Avoiding plagiarism: Steering clear of the rocks

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Abstract

For students embarking on a voyage of academic discovery, the threat of plagiarism lurks just below the surface. By and large, students know the dangers: course outlines draw attention to institutional policies on academic integrity, and students attest that 'this is all my own work' on their assignment cover sheets. However, ours is an age of constantly changing sources of information; demonstrating one's academic integrity can prove a challenging task. By evaluating the typical range of responses to plagiarism— detection, punishment, skills-building, understanding, and prevention — this paper invites learning advisors and academics to consider the most effective ways of helping students avoid potential dangers upstream.

"*Danger, danger! Warning, warning!"* What is the first thing that comes to mind when you see this expression: is it (a) cautionary advice to students about the potential threat of plagiarism lurking below the surface of their voyage of academic discovery, (b) an intertextual reference to a 1960s' science fiction programme, or (c) an example of plagiarism itself? That a single expression may have multiple interpretations indicates just how muddy the waters of academic integrity have become, as attested by the plethora of recent articles on plagiarism— and its counterpart, academic integrity—in areas ranging from ethics (Davis & Carroll, 2009; Rees & Emerson, 2009), to higher education (Devlin & Gray, 2007; Sutherland-Smith & Carr, 2005) , from TESOL and applied linguistics (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Ha, 2006; Liu, 2005), to library studies (Park, Mardis, & Ury, 2011), from business (Christensen, 2011; Hansen, Stith, & Tesdell, 2011) to criminal justice (Ferree & Pfeifer, 2011) and computer science education (Joyce, 2007; Williams, 2002).

In fact, students should already be aware of the dangers: just as adventure tourists sign a waiver before embarking on a white-water journey, so students are required to attest that 'this is all my own work' on their assignment cover sheets. Despite this, students' apparent inability to avoid plagiarism should come as little surprise. As the opening example reveals, steering clear of the rocks poses considerable challenges in an Internet age typified by increasingly credible, universally available sources of information. Moreover, the associated information management tasks are bewilderingly complex. As outlined by Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL) checklist, in order to demonstrate academic integrity, students must:

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Develop a topic based on what has already been said and written	BUT	Write something new and original
Rely on experts' and authorities' opinions	BUT	Improve upon and/or disagree with those same opinions
Give credit to previous researchers	BUT	Make your own significant contribution

(Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), 2011)

Avoiding plagiarism entails much more than simply knowing how to cite accurately; students must be able to interpret, evaluate, assimilate and synthesise secondary materials: sophisticated skills made even more demanding if operating in other than one's first language. By evaluating the typical range of institutional responses to plagiarism— detection, punishment, skills-building, understanding, and prevention — this paper invites learning advisors and academics to consider the most effective ways of helping students avoid potential hazards upstream.

Detection

Tertiary institutions take plagiarism very seriously, as evidenced by the tendency to couch the issue in moral terms, as typified by Victoria University of Wellington's statement: "it's not acceptable to lie about, steal or mistreat academic, intellectual or creative work that has been done by other people" (Victoria University of Wellington, 2010). From the institution's perspective, students have been forewarned. Course outlines cite the plagiarism policy, assignment instructions stress the need to acknowledge all sources correctly, and, as a measure of compliance, students are frequently required to submit assignments electronically via plagiarism-detection software. Although such measures come after the fact, Turnitin.com, the best-known of these programmes, claims that the process helps prevent plagiarism (2011). Certainly this assertion is supported by Ledwith and Risquez (2008) who found Turnitin.com's peer-review function encouraged students to take more care in their work; similarly Davis and Carroll (2009) reported success when using the programme's feedback reports as teaching resources. However, each of these studies incorporated human intervention rather than detection alone, the merits of which are affirmed by Emerson, Rees and MacKay (2005) in their paper, "Scaffolding academic integrity". Indeed, according to other researchers (Okoro, 2011; Sutherland-Smith & Carr, 2005), the use of anti-plagiarism software in isolation not only has little deterrent effect, the associated presumption that all students are dishonest may actually harm the student-teacher relationship.

Having said this, of course, an act of plagiarism, once detected, demands some form of reaction, which often entails disciplinary proceedings in accordance with institutional policy. Punishments vary (depending on the perceived level of premeditation) from verbal caution to written warning to disciplinary hearing; from failing the assignment or course, or even, for serial offenders, exclusion from the institution itself. While such measures uphold academic integrity, punishment in itself does little to foster good behaviour. For this reason, the process generally also includes referral for

remediation to Learning Advisors, who frequently find culprits fall into two distinct categories. The first group freely acknowledge they have copied material —it perfectly expresses exactly what they want to say. Moreover, they consider the accusation of plagiarism as an over-reaction, regarding the inclusion of a Reference List as sufficient. The second group tend to be more indignant: how can they use their own words when they don't know anything about the topic? Does their marker *really* expect them to reference every sentence? Often such students are taking a single essay-based course within a largely practical degree, making both punishment and rehabilitation largely meaningless. In any case, no one is advocating punishment as the sole response: "robust and transparent procedures for detecting and punishing plagiarism" (Park, 2004, p. 294) must go hand-in-hand with education and prevention.

Education

Just what form this education should take is the area of most debate. Despite Purdue OWL's realistic appraisal of the complexity of requisite skills, the immediate response to plagiarism usually focuses on teaching students how to format references in accordance with stylistic conventions. Such an approach addresses the symptoms, but little else. Granted, students need to learn how to cite accurately, and, to this end, there are any number of online and workshop-based 'how to' resources, including Auckland University's excellent *Referencite* (2011) and bibliographic software such as Endnote or Zotero. A number of institutions have gone even further, as exemplified by the award-winning Youtube clip, *Diagnosis Plagiarism* (2009), from Yavapai College in The United States. Nevertheless, it is not enough simply to explain how to format citations without broader discussion about academic integrity as a whole (Baetz, Zivcakova, Wood, Nosko, De Pasquale & Archer, 2011). Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that this big picture discussion rarely happens, or that there is a mismatch between theory and practice. Markers' comments such as "it doesn't matter what style you use as long as you're consistent" reduce referencing to a stylistic technicality, rather than acknowledging its integral place within the disciplinary discourse. Equally problematic is the fact that inconsistency abounds: course readings may lack full bibliographic details, or include references 'copied and pasted' in a variety of styles; different disciplines require different, often unspecified, conventions, and even recognised styles have alternate forms.[2] Learning how to acknowledge sources correctly is a crucial academic skill, adding value to students' work and demonstrating mastery of the intellectual discourse. However, teaching students how to reference does not in itself prevent plagiarism.

[2] For example, here are Reference List entries formatted according to the first three Google hits for 'Harvard referencing style':

Baron, D. P., 2008. *Business and the organisation.* London: Pearson. (Anglia Ruskin University, 2012)

Baron, DP 2008, *Business and the organisation*, Pearson, London. (Monash University, 2006)

Baron, D.P. (2008). *Business and the organisation*. London: Pearson. (Wikipedia, 2012)

The differences (commas/full-stops/parentheses; 'place, then publisher' versus 'publisher, then place',etc), may seem insignificant in terms of the 'doesn't matter as long as you're consistent' rule. Nevertheless, as with novice kayakers, providing a single line of navigation has got to be preferable.

Understanding

One reason for education's lack of effectiveness is its assumption that plagiarism stems from either wilful deception or lack of knowledge. In fact, there are many reasons why students plagiarise, with, over the years, a shift away from an assumption of cheating to a more sophisticated analysis, as outlined by Joyce's (2007) literature review. While no study has investigated whether New Zealand students employ the essay-mills prevalent in United States' tertiary contexts, undoubtedly there are those who knowingly copy others' work. Nowadays, few students can genuinely claim ignorance or cultural misunderstanding. As Lui (2005, p. 237) indicated: "those who plagiarize in China, like those who do it in the West, know that what they are doing is wrong and they do it anyway as an easy way to obtain personal gains". In many instances, however, simple expediency rules, with students failing to allow adequate time for research and simply latching on to the first available resource. One such example was a student referred to our Learning Support unit whose essay on "the constitutional nature of New Zealand's parliamentary system" largely comprised a verbatim copy of the North Shore Bowling Club's Constitution, which satisfied the assignment's word count requirements, but little else.

Deliberate transgression aside, many instances of apparent plagiarism should more properly be regarded as students' first attempts at developing an academic voice. Linguists call these efforts "patchworking" or "plagi-phrasing" (Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Reid, 2009; Wilson, 1997), half-way measures whereby students gradually learn to express their own ideas through modelling the language of the literature, as shown by Figure 1 below:

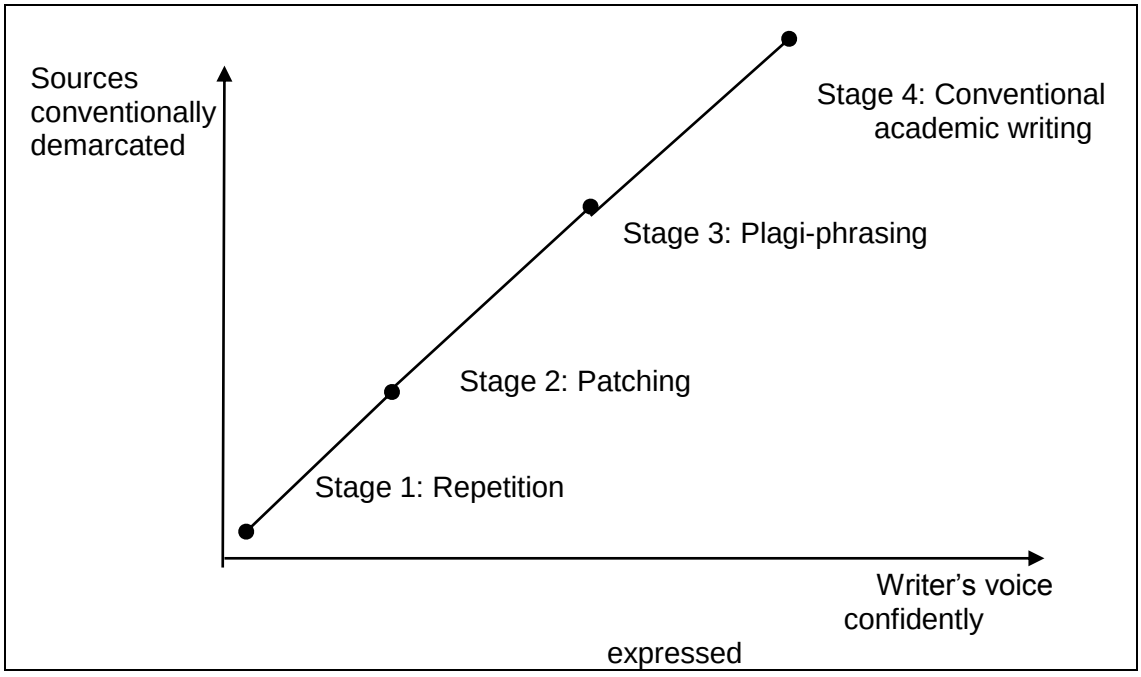

Figure 1: Writing from sources as a developmental skill (Wilson, 2006, p. 765)

Developing an academic 'voice' merits an entire body of literature of its own, with, as already noted by Purdue's OWL (2011), synthesising borrowed material having as much to do with thinking as writing. Paraphrasing is a sophisticated skill, which (Wilson, 2006) goes so far as to call an "arcane practice", as exemplified by one student's reaction: "'Why do you ask us to paraphrase when the author already explained it?'" (Wilson, 2006, p. 766). Moreover, being exhorted to use one's own words may seem a retrograde step for students seeking to emulate academic discourse: "'when I read the book (…) I want to write like that'" (Reid, 2009, p. 71). Such evidence calls for realisation that apparent instances of plagiarism may well represent genuine efforts to obey the rules; accordingly, academics and learning advisors must appreciate the inherent developmental stages involved in successfully incorporating borrowed material into one's writing.

Skills-building

Learning how to "write like that" is crucial if students are to master the requirements associated with academic assignments and avoid plagiarism in the process. Along with 'how to reference' guides, there are any number of 'how to paraphrase' courses, workshops and online resources (Park, Mardis & Ury, 2011). However, exercises asking students to 'indicate which passage is plagiarised' bear little relation to actual course readings, while paraphrasing activities tend to focus on the word level (finding synonyms, reworking expressions) rather than providing opportunities for students to achieve real understanding. For example, a fellow VUW learning advisor, Kirsten Reid, recounts a typical strategy employed by second language students: "First I think in Korean and write in Korean finding words from electric dictionary" (Reid, 2009, p. 65) . Although aware that word-by-word translation was not ideal, this student knew no other way to incorporate source materials, apart from using direct quotations "if I don't understand". Unless "value is added through critical analysis" (Williams, 2002, p. 278), little is gained from simply rewording borrowed ideas.

As Learning Advisors, we need to encourage students not only to understand what they are reading — but also clearly demonstrate how such material supports their argument (Wilson, 2006). Avoiding plagiarism demands the development of critical thinking and writing skills (Ferree & Pfeifer, 2011). To this end, introducing reporting verbs as a way of foregrounding the student's voice and working with course-specific readings go some way towards reinforcing the bigger picture: that 'avoiding plagiarism' equates to engagement with academic debate as illustrated by this extract from a brochure from VUW's Student Learning Support Service.

"How do I use borrowed material in my essay?"

Show your understanding by rewriting in your own words:

- **For short passages:**
  - Break up long sentences
  - Combine short sentences
  - Use synonyms [use a Thesaurus]
- **For longer passages:**
  - Close the book
  - Write down what you remember

For example:

Original: C. Zhou. The Asian Economy (Oxford, OUP, 2002), page 33

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, it was faced with major pollution problems. The government introduced taxation on motor vehicles and tobacco sales, and enacted anti-littering laws to solve the problem. Because of the cleaner environment resulting from these policies, many multinational companies have since invested in the country.

Step 1: Paraphrase (using <u>all</u> your own words)

When it became independent in 1965, Singapore was heavily polluted. To address this problem, the government began taxing people for owning cars and smoking, as well as fining people for littering. This legislation resulted in cleaner surroundings that have attracted many international corporations to invest in Singapore (Zhou 2002, p. 33).

Step 2: Use the information to support your own views:

A second, less obvious instance of government's influence on business can be seen in Singapore. **According to a study on the Asian economy, Singapore used to be heavily polluted, but since independence in 1965, a successful government anti-pollution campaign has made the country attractive for offshore investors (Zhou 2002).** This shows how legislation to improve the environment can also have an impact on the commercial sector.

Figure 2: "Avoiding plagiarism or How to write an 'A' essay" (Laurs, 2011).

As revealed by the literature on plagi-phrasing, paraphrasing skills take time to acquire (for both native and non-native English speakers), a developmental process that needs to be scaffolded within the assessment system.

Prevention

All the responses discussed so far tend to represent reactions rather than proactive measures to forestall plagiarism in the first place. Certainly informing students of the dangers, understanding the pressures on them to perform, and helping them develop the requisite written and cognitive skills can help, but such responses are of little use if assessments inadvertently encourage the problem in the first place. For example, if a first-year assignment calls for a brief biography of a 'chosen educational theorist',

students can do little other than reproduce the following passage almost word-for-word:

> Jean Piaget was born in Neuchâtel (Switzerland) on August 9, 1896. He died in Geneva on September 16, 1980. He was the oldest child of Arthur Piaget, professor of medieval literature at the University, and of Rebecca Jackson. At age 11, while he was a pupil at Neuchâtel Latin high school, he wrote a short notice on an albino sparrow. This short paper is generally considered as the start of a brilliant scientific career made of over sixty books and several hundred articles. (Jean Piaget Society, 2007)

Paraphrasing is not only difficult for students dealing with subject-specific, factual information. Even ostensibly more open topics such as 'explore the relationship between leadership and organisational behaviour' result in ready-made responses with the very first hit on Google.

In order to discourage plagiarism, assessment should be timely, visible and varied. Topical questions not only challenge students to recognise the relevance of their studies, they require them, at the very least, to think about and rework textbook information to suit the particular context. In one such example, an introductory Victoria University of Wellington course on Government, Law and Business required students to apply their lessons on "governmental capacity to intervene in the economy" to the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake. While students may still possibly plagiarise the more theoretical aspects (Wilson, 1997), using localised examples privileges original thinking. Students are likely to have already considered the earthquake's consequences in real terms, making their answers more authentic on all counts. Similarly, making the process overt by breaking down assessment into its constituent parts (for example, requiring an initial essay plan or annotated bibliography) has twofold advantages. Firstly, scaffolding reinforces the hows and whys of academic integrity, enabling students to isolate the requisite skills and tackle each in turn. Secondly, markers gain advance insight into students' researching and thinking strategies, and can, if necessary, intervene. Variety is perhaps the most desirable form of assessment design, although the demands of large classes, brevity of teaching terms, and limited sessional assistance mean academics often fall back on standardised written formats rather than allowing for self-selected topics, or oral, visual or online presentations. Some, however, are willing to push the boundaries. Massey University's Communication in the Sciences course, for example, uses i-maps as both formative and summative assessment of first-year students' understanding of source materials, as shown in Figure 3:

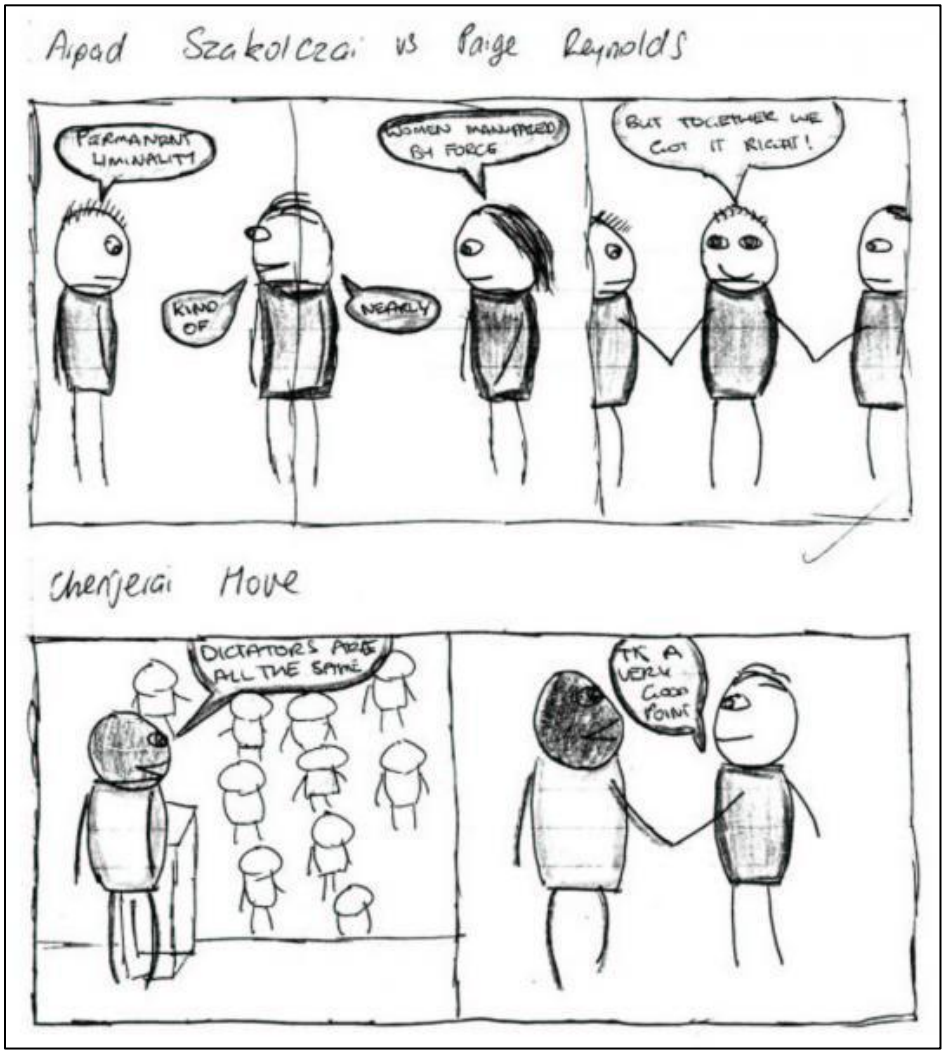

Figure 3: Sample i-map (Emerson, Stevens, & Muirhead, 2008)

Through encouraging authentic responses to the literature (*'kind of…nearly… but together we got it right'* and *'It's a very good point'*), i-maps not allow the student voice free range, they also effortlessly foster engagement with the academic discourse. Such personalised reactions do much more than inhibit plagiarism; they demonstrate "evidence of students being more confident about engaging with secondary source material, articulating their own position in relation to a research question, and understanding the writing process" (Emerson, Stevens, & Muirhead, 2008). Moreover, as Massey's case study reveals, innovative assessments need not be time-consuming to mark.

Ultimately, honest treatment of the literature is what academic integrity is all about: avoiding plagiarism simply the process by which this honesty is made manifest. The rocks and rapids of plagiarism need to be recognised for what they are: obstacles that, with careful planning and sound navigation, need never be encountered in the first place. Getting rescued and/or chastised do not necessarily prevent future mishaps. Similarly, warning of the dangers does little to protect against reality. Practising the

necessary steps to deal with the situation is a good first step, but only if drills are consistently reinforced. Moreover, it is important to realise that some may need the rocks as stepping stones, before casting off on their own. Furthermore, as with any voyage, everyone must be on board.

Rethinking

The twenty-first century offers considerable scope for reconceptualising plagiarism: intertextuality, remixing and mash-up are all legitimate art forms: *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961) is a reworking of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare), the 1995 movie *Clueless* (Heckerling) draws heavily on Jane Austen's *Emma*, likewise the Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) relies on the audience having at least a passing knowledge of Homer's *Odyssey*. Taking things further, a recent Sky TV "Happy Place" advertisement (Baldwinson & Elstone, 2011) purportedly depicts the main character on the same golf course as Tiger Woods, while an amateur You Tube clip (McIntosh, 2009) deftly weaves scenes from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight* into a valid 'alternative' narrative. In each instance, the product highlights the contributing factors and showcases the creator's skills in the process. Likewise, rather than focussing on plagiarism's negative connotations, institutions, educators and learning advisors need to build on students' strengths in order to help them successfully navigate the waters of academic discourse.

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