article:1892

International engineering students – avoiding plagiarism through understanding the Western academic context of scholarship

A H Duff, D P Rogers and M B Harris

Article Summary

Those who are new to university environments are often confronted with a new culture of scholarship – particularly with the way in which research is presented and attributed.

As Learning and Academic skills advisers will attest, the international student cohort (that is, those who are articulating into Western systems) face the biggest challenge with referencing and attribution. This is because the notion of using sources is characteristically a Western notion, dating back many years to the freedom of expression, the growth in the book and British copyright laws in the early 18th Century. This assertion – culture and difference – is promulgated widely in the learning and academic support literature by writers such as Ballard and Clanchy (1991); Lowe and Cook (2003) and Chanock (2003). It is also presented in literature around applied linguistics (for example Hyland, 1999).

In late 2003 a group of Masters Engineering students at the University of South Australia were found to have plagiarised. Their 'sins' ranged from cutting and pasting from the internet, to failure to reference their sources in text. The relatively large numbers of students indicated that dishonesty was not the only reason for lack of attributions in their papers. A combination of lack of familiarity with the language-rich genre of proposal writing, combined with lack of exposure to Western systems of referencing, left the group vulnerable to plagiarism through ignorance.

Engineering staff and Learning Advisers (from the teaching and learning unit, *Learning Connection*) instigated a series of interventions which made explicit the cultural differences as they related to attribution and scholarship. These interventions involved:

Scaffolding assessment so that students could build their skills toward a final product. (For example, the first piece of assessment was demonstrating basic referencing skills, the second was to write a literature review and the third their final research proposal.)

Library-run sessions about how to use electronic databases.

A series of formal workshops about referencing (in the Western tradition); writing the literature review and writing a research proposal.

A series of informal Writers' Circles. Students volunteered pieces of writing and the rest of the class 'solved' referencing and other writing conundrums.

The identification of students perceived to be 'at risk' of failing or – indeed – plagiarism. These

students were referred on to Learning Advisers.

The development of specialist online resources, such as an Avoiding Plagiarism website which was targeted especially to the course.

Data was gathered longitudinally over a three year period. It indicated that these interventions yielded a dramatic decrease in the amount of plagiarism recorded from 45% of the class cohort in the first half of 2003 to 2.1% by the second half. By the second half of 2005 instances of plagiarism had declined to nil.

Such a successful result demonstrates two things. Firstly, that collaboration between Engineering and academic support staff provides fruitful results. Secondly (and most importantly for this study), we must constantly guard against tendencies toward stereotyping those new to our shores as 'plagiarists' or somehow academically deficit.

Making explicit the cultural nuances of Western academe goes a long way toward improving the quality of the work received by students and the teaching delivered by lecturers.

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Monica Behrend, the Systems Engineering and Evaluation Centre, the library team at the Mawson Lakes campus of the University of South Australia and the teaching team at Learning Connection.

References

Ballard, B. and Clanchy, J., *Teaching International Students: a Brief Guide for Lecturers and Supervisors*, 1991 (IDP Education: Melbourne).

Chanock, K., Before we hang that highwayman – the LAS advisers' perspective on plagiarism, in *Educational integrity: Plagiarism and Other Perplexities: The Inaugural Educational Integrity Conference*, 2003.

Hyland, K., Academic attribution: citation and the construction of disciplinary knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 1999, **20,** 341-367.

Kokkinn, B. and Stevenson, M., Meeting the challenges of learning support for on-campus, off-campus and offshore students in a multi-campus university, in *In the Future: Language & Academic Skills in Higher Education Biannual National Conference LAS 2003*, 2003.

Lowe and Cook, Mind the gap: are students prepared for higher education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2003, **27** (1).

Park, C., In other (people's) words: plagiarism by university students – literature and lessons. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2003, **28,** 471-488.

Park, C., Rebels without a clause: towards an institutional framework for dealing with plagiarism

by students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2004, **28,** 291-306.

Sabieh, C., An ELT's solution to combat plagiarism: "birth" of CALL. Available online at: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/0d/f2/7c.pdf (accessed 10 May 2005).

Scollon, S. Not to waste words or students – Confucian and Socratic discourse in the tertiary classroom. Hinkel, E (ed) *Culture in second language teaching and learning* Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Sunderland-Smith, W., Pandora's box: academic perceptions of student plagiarism in writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 2005, **4** (1), 83 - 95.

Author 1: Andrea H. Duff anrea.duff@unisa.edu.au

Author 2: Derek P. Rogers dprogers01@iprimus.com.au

Author 3: Michael Harris Michael.Harris@unisa.edu.au