

The Critical Role of Pedagogy in Plagiarism Prevention: The Unley Ten Point Counter Plagiarism Strategy

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Abstract:

The plagiarism debate is typically characterised as a problem of either teach-them-to-be-good or catch-them-at-it. By themselves, neither approach has a realistic chance of success because teaching and learning processes are ignored. By locating blame with the students, educators unconsciously absolve themselves of responsibility to examine their pedagogy. This paper argues that a new paradigm is essential and it describes the multi-faceted approach of the 10-step Counter Plagiarism Strategy developed at Unley High School.

A fundamental assumption in designing a task is that a student will go through a process or a number of processes, during which the desired learning should happen, in order to come up with the product that is then assessed. However, the subversive student seeking shortcuts sees only the requirement to deliver the paper and these can be obtained wholesale in well-documented ways. By designing tasks more thoughtfully, being explicit about processes, paying attention to the functions of language and rewarding the process as well as the product it is possible to significantly increase the difficulty of plagiarism and therefore reduce its incidence. Educators also need to contribute to the development of students' ethical intelligence and be aware of methods used by plagiarists as well as simple strategies to detect theft of intellectual property.

While the examples discussed are from the secondary sector a challenge is issued to all primary, secondary and tertiary educators to reflect on their practice and consider how these strategies might be adapted to their own circumstances.

Keywords:

assessment, ethics, learning, literacy, plagiarism, questioning, higher-order-thinking

Paper:

Introduction

Some students have always seen plagiarism as the easy option. With the increased emphasis on independent research coupled with the widespread adoption of ICT, and the internet in particular, the incidence of plagiarism has risen dramatically. Helen Marsden found '81% of tertiary students have plagiarised someone else's work for their assignments' (Fewster, 2002). 'The New Plagiarism may be worse than the old because students now wield an electronic shovel to find and save huge chunks of information with little reading, effort or originality.' (McKenzie, 2000, p 129). Plagiarism is immensely frustrating to those on the front line and the debate is typically characterised as a problem of 'teach-em-to-be-good' or 'catch-em-at-it'. (Marsden, quoted by Laurie, 2003). Typical counter plagiarism sites echo this division, eg, Tjomsland (2002) and Jane Sharka advocates teaching, 'proper citation and copyright compliance and by making sure our

students know that stealing someone else's work is wrong.'(2003) Because teaching and learning are ignored, neither approach has any realistically chance of success on their own. A new paradigm is essential, a multi-faceted approach accounting for all the above.

Is the debate about 'academic integrity' really just about other people's integrity? The problem with the teachem/catchem view of the world is that it essentially locates the blame with the students and we as a profession, in both the school and tertiary sectors, are conveniently able to absolve ourselves of responsibility. There are very few who, like McKenzie, insist that we must look to our pedagogy. This is not to say the plagiarists are innocents, however the fact that some are undoubtedly scheming, cheating, cunning opportunists does not release us from responsibility of ensuring our methodology is effective.

We do not have time, resources or energy to exterminate plagiarism but we do have a duty to adopt strategies that will reduce it. While decisions about plagiarising are individual ones they are made in the context of prevailing school/university cultures/subcultures and wider social mores. This may include genuine and feigned ignorance, a belief that the risk of detection is low and perceived tolerance. Maintaining a focus on process systematically deprives students of opportunities to plagiarise and counters a cheating culture. While individual teachers can and do adopt a stand it will be much more effective if there is a coordinated approach and consistency of expectations across the site. At Unley High School a 10-point whole school strategy has been developed. These strategies are essentially good teaching practice and require little new learning.

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|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 focus on question setting | 6 consider linguistic evidence |
| 2 be explicit about skills | 7 know your students' abilities |
| 3 make student thinking visible | 8 develop ethical intelligence |
| 4 value process as well as product | 9 search for 'borrowings' |
| 5 use one referencing system | 10 discuss suspect pieces |

1 focus on question setting

Teachers set questions because they have an expectation that students will go through a number of processes during which some real learning will occur. It is therefore critical to design questions that oblige students to go through the processes you wish them to. McKenzie is unambiguous,

it is reckless and irresponsible to continue requiring topical, 'go find out about' research projects in this new electronic context ... We have more to worry about here than websites offering term papers for sale ... What we have is a societal shift toward glib and facile understandings allied with an archaic school research program (in some places) that places little value upon questioning and original thought. (2000, p 130)

By developing a focus on setting questions requiring higher order thinking, ready-made answers are less likely to be available. McKenzie suggests asking why something did not happen, or why it did not happen sooner or later. 'Write about the life of Mao' is simply inviting a serve from Encarta. Asking 'Would the course of Chinese history have been the same if Mao had died in (say) 1941?' requires students to apply their understanding and make judgements about his influence.

Unley High maintains a focus on differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of students of differing ability levels. Bloom's Taxonomy is used to develop tasks encouraging the use of higher order thinking skills and as a framework for reconsidering tasks. The following assignment had been used by the LOTE faculty to encourage year 8 students to use the internet and develop their understanding of the country whose language they were studying.

Choose a region of Italy/France/Germany/Greece/China and research any five of the following: cities; agriculture/industry; history; cultural events; tourist features; famous people; foods/wines; special events; legend/myth.

Teacher Karin Wichmann saw this task as an invitation to wholesale plagiarism. A student with access to a CD/online encyclopaedia could have a four-week project done in under an hour, complete with maps, illustrations and artwork. The problem with such 'trivial pursuits' tasks is that a factual answer, the lowest level of thinking, is all that is required. Typically, any original thought involved in the process is dedicated to designing the cover.

You are a tour guide preparing an itinerary for a group of students who are planning to visit a particular region of Italy/France/Germany/Greece/China. This must be accompanied by either a letter or a presentation to the supervising teacher, students and parents convincing them of the value of your itinerary.

Reframing the assignment thus requires the student to gather the information, then synthesise and present it to meet the specific needs of an identified audience, allowing more scope for originality. The best answers would recognise that teacher, students and parents may all be looking for something different and seek a compromise to balance these needs.

Examine tasks you set and consider the processes you are expecting the student to go through. Does the task require those processes or can they simply be sidestepped? What order of thinking is required? Will the student be interrogating authentic raw data and drawing conclusions? How can new understandings be demonstrated? Use Bloom's or a questioning toolkit <www.questioning.org> to develop a range of questions. An outstanding resource is the Xpata Lesson Planner <www.xpata.com>. Be wary of student requests to do a particular topic as it may be stimulated by access to easily plagiarised material. Genuine interest however is the best motivator so rather than say no, set up the task carefully. Finally, change your tasks to a significant degree for every class, otherwise 'heirloom answers' from older siblings and friends will continue to be handed down, year after year.

2 be explicit about skills

Having developed tasks to ensure students go through particular processes it is important to be explicit. What is required of the task? Teach students research skills such as how to analyse questions and break down tasks into any sub questions that will help answer the main question. Discuss the linguistic requirements such as subject appropriate vocabulary and scaffold the relevant text types needed. Show students what success looks like by including examples on your teacher or faculty website. It is helpful to share staff understandings through developing a whole school literacy focus.

Many students need help with note taking and reference keeping, particularly as they move to higher levels of education and the demands become more rigorous. It cannot simply be assumed that they know as the range of help brochures available at any tertiary student centre testifies. Similarly, paraphrasing comes easily to some but for others, ‘put it into your own words’, is confusing. One way of showing students how to do this is teaching them how language functions, for example how linguistic features such as agency or nominalisation actually work. Though beyond the scope of this paper to explore, students developing these understandings find it easier to manipulate language for a much greater range of purposes including paraphrasing.

3 make student thinking visible

A feature of poor formal communication, oral and multi-modal as well as written, is a lack of organization at both the whole text and the sentence level. It is common to find one point appear, apparently at random, in a number of places in a text rather than being gathered into a single paragraph. Similarly, sentences often meander with the end bearing little obvious logical connection to the beginning. They are semantically/grammatically compromised because the writer often starts sentences without a clear idea of how to end, let alone how the whole text will be organised. They may not have been explicitly taught how to structure responses so little wonder plagiarism is a tempting alternative. In other cases students simply think the quickest way to complete the task is to write until the word limit is achieved. This results in a jumbled flow-of-consciousness style that is next to impossible to untangle and provide meaningful feedback.

By requiring students to develop detailed outlines or concept maps to plan their responses you have something concrete to discuss. This stage ‘makes student thinking visible’, by making visible the links or associations a student is making between aspects of a topic. This is often the ‘teachable moment’, the optimum time to intervene, clarify, query or relate to evidence. Most importantly, the outline provides the structure for the final text. When a student starts a sentence they know what it is about and are far less likely to ramble. Thus planning can significantly improve the grammar at both the whole text and the sentence level. In my experience students initially resent having to do ‘extra work’ but eventually realise that outlining makes tasks easier and faster to complete. An excellent way to develop this understanding is teaching them to use Word as an ‘ideas-processor’.

Word processors are typically used as clever typewriters able to edit and make text look pretty. There are however, more powerful tools and Word’s best-kept secret is the Outline (*screen dump possibility?*)

function. Accessed from the view menu, outline facilitates the simple creation of a hierarchy of points that can easily be moved around by dragging them to the desired position. Thus, students could start with a generic scaffold of a text type, eg, argument and then fill in the points for and against together with supporting evidence. Headings and subheadings can be expanded or collapsed at will revealing the structure of a text. The outline can be used for conferencing and becomes evidence of process. Paragraphs can be completed in any order and the introduction may be written last when the writer knows precisely what is being introduced. Text creation was previously constrained because the typewriter (or pen) necessitated starting at the beginning and working through to the end. Many people are still bound by this 'typewriter thinking'. Even though they may cut, paste and edit in ways impossible before they have yet to realize the full potential of the technology and a more free-form way of working. Because it is easy to save and print at different stages, an audit trail is created that provides evidence for the virtuous and makes it more difficult for the plagiarist, hence the importance of insisting on using such planning tools.

There are other valuable programs that help students plan and can provide evidence including *Inspiration* (concept-mapping) and *Reasonable* (mapping/evaluating arguments). A current project is investigating the use of *CaptureCam* to enable students to record their thoughts and processes at different stages of a task <www.tsof.edu.au/research/plict>. Initially developed for making short instructional multimedia clips for technical support, this easy to learn program records both what is happening on a screen and a voiceover that can be used for student/teacher comment. In the study students record their project status at defined intervals or milestones. This forms a record of their progress in the form of a digital journal. Students proved enthusiastic about using *CaptureCam*, particularly those who are less confident or reluctant to write. Teachers can skim a file that provides further evidence of a student's involvement in learning. Although in the early stages of exploration this strategy shows a great deal of potential and could be useful in all areas of learning.

4 value process as well as product

On occasion students' understanding of the process or processes involved in a task are assumed, left implicit or, if explained, done too briefly. Any student looking for a shortcut will quickly work out that they can skip some or all of the process(es) unless they are made very explicit, are required and demonstrably valued by the award of marks. Simply rewarding the paper makes it easy for the plagiarist to avoid any real learning and focus on how to get the product. Allocating marks for each stage of the process, eg, research notes, developed outlines, drafts and proper referencing, will help 'keep them honest'.

5 use one referencing system

For the sake of consistency and to eliminate potential confusion and excuses it is important to adopt a single referencing system that every student in every subject should understand and be expected to use. Unley HS adopted the Harvard (author-date) system because of its relative simplicity and popularity in tertiary institutions. Supporting resources provided to ensure consistency include a brochure and a PowerPoint

presentation as well as information in the student planner and on the website. To ensure students actually use it teachers are encouraged to insist on correct referencing and reflect this in their marks.

6 consider linguistic evidence

All texts have a particular style that may be thought of as a 'signature' or 'fingerprint'. This style will depend on the purpose of the text and the expertise of the author, both as a writer and as an authority. Any discrepancy of styles between work submitted and the student's known ability is grounds for suspicion. It is instructive to consider two passages from an independent study task submitted for year 12 Design (not from Unley). The first is from the introduction and the second is from the fifth paragraph

Computer chairs are among the most abundantly used article of office furniture to date (along side desks and shelving). With more and more jobs involving computers arise so does the demand for an ergonomic computer chair.

.... Backrest angle adjustability allows the chair to support different degrees of recline, which in turn transfers some upper-body weight to the chair backrest and lightens the load on the lower back's intervertebral discs.

The style of first passage is everyday, conversational language with simple structures typical of an inexperienced writer. The second, in contrast, is far more precise and complex with a sequence of consequences and use of specialist language. You do not need to be a forensic linguist to deduce two authors. The teacher who set the task seems oblivious however and made the following comments: 'sound research – reflection evident – clear understanding', awarding it 9 marks out of 10! A quick search revealed that, except for the poorly written introductory and concluding paragraphs, the 8 pages were taken verbatim from 3 unattributed websites.

The teacher does not seem to have followed any of the strategies raised in this paper but the real reason this has not been challenged is probably more complex. There is a tendency for some teachers to confine themselves within their specialist area. The belief that language is the sole and exclusive preserve of the English faculty is not uncommon. This manifestly should not be the case as all teachers, whether they acknowledge it or not, are literacy teachers, having a responsibility to teach students to communicate in ways that are powerful, particular and appropriate to their subject. A carryover of this mindset is that many specialist teachers ignore the way content is communicated and linguistics triggers that are clear indicators of blatant plagiarism are missed.

There is a need for teachers generally to increase their awareness of the linguistic markers that are the 'smoking gun' of plagiarism. There are a number of features that experienced teachers look for. Plagiarised texts may be taken from authorities including textbooks, journals and reputable sites on the internet. These 'encyclopaedic' texts are well structured at the clause, sentence, paragraph and whole text level and are typified by lexical density, extended sentence length, complexity and consistency. Notably, they contrast to the way most students write. ESL learners in particular may have their own patterns of apparently quirky

English structures, often influenced by their first language, which can contrast starkly with the flow of 'borrowings'.

7 know your students' abilities

By ensuring that tasks are occasionally done in class under test conditions you can see what a student's unaided writing is like. Most teachers develop a keen sense of the standard of work a student can produce under supervision and the unacknowledged work of others will become more obvious in comparison. Tertiary educators would generally develop this understanding in tutorials/seminars. Reflect, 'is this level of understanding and literacy skill consistent with what I know about this student'. If not, then further attention is warranted.

8 develop ethical intelligence

Developing ethical intelligence contributes to a positive culture but is not easy in a time of ethical ambivalence, mp3 file sharing and software piracy. Students need to understand why it is not in their own long-term best interests to steal the work of others. Ultimately they cheat themselves.

An important source of deep personal pride, confidence and positive self-concept is achievement. Baffled students can doubt their own ability and certainly can't take pride in work they do not know how to do. The pedagogic implications include ensuring students understand tasks and how to be successful (above). Midolo and Scott (2003) argue that when school communities value student created work perspectives change as students understand they are owners of intellectual property have exercisable rights.

Discuss the issue of plagiarism so expectations are clear. They should understand the strong probability that they will be detected and need to know that you know about 'homework-help' sites, etc. Expectations and consequences should be clear and public, eg published in the student handbook or planner. Parents and the wider community need to know that the issue is taken seriously.

9 search for 'borrowings'

Being aware of what you are up against is a useful starting point so think about the plagiarist's 'craft'. How could you shortcut the task if you had been given it? Visit some homework 'help' sites and look at what is on offer. A May 2002 Google search for 'homework' returned 4.6 million sites; by September 2003 this had risen to 7.75 million! These sites vary from the laudable, eg, www.nationalgeographic.com/homework to the exploitative 'paper mills', sites which have a huge range of papers for sale. You can even select a particular grade, presumably so you can stay in your own league and not make it too obvious it's not your work. The Kimbel Library maintains an excellent site tracking the 'mills' <<http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>>. They note that, 'in March 1999, it had 35 sites on it. Currently, March 2003, there are over 250 general sites listed.' There are also subject specific sites. Lovers of irony should visit www.ethicspapers.com, providing 'research papers to assist students studying ethics'. If they don't have it, they'll 'write one as quickly as you need!'

Well known mills include, www.homework.com, www.schoolsucks.com, www.screw-essays.com, or www.cheathouse.com. These sites may be filtered, eg, on sa.edu (SINA) so try from elsewhere or have the site unblocked. The best-known detection site is www.turnitin.com which checks student work against potential sources and then reports back to the subscriber. Students of subscribing schools can even submit work through this site so it has been authenticated before handing up. While serious money would be made by the mills, it is probable that sites/software specializing in detection are also highly profitable and one driver of the 'catch-em-at-it' group may be commercial interests.

Steps any teacher should take before going to this expense include the following. Search topics you set to acquaint yourself with what is available. Try more than one search engine as they throw up different results. Note that people rarely go beyond the first page or so of the sites returned. You might casually ask targeted students which engines they find most helpful. CD/online encyclopaedias are particular favourites of the lazy so check these if nothing else. Having assignments emailed to you saves the tedium of keying in suspect passages accurately.

Students may try to disguise plagiarism by changing the introductory paragraph or the first line of other paragraphs so start elsewhere. Look for technical terms and/or complex language and choose a 'string' of 5~10 words. Type or paste the suspect string into the search engine find field enclosed in double quotes forcing a search for the complete string. Search engines use different algorithms so some are better than others. I usually start with www.alltheweb.com because it looks for the string exactly as entered and will often return a single accurate hit. Google is the most popular engine and what a plagiariser finds with it will also be found by the righteous! Before giving up on a search try different suspect strings and different engines. Colleagues who tried this technique found the results 'quite scary', particularly as they were not initially suspicious and were simply experimenting. Remember, you don't find anything it does not mean the work is not plagiarised, only that you did not find it. Your intuition could still be correct.

10 discuss suspect pieces

'I found your speech to be good and original. However, the part that was original was not good. And the part that was good was not original.' (attributed to Samuel Johnson)

You may have proof that some, or all of a particular piece of work is plagiarized or just a strong feeling that something is amiss, that the language and understanding of a piece is inconsistent with your assessment of a student's ability. Making accusations however, can be seriously counter productive and may even leave you open to action. At this stage the wise would reflect on their own role by considering the above strategies. Has the task been appropriately structured, the required skills explicitly taught, the process valued? In short, how comfortable are you that there was nothing more you should have done? Such consideration goes to the heart of one's being and is always challenging. For the reflective practitioner however, it is the key to professional growth.

Even if with incontrovertible evidence of word-for-word plagiarism it is desirable to have a range of non-confrontational strategies to discuss suspect pieces with individuals in the hope that they will realise you

have not been fooled and confess. There are a number of common sense ways to discuss suspect pieces and it is important to have a structure in mind. For example, begin by asking them to discuss the process they went through getting the information and work through their outline, notes and draft(s). Move from the general to the specific, identifying words or phrases that caught your attention as inconsistent, curious, out-of-context usage or technical terms and ask them to explain/expand. Explain your concerns and ask, 'did you get any assistance at all?' One source of help may be from a paid tutor and there is a fine line between receiving legitimate assistance and the tutor taking over the task. This is a difficult area and parents in particular may require guidelines.

Always bear in mind that you may not get an admission, and, possibly could be wrong. Remember too that if you had followed all the strategies outlined above you might well not be having this conversation! A useful way to conclude following an admission is to establish the consequence but also reiterate your expectation that next time they will go through the processes required and, perhaps give tips on this. The end goal is to keep students engaged in the learning process. Maintaining a policy is necessary aspect of this but not a goal in itself.

conclusion

There is no simple antidote to plagiarism and never will be. No miraculous technology, no overnight conversion of the student body to scrupulous honesty, no glamorous solution but the long haul that pivots on effective pedagogy and encompasses a range of strategies. Eliminating plagiarism completely is probably impractical but it can be reduced dramatically through a collegial approach, a greater understanding of the function of language and maintaining a focus on these ten steps.

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Links and more all available from my Website

www.tayloron.net/plagiarism