

GOOD IMAGES, EFFECTIVE MESSAGE? WORKING WITH STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS ON ACADEMIC PRACTICE UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

Work at Northumbria University has focussed on activity that extends opportunities for students to engage directly with the skills development necessary for sound academic practice. This has included highly visual campaigns on the 'Plagiarism trap', providing access to Turnitin plagiarism detection software, guides and sessions to highlight use of associated referencing tools. Sessions on a variety of topics, such as supporting study skills and reading of originality reports, have been provided for students on taught, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. This provision has included students working on collaborative partners' sites and also those on research programmes.

Alongside the activities with students, 'designing out' approaches have been embedded in staff development within the educator community at Northumbria. Formative use of Turnitin is integrated throughout programmes and academic practice development is formally recognised within the University Learning and Teaching Strategy's focus on Information Literacy.

This paper will outline and review these activities in a critical institutional context and evaluate responses from a variety of students and educators to determine how effective these measures have been. Developments underway for the University's eLearning Portal using emerging technologies will be indicated and the extent to which these will assist in academic practice development considered.

Introduction/background

Plagiarism is an issue in which Northumbria has had an interest for a number of years. The JISC-funded Plagiarism Advisory Service (JISCPAS) had its origins in a team at Northumbria and several staff have contributed to the debate (Borg 2002, Dordoy 2003, Gannon-Leary & Borg 2003). Dordoy (2003) highlighted the fact that Northumbria staff take plagiarism seriously, in terms not only of detecting and penalizing cases but also in terms of designing assignments. A poster indicating the holistic approach to work undertaken at the University was demonstrated at the second International Plagiarism conference in June 2006. The University has an institution-wide approach, working with Schools and service departments to develop 'Guidelines for Good Assessment Practice'. The most recent version of which has an extensive section covering Academic Misconduct (2007). Reviews of practice take place regularly, indicating a sustainable model of support. An Academic Misconduct group has concluded work to develop a student guide, undertake staff workshops and ensure improved access to Turnitin software from the University's VLE. Authors such as Auer and Krupar (2001) have stressed the value of partnerships in achieving success in designing out plagiarism and the project research team exemplifies such a partnership between the Academic Registry and MARCET (Northumbria's Staff Development Resource Centre). A further and most important partnership is shown with work undertaken at Northumbria with the Student's Union. The Education and Welfare officer was a member of the Academic Misconduct Group and instigated an information campaign on 'Plagiarism' in conjunction with the Group.

Focus

As authors such as Harris (2001) and Evans (2006) point out, reasons for plagiarism are complex and can include psychological, personality, cultural and demographic factors as well as those related to teaching and learning:

"ignorance, opportunity, technology, changes in ethical values, competitive pressures, perceived lack of consequences, and even poorly designed assignments." (Harris 2001)

This study is not attempting to delve into the many and varied reasons but rather to focus on those elements more specifically related to assessment, e.g. the way students are expected to access and process information they need for their assignments (Errey 2007), compounded by the increasing availability of online information (Badge et al 2007) and the lack of training in academic literacy skills (Badge et al 2007).

As Ashworth et al (1997) comment, published work of the 1990s on cheating and plagiarism amongst HE students tended to presuppose a shared understanding on the part of students and staff in respect of the issues. However, as Stefani and Carroll (2001) identify, in the 2000s we have started to discuss and explore the complexity of plagiarism as a concept and the potential mismatch between staff and student understandings/perceptions of plagiarism (Flint et al 2006). Gourlay and Greig's (2007) Napier case study indicated that academic staff expected students to arrive at the university with an awareness of appropriate academic practice. In fact year one students were conscious of making a transition into an environment with different requirements in terms of, e.g. academic writing, than had been their prior experience. Marsden et al (2005) found high rates of plagiarism amongst students with low levels of academic self-esteem so it is important that students develop confidence in their abilities to cope within the new learning environment.

Deficit model vs academic literacy model

Like Gourlay and Greig (2007), Macdonald & Carroll (2006) and Haigh & Meddings (2007)

emphasise the need for recognition that students are inadequately prepared when entering HE and lack the skills necessary to take a scholarly approach to their learning. Whitaker's (1993) undergraduates, asked to define the concept 'plagiarism', used terms such as "copying" and "stealing" as synonyms. Presumably they were influenced by emotive media coverage (Carroll 2004, Sutherland-Smith & Carr 2005) and what Howard terms the "gotcha industry" (Howard 2002).

The deficit model takes a punitive perspective whilst the academic literacy model takes a student empowerment perspective (Macdonald 2000, Burkhill & Franklyn-Stokes 2004).

As Macdonald (2000) says, a distinction needs to be drawn between intention and ignorance coupled with inadequate writing and citing skills. We need to consider what learning, teaching and assessment strategies we deploy, especially in the light of our changing student population. Macdonald (2000) recognizes this is, in part, a staff development issue. MARCET provides staff development opportunities in collaboration with Schools and Central Services to ensure students have a positive learning, teaching and assessment experience. Indeed Northumbria recognizes this in its Learning and Teaching Strategy, central themes of which include development and use of contemporary modes of teaching delivery; development of effective assessment as a tool for learning; and developing the expertise of our staff in teaching and supporting learning.

Macdonald (2000) highlights the fact that some assessment methods almost invite cheating. Information management and critical analysis skills are important and need to be developed. Students need to be given clear guidance about what is appropriate, reinforced through learning tasks and assessed formatively i.e. to measure the process of analysis rather than the regurgitation of content (Williams 2002). This strategy involves designing out plagiarism by designing assignments which afford little scope or opportunity for plagiarizing in the first place plus provision of clear and consistent advice to students (Harris 2001, Evans 2006).

Barrett and Malcolm (2006) reiterate that, in order to hone their academic literacy skills, students need to perceive the relevance of these skills and the optimum method to ensure this is to relate the skills to a piece of their own work. Barrett and Malcolm (2006)'s case study used electronic plagiarism detection tools, including Turnitin, to help students understand correct academic practice in using source material and this is a similar approach to that taken at Northumbria. This approach has also been adopted by Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in a case study of module on an Early Childhood Studies degree (O'Hara et al 2007) which took a co-ordinated, multi-disciplinary approach to academic writing skills using Turnitin as a formative tool to support students, particularly in relation to building their confidence and competencies. SHU are moving towards incorporation of study skills into formative assessment activities.

Macdonald & Carroll (2006) advocate assessment-led solutions such as these which focus on using low stakes, formative assessment, starting from the premise we need to get assessment right in the first place and to integrate actions to deal with it into a coherent, institution wide approach that is evidence-based (Devlin 2006). This holistic approach recognises the need for shared responsibility between students, staff and institution, supported by external quality agencies. Northumbria's activity reflects this, engaging staff from Schools, support departments such as Student services, Library and Learning Services, the University's Secretary's office, Academic Registry Learning and Teaching Support, working with the Students' Union also. This offers opportunities for a sustainable, coherent and balanced approach. Much of the literature (Park 2004, Green et al 2005, Barrett and Malcolm 2006) perceives such an approach as a win-win situation for students and staff. For the former it means skills development, relevance and reduction of fear of unintentional plagiarism while reinforcing ideas of academic integrity in assessment. For the

latter it aids a common understanding of what constitutes plagiarism; avoids variations in practice; and promotes standards of scholarship. It means they are not forced into the role of “plagiarism buster” (Silverman 2002) faced with the dilemma of whether or not to report a suspected incidence of plagiarism. Swain (2005) quotes Carroll saying it is preferable to make courses less plagiarism-friendly or give students guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism rather than pursuing a case against a suspected guilty student.

It is a case of protecting student and staff interests plus the institution’s reputation as a learning university. One of the central themes of Northumbria’s Learning and Teaching Strategy involves development of Northumbria students as effective lifelong learners and in respect of this our intention is to

“produce graduates with sound information literacy skills: in particular knowing when and why information is needed, where it can be found and how to evaluate information and use it in an ethical manner.” (Northumbria University. Learning & Teaching Strategy, 2007)

This is in line with McCabe and Pavela’s (2004) principles of academic integrity which stress the recognition and affirmation of academic integrity as a core institutional value and the fostering of lifelong commitment to learning.

Media reports of incidents of plagiarism can cloud the public view of academic integrity in HE. Green et al (2005) discuss how a culture of academic integrity should be engendered across all levels of the University. There is, of course, always the concern about engendering suspicion and mistrust with concepts of surveillance society and a big brother culture. Clearly there is the potential danger of jeopardising the staff: student relationship of trust but this should be minimised if the institutional policies are made transparent (Park 2004) and equitable, fostering good practices and ensuring the good reputation of the HEI.

Marsh (2004)’s scholarly critique on the use of Turnitin serves to warn academic staff that its use as a pedagogical support should not stamp out creativity or non-conformity! This is very much the approach advised by Williams (2002) who also echoes Gourlay & Greig (2007) in his reference to the blame culture/deficit model. We are about promoting “good images, effective messages” with a proactive rather than reactive strategy and high profile institutional use of Turnitin.

Students’ Union ‘Plagiarism trap’ information campaign

In 2006 the students vote for campaign of the year led to the Chair of the University Academic Misconduct group being invited to work with the Student’s Union to specify the campaign. Funding was gained from the Regional Development Agency to support the work and paid for Design consultant services to develop the project.

The aims and objectives of the campaign were to ‘raise awareness of Northumbria University’s approach to development of academic practice, thereby preventing misunderstanding and academic misconduct’. Objectives were set to use a variety of media to reach as wide a student body as possible, engage in high-profile events to communicate the range of support mechanisms available across the University and to run a series of workshops to develop skills and understanding of academic practice such as referencing, use of web searches and sources etc. The outcomes of this work included a set of materials such as: Posters, A5 flyers and post-its that were used in an anti-plagiarism week in autumn term. Follow-up activity was provided through the semesters. Links to activities and the work of the academic Misconduct group were made where possible. Copies of the five posters

depicting 'Sly Fox', 'Cheeky Cow' and so on became collectors' items and these have been re-used by the Students' Union in subsequent years.

This study sought to the extent to which the combined activities at Northumbria have contributed to an effective message regarding academic misconduct.

Methodology

A mixed methodology was employed to enable triangulation. The research team identified Turnitin Users amongst the staff and their associated modules. Fifteen staff users who regularly used Turnitin were asked to contribute views of their use of the system. They were contacted and asked if they were willing to participate in the pilot and to allow a team member access to Turnitin to view their specific module assignments and the generated originality reports, which helped inform questions for the survey. The team tried to target staff from across all Schools at Northumbria in which Turnitin was used to try to ensure fair representation. Six staff responded positively and identified modules which would be appropriate for the project. By appropriate the team had suggested "module/s which you teach which you consider to be the best exemplar in terms of your use of Turnitin".

Questionnaires were designed by the team and mounted on the SurveyMonkey survey software site. Online surveys have proved useful in past research projects at Northumbria in gaining prompt feedback on key issues and it was decided that this approach would render the survey more attractive to staff and, particularly, students. Because the team had only a basic account this placed limitations on the number of questions that could be asked and on the number of respondents. The latter was of no concern because the population sample was small at this pilot stage. The former was a limitation but it did ensure that the team focussed on what they believed to be the key issues at a pilot stage, whilst allowing free text sections on the survey which could be completed by respondents to raise their own key concerns. Some questions in the surveys were the same to enable comparisons to be made between staff and student responses. The URL for the staff survey was emailed to staff. The email cover letter requested that they notify the students via the University's virtual learning environment (known as the eLP or e-learning portal) of the URL for the student version of the survey. This method ensured that students on the identified modules were targeted. The cover letter also assured potential respondents that the University ethics and data protection procedures were being followed by the team. Although only six out of fifteen targeted staff members had agreed to participate, a version of the cover letter was sent to the other nine staff also on the assumption that non-response might not necessarily indicate unwillingness to participate! Clearly the cover letter indicated the voluntary nature of the project.

The staff questionnaire included a box in which staff could indicate their preparedness to engage in a follow up interview. Where such preparedness was indicated the staff member was contacted and a semi-structured interview was conducted.

Results

Responses were received from five staff and twenty-eight students.

How Northumbria staff use Turnitin

Staff at Northumbria use Turnitin formatively and summatively. Generally, tutors in this study explained the purpose of using Turnitin within a research or study skills module. Students were told of the processes involved and how to access originality reports. Staff checked that their students could find the submission area, load the reports and could see the materials on the module site that would help them interpret the originality report. In effect

the procedures are similar to those reported in Badge et al's (2007) case study in the school of Biological Sciences at the University of Leicester where students undergo training through formal lectures and a tutorial exercise to teach them about plagiarism (Willmott & Harrison 2003). It also resembles the approach reported in Barrett and Malcolm (2006)'s study where, prior to essay writing, students were given a series of lectures on finding and summarising sources, and were reminded about what constitutes plagiarism.

As one Northumbria academic said,

"In year one, semester one students have to complete an essay and often don't realise they have copied large sections from textbooks or notes, it was anticipated that this [session] would introduce them to the facility as a guard against unintentional plagiarism."

The students' essays were submitted to Turnitin and the resulting reports used to give feedback to students on how original their words appeared to be. Northumbria academics tended to use a formative approach encouraging students to revise their assignments if the threshold of matching text was over a particular percentage (in some cases any non zero matches) and then to resubmit. Northumbria staff found that decisions on threshold could involve a 'gut instinct' especially in subject areas with generic terminology:

"20% and over I would check but often there would be odd words or phrases that might be quite generic Finance expressions so the reports do need to be considered carefully. I have seen matches over 30% which really do not give any significant 'chunk' of text that can be matched"

A threshold of 15% of matching text was used by Barrett and Malcolm (2006) who found 41% of students had submitted work identified by Turnitin as possible plagiarism but this reduced to 26% on inspection by academics. After a second submission, incidence of plagiarism dropped to 3% overall. Whilst our sample is too small to talk in percentages, Northumbria staff did comment on a reduction in incidences:

"Good students are excellent and know how to source and cite material. Poor ones reply on Wikipedia. For some there was a difference between the first submitted and second submitted pieces of work so it helped them"

Generally at Northumbria the students were expected to use Turnitin as a self-assessment resource. Some students would seek clarification individually from the academic staff over content and staff were able to guide them on improvements

Evans's (2006) case study found that Turnitin successfully identified examples of poor scholarship and unfair practice that would have been missed under the usual marking system but highlights the impracticality of rigorously checking every script for plagiarism. Clearly a threshold or cut-off point has to be decided beyond which originality reports are taken on trust and not subjected to further checks. Sutherland-Smith & Carr (2005)'s case study found that checking only yellow, orange and red cases was worthwhile. However, Goddard and Rudzki (2005)'s New Zealand case study participants, in discussing Turnitin colour coding, agreed one could not assume all those assignments coded blue or green were good and those with orange or red codings were bad: much was dependent on teaching modes, levels (undergraduate, postgraduate). One Northumbria academic agreed that:

"This is quite difficult to judge as you also have to determine whether that which has been flagged is actually properly cited and referenced and can therefore be ignored"

One Northumbria student commented on how they disliked the way their assignment was marked as having 9% matches, all of which were for references:

"I had only a few references so I can imagine if I did a bigger one with more references there would be a higher percentage of 'unoriginality'. Reference sections should be submitted separately not through this system as, at a quick glance, it could look like a student has high plagiarism when in fact they don't"

Another student commented they were uncertain about how accurate Turnitin was and they were unsure about the thresholds. If academic staff are going to have to examine submissions in depth, this could have time and workload implications. One Northumbria academic pointed out that, whilst analysis of Turnitin results could be very time consuming but:

"Better than trying to find the sources in cases of suspected plagiarism, the knowledge that I am going to check their work certainly encourages the students that I come across to identify their sources."

Consensus was that, used in a formative way, with students being required to use Turnitin and view their originality reports themselves, Turnitin does not have to be onerous for the academic and:

"It is also more beneficial to the students as they see it as a way to improve their work rather than a stick to beat them with when they submit their work for summative assessment."

Staff perspectives on Turnitin

Sutherland-Smith & Carr (2005)'s small-scale case study exploring staff perspectives about the effectiveness and usability of Turnitin indicated they found it to be time consuming and they were unsure of the benefits of its use to students learning. Getting students to self-submit meant that Northumbria staff did not necessarily have to look at the Turnitin reports at all and might only do so when marking a script that caused them concern, in which case:

"It is then much more convenient if the script already has an originality report and I don't have to go into the site, and load it up myself and then wait for the response."

Generally Northumbria staff saw the use of Turnitin as of beneficial to student learning.

"It is very useful...reassuring that their work is plagiarism-free"

"A positive experience for students as many engage with it...and will change their writing as a result."

"Student feedback has demonstrated that it has made them more informed and less tolerant of plagiarism."

"Many students feel they are information literate but Turnitin may show otherwise and makes them realize how important writing and referencing skills are."

However, one respondent did indicate that they perhaps needed to give students more support and, clearly, this does have time and workload implications. Similarly their colleague commented:

"I have changed one assignment to be able to use Turnitin but now that students are able to use it I need to develop the follow-up so that they can learn more from their experience and result of using it."

Case studies (Sutherland-Smith & Carr 2005, Barrett and Malcolm 2006, Evans 2006) stress the need to use Turnitin in a positive, educative manner enabling students to check their own work through Turnitin before submission to staff, not to see if they will be 'caught'. It needs to be integrated with materials/training designed to help students understand issues which, generally, is the approach taken at Northumbria. This is confirmed by one comment made by a staff respondent:

"I had very positive feedback from the students. It is seen as a useful tool not something that is trying to catch them out or trick them."

Positive remarks from staff in Savage's (2004) study concerned Turnitin's effectiveness as a deterrent; the fact it promoted a level playing field with regard to assessment; that it afforded students support/reassurance, that it gave them an incentive to improve citation, and, overall, had the potential to raise standards. These remarks were echoed by Northumbria respondents:

"It has made me more confident in the originality of the work submitted to me for assessment...and has made the students more aware of the need for honesty and originality"

Student perspectives on Turnitin

Savage (2004)'s evaluation of Turnitin trial at the university of Sydney raised two warnings in regard to student objections. Firstly some students hold objections that relate to legal issues concerning privacy, copyright and ownership of labour. Secondly that senior students are more likely to seriously object than junior students, which may presage a problem for the introduction of Turnitin in postgraduate courses. However, students were positive about aspects such as fairer assessment, the deterrent effect and the incentive to develop citation skills thus improving scholarship. Similar benefits were identified in Green et al's (2005) large-scale (N=728) evaluation of a trial of Turnitin software. Student beliefs about Turnitin were that it helped them avoid unintentional plagiarism, assisted them with learning (Martin 2004) in development of academic skills through closer scrutiny of writing, essay structure and referencing. None of the Northumbria student respondents raised any objections to use of Turnitin but several highlighted benefits they felt they had derived from its use which corroborate those of Savage (2004) and Green et al (2005):

"Turnitin was very useful as it highlighted the issue of academic misconduct"

"It is important for everyone in understanding the importance of not plagiarizing..."

"It helped me understand how serious plagiarism is and also helped me learn how to do my own essays/assignments."

"It leaves no room for doubt. You know what you have handed in is yours and that others will have handed in their own work as well. It semi-involves the student in the marking process, gives you a different point of view and I think you do better work"

"As an international student it was helpful to see what exactly I was expected to cite in order to get a better mark."

Only two fifths of students in Sheridan et al's (2005) exploration of views on the use of Turnitin had gained a clearer understanding of plagiarism although they did acknowledge it had helped them to reference correctly and write assignments in their own words. Students indicated wanting more feedback from tutors on the outcomes of submitting their work to Turnitin. This was the case with some Northumbria student respondents too:

"All I remember is getting results back for the complete assignment. Results from Turnitin were not gone through with each student individually"

"Staff did not follow up any submission. Throughout all the reports we submitted to Turnitin we did not get any follow up..."

However, other students did get more feedback:

"They were helpful in the sense they told us in general what to include and exclude to get a low percentage from the originality report."

"If you had any problems the staff made it clear they were there to help and would discuss any problems you had with them."

"I am an information literate student and the advice and help from staff so far this year has helped me to become so. Turnitin will definitely help improve my skills as I continue to use it."

Further research is needed into the potential impact of use of Turnitin on learning outcomes. Some students in Green et al's (2005) study believed that use of Turnitin would help them be more original (McGowan 2002) and critical in their work but, for some Northumbria students, the use was an inhibitor:

"Turnitin makes you more wary about how you write your assignments. If we didn't have to use it then I would probably be more relaxed about what I am writing."

For others, use had encouraged independent thought:

"Turnitin has not had a major effect on my academic practice. However, it has made me think more independently"

As one member of staff commented:

"I see Turnitin as a positive experience for students as many engage with it. They now ask tutors to set it up for assignments and will change their writing as a result but perhaps I need to give more support here"

Conclusion

The pilot study demonstrated points about developing practices using Turnitin. For students formative use of Turnitin was beneficial though a variety of practices and the affects of these on learning suggest further development work. Staff views also suggest that development of further policies of use and facility to share staff practices in academic teams would be beneficial in order to develop student support and reading of originality reports for example.

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