

LEARNING AND TEACHING BRIEFING PAPERS SERIES

Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development

DEALING WITH PLAGIARISM

Jude Carroll

It may be that plagiarism is becoming more common, more serious, and more of a threat to the integrity of Brookes' qualifications. It is certainly true that academics are becoming increasingly worried about it. Here are some steps you might take to decrease the chances of your students plagiarising – that is, claiming credit for work that is not their own.

DESIGNING OUT THE EASY OPPORTUNITIES

Students will be less able to plagiarise if you make regular and frequent changes to the assessment tasks and what they are asked to submit for assessment. If possible, avoid problems and tasks that result in one solution. Instead, seek ways for students to submit individualised answers. Perhaps you can require them to include a statement about why an approach was chosen, or early drafts, or the 'workings out' as well as the final result.

When designing assessment, integrate course work and the exam so that the former is necessary to succeed at the latter. For example, the exam questions could include a review of the coursework, perhaps asking an evaluative question. Or an exam question may require the student to integrate her/his coursework findings, by using information from and/or the same processes/skills as the coursework. If you do integrate observed and unobserved work for authentication reasons, ensure that students know this to be the case at start of the course, or only the more strategic of them will notice the link.

Learning outcomes that ask students to describe and list information are especially prone to wholesale downloading from the Web. By asking instead for comparisons, analysis and evaluation, you lessen the chance that a suitable document already exists to meet the requirement. However, you could include information-gathering skills in the learning outcomes and devise tasks that encourage students' Webplundering skills

Research shows that a key driver for plagiarism is poor student organisation, leading to cheating when last minute panics arise. To lessen this effect, you could put more emphasis on the planning and structure of tasks rather than only assessing the end product. By asking that students show you an essay plan, a draft or copies of research papers they will use for the final product some weeks before the submission date (not for assessment but to verify it exists), you encourage all students to be as strategic as the good ones.

Finally, asking for different artefacts for assessment can significantly lessen the chances of submitted work being bought, faked or copied. Rather than a standard essay, it might be possible to devise something that is equally valid as an assessment tool and equally likely to encourage student learning. Annotated booklists, portfolios, poster presentations, group project reports and reflective logs cannot be downloaded wholesale and probably do not lend themselves to cut-and-paste construction.

INFORM STUDENTS/TEACH THE SKILLS

Induction can be a useful place to first introduce the idea of referencing sources, attributing ideas to their initiator and using paraphrasing and summaries in academic writing. However, it is unlikely that students read their module handbook or remember a tiny fraction of what they are told in induction sessions. Regular reminders in module handbooks and assignment briefs are important. Explanations should be written in student-friendly language and include examples of both behaviours to be avoided and those to be encouraged regarding collaborative learning and use of sources.

Students often find the concepts of plagiarism and collusion difficult. They frequently use the term 'plagiarism' to cover everything they must not do in university. If plagiarism is defined as passing off someone else's work as your own for your own benefit, the 'work' includes constructions, photographs, compositions, graphics, ideas gained through group work, and perhaps even the structure and plans underpinning a particular presentation of work (a poem layout, for example). Collusion can also be considered as a form of plagiarism if the work achieved in a group is submitted as a student's individual effort. If you wish students to collaborate, tell them how they should submit the work to show individual contributions and/or effort.

Students often do not realise that intention is irrelevant to whether plagiarism has occurred, although it generally is relevant to the consequences and punishments arising from a proven case. In other words, 'I didn't mean to do it' is not a defence, but it is a plea for fair and reasonable punishment. Generally speaking, students who do not adhere to academic regulations are treated progressively more severely depending on the extent of the plagiarism, the level of their programme, their previous learning environment (implying how familiar they might be with UK academic conventions) and the assumptions on citation in their discipline.

Some student groups will need extra help in understanding citation rules. International students, those at the start of their academic career, and those engaging in cross-disciplinary work are especially in need of guidance. Academics also hold diverse and sometimes mistaken ideas about what does and does not constitute plagiarism, compounded by different conventions that arise in different disciplines and different contexts (for example, a published paper and an oral presentation). You could check this out with your own colleagues.

All students (and many academics) will need to use active learning techniques to fully understand how to comply with academic regulations governing plagiarism and collusion. Finding time to teach these skills can be tricky, especially in a modular programme. Skills are best learned if they are incorporated into the discipline-based teaching. Students can check their understanding by exercises such as choosing which of three versions of a paraphrased text is acceptable, or peer reviewing the citation practice of fellow students.

MODELLING GOOD PRACTICE

Research shows that students are more likely to cheat if they feel a course is unimportant or badly taught. If they feel ignored, cannot understand the purpose of the assessment, or believe that they are being asked to reiterate well-worn ideas rather than create their own, they are much more likely to cheat. So showing you are interested, constantly reviewing the course in response to student feedback, and putting effort into devising useful and creative assessment tasks will have benefits for combating plagiarism.

You could also model good practice yourself, citing references in your lectures and explaining why you believe in academic values. Another important signal is to spot and take action on blatant signs of plagiarism such as URLs left on pages, fluent written English from a student who struggles with day-to-day conversation, all references in an obscure and distant library, or American spelling. If you see any of these signs and do nothing, you are signaling that academic rules are not worth defending.

Oxford Brookes now has a system of Academic Misconduct Officers (AMOs) who have responsibility for dealing with breaches of academic regulations such as plagiarism. Should the measures described in this paper still not be sufficient to deter a student, then referral to one of these officers is the sad but necessary next step.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

For more information on the AMO's role, see

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/regulations/scrdp608.html>

For Student conduct regulations and disciplinary procedure, see

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/regulations/sturegs.html>

For more information on dealing with plagiarism, see Appleton, J. & Carroll, J. (2001). Plagiarism: a good practice guide available online at <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/pub01/brookes.pdf>

The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning
Development
Oxford Brookes University
Wheatley Campus Oxford OX33 1HX
Tel: 01865 485910
Fax: 01865 485937
Email: ocslid@brookes.ac.uk
Web: www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 UK:
England & Wales License.



Original: 27 June 2002

Other papers in this series are available at: www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/briefing_papers