Studying the Issue of Plagiarism at a University in Hong Kong: An Exploration of the Teaching and Learning Processes

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from the exploratory stage of an ongoing study conducted at a university in Hong Kong on the issue of plagiarism. The early stage of the study focused on exploring undergraduate students’ understanding of plagiarism, the strategies they used when preparing their assignments, the textual results of their strategies, lecturers’ response to their students’ use of sources, and the role played by Turnitin in the assessment process. In the present paper, the data collected from nine student participants and four instructors were drawn upon to illuminate some findings. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications that the reported findings may have for universities’ anti-plagiarism policies and for the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and subject-based instruction.

Keywords: plagiarism, patchwriting, Turnitin, EAP instruction

Introduction

In the past two decades an anti-plagiarism discourse has largely been found in English-speaking countries. However, while a comparable track of interest in the issue of plagiarism is not consistently found in the rest of the world, the issue does increasingly gain prominence in the higher education sector on a global scale. Given the central place of writing and learning to write in the university, studying students’ and instructors’ engagement with the issue of plagiarism and the avoidance of the problem of plagiarism would be intimately linked to the reflections upon a university’s mission to cultivate qualified future generations with critical minds.

In Hong Kong, where English is used as the dominant medium of instruction in higher education which is characterised by a high level of international engagement (Li & Flowerdew, 2009), university policies against plagiarism have long been in existence. Deckert (1993) and Pennycook (1993) (the latter leading a project team), both expatriate university lecturers in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, investigated the issue of plagiarism at their institutions, with the former focusing on to what extent students understand what plagiarism is and the latter adopting a broad contextualised approach with a cultural and historical perspective. Subsequent to Deckert’s and Pennycook’s research in the early 1990s, an internet-evoked paradigm shift has taken place in the academe and changes in technologies have re-designed the landscape of reading and writing in universities. There is a need to go beyond Deckert and Pennycook, whose research was conducted almost 20 years ago, to update our understanding of the current scenarios in relation to the issue of plagiarism.
As instructors may tell from experience, cases of plagiarism characterised by an intention to cheat and typically large-scale text-matching with sources, or what Pecorari (2003) termed “prototypical cases of plagiarism,” do occur occasionally. However, what is more often found in student texts is perhaps a form of non-prototypical plagiarism, typically devoid of the intention to cheat (even though the question of intention may be inherently controversial) and textually characterised by *patchwriting*, where strings of words are lifted from sources, with new words inserted at various points and syntactic structures adjusted sometimes (Howard, 1993, 1995). Researchers have suggested various perspectives in investigating students’, especially ESL (English as a second language) students’, problematic source use practices in academic writing, and proposed educational responses to patchwriting (e.g., Angélil-Carter, 2000; Carroll, 2009; Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004; Harwood et al., 2011; Li & Casanave, forthcoming; Pecorari, 2003; Polio et al., 2010).

In the spirit of contextualising the investigation of the issue of plagiarism, as Pennycook (1993, 1994) called for, there is an apparent need for studying how ESL students at an English-dominant university in Hong Kong engage with the notion of plagiarism as they write their assignments, how they use and write from sources in a technology-based learning environment, and how Turnitin may be used to facilitate teaching and learning. With an ongoing study conducted at a university in Hong Kong, I intend to address this niche of research. In the present paper, I will highlight some findings derived from the exploratory stage of the study and briefly discuss the implications of these findings.

**The Institutional Context and the Method**

The research site of the study is a research-based university in Hong Kong. As at other universities in the territory, pamphlets (in both print and Web-based versions) providing a definition of plagiarism and illustrating what it is and how to avoid it are distributed to students at the university. Students at all degree levels, in the first semester of their study programme, take an academic English course where a strong anti-plagiarism message is conveyed and where they are expected to satisfactorily demonstrate an ability to write from sources with proper attribution. Increasingly, students at the university have also been engaging with Turnitin since it was first put on trial in 2004. On many courses, it is either compulsory for the students to submit their assignments directly to the text-matching system, or submit soft copies of their assignments to their lecturer who will usually run all of the assignments (or sometimes some of them, if the lecturer becomes suspicious about particular assignments) through the system for checking. In addition, it has become mandatory for research students to check their MPhil/PhD theses with Turnitin before formal submission. In this plagiarism-conscious setting, it may be particularly worthwhile to find out how students may perceive the issue of plagiarism and how teaching in this connection may take place.

Major questions guiding the exploratory stage of the study (roughly falling within the period from March 2010 to May 2011) included: How do undergraduate students understand plagiarism? What strategies of searching, using, and citing sources do they use to write their assignments? What are the textual results of their strategies? How do lecturers respond to their students’ use of sources in assignments?
And what role does Turnitin play in the assessment process? Guided by a case study approach, multiple sources of data were collected from nine student participants (referred to as S1-S9 in the present paper). The data included interviews (conducted in English, Cantonese, or Mandarin), observation, process logs (the students’ documentation, in light of a provided prompt, of their process of completing an assignment), paper drafts, source texts, notes, and other textual artifacts such as course syllabuses and assignment instructions. In addition, interviews were conducted (in English) with 12 lecturers. The present paper will draw upon the interview data collected from four of the lecturers (referred to as T1-T4 in the present paper), who were instructors of several of the student participants in the study. Finally, to depict a teaching-learning scenario, a conference between T1 and S1 focusing on S1’s problematic use of sources in an assignment will be described in this paper. The findings to be presented in the following under four main headings and illuminated by relevant interview and textual data have been derived from combining such analytical strategies as intertextual tracing (Prior, 1998), inductive analysis (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984), construction of individual case profiles (Strauss, 1987), and triangulation of data from various sources.

**Patchwriting in Student Texts**

Howard (1995) has suggested that patchwriting (typically with source attribution) is often the result of the learners being unfamiliar with the words and ideas that they need to engage with in reading and writing. This seems a powerful explanation for the patchwriting of the student participants in the present study, as where patchwriting occurred, the source texts tended to be scholarly texts with varying degrees of technicality. However, two additional reasons can be suggested to explain the occurrence of patchwriting in the student participants’ papers.

The first concerns a student’s misunderstanding that patchwriting is acceptable, despite his/her ability to recite the tenets of the university’s plagiarism policy by giving a synopsis of the definition of plagiarism. Here is how S1 defined plagiarism:

Patchwriting is that a student copy some opinion or some original thought when it is not think by him- or herself without proper citation.¹

However, patchwriting was found in S1’s linguistics paper when it was read against the sources. Likewise, S2, who had clear awareness of the need to avoid plagiarism, relied on patchwriting at several places in her sociology paper. Figure 1 shows an extract from a source text and S2’s citation (with overlaps between the source and the student text underlined).
A team can be defined as (a) two or more individuals who (b) socially interact (face-to-face or, increasingly, virtually); (c) possess one or more common goals; (d) are brought together to perform organizationally relevant tasks; (e) exhibit interdependencies with respect to workflow, goals, and outcomes; (f) have different roles and responsibilities; and (g) are together embedded in an encompassing organizational system. [...]  

— Kozlowski & Hgen (2006, p. 79)

**Figure 1.** S2’s citation of a source text

S2 and a few others did not seem to realise that patchwriting, even with citations supplied, is not acceptable in a piece of work submitted for assessment (Howard, 1995). They seemed to believe that as long as it was not word-for-word copying (and to S1 and S3, not copying three words in a row—which is what they said but not what they always practiced), and as long as the source was provided, then it was problem-free. In addition, for S3 and S4, whose essays included footnotes containing patchwriting, citation could be less strict in footnotes because they are not part of the main text.

Patchwriting has also been facilitated by the ease of navigating through Web sources. When students write in a subject area, they frequently use academic journal articles as sources, which they access through Google search or the university’s library database search. Patchwriting from the first page of an article, i.e., the abstract or the introduction (perhaps frequently the only part of a source that the students would take a look at), is not rare. This is illustrated by the case of S3 in writing his linguistics paper (see also Li & Casanave, forthcoming): he wanted to add a footnote explaining an area in the brain called “Broca’s area,” so he googled “Broca’s area” and under the Wikipedia entry of the term he found this reference:


By clicking on the doi link, S3 came to the article by Dronkers et al., which opens with the following:

In 1861, the French surgeon, Pierre Paul Broca, described two patients who had lost the ability to speak after injury to the posterior inferior frontal gyrus of the brain. Since that time […]
Hence S3’s footnote was:

Paul Pierre Broca reported impairments in two patients who had lost the ability to speak after injury to the posterior inferior frontal gyrus of the brain. Since then, [...] Retrieved from Dronkers, N. F. [...] 

The “intertextual agility” (Chandrasoma et al., 2004, p. 173) offered by the Web space tends to facilitate superficial and piecemeal reading (Carr, 2010), or skimming through a text to look for useful information rather than in-depth reading based on critical thinking, which in turn may encourage patchwriting. Some students also habitually searched on particular words of their choice, so they only needed to look at a few short segments of texts that contain the target words. For instance, S5 searched on “listening” in a Google book while preparing an English pedagogy assignment. It would be fair to say that this way of searching for target words, a useful information-gathering skill in itself, if used as the primary mode of reading, is more likely to lead to knowledge-telling characterised by patchwriting, than knowledge-transformation based on critical synthesis and analysis of multiple sources.

**Impact of High School Experience of Writing**

For a few first year students in particular, previous high school experience of writing seemed to impact upon the way they studied and cited sources in writing. An example of good practice came from S6. S6 graduated from an international school in Hong Kong where she underwent an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum during the final two years. In particular, from the subject “Theory of Knowledge” in the IB syllabus, she learned how to analyse an issue from different perspectives:

We were told to present different sides of an argument, to form better argument in our essays. Teachers always emphasise how you have to present many sides of an argument, and then refute the one you’re opposing.

This orientation toward analysing an issue from different perspectives was commensurate with S6’s way of citing varied, contrastive sources to provide evidence to support her views in her linguistics paper. When quoting, she would make sure “I say why it’s relevant to the thing I’m talking about.” It could be seen that such a position in relation to sources gave her text an authorial voice.

In contrast, S1, who had studied in the science stream at a local CMI (Chinese as the Medium of Instruction) high school, pointed out that she had had no experience of writing an English essay from sources, and that how she was previously expected to write in science (where there were often “model answers”) was different from the demands in the arts subjects in the university (see also Li & Casanave, forthcoming):

[In high school] I learned to present analysis in a systematic way, for example first is what, second is what, third is what. [...] You know when you attempt an exam in science, you just try to think logically without trying to rephrase somebody’s saying.
S1 was called into office by her instructor (T1) for her problematic source use (i.e., patchwriting) in her linguistics assignment (the same assignment referred to above with S3 and S6); the conference between T1 and S1 will be described in a later section of the present paper.

Stances on Learning and Writing in the University Making a Difference

Apart from the impact of previous training in high school, it was revealed in the present study that the occurrence of patchwriting was linked to the student participants’ particular stance on learning and writing. For example, both S1 and S2 found their source texts by using time-saving strategies. In the list of references that popped up from her library database searching, S1 selected the first two having a full text in PDF as the sources for her linguistics assignment. The two papers turned out to be beyond her level of comprehension, as T1, her instructor on the linguistics course, pointed out to her later. S2, in meeting the deadline of submission of her sociology paper, adopted the whole set of references used by a friend who took the same course in the previous year, and composed her essay using the same sources. The two students’ attitude toward learning and writing in the university as reflected in their way of completing their assignments was perhaps one of “getting the assignment in and getting passed” and their very limited investment apparently helped to explain the patchwriting in their texts.

By contrast, two high-achieving first year students, S7 and S8, were markedly different from S1 and S2. Their case would challenge the stereotyped image of early year university students in the literature, i.e., that these students often adopt a content-driven (as opposed to issue-driven) approach in searching for sources and are predisposed for knowledge-telling from sources in writing (Geisler, 1991; Nelson & Hayes, 1988). S7 held that “a purpose of going to the university is to let oneself become someone with independent thinking,” and S8 posited that in the university “I should learn something that can enrich the spiritual culture.” Both selected courses that they believed would broaden their mind and hone their critical thinking skills (e.g., political science, philosophy, and history of China’s Cultural Revolution), and avoided courses where they thought they would be expected to learn rules (e.g., finance, and accounting). For writing in various introductory courses, they both suggested what mattered more was not “what you write” but “how you write,” with the central goal being writing convincingly with logic. For their political science assignment, they both engaged with their sources in ways that enabled them to stake out their line of argument. Patchwriting did not have a place in the two students’ knowledge-transforming approach to their learning and writing processes.

Using Turnitin as an Educational Tool

When Turnitin.com was first introduced at the university which was the research site of the present study, it was proposed (as recorded in the minutes of the meetings of the working team involved) that it should be used as an educational tool assisting students’ learning rather than as a policing device geared to detection and punishment. However, findings from the present study indicated that some instructors were hesitant in exploring the tool’s educational use.
Anecdotal and empirical evidence has shown that Turnitin deters plagiarism (e.g., Emerson, 2008; Ledwith & Risquez, 2008). Given the complexity of text-matching (for instance, a sizeable number of specialist terms in a text may boost the similarity index), it is generally agreed that the onus of examining and determining the nature of the matches between a student text and the sources rests with the assessor (Caren, 2011). A question here might be, when the overall text-matching percentage (as reflected in the similarity index) is not particularly eye-catching, will an instructor scrutinise the matches in a student text and educate the student against patchwriting when it occurs? S9’s essay in public administration contained instances of patchwriting and other citation problems (e.g., messing up author names and wrong attribution). Although the instructor, T2, ran all student essays through Turnitin and the similarity index for S9’s paper was 12%, T2 did not find it necessary to check the individual instances of patchwriting in S9’s paper and talk them through with the student; meanwhile, the various citation problems in S9’s text also remained hidden to T2. A junior professorial academic who newly joined the university, T2 pointed out that she lacked incentives to set a really “high standard” for students to observe in source attribution or to implement individualised teaching on how to cite sources. This is both because she felt that she could not afford the time to do so given the pressure of academic publication she was under, and because the possibility of a high percentage of her students not meeting a “high standard” would actually reflect badly on her and even jeopardise her job.

Some instructors in the present study expressed concern that giving students access to the Originality Report from Turnitin could have a counter-productive effect. T3 found that his students, after being given the Originality Report, only revised their papers by editing out the matches. Likewise, T4 was concerned, after sending the Originality Report on a research student’s draft of a literature review chapter to the student, that the student would focus on editing the matches without making an effort to deepen engagement with the literature.

Holding a conference with students with reference to a Turnitin Originality Report can be an occasion for judging whether plagiarism has occurred (Edwards, 2011), while serving teaching and learning purposes (Emerson, 2008). T1, when going through S1’s linguistics paper, wrote in the margins “sources?” numerous times; he then checked S1’s text with Turnitin which turned up a similarity index of 25%. He followed up with a face-to-face conference with the student. In his 40-minute conference with S1, referring to the Originality Report from time to time, T1 earnestly tried to drive home the message “you will get respect by acknowledging.” In the following excerpt from the conference, T1 was demonstrating to S1 how she should put the words copied from a source into quotation marks:

If you say “language is […] language impairment” [demonstrating the action of reading something off from a source and moving fingers as if typing up something from the source] and TAKING it from somewhere, I need to acknowledge it, I need to acknowledge it.

Apart from combining verbal instruction with nonverbal actions, T1 also used analogies to emphasise to S1 the importance of acknowledging sources, as this excerpt from the conference illustrates:
You don’t want to NOT acknowledge—you’re going to steal from 7-11 and not paying money, it’s the same way, that’s the kind of thing you need to say, OK I borrowed, I borrowed it from that Abstract, I acknowledge.

T1’s commitment to “turning the students around” (as he himself put it) was impressively shown in the way he integrated the tool of Turnitin into an educational process. T1 contrasted with T3 and T4 as the latter were not sure about granting students the access to the Turnitin Originality Report; T1’s way of individualising teaching through a face-to-face conference also posed a contrast to T2’s comment that doing so would necessitate an investment of time that she could not afford.

Implications

In the foregoing section I presented a few strands of findings from the exploratory stage of my ongoing study conducted at a university in Hong Kong on the issue of plagiarism, drawing upon some data collected from nine individual students across the years of study and from four instructors who were teaching some of the student participants. It is shown that firstly, where patchwriting occurs, it seems to have been fostered by the ease of navigating through Web sources and by the students’ misunderstanding that patchwriting is acceptable, despite the fact that the students seem to be able to recite the tenets of the university’s anti-plagiarism policy. Secondly, previous experience of writing in high school can have an impact upon a student’s capability of handling the challenge of writing from sources in university. Thirdly, an orientation toward critical thing and knowledge-transformation in learning and writing seems to work effectively against patchwriting. Finally, despite the use of Turnitin, patchwriting and other citation problems such as wrong attribution may still be overlooked by an instructor, partly because he or she may feel setting a high standard may not be cost-effective. Nevertheless, the description of a face-to-face conference between an instructor and a student where the Turnitin Originality Report was utilised for teaching purposes has illustrated the potentiality of using Turnitin as an educational tool. Taken together, these findings indicate a need for actions on various fronts. I would just highlight two areas in the higher education sector where actions can be taken, concerning, respectively, universities’ anti-plagiarism policies, and the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and subject-based instruction.

It has been found that anti-plagiarism policies in English-dominant universities are surprisingly similar across continents (Pecorari, 2001). Generally enshrined in a “discourse of morality” (Abasi & Graves, 2008, p. 228), the policies fail to address the complexity of the issue of plagiarism. Back in 1995, Rebecca Moore Howard (Howard, 1995) put forward “a proposed policy on plagiarism” which distinguished between three forms of plagiarism: cheating, non-attribution, and patchwriting. Howard’s proposal has largely failed to find an echo in the institutional discourse on plagiarism till this day (Li & Casanave, forthcoming). The still-current “discourse of morality” of universities’ anti-plagiarism policies is limited in its use in assisting teaching and learning. A revision of the existing policies should reflect the “effects of electronic composition,” as Howard (1995, p. 802) pointed out for a future update of her proposed policy while looking ahead into the digital age with prophecy; the revision should perhaps also encompass a “Turnitin policy statement” (DCQE, n.d.), which spells out guidelines for using Turnitin with sensitivity and discretion and in ways that facilitate the teaching and learning of the proper use of source material.
In addition to teaching referencing styles, citation skills, and evaluation of Web sources, EAP instruction needs to address students’ potential misconceptions about source use, while subject instructors should be more aware of their students’ process of writing assignments, and better address students’ learning needs in writing from sources. The achievement of these educational goals can be supported by the use of Turnitin as a formative assessment tool in conjunction with an “educational package” which includes face-to-face conferences between EAP or subject instructors and students (Emerson, 2008, p. 190). However, admittedly, the extra demand on the EAP and subject instructors’ time invoked by these pedagogical approaches could remain a barrier to their implementation.

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Notes
1. Where an interview was conducted in English, errors in English are retained in the present paper.

References


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