

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

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The substantial and growing body of research into plagiarism includes good coverage of student views, understandings and attitudes (e.g. Crocker & Shaw, 2002; Pecorari, 2003; Shi, 2004). Less attention, though, has been given to the perspectives of university teachers, possibly because the received view of plagiarism as the worst of academic crimes is so widely established that it has appeared to be safe to assume that teachers strongly and consistently object to it as an act of academic dishonesty.

There are, however, indications in the literature that teachers' views of plagiarism may not in fact be homogeneous. For example, Sutherland-Smith (2008) found that some of the teachers she studied categorized plagiarism as always involving dishonest intent, while others took the view that it could occur unintentionally. In response to specific instances of source use, sharply differing responses to quite similar student writing strategies have been documented (Pecorari, 2008). When academics are accused of plagiarism, the charge is often the subject of heated debate, with their colleagues taking opposing positions on how to regard the act (e.g., Leatherman, 1999; Smallwood, 2002; Yilmaz, 2007). There is reason, therefore, to think that individual academics may differ widely not only in terms of how they handle cases of plagiarism which arise in their classrooms, but also in terms of which textual acts they consider to be plagiarism, or how serious they consider acts of plagiarism to be for students in various situations.

If there is inconsistency in staff views of plagiarism, this creates a dangerous situation for students, whose writing strategies may be judged to be appropriate by one teacher and dishonest by another. Inconsistent views can lead to students receiving conflicting messages, resulting in an opacity which is not helpful in shaping a climate of honesty. Inconsistencies also create difficulties for teachers and administrators who work with questions of plagiarism. If there are consistent differences between disciplines, application of uniform policies across universities may be unworkable, or unrealistic, or unfair. For pedagogical interventions, detection efforts and disciplinary responses to be appropriate, they must be based on an understanding of what the relevant academic community is prepared to accept, what it is not, and which acts, if any, fall into the gray zone between fully acceptable and transgressive. A clearer picture of staff perceptions of plagiarism is therefore needed as a foundation for universities' efforts to promote student learning and shape a culture of honesty.

This paper presents the findings of a study of university teaching staff and their attitudes toward plagiarism. Interviews were conducted with university teachers in one English-speaking country and one country in which English is a foreign language in common use in tertiary education. Teachers came from a range of academic disciplines and from two institutions per country. The interviews aimed at establishing the extent to which informants took similar or different views on plagiarism and how these differences might be related to national or academic culture.

The interviews show considerable diversity in how academics react to instances of possible plagiarism. While some of the differences appear to be linked to disciplinary differences and

what parts of the writing process are prized across disciplines, there was also variation within the same fields. One important factor explaining the diversity of responses is whether the staff member viewed the plagiarism in question as springing from dishonest intent. When teachers believe that students lack intention to deceive, they are reluctant to categorize the student's work as plagiarism. Perceptions about what they assume to be the student's intention are therefore a more relevant criterion for some teachers in determining plagiarism than the actual relationship between the student's work and the sources it draws on. This finding has important implications for the use of text-comparison tools which rely on textual features to detect the possible presence of plagiarism.

Another issue emerging as important was the difficulty of writing in a foreign language, and there are indications that some teaching staff may take this issue into account in determining whether a text manifests plagiarism. This in turn is related to the different attitudes to students who are writing in a foreign language in a country where they are paying customers and in one where they are valuable guests.

A third factor is the teacher's view of the relation of text and content, which derives from disciplinary epistemology. Where text is constitutive of meaning, as in the humanities and social sciences, copying of any part may seem to be theft of intellectual property. But in the natural sciences, where a clear distinction can be made between the intellectual work and the report of it, there may be more tolerance of copying mere words.

Because inconsistent views of which writing strategies are transgressive have, as noted above, a potentially heavy impact on novice writers, implications for educational administration and teaching practice will be discussed.

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