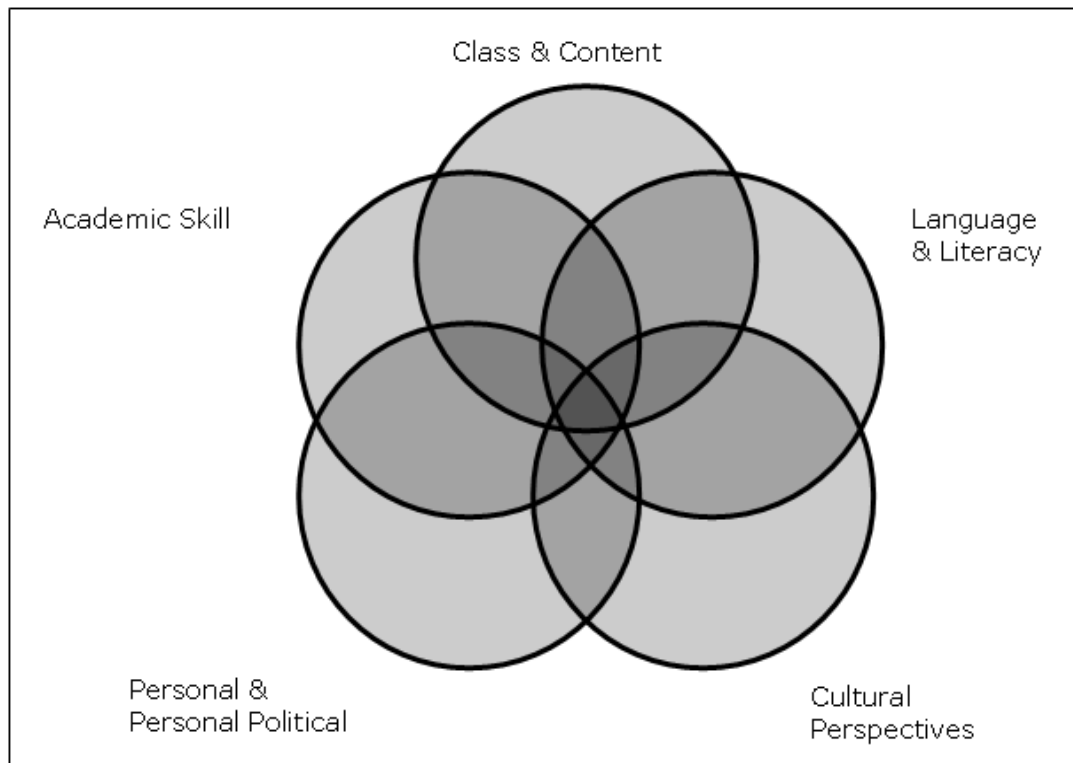
Figure 1. The plagiarism model – the five dimensions of plagiarism

A case was determined to be plagiarism if it met Larkham and Manns' (cited in Martin, 2005) definition of plagiarism of poor scholarship, carelessness or deliberate intent. This definition encompasses a wide range of situations and therefore a wider range of factors could be included in the model. The majority of cases centred on cut and copying tracts from the internet for assignments, although other cases were examined, including cheating in tests and collaboration on individual work. Conversations with subject tutors and students generated possible reasons for the plagiarism behaviour, termed factors. These factors were grouped into five categories or dimensions, and compared to literature, in particular, work by Anyanwu (2004), Biggs Chaney (2004), Bretag et al. (2002), Dawson (2004), Love and Simmons (1998), Park (2003), Singh (2003), and Taniar and Rahayu (1996).

Limitations and characteristics of the plagiarism model

Each of the circles in the model represents a dimension of plagiarism. The dimensions overlap, that is, each dimension influences other dimensions. For example, the personal dimension will influence how the student perceives their class and how readily they take on academic skills. Therefore, the model is a simplification of reality because it does not seek to analyse the relationship between the dimensions or between the factors within these. The extent to which the dimensions overlap is unknown and could be an area for further study.

A single cause of plagiarism may be present in a number of dimensions. For example, a student who is running out of time on an assignment, and consequently plagiarises may do so because of a lack of time management skills (academic skill) and/or an unreasonable workload (class and content). For this reason, elimination of a single dimension may not necessarily reduce plagiarism; however an understanding by staff about these dimensions and a reduction across the institution of all the factors will reduce the incidence of plagiarism. The model will evolve as new conditions impose themselves upon the education system and as our knowledge of plagiarism factors develops.

Discussion of the five dimensions of the plagiarism model

The class and content dimension
The class and content dimension is how students perceive the classroom environment and how student friendly the lesson is. Mawdsley (1994, cited in Myers, 1998) points out that this also means the agreement between the student and tutor on the subject matter and the use of that subject matter. Factors which contribute to plagiarism within this dimension are course difficulty and workload (Dawson, 2004; Lipson & McGavern, 1993; Thomas, 2004); unfamiliar discourse; competition for grades (Gerdy, 2004; Lipson & McGavern, 1993; Love & Simmons, 1998; Thomas, 2004); assignment type (Alam, 2004; Love & Simmons, 1998); and a lack of knowledge, interest and understanding in the course (Alam, 2004).

The largest factor in the class and content dimension is a lack of knowledge, interest and or understanding in the course. Alam found that 41% of students cited this as a major factor in plagiarising. To address this, institutions need to review their course and assessment design focusing on these three aspects. As part of this review, the roles of faculty need to be clearly defined. Hannabuss (2001) notes two roles, one as gatekeepers, the other as facilitators. As gatekeepers, the emphasis on plagiarism is on detection and punishment with little self-reflection of the course content and design. Conversely, as facilitators, staff aim to educate students, training them in the discipline and drawing them into a culture of enquiry. It is crucial that tutors hold the latter view as the tutors' perspective affects the way students view the course and the extent to which tutors encourage students with their learning.

Difficulties with unfamiliar discourse, workload and subject matter cause students to merge referencing material and to copy in controlled assessments because students find text more difficult to read and remember (Torres & Roig, 2005). As discussed earlier, self reported plagiarism correlates with low grade point average scores, suggesting students on the borderline of passing or failing are more likely to plagiarise. NESB students are more likely to have lower grades and higher failure rates and are more at risk of plagiarising.

The key here is for staff to provide information, models and samples to assist students to feel confident of what is expected and their ability to do it. Learning advisors and subject tutors who scaffold assessments build confidence in their students by breaking daunting tasks into more manageable learning units. Subject tutors need to arrive at a consensus with students on the subject matter and its use. Learning advisors can provide models of the assessment types, clarify the learning outcomes for the course, and help students manage their assessments.

The language and literacy dimension
Literacy is the involvement and interaction in knowledge communities (Kuhn, 1970, cited in Singh, 2003); language is the vehicle to enable these interactions. Without language skills, students will struggle to interact in knowledge communities. Students need an ability to understand context and details of information and translate these into coherent, mainly written, work. Therefore, low English skills will accompany plagiarism (Lahur, 2004).

Language often dominates the discussions of international student success, and for good reason, as international students in particular are still acquiring skills with syntax and effective expression. After analysing six courses, Bretag et al. (2002) confirm that "without exception, each of the case studies concludes that English proficiency is the dominant issue faced by international students" (p. 61), and Volet goes further by stating that "when English language proficiency is not an issue, Asian undergraduate students tend to perform better in their academic study than local students" (1999, cited in Bretag et al., 2002, p. 68). This raises many questions for institutions regarding what English proficiency level is required and what language development is anticipated over the course. Institutions need to examine their entry criteria so students are not set up to fail by being in a position which requires them to plagiarise in order to pass the course. In relation to this departments and

student support services might ask themselves what responsibility they have once students are accepted onto a course with an English level of IELTS 6 or a TOFEL of 580 (a common English language entry level for an undergraduate degree).

However, this dimension does not affect only NESB students, Dawson (2004) discusses difficulty in reading "boring" and "abstract" text and academic vocabulary (¶ 15). Students need to be effective critical readers who are able to identify key points, yet texts are seldom elaborated on during lessons. Torres and Roig's 2005 study found difficult texts do not significantly assist learning whether the student paraphrases or plagiarises the text. Subject tutors and learning advisors should provide reading and information at different language levels, assisting students to interact with texts, and to practice language and literacy outside assessment tasks. This may prompt debate amongst learning advisors as to the role we play in language development.

Cultural perspectives dimension
Cultural perspectives are the differing roles, expectations and behaviours of tutors and students with regards to plagiarism, due to different backgrounds and cultural values of these groups. Often when we examine cultural perspectives we look into the history of copyright from a western perspective. That plagiarism is wrong has been built into many centuries of western thinking. The rights of an individual, or a publisher, to an idea or thought (from the 17th Century) were the beginnings of intellectual property laws – noticeably all born in the west. It is interesting to examine recent perspectives on plagiarism in Asia. A recent plagiarism case at Peking University shows differences in thinking with regard to ownership and scholarship. The case centres on a professor of anthropology, Wang Mingming, who was accused of plagiarising 100,000 words from an American academic. A very public debate in Chinese academic circles ensued in January 2002. In 2002, Peking University adopted a written rule on plagiarism, the first time that a Chinese university had done so. This is surprising given that Peking University is one of China's most prestigious universities and therefore most likely to have such policies. Jiang's 2002 article is interesting because it highlights plagiarism policy in China, and responses from Wang's contemporaries and Chinese students on plagiarism. Students at Peking said plagiarism generally goes "undetected and unpunished" (Jiang, 2002, p. A45). The reasons for this may lie in the attitudes of academic staff towards plagiarism: the responses of Wang's contemporaries show plagiarism in terms of social relations rather than western reactions of ethics. Jiang cites the following responses to Wang Mingming's plagiarism: Deng Xiaomang, professor of philosophy at Wuhan University, is quoted as arguing that "Mr Wang was a victim of jealous peers, and that Mr. Wang's real crime was arrogance. If Mr. Wang has better relations with his peers, this would not have happened"; Huang Jisu, a sociologist, stated, "I'm not surprised that Wang Mingming finds himself in such a mess. He has plenty of enemies, but no friends" and a professor from Beijing Normal suggested the centre had "too much power and independence, which led to the accusations" (p. A45). The thinking, responses and repercussions for students engaging in plagiarism in China is different from New Zealand. For students moving to a new culture to study, the above case illustrates how there can be a chasm between past and present acceptable behaviour and educational experience.

The key to improve cultural understanding is initially an awareness of the different perspectives, and further, flexibility and time as students move towards our expectations. Most importantly, these expectations must be made explicit to students. Learning advisors must model good practice and encourage modelling of good practice, providing support early so students do not find themselves unknowingly accused of plagiarism, and encouraging understanding within our institutions.

The onus is also on NESB students to decide whether to learn new skills and to choose whether to incorporate western thinking on plagiarism into their value system. As Myers (1998) points out, "teaching the conventions of writing in English is also a form of social instruction; and the conventions surrounding the notions of plagiarism and intellectual property have especially powerful economic and political ramifications" (p. 3). If students choose to make changes, learning advisors

can support them by making the New Zealand education culture explicit to students and helping students with academic writing and construction.

Personal and personal-political dimension
Personal and personal-political factors are internally driven. Personal factors include the motivation of the student, their drive for efficiency, personal confidence levels (Dawson, 2004; Love & Simmons, 1998), and the desire to learn (Love & Simmons). Love and Simmons state that other factors are more significant in leading to plagiarism than personal factors. Therefore, a student's personality will enhance or negate the likelihood of plagiarism in other dimensions. For example, a student's confidence in language and literacy or his or her willingness to improve academic skills is based on the personal dimension.

Personal-political factors arise when a student examines the value of the learning or the assessment processes. Biggs Chaney (2004) describes a situation in an American university where one of her students plagiarised to challenge the assessment procedures (the student believed tutors overused essays for assessments). In a teaching reflection, Biggs Chaney discusses why the student may have chosen to plagiarise, listing; "lived reality versus academic expectations" (p. 35), a "fundamentally negative attitude" (p. 31), and power issues. As a solution, she suggests the importance of listening and helping students to express their discontentment through other channels within the institution from which students can receive an authentic reply. International students and students from non-traditional backgrounds may also face a tension to retain linguistic and cultural identity (Dawson, 2004; Evans & Youmans, 2002; Maizey, 2001). This is heightened when they perceive their views as being absent or under represented (Mills, 2001).

These factors will never be eliminated; however, improvements can be made in matching expectations of the course with the student. Subject tutors may provide incentives and allow for self-determination where possible (Lahur, 2004). Learning advisors can emphasise learning to enhance student motivation, and help students seek solutions by having their views represented within the institution.

Academic skills
The final dimension of the plagiarism model is academic skills; this is a dimension which learning advisors are particularly focused on improving. Students with academic skills are able to display their knowledge and competences to the subject tutor. Failure in this area is a significant cause of plagiarism. Research diverges on the most significant factor within this dimension. Moller and Groothedde's 2003 survey found time management and deadlines were the key factors in the decision to plagiarise while Lahur's 2004 study of NESB students found referencing skills were the main problem.

Students need to know and use the sometimes complex academic writing conventions such as referencing and use of voice. As an example of the complexity of western writing conventions, the Purdue University website for avoiding plagiarism offers students advice that may be viewed as contradictory and complex. The site advises using research and reading authorities but contributing original work and possibly disagreeing with experts; choosing when to document sources; and making decisions about what is common knowledge (Maizey, 2001; OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University, 1995-2003). Considering many NESB students have not heard terms such as referencing, citation and even plagiarism, there is additional difficulty with navigating these conventions (Dixon, 2005).

A further example of academic skills is the use of voice in student writing. Strauss and Walton (2005) describe voice as the author's perspective. The use of voice in writing is based on culture and language. In an experiment with young Chinese and American children, Chinese children used three times less "I" statements than American children when reporting daily events, and American children made more references to their own preferences and emotions (Nisbett, 2003). This early training in voice may make layering of texts and voice simpler in tertiary study for domestic students.

Students obviously need skills in paraphrasing and citation. Once students understand the rules and processes governing paraphrasing they need to know how to apply them. Unfortunately, many students misunderstand paraphrasing and a significant number cannot identify differences in paraphrased and plagiarised work. These students are unlikely to be able to write correctly cited work:

> Focus group discussion confirmed the prevalence of the misconception among students (especially among students whose first language is other than English) that paraphrasing is essentially a process of omitting and changing words in the text, rather than the intellectual assimilation, reprocessing and rearticulation of source material (Ventola, 1996, cited in Dawson, 2004, p. 4).

Roig (1997) used two studies of undergraduate students, NESB and domestic, to determine if students could identify plagiarised paragraphs from correctly paraphrased ones. He found a quarter of the students could not correctly identify plagiarised paragraphs: with some paragraphs up to 50% of students marked a plagiarised paragraph as acceptable paraphrasing. In fact, only 4% managed to categorise all the paragraphs correctly. There was mass confusion in their ability to determine plagiarised text. Alam (2004), Anyanwu (2004), Dawson (2004) and Lahur (2004) confirm this difficulty. Not surprisingly, "paraphrasing is arguably the highest and most synthetic language skill of all" (Myers, 1998, p. 5). A system where students submit writing to plagiarism detection software cannot resolve this difficulty as the software relies on matching portions of 'word for word' text, encouraging students to use synonyms rather than develop their own meaning of the text. Instead, students need interaction and discourse with tutors and to practice paraphrasing outside of assessment tasks.

As students may not realise they are paraphrasing and citing incorrectly, improving outcomes in the learning skills dimension is particularly important for reducing non-deliberate plagiarism. Learning advisors have important work to do in enhancing students' learning skills: supporting students with planning and managing their time, researching and note taking; correcting misconceptions of paraphrasing processes; and creating opportunities for dialogue with students regarding correct paraphrasing and referencing.

Use of the plagiarism model

The onus is often on students to make changes; however, on examining these dimensions it is obvious that institutions also have an obligation to transform courses, to educate staff and to open the discussion of plagiarism into the realms of education and out of the detection and punishment paradigm. Education may be reactive, analysing plagiarism cases as they present, and proactive, looking at what institutions can do within each dimension.

The plagiarism model can be used to evaluate alleged plagiarism offences. Analysing a plagiarism case according to all the dimensions ensures solutions for the student and that the institution covers all the factors likely to make a difference for that student. The student can then be provided with opportunities to develop skills needed in these areas, which opens the doors for educational success for the student.

The plagiarism model can also be used to examine what students, institutions, tutors, and learning advisors can do to improve student and staff work within the area of plagiarism. The learning centre at the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki (WITT) provides a range of excellent resources on referencing but more focus is needed on helping students actively practise paraphrasing. Within the class and content dimension we provide samples of student essays which have been marked with comments to help students understand the discourse required. However, we do little to help students negotiate workload with their departments or work with departments to examine workload issues. In this way the model becomes a vehicle for proactive improvements in student success by reducing factors for plagiarism.

Further, the model could be developed to enable institutions to rank their courses to estimate which courses are likely to suffer plagiarism. These courses could be targeted for plagiarism improvement strategies.

Conclusion

Plagiarism cannot be reduced to a single dimension. It is multifaceted and to single out one issue will not improve outcomes for students and institutions. Twenty-first century plagiarism is going beyond the ideas of intent and moral, to look into the factors that contribute to student plagiarism and to develop strategies that help institutions, staff and students to move forward in education.

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