Proctors, plagiarism and problems:  
A case study in developing procedures for  
dealing with dishonest academic practice

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Abstract: Matters of misconduct at universities previously reflected types of misbehaviour also prevalent in society in general. Methods of dealing with such misdemeanours included the role of the proctor as university disciplinarian. The comparatively sudden onset of plagiarism as a major issue, has lead to universities struggling with recognising and defining the concept and with developing appropriate procedures. Previous disciplinary measures including the role of the proctor have been revealed as inadequate for dealing with this problem. Many academics are uncertain as to whether plagiarism is the result of inadvertent behaviour on the part of students or deliberate dishonesty. In the case study reported here a distinction was drawn between inappropriate copying in assignments which was to be treated first as an matter for education and warning, and matters of dishonest academic practice, which required to be handled as potentially serious breaches from the first notification. The development of policies and procedures was based on the former being handled by academics in their academic divisions while the latter, like other serious misdemeanours, was to remain with the proctor. The separation required the development of a new database for inappropriate copying offences alongside the existing proctor’s database. This paper suggests that replacement of the concept of plagiarism with distinct concepts of inappropriate copying and dishonest academic practice may prove a way forward in dealing with the problem.

Keywords: proctor, plagiarism, dishonest academic practice

Introduction: matters of misconduct

The comparatively sudden onset of plagiarism as a major issue, or at least the recognition of it as such, has challenged universities’ definitions of misconduct and their traditional disciplinary methods. This paper outlines previous ways, including the role of the proctor, used by universities to deal with misconduct. The increasing incidence of plagiarism resulted in new challenges in defining the problem and developing appropriate measures for dealing with it. The case study of one university illustrates how separating out two aspects of plagiarism may provide a useful way forward.

The situation of mediaeval universities where the problems of dishonesty and misbehaviour at universities were primarily those of students who drank too much, threw darts in lectures, and crept into the rooms
of the opposite sex late at night, continued until surprisingly recently. These misdemeanours were not necessarily trivial; they could include theft, the destruction of property and personal injury. However they were frequently not academic matters but ones which would have been regarded as misconduct, regardless of who committed them and where they were committed.

Such matters were referred to the proctor, as the university disciplinarian, who dealt with them with penalties, such as fines, similar to those imposed outside the university precincts by officers of the law. Many such matters of misconduct still appear in university discipline regulations, according to which no student shall, for example,

- wilfully or recklessly damage or deface without authority and property of the University …
- wilfully create any nuisance in the University precincts …
- fail to comply with the directions of any notice erected with authority of the Council (Lincoln University 2005 Calendar, p.59).

Similarly, at universities like the one where I teach, which have agricultural classes and field trips, the proctor is responsible for enforcing university rules, including those relating to behaviour on field trips. A student may not,

- knowingly fail to comply with any reasonable direction given to that student by the person in charge of a group of students going to, engaged or returning from a field trip … or, while a member of such a group, do anything which would constitute misconduct if done within the University precincts (Lincoln University 2005 Calendar, p.59).

Many of the matters requiring disciplinary action at universities have mirrored those of society at large, including, for example, harassment and sexual harassment, which became issues of concern in the 1980s. Although until recently plagiarism was not a significant concern in universities, cheating in examinations has long been considered a major misdemeanour, as evidenced in regulations like that which asserts that no student shall commit any dishonest or improper practice in relation to formal examinations, tests or other work being taken for credit (Lincoln University 2004 Calendar, p.57).

Again there are parallels with dishonest practice in other areas, reflecting concern about those who benefit from illegitimate activity, whether the cheating has taken place in a sporting arena, the business world or some other place. Cheating is not an activity confined to university, although the way it manifests itself there relates to academic activity.

**The role of the proctor**

In England and New Zealand the word ‘proctor’ is used for a person who exercises wider powers than a proctor in an American university where the role is related to examination supervision. In New Zealand universities the proctor is responsible for discipline and enforcing university rules, with the role being based on that in British universities.

The regulations of Lincoln University, for example, declare that: “The University Proctors shall jointly and severally be responsible in the first instance for the investigation of complaints about breaches of discipline as defined … in these regulations” (Lincoln University 2005 Calendar, p. 60) and that the vice-chancellor may delegate to the proctors any of the disciplinary powers conferred by the regulations.

At Lincoln University, the proctors thus play the dual roles of investigator and disciplinarian. As problems with plagiarism have increased this has become more problematic. When, five years ago, I became part
of the proctorial team my colleague and I discussed whether he might continue to deal with the major misdemeanours while I took responsibility for plagiarism. Cheating in examinations would remain his responsibility but I would be responsible for problems with assignments and other in-term assessments. It was assumed that my role would be the lighter of the two while he dealt with the challenges presented by of the destruction of the letterboxes of local inhabitants.

The assumption that plagiarism could result in fewer referrals to the proctors than other disciplinary matters now seems naïve. The Lincoln Proctor, like proctors and other disciplinary authorities in universities, has been faced in recent years with greatly increased workload as a result of the comparatively sudden onset of plagiarism as a major issue in Australia and New Zealand.

**Plagiarism, a matter of academic concern**

Plagiarism has hit the headlines in both countries, as in the United Kingdom (Park, 2004), the United States and elsewhere (Hunt, 2002; McCabe, 2003); has been the topic of numerous papers and seminars; and the subject of recent conferences (e.g. Educational Integrity: Plagiarism and other perplexities, University of South Australia, 2003). It has become a matter of institutional and political, as well as academic, concern, and the subject of many media reports. The rise of plagiarism has created problems of definition and understanding that do not occur with cheating.

Cheating is, like other generally understood misdemeanours, a concept that is understood both in general society and in universities. Walker, drawing on Graham, Monday, O’Brien and Steffen, 1994, defines academic cheating in this way:

> Cheating is regarded as encompassing behaviours such as copying from another student during an exam; using illicit notes or “cribs” during tests; arranging to receive answers by signal in a test; copying someone else’s term papers or writing a term paper for another student (Walker, 1998, p. 91).

This list is easily understood as being of unacceptable behaviours by those outside as well as by those inside academic institutions. Plagiarism, however, is a less easily understood concept, being primarily a matter connected with academic standards. It is a term rarely used outside academia and one that is hard to explain to non-academics. Concern about plagiarism expressed outside universities and other tertiary institutions has focused on what is happening in the institutions and how their integrity is affected, rather than, for example, about fears that the practice might spread to other areas or is a manifestation of some larger social ill. University staff struggle to define the concept for students, resorting such phrases as ‘taking someone else’s words or ideas and presenting them as your own’ (Pickering, 2002, p.1) or ‘At its most fundamental level, student plagiarism usually takes the form of unacknowledged copying of material from a source text’ (Walker, 1998, p. 89).

Jude Carroll who declares that ‘Definitions matter and agreeing a good one is harder than you think’ opts for ‘Passing off someone else’s work as your own, intentionally or unintentionally, for your own benefit’ (Carroll, 2003, p.12). While this may work as a definition of plagiarism in universities it is hard to see it becoming a definition for a type of misdemeanour in areas outside the academic world. Although dealing with issues of intellectual property has become a distinct area of legal practice, journalists, politicians, preachers and teachers are some of those in public life who, every day, use the words and ideas of others without full acknowledgement. Omitting to acknowledge the work of all who contributed to any breakthrough, venture or accomplishment is an everyday occurrence in most fields of human endeavour.
The less clear nature of plagiarism lies not only in the difficulties relating to defining it and its prevalence in other spheres of similar but acceptable practices, but also in questions of intent. Once identified, most cheating is regarded as the result of intentional acts committed by someone who is clear about the mores their actions have transgressed. Plagiarism is less clear-cut. Learning to use and reference quotations and to paraphrase and acknowledge ideas are complex tasks that can challenge even experienced researchers and writers. Knowing when an idea is a common one that need not be referenced, is a matter that even disciplinary experts may not agree on. It is often impossible to tell when a student has deliberately copied works or phrases or ideas without proper acknowledgement, and when failure to provide appropriate acknowledgement is the result of incompetence. This uncertainty about the definition and the boundaries of plagiarism is manifest also in uncertainty about its causes and ways to combat it.

**Developing a new system: a case study**

**The need for change**

When the wave of plagiarism has affected institutions of higher education in recent years academic staff have usually the first to become concerned. At Lincoln University the initial recognition of the need for a new look at dealing with plagiarism came from the teaching staff. At a seminar, organised by Teaching and Learning Services, which was planned to increase staff understanding of the issues and to share strategies, there was a recognition for the need for more than discussion and a call for the university to review its policies and procedures.

The same triggers as have been identified elsewhere had lead to an increased incidence of both plagiarism and more serious breaches of academic practice. The increase in student numbers, a widening of the range of academic ability, and an increase in the number of students of different cultural and educational backgrounds, had been accompanied by increased access to and use of the Internet. The numbers of students who were looking for shortcuts or unaware of appropriate academic practice had risen at the same time as the opportunities to take the short cuts had expanded. While many of the concerns voiced by staff related to copying, the disciplinary areas of the staff and students affected the nature of those concerns. Those who set tests were concerned about cheating in tests and laboratories. Those who set written assignments had noted failures to reference and sections of essays had been downloaded from Internet sources. Some lecturing staff were considering opting for tests rather than the more varied, and pedagogically more desirable, range of assessment they had used previously. Others had already made this switch. Teaching staff in the foundation studies area, who were preparing students for degree study, had become skilled in detecting and dealing with plagiarism with expertise greater than most of their colleagues. The proctorial workload had risen dramatically as a result of breaches of examination protocols.

University procedures existed (Lincoln University 2004 Calendar, p.49-50) but had been designed for times when breaches were infrequent and all infringements assumed to be of a serious nature. In theory all cases were reported to first to the divisional director and then, if appropriate, to the proctor, but in practice there was considerable variation in what happened. Some lecturers expended considerable energy in teaching the reasons for, and methods of, referencing, backed up by the help offered by the Teaching and Learning Services. There were some consistent university–wide practices, such as a standard statement about plagiarism that appeared in all course outlines. Introductory library sessions, which were compulsory for undergraduates, mentioned the significance of correct referencing and the problems of plagiarism. Teaching divisions had developed a variety of responses such as a system of responding to instances of plagiarism and keeping records of these.

The new situation, however, was recognised as being much more complex and as requiring a variety of responses. In particular the rapid growth in the numbers of international students was seen as a challenge
to established ways of working. In common with their counterparts elsewhere lecturers were uncertain about whether the increases in plagiarism were a result of clashes between different teaching and learning styles and whether education could reduce the incidence. Teaching staff wanted support in their fight against plagiarism and some certainty that the efforts they were making in combating offending practices were worthwhile. At this stage definitions of plagiarism and the whole notion of what constitutes plagiarism were regarded as being relevant, but not critical. The obvious next step was for discussion that might lead to a co-ordinated approach. While the proctors needed to be involved in the process and its development, plagiarism had to be handled differently from other disciplinary matters.

**Development of the process**

The recognition of the need for a new university-wide response to the situation led to the establishment of a committee with representatives from different parts of the campus, including those with a particular interest in the issues: academic staff with teaching and administrative responsibilities, a staff member from Foundation Studies, a teacher librarian, a learning skills tutor, the proctor and deputy proctor, the education officer of the students’ association and, as convenor, the chair of the Academic Administration Committee. The wide representation and experience of the committee members proved invaluable. Each time an issue was raised someone could comment from their experience with a student or raise the complexities inherent in tackling a problem on the basis of having tackled the problem before.

The first stage of the committee's work was getting agreement on the task it was charged with and its orientation to the task. Early discussion elicited agreement with, and commitment to, the primary principle in dealing with plagiarism being educational. The development of the new process reflected the beliefs of the committee and the commitment of its members to fairness and equity in dealing with students. While a distinction was made between less serious and more serious offending, at this time both were regarded as instances of dishonest academic practice (DAP).

The thrust of the Working Party's approach is to treat DAP holistically. The aim is to create a university environment in which: both staff and students recognise DAP as antithetical to academic endeavours; most instances of DAP result from isolated learning difficulties; the few serious, repeat, offenders call forth strong and public sanctions. (Draft report, Lincoln University, 2004).

The essential tasks were developing flow charts to identify problem areas in current regulations and to 'chart' a proposed alternative procedure for in-term assessment; discussion of the education issues generated by concerns about dishonest academic practice; proposed in-term assessment policy and the review of regulations relating to dishonest academic practice and breaches of instruction, involving suggestions for clarifying the role of the proctor and improving the speed of resolution.

**An educational or a disciplinary issue?**

The central discussion about whether plagiarism is the result of inadvertent behaviour on the part of students, or of deliberate dishonesty, was constantly revisited by the committee during the development of policies and procedures. As elsewhere, this discussion was frequently focused on whether international students were disadvantaged by western academic practices that might clash with Asian cultural imperatives and practices that valued verbatim reporting of the words of the wise and revered. Indecision about motivations behind plagiarism has left many academics uncertain how to deal with the problem. Progress was made in this case because all members of the committee were clear that learning to reference and use quotations appropriately was a matter all students needed to learn. They recognised these as academic skills that needed to be taught and took time to acquire.
It was agreed that minor cases of inappropriate copying in assignments were to be treated as educational issues. Instead of using the term plagiarism being used the term inappropriate copying in assignments was chosen so that the emotive connotations of plagiarism were defused. The boundaries of inappropriate copying are not firm but the term allowed for agreement that such transgressions of academic practice as failing to reference a quotation could be treated appropriately and in a different manner from major transgressions. This was an improvement on the existing regulations dealing with plagiarism, which, having been drawn up at an earlier time, had allowed for little discretion in dealing with plagiarism, whether minimal or blatant.

Similarly, the term, plagiarism, was abandoned for more serious breaches of honest academic practice and replaced by the term dishonest academic practice. This was used to cover offences which could be termed cheating, such as copying in a term test or a final examination, either from another student or from material not permitted in the examination room, and also repeat offending and plagiarism in a dissertation or thesis.

Procedures were developed for dealing with a first or second case of inappropriate copying. These procedures involved education of the student, recording of the offence and, where appropriate, some disciplinary action, usually a loss of marks. It was resolved to set up a database to record all instances of inappropriate copying so that there was a record of when, a second, and more importantly, a third instance occurred. A database which had been operating in one academic division of the university was used as a model for a university wide system. Processes have been developed to ensure that the database provides an accurate record and that there are no opportunities for misuse. This has involved the entry of data being done only by an authorised person and access to the information which has been entered being restricted to those who had the right to know, the authorised operator and the proctors.

On the assumption that the student had been exposed to, and should have learnt from, the educational processes associated with the first and second incidents, a third such incident moved the offence into the category of being more serious. The result will be immediate and automatic referral to the proctor for investigation and/or disciplinary action.

Inappropriate copying in assignments was, therefore, to be treated first as a matter for education and warning with increasing penalties, while matters of dishonest academic practice, which were essentially incidences of academic cheating, were to be handled as potentially serious breaches from the first notification. The decision to abandon the term plagiarism and make a clear distinction between inappropriate copying in assignments and more serious matters of dishonest academic practice was a major breakthrough in terms of making progress.

Among the unifying factors that united the working party was a determination to reach the best possible solutions for the students and the university, in other words commitment to fair treatment and educational goals and a concern for appropriate process. There was much discussion about might be expected from international students, who come to Lincoln University mainly from Asia, and the amount of latitude that should be allowed them, with differences among the views of members about the significance of culture as a contributing factor to students copying inappropriately. Somewhat surprisingly, the student representatives and those worked most closely with international students, were found to be strongest in advocating ‘the waving of a big stick’. The apparent incongruity here resulted from those advocates wanting the students to be given very clear signs about what was not acceptable in the Lincoln University context and what the resulting penalties would be.

Another concern was that while the existing educational introduction worked well for undergraduates, graduates coming in from universities in other countries might not have had clear instruction in
appropriate referencing procedures and practices either before they arrived or at Lincoln, a difference also noted by Sheard, Markham and Dick (2003). Plugging such gaps was therefore a matter that had to be worked through.

Conclusion

So, ironically, abandoning the term plagiarism was a major breakthrough in dealing with plagiarism at Lincoln University. Instead of all cases of plagiarism being referred to the proctors, with the adoption of the distinction between inappropriate copying in assignments and matters of dishonest academic practice, the procedures for dealing with the two types of misdemeanour were separated. While there is some artificiality in the distinction between inappropriate copying and dishonest academic practice, separating the two ways in which plagiarism manifests itself has been a positive step forward. No longer are all such misdemeanours referred to the proctor. The responsibility for dealing with inappropriate copying is now more clearly with academic staff. They will still be required to report any incident but the proposal to set up a university wide database will facilitate the sharing of necessary knowledge within well-defined limits. Selected administrative staff will have roles to play and the divisional directors will still oversee the process when inappropriate copying is the issue. The proctors remain responsible for such offences as cheating in tests and examinations. Their responsibilities are now more clearly focused on matters of dishonest academic practice, including inappropriate copying which reaches this level.

The system at Lincoln is still being developed and may well go through further modification. The role of the proctor has been redefined and, with the sharing of responsibility for dealing with plagiarism, is complemented by the greater involvement of teaching staff and appropriate sharing of responsibility.

References

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