

WHY MY STUDENTS DON'T PLAGIARISE: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

I teach the history of philosophy, and over the years I have evolved methods of teaching which mean that my students do not plagiarize. I verify that they do not plagiarize by use of Turnitin, anonymous questionnaires, and long experience of comparing my students' work with that written for other teachers.

In the paper, I shall outline a range of techniques I have deliberately adopted to make plagiarism counter-productive. These include: explicitly rewarding students for independent thinking; assessing skills rather than factual knowledge; setting questions such that relevant answers are not in the public domain; fostering a culture of honesty in which my relations with students are as personalized as is practicable; discussing student's work with them in short, individual tutorials; warning them that I use Turnitin.

These deliberate techniques are supplemented by the outcomes of a student questionnaire about why they don't plagiarize. They are interestingly different from (though not inconsistent with) my own perspective, and they reinforce the importance of encouraging a healthy learning culture, and establishing a relationship of mutual respect between teacher and students.

Although my direct experience has been confined to the teaching of the history of philosophy at a Russell Group University, it is generalizable to most other disciplines and institutions.

1. Introduction

I teach the history of philosophy, and over the years I have evolved methods of teaching and assessment which mean that my students do not plagiarise. Although this case study describes methods specific to a module on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, most of what I do is generalisable to other disciplines, especially those in which knowledge claims are contestable.

From the very outset, my claim that my students do not plagiarise may seem arrogant. It is well known through anonymous surveys that a substantial proportion of coursework is plagiarised (experts estimate that around 10% is sufficiently plagiarised to warrant disciplinary action), and that the majority of academics are blithely unaware of the plagiarism going on under their noses. So what grounds do I have for supposing that I do not come under the latter category? The answer is that, having published a number of articles on plagiarism, I have a vested interest in detecting plagiarism when it occurs. I am conscious of it as an issue while I am marking, and I have had many years of experience discerning whether students are thinking for themselves or not. I submit all students' coursework to Turnitin, and I believe that, in an increasingly digital culture, it is less and less likely that students will plagiarise from out-dated hard-copy materials not available in digital form. I also issue an anonymous questionnaire, in which no-one has admitted to plagiarism.

I have to admit that my claim that my students do not plagiarise is not quite true. Out of about 300 students over the past six years, I have detected two cases sufficiently serious to warrant further action, and a few more where students have needed to be warned to improve their practice because of a sentence or two. But a crime rate of below 1% is not a major issue. So what am I doing right, which other teachers are not?

There is no single magic bullet which can be used to solve the problem. Instead, a wide range of changes in practice is required, each one of which makes plagiarism less likely. Apart from the use of detection software (the sole function of which is to deter and reveal plagiarism) just about any measure to make plagiarism less likely will also have the added advantage of improving the quality of student learning. Conversely, measures taken to improve student learning often have the unintended side-effect of reducing the incidence of plagiarism. Designing plagiarism out does require turning your teaching methods round 180°, so that instead of delivering teacher-centred lectures and testing factual recall in essays and exams, you concentrate on developing students' intellectual skills through active learning and appropriate assessment criteria. The main obstacle to eliminating plagiarism is that the required change in academic culture is too radical for most academics, especially if they are more interested in their research than in their teaching.

In my own case, most of the changes I have made in my teaching methods have been driven by a desire to improve the quality of student learning rather than by a panic about plagiarism. Nevertheless, the outcome is that plagiarism is not a problem for me. Although I have read widely in the literature about plagiarism, this was mostly after I had already developed my teaching methods. I have written about plagiarism from a more theoretical perspective; but the present article is just a case study of my own successful practice, from which I hope others can learn.

There are three sections. In the first and by far the largest section, I provide my own analysis of why I believe that my methods of teaching and assessment are proof against plagiarism. In the second section, I compare my own analysis with that of my students in questionnaires issued in 2007 and 2008. In the final section, I address the issue of how teachers working in contexts different from my own might be able to implement my recommendations.

2. My analysis

2.1. Replacing lectures by seminars

The first radical step I took was to abolish lectures. Lectures were needed before the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, because students could not afford textbooks. The lecturer literally read the book out loud for the students to memorise. Nowadays students have much worse memories, and it is well known that they can recall very little of the content of a lecture, even immediately afterwards. In the post-Gutenberg world, students can be given written materials to study at their own pace. Lectures can still have the function of inspiring students, and of giving them a sense of belonging to a larger community (rather as Christians gather together for church services on a Sunday morning); but they are an extremely inefficient method for conveying factual information or developing conceptual understanding.

More importantly, lectures reinforce a school model of learning, in which the teacher tells the students orally what they need to memorise and reproduce in examinations. Paradoxically, the better a lecture is, the more it harms student learning. If students go away with a warm feeling of understanding and enlightenment, they will think they already have enough to do well in their assessments, and they will have little motivation to do any additional reading. Moreover, if they think that university learning is about reproducing facts, then the source of the facts is largely irrelevant, and they might as well use unacknowledged external sources as well as unacknowledged lecture notes.

I try to give students a clear understanding that university learning is not about reproducing factual information, but about developing intellectual skills. So instead of giving lectures, I use contact time for seminars and individual tutorials. The intention for seminars is that students should *first* read a section of the text with the help of a running commentary (which is in effect the substitute for lectures), and prepare answers to a number of questions. Their answers to the questions are discussed in class, and when things go well, the students have the live experience of entertaining different interpretations of the text and different evaluations of it, and of supporting or rejecting them with rational arguments. This is a very different experience from that of passively absorbing my own views, and it embeds the notion that I expect students to come up with their own ideas and arguments, and that what they say will command my respect, even if I do not happen to agree with it. When this is fully understood and accepted, students know that using plagiarised material will get them nowhere.

I have to confess that my seminars do not always fulfil this ideal, primarily because the text I teach is so difficult that even the best students are very unconfident about their understanding, and are reluctant to speak in class. The majority of them would actually feel more comfortable if I reverted to lecture mode, since they would come away with a better understanding than they can get themselves by struggling through the text. There is often a tussle of wills, in which I want *them* to talk more, and they want *me* to talk

more. One way in which students turn a seminar into a lecture is by taking copious notes of everything I say. Obviously, if they are taking notes, they cannot at the same time be thinking of a contribution they themselves can make to the discussion. In order to overcome this problem, I have devised the following strategy. I forbid the students to take their own notes, and instead each week I appoint a secretary to take the minutes. The minutes are posted in a discussion room in the VLE, and I comment on their accuracy, so that students can be confident that they constitute a correct record.

This system has two unintended but beneficial consequences. The first is that I have an insight, which I never had before, into how students take notes, and how accurate their note-taking is (the answer is that it is not as good as I assumed it would be).

The second consequence is that, when students write essays, they treat the minutes as a secondary source like any other, whereas if they were using their own notes, they would not have acknowledged them at all. This raises the important but under-discussed question of whether students who borrow from their own lecture notes or course materials without attribution are guilty of plagiarism. I am not aware of any cases of students having been punished for regurgitating what their teachers have told them without acknowledgment. What they are punished for is for doing exactly the same with external sources. This strikes me as a serious inconsistency, which casts doubt on the central objective of UK higher education, enshrined in the QAA qualifications frameworks and elsewhere, that university graduates should be independent, critical thinkers. Although students now pay fees, this does not mean that they have purchased the intellectual property rights of their teachers. When they are assessed, in order to demonstrate what is the product of their own thinking as contrasted with what they have derived from their teachers, they should be expected to acknowledge their teachers as a secondary source. I cannot say that I am 100% successful in my own course, but it certainly differs markedly from other courses in the extent to which students give references to seminar minutes and course materials. This is good practice, and it is yet another way in which students are brought to see that they are rewarded for their own thinking, rather than for what they have derived from others.

2.2. Personalisation

It is a truism that students learn better if their teachers know them as individuals. Learning takes place through an interaction between teacher and student, and students differ from each other. A one-size-fits-all approach, such as is typified by the dogmatic lecture and model answers to essay questions, fails to accommodate student diversity. As well as improving the quality of learning, a personalised approach also reduces the likelihood of plagiarism. Just as shoppers are less likely to be dishonest with a local shop-owner they know personally than with a large and anonymous supermarket, similarly students are less likely to cheat on a teacher with whom they have an established relationship, than if they regard the assessment system as a bureaucratic structure in which both they and their assessors are mere anonymous cyphers.

Students often complain that no-one (except possibly secretarial staff) knows them as individuals. This is deplorable, and it should be the first priority of every teacher to make it evident to all students that they are at least trying to attach names to faces, even if they fail to achieve a 100% success rate.

The key to my personalisation of my teaching is the replacement of lectures by individual tutorials. I set three short course assignments over the year. I require them to be submitted electronically, so that I can comment on them using the MS-Word comment facility (my hand writing is difficult to read), and I add a template with my general assessment criteria and my judgment of how they have performed. I give the students a copy of the template in advance, and tell them to assess themselves when they have written the essay. I return the essay with my comments as quickly as possible (usually within two or three days), but I do not include a mark, because it is well known that most students will read the mark but not the comments. Instead, I tell them to guess what mark I will have given them and why, and to sign up for a tutorial. At the tutorial, I reveal the actual mark (which is usually remarkably close to the student's guess), and we discuss how they can do better the next time. I find that these tutorials are invaluable for helping me to get to know all my students as individuals, and to appreciate how differently they approach their learning. Conversely, it means that my students know and trust me much better than would otherwise be the case.

From this year, I have acquired the problem that my university has decreed that, with very few exceptions, all coursework that counts towards the degree result must be marked anonymously. This is obviously incompatible with my highly personalised approach. I cannot circumvent the problem by making the assessment purely formative, because the majority of students would fail to submit essays, or would devote very little effort to them. So I have carried on as before, except that I have included in the module handbook an explanation of why I regard my module as an exception — and I have had no complaints at all from my students.

I do think this is an important issue which is highly relevant to fostering a culture which minimises the probability of plagiarism. A policy of anonymised marking gives students the message that academics are unprofessional, and cannot be trusted to apply assessment criteria objectively if they know the sex, race, age, social class, etc. of the person whose work they are assessing. There may be some truth to this, but if it is a problem, it is entirely dwarfed by the much greater problem of the sheer unreliability of much marking, especially in the humanities. Anonymising the assessment makes matters worse rather than better, because it reduces the information about the student available to the assessor. Knowing who the student is, where they are coming from, and what they have done in previous written or oral work might well contribute to a more reliable judgment about their performance.

The solution to the problem is to be more explicit about assessment criteria, and to apply them transparently. Even if the criteria are clearly expressed, both staff and students may have difficulty applying them in practice. The advantage of my method is that we are all engaged in the activity of applying criteria to written work, and we all learn. I myself have improved as a marker, and my students rapidly internalise my marking criteria, so that they know pretty accurately what mark they are going to get before they submit their work. I am not infallible, and there are occasions when discussion with the student about the reason for my mark has led me to change my mind. For example, I might have marked them down for lack of argumentation, and they point out what I took as mere exposition, did in fact constitute an independent evaluative argument. I believe that this sort of negotiation is exactly what assessment should be about, since teacher and student are co-operating in the activity of evaluation. It is only possible if there is a personal relationship between teacher and taught, and it is the polar opposite of a system in which students' work is processed anonymously.

Formative assessment, even if it also has a summative function, is an integral, and perhaps even the most important part of the teaching process; and as one of my former colleagues wisely said, you can assess students anonymously, but you can't teach them anonymously.

It goes without saying that if students know that they are going to have to discuss their work with their tutor in an individual tutorial, they are most unlikely to pass off the work of others as their own. And if they do, you are much more likely to spot differences in their work if you know them personally.

A final comment on personalisation is that, if students are thinking for themselves, the best students will produce very different work, whereas weaker students will reproduce much the same derivative material with varying degrees of success. By contrast, the best students who have been taught to the test will produce very similar work, and that of the weaker students will be more varied, because of the different ways in which they fall short of the ideal standard. It seems obvious to me that the students who are thinking differently have been properly educated, and those who are singing from the same hymn sheet have not. And this is a knock-down argument against the policy of some institutions that internal examiners should produce model essays for the benefit of external examiners. When students ask me what they need to do for a first, I say 'surprise me'. One way they can surprise me is by criticising my module materials — which is an infallible way of giving evidence that they are thinking for themselves, and not merely passively following what I teach them. If they are sceptical as to whether I am serious about rewarding criticism of me, I tell them that if I were teaching them the martial arts rather than philosophy, I would consider myself a failure as a teacher if my students could not throw me from time to time after three years of tuition. I also add that I wrote some of my commentaries a long time ago, and I may have changed my mind since then. This gives them more of a licence to criticise me, and some of the best essays my students have produced have in fact given a sustained argument against my own interpretation of Kant. I can hardly ask for more than this as evidence of my students' independent thinking, but I cannot help wondering how many other academics would mark their students up rather than down for disagreeing with them.

2.3. Intellectual skills vs. knowledge content

Facts can be downloaded from the internet, but skills cannot. In any case, the memorisation of facts is only incidental to the purpose of university education, which is intellectual development. I make it clear to my students that, while they do of course have to get their facts right, I am assessing them primarily on their demonstration of intellectual skills. These skills will vary from module to module, and in my module the principal skills are those of eliciting different possible interpretations of a difficult text and giving reasons for preferring one to another, and of giving reasons for whether or not the text as so interpreted is philosophically sound.

In their first essay for me, some students simply give an exposition of Kant's position, and provide some arguments for or against it. I invariably fail such essays, even if they are well written and philosophically insightful, because they have not provided any evidence of the student's having thought through the text itself. Their interpretation of Kant's position and criticism of it could have come from anywhere. To explain what I am after, I give my students an analogy. Suppose I were teaching them to cook, and sent them off to follow a recipe. If they later bring me the finished dish, how am I to know if

they had slaved away for hours in the kitchen, or merely bought a carry-out from the local supermarket, and put it into a microwave? Conclusive evidence would be if they had a video of themselves actually chopping onions, making pastry, and so on. In writing an essay on Kant, the equivalent is to take a key passage as an ingredient, and demonstrate the skill of arguing about how it is to be interpreted. In doing this, they are reproducing the sort of hard thinking that went on in their heads while trying to make sense of the text, instead of merely reporting on the outcome of the thinking. As in maths exams, you have to show your working as well as providing the answer.

In theory, it might be possible to fake such thinking, but in practice it is very difficult to find publicly available commentaries which provide ready-made answers to the sort of detailed questions I ask. Perhaps I am lucky to be teaching a subject where it is relatively easy to think up questions such that students can answer them satisfactorily only if they can demonstrate that they are thinking for themselves. Nevertheless it should be possible in other disciplines to set assignments that require students to demonstrate their own independent reasoning. When setting assignments, every teacher should ask the question: could a student get a satisfactory mark by making minor adaptations to material available on the internet? If the answer is yes, they should try again.

2.4. Fostering a learning culture

If students want to learn, they will not cheat. If they pay for driving lessons, they do not persuade a friend to take the lessons for them. If they want to learn the guitar, they do not play their teacher recordings of someone else's performance. So why should it be so common for students to pass off other people's work as their own at university?

The answer is that they see the degree certificate as the passport to a good job, even if they have not earned it through their own efforts. This attitude is understandable, if not commendable. It is encouraged by a culture in which both students and the institutions which teach them are measured and rewarded by their scores in tests and league tables. If that is the currency, then the law of least effort dictates that students will be motivated to take short cuts in order to obtain the highest scores with the minimum of work, and their institutions will have no motive to detect and publicise the extent of plagiarism.

There is no simple solution to a problem that is exacerbated by a society which evaluates financial success above education, and by a government which rewards universities for promoting employability skills above the liberal arts (which traditionally included theoretical science, so that it is not an arts/science divide). However, there are at least two ways in which we can fight back, and instil in our students a disinterested love for learning.

The first is to counteract the impression that we are merely degree mills, by interacting with our students personally, and taking every opportunity to inspire them with the ideal that a university education is a transformative experience. This means *providing* them with the transformative experience: by de-emphasising didactic tuition and summative assessment; by setting them tasks which stimulate their creative imagination; by encouraging them to work together co-operatively rather than competitively; by giving them regular and constructive feedback on their performance; by encouraging them to reflect on how their skills and understanding are improving — and generally by doing

everything that is known to be good practice in higher education. Students who are part of such a culture will not plagiarise.

The second way is to get students to understand that the intellectual skills and attributes that they acquire at university are in fact more valuable for employment than the narrow lists of skills produced by employers. Even in vocational disciplines, where much of what students learn is dictated by employer organisations, there is a sense of ‘graduateness’ which is possessed by university graduates, and not by people who have undergone mere training. The concept of graduateness is difficult to define, because there may be nothing that is common between all graduates in different disciplines from different universities, except that all graduates have degrees. Nevertheless, there is a set of overlapping and criss-crossing skills and attributes which make graduates very different from employees who are not graduates. Students should be given more help in articulating what they have gained from a liberal education, which sets them above their merely trained counterparts.

2.5. De-emphasising detection and punishment

In most institutions, there is a focus on detection and punishment as the principal means for eliminating plagiarism. However, there are a number of serious flaws in this approach. Let us take detection first.

Although there are many techniques for detecting plagiarism, which I shall not go into here, there has been an increasing reliance on detection software, such as Turnitin. As I have said above, I use it myself. However, I explain to my students that it is primarily because I need to have experience of it in order to write and talk about it, and I need evidence, for the purpose of documents such as the present one, that my own students do not plagiarise.

But if Turnitin is used as the main means of detection, students will get the idea that plagiarism is only detectable rather than preventable, and they will observe academic honesty in the same way as many motorists obey speed limits (namely only when they are passing speed cameras). This is exacerbated by the policy of some universities of encouraging students to check their work before formally submitting it for assessment. I think this is insane, because it implies that the important thing is for students to ensure that their work comes out clean, even if all they have done is to change a few characters in strings picked up by the software. If the material was originally derivative, it still remains derivative — just as paraphrasing a text fails to turn plagiarism into original work.

As for punishment, one flaw is that the Draconian penalties listed in the regulations give students the message that plagiarism is something desirable, which can be prevented only by severe punishment (like, for example, stealing large quantities of money). Instead, they should be given the message that plagiarism is foolish, because they are depriving themselves of skills and knowledge which would have been of value to them in later life.

Another flaw is that disciplinary committees are usually kept confidential, and other students do not know who has been accused of what, or what punishment they have been given. This is not an argument that for greater publicity, but an argument that,

since confidentiality is appropriate, the deterrent effect of the punishment is only in the threat rather than the execution.

Again, there is a question of equity. Only a tiny minority of plagiarists are caught, but the penalties are sometimes severe enough to ruin their career prospects, even if the offence was unintentional. Yet many others get away with it unscathed.

Finally, the very fact that plagiarism is so rife despite the penalties implies that they have a minimal deterrent effect.

Nevertheless, there is a good case for punishing plagiarism when it does occur, because it is a form of fraud against potential employers, and it damages the value of a degree for other students. However, the emphasis should be on preventing it in the first place, rather than dealing with it after it has happened. A step in the right direction is to do what most universities have done, and to educate students explicitly in good academic practice through handbooks and study skills modules. But these are still of limited value if academics persist in teaching and assessing in ways which invite plagiarism. I might give lectures to local criminals on why burglary is wrong, and warn them of the severe consequences in the unlikely event of their being caught; but if I leave my ground-floor windows open and the alarm off when I leave the house, I am asking for trouble. It is the same with plagiarism — the primary responsibility lies with academics to teach and assess in ways which make plagiarism unthinkable.

2.6. Varying the form

Most materials available for plagiarising from are written in the form of discursive prose, which can easily be incorporated into an essay. I set one of my assignments as a dialogue rather than an essay, for educational reasons I have no space to go into here — it is enough to say that dialogue is the ideal medium for philosophical debate. But one of the outcomes of this exercise is that there is nothing on the internet which students can simply copy into dialogue form. While they might borrow some ideas from external sources (which does not strictly count as plagiarism), they are forced to use their own independent thinking to generate the dialogue.

2.7. Varying the content

One of the things I have done for students on my Kant module is to translate a large part of his *Critique of Pure Reason* into much more intelligible English than in any of the published translations. My motive for doing this was simply that the over-literal policies of translators aiming at the market of *researchers* ignorant of German neglected the needs of *undergraduates* ignorant of German. I have produced a translation of much of the *Critique* which is far more student friendly. One of the unintended but beneficial consequences is that I can tell if students are using unacknowledged secondary sources because the secondary sources use different translations. Students seem to be aware that this is a trap for the potential plagiarist, and I have only once caught a student borrowing from an unacknowledged source using a different translation.

3. The student view

In 2006/07 and 2007/08, I issued an anonymous questionnaire to my Kant students, and I received 53 responses. No-one admitted to cheating in my module or in anyone else's,

so this provides no evidence that my methods deter plagiarism — though it does provide some evidence that philosophy students are an unusually honest lot. However, when asked about special features of the Kant module which make plagiarism less likely, students mentioned virtually all the points I have made in this article, and as features absent from other modules: the frequency and personalisation of feedback, the culture of mutual trust, the focus on independent thinking and showing how positions were arrived at, the specificity of the questions, the emphasis on understanding the primary text, the use of Turnitin, and so on.

They do make some additional points not covered above. One is that since I discourage the use of secondary literature, students would not know what to plagiarise from. Another is that the essays are short, and I do not require students to do too much reading, so they are less in a panic. Again, the module is challenging, and plagiarism would undermine the sense of personal achievement at mastering it; similarly, having to write four essays makes you competitive with yourself — can you better your previous marks?

There were also a couple of less insightful comments: ‘George is scarier than other lecturers and you don’t want to disappoint him;’ and ‘People are also less likely to plagiarise because they are fully aware that George knows just about all the literature that you will look at!’ (which happens to be quite untrue).

4. The transferability of these methods

It might be argued that I am in a position to apply these methods only because I am employed by a relatively well-funded Russell-Group university. I am not convinced by this argument, since recent research by the Higher Education Policy Institute suggests that students actually get closer individual attention at post-1992 universities. This is probably because, in Russell-Group universities, the emphasis on research leads academics to neglect their teaching. It is obviously the case that a department with a high student:staff ratio (SSR) will find it more difficult to provide a personalised education than one with a more favourable ratio — and my own department is on the high side, with a SSR approaching 30:1. There are many departments in post-1992 universities with much lower SSRs than this. So the issue is not one of crude SSRs, but more one of academic structures and attitudes, both of which can be changed.

- High SSRs do not necessarily imply large classes, although they do imply that academics have to spend more time teaching. Work-load models should be driven by student numbers rather than class hours, so that staff are rewarded for the individual attention they give to their students.
- University administrations should not impose uniform regulations which de-personalise staff-student relations, or make it impossible for teachers in different disciplines to explore innovative teaching methods appropriate to their discipline.
- Individual academics and departments should be encouraged and rewarded for teaching in ways that develop students’ independent thinking.

My own experience shows that it is quite easy to eliminate plagiarism almost entirely, and I commend others to follow my example in ways appropriate to their own disciplines.

