

[Paper presented at the 4th Plagiarism Conference, 4-6 June 2010, Newcastle upon Tyne.]

University teachers discussing plagiarism: divided perspectives on teaching writing and shaping a culture of honesty

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Introduction

The objective of responding to plagiarism in such a way as to create a culture of honesty presupposes that the university community shares a sufficiently homogenous view of plagiarism to permit it to serve as a cornerstone of that culture. Yet there are indications that this is not the case, and indeed that heterogeneous views of plagiarism among university teaching staff may lead to a fragmented response to the act.

A small body of research has asked informants to comment on scenario descriptions of questionable writing strategies, and has shown varied responses (Carroll & Appleton, 2005; Yeo & Chien, 2007). In an interview study, Flint, Clegg and Macdonald (2006) were also able to show that university staff differed in their understandings of plagiarism; for example, there was disagreement about whether falsification of data constituted plagiarism.

In her study of the writing of two South African university students, Starfield (2002) establishes that their marker—the same individual—was attuned to different features of the two writers' work. One writer's work she labelled explicitly as plagiarism, and deducted points from his mark to penalize it. Of the other writer's work she said that it was *not* plagiarism; he had simply 'had ideas that he could have picked up in his reading' but had 'put them down in his essay' without 'not[ing] down exactly where he picked them up from' (p. 132).

Sutherland-Smith's (2005) interview-based study of the attitudes of Australian university teachers showed real differences in the role they perceived that intention played. Crocker and Shaw's interviews (2002) show that supervisors report responding to plagiarism differently in different parts of the dissertation, and also report different attitudes to copied text, one accepting 'the odd half-page here or there'. In a series of text-based interviews with supervisors at the master's level, Pecorari (2008) found that while the ways in which their students had used sources appeared in cases to be broadly similar, the supervisors responded to them in very different ways.

There seems, therefore, to be reason to think that while universities may define plagiarism, at a very general and abstract level, in broadly similar terms (Pecorari, 2001), at the level of the individual teacher, and in responding to specific intertextual relationships, there may exist a diversity of views about what constitutes plagiarism. If that is the case, it puts students in a perilous situation, and undermines the efforts of the

university community to create a culture of honesty, featuring a set of shared values and shared standards for judging transgressions against those values. The purpose of the present study was thus to investigate the extent to which university teachers converge and diverge in their judgements about plagiarism.

Methods

The research reported here consisted of focused, text-based interviews with eight teachers at several Swedish universities. The teachers occupied a range of academic ranks and represented a variety of academic disciplines. The majority were Swedish, but two came from and/or had studied in other countries. All (including one who is still pursuing her PhD) were experienced university teachers. Table 1 provides details of the informants, and gives the pseudonyms that will be used to identify them. The interviews were conducted in either English or Swedish (quotations from interviews below have been translated in places).

Pseudonym	Field	Title
Victoria	environmental science	PhD student
Kjell	zoology	reader
Gregorija	computer science	reader
Karin	health care	senior lecturer
Lars	biology	full professor
Mikael	biology	professor emeritus
Urban	biologist	full professor
Stefan	biology	full professor

Table 1 Informants

During the interviews, informants were asked to comment upon five text extracts (in English) which had been taken from two British master's theses, and which had been juxtaposed with their sources. The informants were invited to read the text extracts and their sources, and to comment on whether they considered them to be appropriate examples of source use. To facilitate their responses, the words which appeared in both the student text and the source were printed in red. As a matter of procedure, the text extracts were initially allowed to speak for themselves; that is, they were presented without explanatory detail, apart from the information that the student passage appeared at the top of the page and the source at the bottom. If they felt they needed more information to answer, they were initially left to formulate questions themselves about the type of information they needed. In a later stage, some features of the extracts were pointed out explicitly in order to probe for a deeper answer.

The text extracts, four of which are available in the Appendix, came from two master's dissertations, both in biology, and were chosen to offer a variety of features on which respondents might wish to comment, while being short enough to make it feasible for participants to read them. Extract 1 consisted of 37 words in total, 12 of which were also found in the source, which was considerably longer, at 88 words. No more than four

consecutive words were repeated from the source. No source was named in the student text. Extract 2 was similar to 1 in that a relatively low proportion of the source's language was carried over into the student text. However, those repeated words made up a high proportion of the passage from the student text: only six of the 28 words did *not* also occur in the source. Extract 2 named its source, but that text in turn cited other works. All of extract 3, except for a citation to the source, came from the source, and the consecutive strings of repeated language were longer, and also made up a larger proportion of the source text.

Extracts 1-3 came from the dissertation of one writer, and 4-5 from another. Extract 4 was relatively short at 27 words, all but one word of which ('and' in a list) were also present in the source. There was no citation provided. Extract 5 was very long (and for this reason is not reproduced in the Appendix); the student passage was 311 words long, and all but 28 words were also found in the source. Those 28 words included a reference to the source, three reporting phrases (e.g., 'they found that') and one 15-word sentence. Consecutive strings often included more than one sentence.

The five extracts differed, therefore, in several quantitative respects: 1) the number of words which the student passage and its source shared; 2) how large a proportion of the student passage the repeated words made up; 3) how large a proportion of the source was repeated in the student passage; and 4) how long the consecutive strings of repeated language were. In addition, they differed in terms of whether a reference was given by the student, and the propositional content.

The approach adopted involved choices which, naturally, conferred both advantages and disadvantages. In order to be able to compare responses across participants it was necessary to use the same text extracts across all the interviews; this meant, however, that the respondents had varying degrees of familiarity with the subject matter. This caused a difficulty which one participant commented upon, in understanding whether an idea should be considered common knowledge. Nevertheless, this mixture of disciplines is necessary to reproduce the situation which can be found on disciplinary boards, which include teacher representatives from across the university. In addition, in teaching contexts such as the academic writing class or the writing center, teachers may find themselves offering guidance to students on aspects of academic writing, including plagiarism and source use, when the students are writing on topics outside the teachers' area of expertise.

Another question was the extent to which the presentation of the extracts may have directed the participants' responses excessively, or may not have directed them sufficiently. For example, the fact that repeated words were printed in red may have predisposed informants to focus on language (as opposed to, for example, structure or propositional content) as a relevant factor. On the other hand, it seems likely, based on several responses to the first extract, that some participants did not immediately notice, or realize, that the first extract contained no citation.

Finally, the relative lack of context for these extracts was necessary, since it was hardly feasible to ask participants to read entire dissertations, but inevitably resulted in them making determinations based on less information than they would have had in a classroom or, particularly, supervision setting.

Findings

The interviews revealed that the judgements made by the participants differed in three important respects: whether or not they saw the five text extracts as examples of appropriate source use; whether they viewed specific instances of inappropriate source use as plagiarism; and what reasoning they used to justify that decision. As Table 2 shows, the informants were unanimous in their judgement of only one extract, number five, which they were able to agree was not an example of acceptable source use (although it is approximately the ‘half-page’ said by one technology teacher to be acceptable in literature reviews in Crocker and Shaw’s interviews) . Most felt that extract 4 was not acceptable, but one was not prepared to go that far, calling it a borderline case. The majority also disapproved of number three, but three informants felt it was a borderline case and one called it appropriate. Both number two and number one were generally but not universally approved of: a minority of respondents either could not answer without more information (what sort is discussed below); felt that while ultimately acceptable, there was room for improvement; and one respondent (but not the same one) felt that each of these was simply inappropriate.

Informant	Judgements: Are these extracts appropriate?				
	Extract 1	Extract 2	Extract 3	Extract 4	Extract 5
Victoria	no	yes	no	no	no
Kjell	yes	yes	no	no	no
Gregorija	depends	depends	no	no	no
Karin	yes	no	no	no	no
Lars	yes	yes	yes	borderline	no
Mikael	yes	yes	borderline	no	no
Urban	yes	yes	borderline	no	no
Stefan	yes	yes	no	no	no

Table 2 Respondents' judgements about the acceptability of the text extracts

This disagreement was echoed by, and at least partially explained by, the diversity of comments and explanations that accompanied the judgements. Simply stated, in reaching a judgement about these cases, the respondents attended to a range of factors. They discussed their reasoning processes in terms of factors which included the volume of text which was repeated from the sources, the nature of the propositions put forward by the student texts and their sources, and how often the same information could be found in other sources.

Only two of the respondents failed to express approval for number 1, both focusing on the lack of explicit reference to a source. Gregorija felt that she could not make a determination without knowing, first, whether an expert in the field would consider the facts to be common knowledge, and secondly how easy it is to find the same sort of information; it would make a difference to her ultimate decision if it was possible to find the information in 'hundreds of sources'. Victoria, the only one to express an unequivocal (although not forceful) disapproval of example 1, explicitly based her objection on the

absence of a cited source for the ideas reported. She too attended to the question of common knowledge, though that factor brought her to a different conclusion than Gregorija. Victoria said unhesitatingly that the student should have provided the reference for the first sentence, 'the genus *Mentha* (Lamiaceae) is composed of 19 geographically widespread species and 13 named natural', but that the second, 'peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*) and spearmint are grown world-wide as perennial herbs, and produce different essential oils which are used as flavourings', *might* fall under the heading of common knowledge and therefore not need a reference.

In discussing number 2, several respondents raised the fact that a reference to a source was present, although again this led them in slightly different directions. For Kjell and Victoria, it was positive that a source (Reed, 1999) was named. However, for Karin this was problematic, because the Reed, 1999 text cites other sources. Karin felt that writers have a responsibility to go back to the original source. On the other hand, Karin felt that the similarities of language between the student's text and the source were unproblematic, and Victoria agreed, feeling that this is a case where there are only so many ways to say the same thing. Indeed, she added that for a less proficient writer to try to alter the wording could lead to a less successful result, and possibly one which would be misleading for the reader. Kjell also commented on the question of language, and the similarities between student text and source appeared to be the reason he was somewhat more hesitant about giving example 2 a clean bill of health than example 1. However, he concluded that the amount recycled from the source was relatively small: 'it's still [a] fairly concise report of what so I think it's fair, it's fair'. A further quantitative consideration was given by Victoria, namely that while the writer had taken some language from the source, he had left quite a bit behind. In other words, his textual borrowing had been selective, not wholesale.

This question of the density of information arose again when Victoria contrasted number two, which she found appropriate, and number three, which she did not. In the third example, less of the language of the source was left out. Karin also disapproved of number three, but on somewhat different grounds: she thought that Erden ought to have paraphrased so that the wording was his own. But for Lars, reformulating was optional, and since it was a short string of text that was taken, he said 'I don't really have any problem with that, actually'.

Number four was the first that Lars was not entirely happy with, although he labelled it a borderline case. Mikael, on the other hand, felt that it was inappropriate, although he expressed this view cautiously: 'I would say to this person to rewrite'. While Victoria shared the collective disapproval for this case, she was the only one to spontaneously label it plagiarism, saying 'I mean, this is plagiarism, straight off'.

Extract 5 was the only case on which all could agree: it was not acceptable. However, there were qualitative differences in the response to it. Victoria, who had taken something of a hard line, disapproving of four of the five examples, reacted strongly negatively to 5, based on the lack of 'value added'. She explained 'there's no . . . sort of . . . treating it in any way'. Gregorija saw this as the least acceptable of the five examples, but in her case her disapproval was mitigated by a belief that it could, theoretically, be a process feature. Assuming she found it on a first draft—and she places a great deal of confidence in her ability to uncover problems at an early stage (as did many of the informants, who said that stylistic deviation was a good indicator)—she said that she would discuss it with

the student, as she would for the other examples, rather than treating it as a case of misconduct and reporting it to the disciplinary board. However, she also said that she would involve a senior colleague in the discussion, while she would not do so with any of the other examples.

A further area of disagreement, or at least lack of agreement, was in the discussion of whether these five examples actually constituted plagiarism. There were three dimensions along which the answers varied. The first was the ultimate determination the respondents made. Given that participants differed in their views of whether the passages were appropriate or not, it is not surprising that they also differed in whether they considered them to be instances of plagiarism. With regard to example 5, Victoria, Kjell and Karin said that it was, although Karin later qualified her answer. The others did not take a position on whether 5 was plagiarism. Both 4 and 3 were also called plagiarism by Victoria and Kjell, and were called 'borderline plagiarism' by Stefan. Of the remaining two text extracts, none of the respondents labelled number two plagiarism, and only Victoria believed that number one was. There was thus not only disagreement among the participants about which extracts were plagiarism, there were also some instances of source use which they disapproved of, but were not prepared to call plagiarism.

The second dimension was the spontaneity of these judgements. While some participants independently labelled a given extract as plagiarism, others did so only when asked directly if the extract was an example of plagiarism. As noted above, Victoria disapproved of examples one and three, but it was only when we came to extract 4 that she said spontaneously, 'this is plagiarism'. Kjell and Karin both identified 5 as plagiarism independently; when asked Kjell added that 3 and 4 were as well. Stefan mentioned plagiarism in his response to 3, although he subsequently qualified it by saying it 'approached plagiarism'.

A third and final dimension of interest was the degree of confidence the participants appeared to have about their own judgements. For example, although Victoria seemed quite confident that 4 was plagiarism, when I asked her about 3 she hesitated and found it necessary to work through, and qualify, her decision:

He did give the source, hmmm, but I suppose it is plagiarism in the sense that he doesn't show it as a direct quote. . . . But somehow, I don't know. . . . But actually considering it, I mean it would be plagiarism because he's not showing it's a direct quote, but then I suppose because he's given a reference at least he's shown it's not his own.

Gregorija was unhappy with number four, but when asked if it constituted plagiarism was unable to answer: 'It is indeed really . . . it's unacceptable, I don't know what you'd call it. It's unacceptable'. Karin's immediate response to number five was to call it plagiarism. However, she very quickly felt it necessary to qualify her response and suggest alternative explanations: 'No, this is plagiarism. This could be plagiarism or . . . or they haven't understood. This is too much, this is really bad'. The informants thus demonstrated not only that they disagreed with each other in how the student source use should be regarded, but that the sometimes disagreed with themselves.

Discussion

The findings reported above have shown that university teachers differ in terms of which intertextual relationships they believe are appropriate, which should be called plagiarism, and the factors they attend to in making those decisions. At one level it is unsurprising that different individuals, from different backgrounds, should come to different conclusions about appropriate and inappropriate ways to write. We are not surprised if two teachers award different marks to the same essay, or when two peer reviewers come to different conclusions about whether a manuscript submitted for publication should be accepted. Why should academics not show the same diversity in their response to this particular feature of academic writing?

While the plurality of response may not be surprising, it is highly problematic, because while source use is simply one among many aspects of academic writing, inappropriate source use—or at least the sort identified as plagiarism—is not. Plagiarism is widely regarded not only as a failure to write appropriately but as a dishonest act, and is one of the few aspects of academic writing in which poor performance can actually provoke punishment, as opposed to the withholding of rewards.

In the context of the special status of plagiarism among other academic writing problems, the inability of university teachers to agree about what constitutes plagiarism has serious, indeed worrying, implications for the university community in terms of the ways that plagiarism is taught about, detected and punished.

When students are learning the craft of academic writing, source use raises a particular problem because of its occluded nature (Pecorari, 2006), that is, the fact that the real relationship between a text and its sources is usually not visible to the reader. This results in difficulty for students in learning how to handle sources based on what they observe in the reading they do, and for teachers in giving good feedback on how students have used sources. The two principal sources for students to learn about academic writing—by their observations of other writers' texts, and feedback from their teachers—are thus imperfect, even if established academics were—as readers and markers—working to closely similar standards. However, on the evidence presented in the previous section, that is not the case. Academics differ in their views of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable source use, and of which of the latter category cross the line into plagiarism. The result of that is that input students receive, by example and by feedback, is not only limited, it is likely to be inconsistent.

Even more important a consideration is the impact of this diversity of views on disciplinary proceedings. Given that university teachers have heterogeneous ideas about what constitutes plagiarism, it is reasonable to conclude that they also differ in terms of which acts they diagnose as plagiarism and, even more so, which they refer to disciplinary proceedings. It is similarly likely that when cases of suspected plagiarism reaches a disciplinary board or other official body, their decisions reached are as varied as the attitudes of the individuals passing judgement. The clear implication of this is that students may receive very unequal treatment in response to suspected plagiarism.

A final issue is the question of detection. As the findings reported above establish teachers find deciding what is plagiarism a sensitive, delicate, nuanced matter. In reaching a conclusion about a specific instance of source use, they draw on a number of factors related to the information and the language in the reported proposition, the relationship between the source and the student text, the writer's level and much more.

For the teachers who contributed their responses to this study, deciding what is and is not plagiarism requires a 360-degree view of the situation. This suggests that text-comparison software, which examines only one feature of a text (lexis), is limited in its ability to alert university teachers to texts which they would consider problematic.

Conclusion

We have presented a study of university teachers' judgements about which intertextual relationships do and do not constitute plagiarism, and have suggested that the degree of variation in such judgements presents problems for the handling of university student plagiarism. We would like to conclude by offering some recommendations for university administration and teaching practice.

The first of these is that the general principle that students need to be made explicitly aware of teachers' expectations holds particularly true when it comes to source use. Because teachers differ in their judgements, students should be made aware of what criteria will be used to assess the way they have used sources, and need explicit feedback on that aspect of their academic writing.

Second, teachers who suspect that they may have identified student plagiarism, and administrators who are called upon to adjudicate cases of plagiarism should keep in mind as they pass judgement that the intertextuality which brought the student under suspicion may well be a strategy which the student had used in previous cases without incurring the displeasure of a different teacher, with a different view of plagiarism.

The third and final recommendation is that this diversity of views should be the topic of a dialogue within (and among) universities. There is a tendency for plagiarism policy to be made at a central level, and this is entirely understandable, given that plagiarism is handled administratively as a matter of academic dishonesty. However, one effect of a centralized policy for and/or approach to plagiarism is the need for homogeneous definitions. It may or may not be feasible to harmonize views of plagiarism across a university, but it certainly cannot happen without a universal awareness that there are, in fact, different starting points. A side benefit of a wide and open dialogue on the diversity of views that exists around plagiarism would be that it would almost necessarily involve a discussion of the reasoning behind objections to plagiarism and insistence on good source use; an articulation of the values which individual academics hold, and believe to be undermined by given types of inappropriate source use. By bringing out the fundamental values and principles held within the university, such a conversation would go a long way toward shaping a culture of honesty.

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APPENDIX

Example 1

Erden 1:2a Dissertation

The **genus *Mentha*** (Laminaceae) is composed of **19** geographically widespread **species and 13 named** natural. Peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*) and spearmint are grown world-wide as perennial herbs, and produce different **essential oils which are** used as **flavourings**.

Source: Chambers and Hummer, 1994, p. 1

Mentha is a **genus** of wide distribution and considerable economic importance. Shoots and leaves of several species are often used as a condiment. The **essential oils, which are** steam distilled from the herbage, are processed into **flavourings** for food, medicine, mouthwash, toothpaste and powder, chewing gum, and candy.

In modern taxonomic treatments of the genus (Harley & Brighton, 1977), there are five sections (*Mentha* sect. *Audibertia*, sect. *Eriodontes*, sect. *Mentha*, sect. *Preslia*, and

sect. *Pulegium*) containing 19 species and 13 named hybrids involving species of *M.* sect *Mentha*

Example 2

Erden 2:1b Dissertation

Reed (1999) reported that 50% of the mint cultures in National Clonal Germplasm Repository (NCGR) under slow growth conditions were lost due to the fungal or bacterial contamination.

Source: Reed, 1999

Some clonal crops are kept in slow-growth storage as in vitro cultures for germplasm conservation (Ashmore, 1997; Engelmann, 1991; Withers, 1991; Withers et al., 1990). Previously, mint cultures held at the National Clonal Germplasm Repository (NCGR) were stored at 4 °C in darkness in 13 x 100 mm glass tubes on MS (Murashige and Skoog, 1962) medium. Under these storage conditions, 50% of the cultures were lost to fungal or bacterial contamination (Reed, unpublished data).

Example 3

Erden 1:6b Dissertation

The global and world's largest *Musa* germplasm collection, 1141 accession, is currently stored at the INIBAP Transit Centre (ITC) under slow growth conditions at reduced temperatures and light intensity (Van den Houwe, I, et al. 1998).

Source: van den Houwe et al., 1998, abstract, p. 15

The global and world's largest *Musa* germplasm collection (1141 accessions) is currently stored at the INIBAP Transit Centre (ITC) (Laboratory of Tropical Crop Improvement, K.U. Leuven, Belgium) under the auspices of FAO. In vitro proliferating shoot-tips are stored under slow-growth conditions at reduced temperatures and light intensity.

Example 4

Ingrid 1:2a Dissertation

Brassicas are of major international agricultural significance, for example, as vegetables, animal fodder and oils. These crop species are also diverse in their morphology and development regulation.

Source: Bohuon et al., 1998, p. 394

Brassicas are of major international agricultural significance, for example, as vegetables (cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, broccoli), animal fodder (kales and swedes), oils (rapeseed), etc. They are also known to have important anti-cancer activity (BEECHER 1994). These crop species are also diverse in their morphology and developmental regulation.

