

Negotiating boundaries: Student perceptions, academic integrity and the co-construction of academic literacies

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Abstract

Viewed within the context of an *academic literacies* approach to student writing, the issue of plagiarism may be seen to be rooted in questions of identity, and evolving individual practices and the construction of meaning and the complex development of the authorial self. Student writer identity is seen here as being formed in a 'liminal' space, a site of struggle and negotiation, where norms of participation are not always fully expressed or shared. Although this may have special salience for students from diverse cultural backgrounds, it could also be seen as part of a transition experience for the wider student body, as students explore the boundaries of acceptability and writer identity. This paper will describe a current study at Napier University, Edinburgh, which explores these issues, focusing on students' previous learning experiences, their engagement with awareness-raising guidance and resources at the university, their level of confidence in their ability to avoid plagiarism, and their perceptions about what aspects of writing are most challenging. The study also looks into student perceptions of the overall culture of academic integrity in the institution, focusing on the prevalence of and motivations for plagiarism practices.

An online survey featuring a range of closed and open question types was administered to the whole Napier student body, and attracted over 600 responses. This has been followed by a series of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with students, (25 volunteers have been interviewed at the time of writing), focusing in more detail on students' perception of what plagiarism actually means and where they personally see the limits of acceptable practice, coupled with their perceptions of their emergent identities as academic writers. This paper will provide analysis of this data set, further interpreted in the light of the literature, with a focus on implications for pedagogic practice, awareness-raising focus and institutional policy.

Introduction

The motivations and extent of student plagiarism have been widely investigated (e.g. Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead 1995, Angelil-Carter 2000, Lillis & Turner 2001), and factors such as time management, lack of confidence and misunderstanding of conventions have been identified, among others. Recent research has also looked at writing processes (e.g. Pecorari 2003, Park 2003), and issues such as the relationship between assessment rubric design and plagiarism (e.g. Norton, Tilley, Newstead & Franklyn-Stokes 2001). Other work has looked at issues for post-1992 universities (Bennett 2005), and detection and prevention strategies (e.g. Hyland 2001, Carroll 2002).

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However, some commentators have questioned Western concepts of authorship and intellectual property, arguing that the concept of authorship is a culturally and ideologically specific one (e.g. Scollon 1994, 1995, Pennycook 1996). The validity of the concept of plagiarism itself has been questioned, by for example Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook 2004, who propose the alternative categories of *transgressive* and *nontransgressive intertextuality*. Literacy practices regarded as plagiarism in the West which are employed by students from diverse cultures have begun to be explored (e.g. Robinson & Kuin 1999, Sowden 2005). This body of literature calls into question the assumed stability and universality of 'plagiarism' as a construct.

In the wider study of student writing, an *academic literacies* approach has emerged, which sees writing as a set of 'situated knowledge-making practices' (Lillis 2006). In looking at writing, it investigates issues such as identity and relationships to texts (e.g. Candlin & Plum 1998, Ivanic 1998, Jones, Turner & Street 1999, Hendricks & Quinn 2000, Lillis 2001, 2003, Ivanic & Camps 2001, Thompson 2005, Lea 2005). In Thompson's view, '...the development of writer identity needs to be seen as part of the ongoing epistemological negotiations that occur between students and lecturers as they struggle to construct desired meanings across texts.' (2005: 1).

The international student is often identified as being at the centre of this intercultural struggle for shared meaning-making. However, it may be profitable to extend the analysis as Thompson does, hypothesising the student engagement in the negotiation of academic literacies/identities as an intercultural struggle not only for international students, but also potentially for the wider student body.

Background to the study

This study aims to apply this approach to investigate student perceptions of rights and responsibilities by looking specifically at student identities as writers and how that impacts on their literacy practices, in particular in terms of academic integrity and plagiarism practices. The study also aims to inform evolving Napier policy and related institutional developments such as the Napier's Plagiarism Code of Conduct, Pre-Masters Programme, EFL In-Session Support Classes, and the Academic Conduct Officers Good Practice Forum. The broader aim is to raise awareness among our students and staff about issues surrounding academic literacy and integrity, and also to contribute to the understanding of the complex phenomenon of plagiarism by the wider academic community.

The study developed partly as a result of the findings of the Napier-based International Masters Students Research Project, an interview study conducted in 2005, involving teaching staff and international (Chinese) Masters students (Gourlay 2006 forthcoming). The semi-structured interviews focused on the challenges faced by these students and staff in increasingly international Masters cohorts in the Business School at Napier. One of the key findings of this study was the apparent student need to *decode* cues presented in the context, and lack of explicitness with which expectations seem to be articulated at times. Related to this, issues of plagiarism and academic conduct were raised repeatedly by staff and students. These findings lead to a broadening of research focus to the whole Napier student body, further investigating the concept of student perceptions and decoding of expectations, norms and literacy practices to be engaged in.

Data Collection and Analysis

An online questionnaire was administered in late March 2006, and was 'live' for a month, closing in late April. The survey focused on several aspects of the issue:

- The extent, nature and sources of students' previous knowledge and awareness of academic conduct and academic literacy
- The extent, nature and sources of advice / awareness-raising about academic conduct and academic literacy encountered at Napier
- Student degree of confidence about their ability to avoid plagiarism
- Perceived degree of challenge represented by different aspects of producing written academic work
- Perceptions of prevalence of / motivations for plagiarism practices

Participation

Just 56% of respondents were female, 44% male, which closely corresponds with the gender balance at Napier in session 04-05. The broad mix of home and international respondents was as follows:

Country / region of origin

Country	no of all responses
UK	70%
Europe	19%
Overseas (not Europe)	11%

36 non-UK nationalities responded. 24% of all respondents were from countries where English is not the first language. Of these, 11% were 'overseas' as opposed to EU students, slightly under the university proportion of 15%. The main non-native speaker nationalities were as follows:

NNS country of origin (N150)

Country	Number
Germany	31
China	27
France	21
India	14
Spain	9
Poland	7
Others (27 nationalities)	41

The various faculties of the university responded as follows:

Faculty participation in survey

Faculty	% of all responses
Business School	28
Engineering and Computing	24
Health and Life Sciences	23
Arts and Social Sciences	20
Lifelong Learning	5

These percentages correspond closely to the proportions of students in these faculties as recorded for session 04-05, and so may be assumed to broadly representative.

Results

Guidance Pre-Napier

37% of respondents report having received advice or guidance on plagiarism or academic conduct before coming to Napier, 63% had not. Students could choose more than one answer:

Sources of previous guidance:

Source	% of students who picked this answer
College	29
School	24
Previous UK university	20
Previous overseas university	13
From a friend	3
Other	11

In this previous guidance, the most commonly focused-on skills were reported to be ‘using reference and quotes in your written work’ and ‘writing reference lists and bibliographies’. The least focused-on was ‘evaluating the quality of information for academic writing’.

Guidance at Napier

85% percent of respondents reported that they had received advice or guidance on plagiarism and academic conduct while at Napier, 15% reporting that they had not. This finding seems to point to a robust coverage at Napier in terms of awareness-raising. Students were able to choose more than one answer when asked where they had received advice:

Source of guidance at Napier

School	% of students who picked this answer
Lecturer	80
Programme Leader	34
Another student	17
Member of library staff	15
Academic Support Advisor	9
Personal Development Tutor	8
Academic Conduct Officer	3
NSA student advisor	1
Other	10

By far the most cited source of guidance at Napier was ‘from a lecturer’, which points to a substantial amount of work taking place at modular level. This was followed by ‘programme leader’. Interestingly, the next most common source was ‘another student’, followed by ‘library staff’. This highlights the importance of the collaborative process by which some students draw on each others’ knowledge and experience, co-constructing their perceptions of academic norms within the student community.

Of the skills focused on at Napier and previously, the most reported was ‘using references’, then ‘writing reference lists’, followed by ‘paraphrasing’, in a pattern common to that reported in pre-Napier guidance. Respondents were also asked whether they were aware of the various student awareness-raising resources at Napier, and were able to choose more than one answer. 22% reported that they had seen none of the resources, which is a greater proportion of respondents than those who reported having had ‘no guidance’ (15%). This implies that some of these students had received guidance in a verbal format, not centred on the paper or electronic resources. This suggests that a proportion of the guidance delivered by lecturers may be either purely discursive rather than text-based, or may perhaps be integrated into other documentation such as coursework rubrics, without reference to centrally-produced, dedicated print or electronic plagiarism awareness-raising materials.

Awareness of resources: (504)

Resource	no of responses
“Plagiarism and How to Avoid It” booklet	240
Library information leaflets	207
The Plagiarism Code of Conduct	157
Student Disciplinary Regulations	90
Turnitin UK	47
Other	35

The Napier student booklet ‘Plagiarism and How to Avoid It’, distributed via programme leaders last year, was found to have had the greatest penetration, followed by library materials. Only 18% of respondents had seen or used the Student Disciplinary Regulations, which raises questions about the visibility of these regulations to students. Although in common with practice at other universities, all Napier students sign an agreement at induction that they will abide by the regulations, and are provided with a link to them at that point, it seems unlikely that all students will peruse these in detail at that time.

Confidence levels and academic literacy

Only 3% of respondents reported feeling ‘very unsure’, 24% ‘a bit unsure’, 52% felt ‘fairly confident’ and 21% ‘very confident’ about their ability to avoid plagiarism.

Respondents were also asked to identify the three aspects of producing written work which they found most challenging, from a list of seven. The aspects of writing most frequently reported as challenging were:

The most challenging aspects of producing written academic work

Aspect of writing	%
Searching for relevant information using academic databases or journals	58%
Paraphrasing from reading materials	53%
Writing in an academic style	52%
Structuring your written work	46%
Using references and quotes in your written work	30%
Presenting research results	30%
Using correct grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation	26%

Other	5%
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8 of the 33 ‘other’ responses related to time management, and the rest tended to repeat one of the themes mentioned above, with 7 comments relating to finding and managing information.

Interestingly, ‘Using references and quotes in your written work’ was only highlighted as being challenging by 30% of respondents. The emphasis in the student responses seems to be more on aspects of academic literacy such as information handling, and the relationship between reading and writing in construction of meaning within the norms of academic discourse, as opposed to the mechanics of referencing practices.

Perceptions of plagiarism practices

Students were not asked directly whether they had personally engaged in plagiarism practices, but instead the questions focused on their perceptions of Napier students’ practices as a whole. This was partly to encourage student participation in the survey, but was also designed to investigate students’ perceptions of the overall institutional climate, as opposed to individual practices, as it was assumed students who had engaged in these practices would also refer to their own experiences and motivations when addressing the questions.

Perceptions of prevalence of plagiarism practices

In your experience, how often do Napier students...	% Never heard of it	% Occasionally	% Often	% Very Often
...exchange assessed work with other students?	32	43	18	7
...take ideas or text from books, the internet or other sources without giving references?	22	41	24	13
...buy pre-written work from the Internet?	83	12	4	1

The form of plagiarism practice seen as most prevalent by students was ‘Taking ideas or text from books, the Internet or other sources without giving references’, ‘Exchanging assessed work’ was seen as slightly less common, whereas ‘Buying pre-written work off the internet’ was reported as unknown by the majority.

When asked about motivations for plagiarism, the most cited reasons were ‘Difficulties with paraphrasing’ 51%, and ‘Short of time’ 50%. The next most popular response was ‘Worried about failing’, with 47%. Under ‘other’, several reasons were cited, the most common of which may be summarised as follows:

“Other” reasons for plagiarism: (60)

Reason	no of responses
Laziness	25

Due to lack of awareness about how to avoid it	8
Unwitting plagiarism	5
Lack of confidence / knowledge	4
Because marks / pass only important	3

Interestingly, ‘Difficulties with using references and quotes’ was picked by only 31% of respondents. This result is noteworthy when contrasted with the skills focus experienced by students in their awareness-raising, where a strong emphasis on the use of referencing conventions was reported. One interpretation is that this focus has been a success at Napier, as 70% of respondents did not cite it as a contributory factor in plagiarism. However, this result could also imply that the focus of Napier’s (and previous educational institutions’) efforts should perhaps be more directed towards the information / academic literacy skills of searching and evaluating sources and paraphrasing. As Lillis (2001) points out, there may be a tendency among academics to focus on aspects of academic literacy which are easier to convey, such as referencing conventions, as opposed to the more complex processes involved in paraphrasing.

Additionally, although aspects of time pressure are arguably outside the direct influence of the University, as financial pressure leads students to more and more employment, it is clearly a serious issue for students in this survey. This result may highlight the need for greater guidance on time management, and perhaps greater attention on assessment loading and timing in the modular system.

Student needs and attitudes

The final question asked students to show to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree		Strongly agree	
"I need more help to develop my writing and information skills, and to avoid plagiarism"	18	37	31	14
"I'm not sure about the rules related to plagiarism"	39	35	19	7
"Academic writing is too difficult for me - I can't do it without plagiarising"	65	27	6	2
"The important thing at university is to pass, it doesn't matter how"	66	23	8	3

These responses indicate an institutional climate in which the majority of students are reasonably clear about the conventions surrounding plagiarism avoidance, but a greater number feel that they need support with academic writing in general. In terms of student integrity, the majority of respondents disagreed that passing regardless of the method was the main aim of university studies.

Additional Comments

Students were also invited to give any additional comments, and a range of points were made with over 100 responses. Many students linked plagiarism avoidance with general writing, for example:

I think academic writing should start at the first year so that by the end of the course students will be in a good position to write without plagiarism. I also feel it is important these skills are

gained at an early stage of the course and enough time and supervision should be given to students.

Examples of how to paraphrase information from other sources would be beneficial as simply suggesting we do it doesn't help a great deal. There's also the risk that simply changing the words from 'source one' around will result in plagiarising from 'source two' from which source on got its information. It's a very difficult area.

I became a student in 1997 and it must have taken me at least 2 years to develop my writing skills and become familiar with methods of referencing and how to avoid plagiarism. The class I was in was small so academic support was high and I now feel that from good tutoring and feedback from lecturers that I can reference and write to a good academic standard with out having to worry about accidentally plagiarising.

Interviews

Students were also invited to take part in research interviews, and over 25 volunteers have been interviewed at the time of writing. The semi-structured interviews focus on:

- Student perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism, and the boundaries of acceptable practice.
- Their perceptions of themselves as developing writers
- Their attitudes towards engaging with written academic discourse

Interviews are still taking place, and data is currently being transcribed. Some students in interviews have reported extremely positively on the quality of support which they have received, and some have raised points where they had difficulties. An initial analysis reveals the several themes and narratives which have arisen in the interviews so far:

“We are not habitual of doing this in our home country”: Hidden rules and mysterious transitions

Student 1, an MSc student from Pakistan, commented that the academic conventions in his previous experience had been completely different in various respects. One aspect of academic practice which he commented on was the emphasis on coursework in the UK system, which he reported was very different from the Pakistani university emphasis on exams. He stressed how he had received a very useful face-to-face workshop, but would have preferred it nearer the beginning of the programme. The same student reported that he had unintentionally committed collusion by working together with a friend on a coursework task. He reported feeling a severe lack of confidence about writing due to language and time pressure.

“I’m not going to sabotage my degree for their laziness”: Plagiarism in groupwork

Student 5, a 3rd year undergraduate student, reported that she had been named as the editor in a group coursework, and found that some international members of her group had been plagiarising. She attempted to tackle them on this pre-submission, but they did not adequately change or reference their work, and claimed language difficulties were to blame. She felt very confused and anxious in this situation, and eventually alerted the lecturer concerned, unknown to the group, as she was anxious that she

would be also be investigated for plagiarism. She felt that the whole episode had soured relations between her and her group members, and felt very unwilling to undertake groupwork in future.

“I wish I’d been told”: Hidden expectations

Student 10, a distance-learning mature student, reported that she had joined an MSc programme feeling confident about her academic writing at the start, but had lost confidence as a result of receiving low marks on her first assignment. The lecturer had told her and others in the feedback that he had expected a certain number of journal articles to be referred to in the coursework, and that other types of sources were not acceptable. These expectations had not been expressed in advance of submission. The student had withdrawn from her programme and reported that this experience was ‘a factor’ in her decision. Other students also reported that they had understood requirements retrospectively, in some cases through negative experiences or feedback.

“The system give me really panic”: cheating as a survival strategy

Student 3, an international MSc student reported that he had been caught cheating in an exam. He reported that he had opted to cheat as he felt he may not otherwise pass, as he said he had not been able to do adequate revision due to coursework pressure. He said he had been very anxious and stressed for some time about the exam. He had felt the cheating would be worth the risk, as the prospect of failing was such a fear for him. He also reported that he felt his English language skills had been a factor, as he had to spend longer reading than his classmates, which had impacted on his exam preparation time.

“I feel really strongly about this”: Academic integrity and esteem

Student 7, a 3rd year undergraduate student reported that she felt angry at the idea of students getting away with plagiarism in her subject area. She felt that Napier’s response to plagiarism was related to how she felt it was viewed from outside the institution. She was conscious of unfavourable comparisons between her Napier department and its counterpart at Edinburgh University, and she felt strongly that Napier demonstrating a stringent attitude towards plagiarism would enhance the esteem in which her department was held in the wider community.

“Surely the plagiarism machine can’t catch that out”: Perceptions of TurnitinUK

Student 2, a 4th year undergraduate student, said that he would not commit plagiarism himself, but thought that some students felt it was worth the risk in 4th year, in order to possibly raise their degree classification. He reported that students are becoming aware of TurnitinUK, but that there is a perception that little-known or ‘home-made’ websites would not be picked up by it.

The teachers didn't seem to care": Plagiarism at school

Student 5 also reported that not only she did not receive any guidance about referencing or plagiarism avoidance at 6th form college, but also that the teachers did not correct plagiarism when it was committed by students. She explained that this took place more via minimal paraphrasing without using citations, as opposed to cutting and pasting directly - which she was aware was not acceptable. She reported that she and his friends saw this form of 'changing the words a little bit' as a grey area, but did not think they would be penalised for it.

Conclusions and future directions

The survey and interview data reveal widely differing transition experiences among respondents. However, a common theme was a sudden change in academic culture and expectations in terms of writing when making the transition from school or college to university. Some students reported that the expected norms of academic writing at university were not expressed to them, and that they have developed as writers through trial and error. This echoes Lillis's 'institutional practice of mystery' in which the institution '... fails to teach the conventions of the literacy practice it demands' (2001:161). Differing practices and a lack of explicit guidance at school or college was also highlighted.

The initial analysis of the data has also shed light on students' difficulties with written work, the contexts in which students are receiving normative guidance on academic literacy and plagiarism, and the texts and resources used to mediate this. Although the results suggest a good level of awareness-raising at Napier, particularly in the area of referencing conventions, they also raise questions as to the focus of future academic support.

Implications for practice

Although the survey data suggests that a large majority of students at Napier are receiving guidance and awareness-raising regarding plagiarism avoidance, there is further work to do in order to be assured that *all* students are adequately and appropriately informed and given the opportunity to develop their academic literacies, in order to meet the expectations of the university. The interviews suggest that the process undergone by students as they develop their writing is an individual, iterative and complex one, which would not be sufficiently addressed by 'one-size-fits-all' approach such as a 'comprehensive' booklet. Instead, a range of awareness-raising events and resources seems to offer the greatest chance of engaging students effectively. This process has been started at Napier, and this research has highlighted areas where further development may be beneficial, for example increased face-to-face events such as workshops, greater visibility and accessibility of regulations - and more importantly - more focus on complex literacy practices such as paraphrasing and synthesising of source materials, and the development of a critical authorial "voice".

In addition to centrally-provided resources, much awareness-raising work at Napier seems to be taking place away from the 'centre' at the module level. Creative ways should be explored of recognising and developing the extent of this work,

ensuring that all coursework norms and requirements are fully expressed in advance, via rubrics and classroom explanations. This also raises questions of ownership of responsibility in the institution for the development of student academic literacy. This has perhaps traditionally been seen in the HE sector as the responsibility of schools, or the preserve of university student support and library services, with some lecturers viewing it as 'not my job'. However, several factors seem to call this assumption into question. The increasing complexity and volume of information now available to students, the major academic literacy challenge involved in the transition to higher education for students across a range of backgrounds, the increased focus on employability as a core goal of higher education, greater internationalisation and increased participation, and the growing financial and therefore time pressure on students - all these point to a situation where the development of information and academic literacy ought to be seen as central to the Higher Education project.

Consequently, central resources and development should be designed to take account of the challenging, complex and co-constructed nature of academic literacy, with adequate opportunities for students to engage with a range of materials and events, staff and with each other in a supported environment. This ought to include a focus on making expectations and rationales explicit, elucidating terms used in rubrics, and exemplifying text types required. This could be achieved, for example, through the use of guided rubric analysis, glossaries and model texts. Feedback, but more importantly pre-submission advice, could be more specifically focused on aspects of academic literacies. By experimenting with a range of approaches - central, programme-based and modular - with appropriate staff support, universities may more collaboratively support students as they explore new academic territory, testing the boundaries of participation in a positive, supported ethical climate. If the development of academic literacies is central to student confidence and identity, then it should perhaps occupy a more prominent position in the goals of the Higher Education sector as a whole.

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