



You plagiarised your supervisor

Target audience: Senior academic staff, Research supervisors, Academic staff developers

Key issue being addressed: Academic integrity and understanding academic writing

Purpose of the case:

1. To assist academic staff in weighing up what is deemed to be 'common knowledge' and what is required to be acknowledged in a research assignment.
2. To discuss the relationship between academic integrity and academic literacy development, particularly in courses where relatively little writing is required

Materials and preparation needed to answer case:

- Remind participants to find and access appropriate policy and academic integrity resources at own institution prior to coming to session.
- Copy of university academic integrity policy, and procedures.
- Separate PowerPoint for facilitator based on 1 or 2 hour session.

The case

Abstract

An Engineering Honours student faces a charge of plagiarism after he uses his supervisor's published framework as the starting point for his thesis.

Van¹ is a near-native speaker of English, having left Vietnam with his family and arrived in Australia as a child. He has just completed his Honours year in Engineering. Throughout the four years of the course there has been little need for any writing in continuous prose, such as essays or reports. Assignments have tended to focus on problems and solutions expressed in short paragraphs, annotated diagrams and mathematical symbols; and assessment criteria required students to demonstrate their comprehension through applications of existing methodologies and formulae. Van's final assessment is by a 50-page dissertation which requires demonstration of a higher level of creative problem-solving. All students at this level are assigned a supervisor to guide them and to provide formative feedback on the content and the structure of their writing. The thesis requires an introduction to explain the problem posed and the process by which it is to be solved; this is followed by a creative solution in text which relies increasingly on the use of symbols and formulae, the communication method in which Van is more at home than in the writing of extended prose.

Van had been an exceptionally bright student and his thesis impresses his first examiner with the elegance of his method and solution. His second examiner, however, notes a slight

¹ All characters in the case are pseudonyms

change in style within the introductory pages. She googles a key phrase from this section, and discovers that Van's chosen method has close similarities with a published method. She further notes that the author of the publication is none other than his own supervisor.

Van's case is handed to the faculty's academic integrity officer, who, himself an engineer, finds that, while the methodology is indeed based on an approach developed and published by his supervisor, Van's adaptation and solution are quite creative, as required for the assessment. Van is called to an initial meeting which is mandatory following a suspected plagiarism incident. He asserts that he was not intending to cheat, and explains that he was unaware that he needed to reference his supervisor's method which he had quite openly used as the starting point for his adaptation. In the meantime, the first examiner has put the thesis through the text-matching tool *Turnitin.com*, only to find matches for a large number of phrases and even some complete sentences throughout Van's prose.

Points for consideration

- The role of formative and summative assessment practices
- The amount of discretion allowed for by the University's academic integrity policy
- The amount of induction that students receive into academic writing
- The level of supervision and feedback they receive while writing

Questions for discussion

1. What in your view would be an appropriate outcome for Van?
2. What position might the supervisor take in this situation?
3. What position might the academic integrity officer take?
4. What aspect of your university's policy would you invoke to respond to this situation?
5. Does your Academic Integrity policy give prominence to assessment principles or refer to an Assessment Policy?
6. Do these policies link Academic Integrity to academic writing, feedback, curriculum design?

Some useful references

Bretag et al (under review) 'Teach us how to do it properly!' An Australian academic integrity student survey, *Studies in Higher Education*.

I have a sound knowledge and understanding in relation to referencing but this was only picked up over time. Over my four years at [this university] I have always been unsure whether I am satisfactorily meeting the academic integrity policy with my work, but I have never received any breaches. [Student comment]

Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. (2007) 'The Power of Feedback'. Review of educational research 77 (1), 81–112 <http://rer.sagepub.com/>

In too many cases, testing is used as the measure to judge whether change has occurred rather than as a mechanism to further enhance and consolidate learning by teachers or students (p104).

Ireland, C & English, J (2011) Let Them Plagiarise: Developing Academic Writing in a Safe Environment, *Journal of Academic Writing* 1(1) pp 165-172
<http://e-learning.coventry.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/joaw/>

It seems that the considerations which need to be made with regard to plagiarism education should be no different to the pedagogical considerations for any other topic. In fact, it may be argued that since the potential consequences of not understanding plagiarism are more serious than the potential consequences of not understanding a disciplinary topic, then greater consideration needs to be given to how best to help students understand plagiarism [p166].

McGowan, U. (2010) Re-defining academic teaching in terms of research apprenticeship. In M. Devlin, J. Nagy and A. Lichtenberg (Eds.) *Research and Development in Higher Education: Reshaping Education*, 33 (pp. 481-489)
http://www.herdsa.org.au/?page_id=1371#M

While plagiarism by students who deliberately set out to deceive the assessor clearly equates with cheating or fraud, and while fostering honesty, ethical behaviour and professional attitudes is integral to the learning goals set out by universities, there is also an increasing awareness that much of the identified plagiarism may be the result of students' inadequate understanding of the procedures, and indeed the reasons for the academic requirements. (p483)

Support for this project/activity has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.



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