Topic 1
Plagiarism

Lead-in

1. "All my best thoughts were stolen by the ancients."
   Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), American essayist, poet, and philosopher

2. "Good artists borrow. Great artists steal."
   Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Spanish artist

Questions for Discussion

- What is your definition of plagiarism? Can you give an example?
- Why is plagiarism taken seriously in the academic world?
- Why do you think students plagiarise? Is plagiarism just innocent laziness?
- Are words the only thing that can be plagiarised?
- Do you think access to the Internet makes plagiarism easier and more common? Why or why not?
- How do you avoid plagiarism in academic writing?

Unit 1

Exploring University Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism:
A Focus Group Study

> ## Learning Objectives
>
> **Upon completion of this unit, you will be able to**
> √ understand the organizational structure of a research paper;
> √ understand the academic writing style;
> √ understand the characteristics of a qualitative study.

Reading

Exploring University Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism: A Focus Group Study

Judith Gullifer & Graham A. Tyson
Charles Sturt University

Abstract

Plagiarism is perceived to be a growing problem and universities are being required to devote increasing time and resources to **combating** it. Theory and research in psychology show that a thorough understanding of an individual's view of an issue or problem is an essential requirement for a successful change of that person's attitude and behaviour. This pilot study explores students' perceptions of a number of issues relating to plagiarism in an Australian university. In the pilot study, focus groups were held with students across **discipline** areas, years and modes of study. A **thematic** analysis revealed six themes of perceptions of plagiarism: confusion, fear, perceived **sanctions**, perceived seriousness, academic consequences and resentment.

Keywords: academic integrity; plagiarism; student ethics; university students

Introduction

[1] Since the 1960s, and particularly in today's technologically advanced society, academic dishonesty (for example, cheating, **collusion** and plagiarism) continues to attract considerable attention from the media, academics, administrators and students (Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne 1997; Ashworth, Freewood, and Macdonald 2003; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead 1995; McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield 2001; Petress 2003). Plagiarism, a type of academic dishonesty, is often conceived as fraudulent behaviour that diminishes the intellectual property of the original author and rewards

plagiarists for their work. Indeed, Petress (2003) describes plagiarism as a "plague on our profession" (624) that, arguably, **obliterates** rewarding the ethic of hard work, eroding the moral value of honesty, whilst devaluing the role of assessment items within our educational establishments.

[2] This characterisation of plagiarism is partly due to its historical roots, positioning plagiarism within a legal **discourse**, suggesting that plagiarism refers to an act of theft of the individual ownership of intellectual work (Ashworth, Freewood, and Macdonald 2003; Stearns 1992; Sutherland-Smith 2005). This construction of plagiarism assumes that knowledge has a history and that past authors must be acknowledged. Without due acknowledgement, it has been argued that one severs the ties between the creator of the work and the creation (Stearns 1992). Indeed, Athanasou and Olasehinde (2002) **assert** that "The essence of cheating is fraud and deception"(2), arguably a simple and direct characterisation of plagiarism.

[3] At a broader social level, Marsden, Carroll, and Neil (2005) stress that the costs to the public through inadequately trained graduates could **pose** a threat to public safety, welfare and financial decisions through inaccurate advice, the **ramifications** of which **tarnish** universities' reputations and increase media scrutiny. Moreover, it has been suggested that academic dishonesty is growing, requiring universities to devote increasing time and resources to combat it (Carroll 2005a; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead 1995; James, McInnis, and Devlin 2002; Johnston 1991; O'Connor 2003; Park 2003). In particular, the **onus** is on the academic managing the subject to correctly identify plagiarism and refer the matter to appropriate university processes (Sutherland-Smith 2005).

[4] My (Gullifer's) experience of identifying and managing instances of plagiarism occurred in the first semester of my appointment as an associate lecturer. Whilst the number of cases was low, I felt an overwhelming sense of disappointment and frustration. Two issues were evident. Firstly, investigating an **allegation** of plagiarism requires time and effort that can take a few hours of work to locate the original sources and cross-reference with the student assignment, and longer to process the allegation and any **subsequent** misconduct **panel** and/or appeals. Secondly, and more importantly, good academic writing is **contingent on** developing sound skills in both research and writing, critically reading and comprehending appropriate sources, careful note-taking, paraphrasing, **judicious** use of quotations and **giving credit to** authors for their ideas and writing (Burton 2007). As a consequence of plagiarism, students deny themselves an opportunity to master these skills, making academic writing increasingly difficult as they progress through their degree.

[5] As psychologists, we are aware that, when attempting to modify people's attitudes

or behaviours, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the target person's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the issue. In therapeutic situations, for instance, it is regarded as essential to obtain the client's perception and understanding of the issue or problem before **commencing** therapy. This insight is likely to influence the individual's responsiveness to different therapeutic approaches (Cochran and Cochran 2005; Egan 2007; Kanfer and Schefft 1988; Prochaska and Norcross 2007). Similarly, when exploring attitudes and beliefs towards plagiarism, we can apply the same principles to gain a better understanding of student perceptions, and then develop appropriate strategies with an increased probability of effectiveness.

[6] Likewise, literature from **forensic** psychology suggests that having some understanding of an offender's perspective and motivation is important in order for positive change to occur, and recidivism to decrease. For example, Byrne and Trew (2005) argue, "to be effective, **interventions** that aim to reduce or prevent offending behaviour need to be based on a sound understanding of what leads people to offend, and what leads people to stop offending" (185). Comparable sentiments are expressed by Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne (1997) in relation to plagiarism. They argue that "understanding the student perspective on...plagiarism can significantly assist academics in their efforts to communicate appropriate norms" (187).

[7] From this, we argue that there is merit in understanding students' perspectives regarding plagiarism in order to develop successful strategies to promote academic integrity and thereby prevent plagiarism. McCabe and Trevino (1993) identified a significant relationship between academic dishonesty and how students perceived both student and faculty understanding of institutional policy. Higher levels of dishonesty were associated with lower levels of understanding. Another study by Roi (1997) clearly demonstrated that more than half of the students in their study could not identify clear examples of plagiarism, indicating that, whilst policy may exist, students have little knowledge or understanding of it.

[8] It is apparent, therefore, that universities can benefit from learning about their own students' perceptions of plagiarism in order to develop appropriate strategies to promote academic integrity. **In light of** this, the aim of our research program is to systematically examine students' understandings of, and attitudes towards, plagiarism, with the intention of informing the institution on approaches that might promote a greater awareness of plagiarism and, therefore, prevent its occurrence. This study is exploratory in nature and will form part of a larger investigation.

Literature Review

[9] There is abundant literature on academic misconduct, most of which has been

published during the last two decades. The literature on plagiarism offers many different reasons for student plagiarism. These include, but are not limited to, time to complete tasks (poor time management), perceived disjuncture between award (grade) and effort required, too much work to complete over too many subjects, pressure to do well, perceptions that students will not get caught, **anomie**, motivation, and individual factors (age, grade point average, gender, personality type) (Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield 1998; Anderman and Midgley 1997; Calabrese and Cochran 1990; Caruana, Ramaseshan, and Ewing 2000; Davis, Grover, and Becker 1992; Kibler 1993; Love and Simmons 1998; Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, and Armstead 1996; Park 2003; Perry et al. 1990; Roig and Caso 2005; Sheard, Carbone, and Dick 2003; Whitley 1998). These studies tend to focus on individual student characteristics.

[10] Focusing on individual student characteristics can be problematic, as the emphasis is then placed on the individual behaviour change process, with little attention to socio-cultural and physical environmental influences on behaviour. McCabe and Trevino (1997) examined both individual characteristics and contextual influences on academic dishonesty. Their results **indicated** that decision-making relating to academic dishonest behaviour is not only influenced by individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender and grade point average), but also contextual influences (e.g. the level of cheating among peers, peer disapproval of cheating, membership of societies for male and female students, and the perceived severity of penalties for cheating). Therefore, to better understand student perceptions of plagiarism, we need to **take into account** not only individual student characteristics but also broader contextual factors.

[11] Only a few studies have been conducted to explore students' perceptions of plagiarism, and these tend to focus on the reasons why students **plagiarise** (Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne 1997; Devlin and Gray 2007; Marsden, Carroll, and Neill 2005), or **utilise** attitude scales that are developed with the assumption that all relevant stakeholders share the same meaning frame of how plagiarism is understood (Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke 2005; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead 1995; Hasen and Huppert 2005; Lim and See 2001). The assumption that the term "plagiarism" has shared meaning is due to the institution's reliance on university policy to be an instrument to both define what plagiarism is and the possible consequences if **breached**.

[12] It has been argued, therefore, that having a good understanding of institutional policy reduces the risk of engaging in plagiarism. Jordan (2001) found that students classified as non-cheaters reported a greater understanding of institutional policy than cheaters did. The apparent lack of knowledge of institutional policy is further compounded by contradictory and often **ambiguous** information delivered by academic staff, as they also struggle to enforce an accepted and clear definition of plagiarism

(McCabe, Butterfield, and Trevino 2003). For instance, in a study conducted by Burke (1997), over half of the academics surveyed not only reported a lack of familiarity with the university's policy on plagiarism, but also did not refer to the policy when dealing with incidents. As Carroll (2005a) suggests, it is this lack of clarity about plagiarism that influences how students perceive plagiarism.

[13]   In order to both understand how students perceive plagiarism, and develop and evaluate learning materials aimed at educating students about plagiarism, Breen and Maassen (2005) conducted a two-phase research project, that firstly explored student perceptions of plagiarism and then developed learning materials to be **embedded** within courses. This was done by utilising four focus groups, consisting of 13 under-graduate psychology students across the first, second and third years. Their findings suggest that, apart from a clear understanding of **verbatim** use of other people's work without referencing, students had difficulty comprehending "grey" areas (e.g. ability to comprehend and paraphrase work with due citation). The lack of familiarity with what required citation was, in part, due to the inability to source adequate information regarding the subtlety of paraphrasing, inconsistency between staff and the fear of **inadvertent** plagiarism. They also found that students reported an increasing under-standing of plagiarism as a function of year level, with the associate skill development to complete assignments. Students also made suggestions for course improvement to focus on **proactive** strategies, **as opposed to** the reactive nature of dealing with plagiarism once discovered.

[14]   Whilst Breen and Maassen (2005) aimed to explore students' understanding of plagiarism, their main focus was to develop resource material to embed within their courses. Consequently, only a small sample pool of 13 psychology students was utilised, and questions centred specifically on students' ability to define and avoid plagiarism. Though Breen and Maassen were able to **elicit** some understanding of student perceptions, based on how students define plagiarism and then avoid it, the current study aims to extend and build upon their work. It is proposed in this study to sample across disciplines and **delve** deeper **into** student understandings of plagiarism.

[15]   McCabe and Trevino (1993) argued for a shift in our conceptualisation and examination of plagiarism, from one focused on individual factors that may inform an individual's **propensity** to plagiarise, to one of examining situational or contextual variables that can be utilised towards an integrated institutional response. Despite this **exhortation**, relatively little systematic research has been done on the topic of under-standing student perceptions of what plagiarism is, and most has been conducted in the USA or the UK. The aim of the present study is to develop a better understanding of how students construct plagiarism by using group discussions to explore the range of

opinions regarding students' perceptions of plagiarism.

Methods

Design

[16] This is a focus group study, where our aim was to collect **qualitative** data by engaging groups of students in an informal group discussion "focused" on their perceptions of plagiarism. Our study aimed to place students (who are **typically aware of** the rhetoric surrounding plagiarism) in the position of experts, whose knowledge and experience is essential to advance the theoretical discussion on student perceptions of plagiarism. It was intended, as suggested by Madriz (2000), that the interaction among group participants would reduce the interaction between the **moderator** and the individual members of the group. In this way, the role of the moderator was to actively **facilitate** discussion among the participants, by encouraging students to discuss their views with each other as opposed to directing them to the facilitator.

Participants

[17] The participants were students **recruited** from a regional Australian university. A total of 41 students (25 women and 16 men), who were either in their first or third year of study, took part across seven focus groups. Each focus group was **homogeneous** with regard to discipline and year, as issues **pertinent** to understanding plagiarism may be discipline or faculty specific (e.g. referencing formats and emphasis placed on plagiarism), and would therefore have impact on how students perceive plagiarism. The participants brought a rich variety of backgrounds to the discussions and represented four different discipline areas of psychology, policing, public relations and advertising. Wilkinson (2008) states that a focus group can involve as few as two or as many as a dozen participants, with the norm being between four and eight. The composition of each focus group is illustrated in Table 1.

Materials

[18] An interview schedule was developed to provide an overall direction for the discussion. The schedule followed a semi-structured, open-ended format to enable the participants to set their own agenda (Wilkinson 2008). Each focus group was asked the following questions:

(1) What is plagiarism?

(2) What are the causes of plagiarism?

(3) How common is plagiarism?

(4) How serious is plagiarism?

(5) What are the chances of being caught?

[19]   The guide provided moderators with topics and issues to be covered at some point during the group discussion. Questions that were more important to the research agenda were presented early in the session.

Table 1   Focus group participants

Focus group	Participants	Year & discipline
Group 1 (pilot group)	3 students: 2 men, 1 woman (all mature age*)	1st year psychology students
Group 2	9 students: 8 women, 1 man (1 woman was a mature age student)	1st year psychology students
Group 3	8 students: 7 women, 1 man (mature age man).	1st year psychology students
Group 4	8 students: 6 men, 2 women (all mature age)	1st session police students
Group 5	7 students: 5 men, 2 women (all mature age)	1st session police students
Group 6	3 students: 2 women, 1 man (no mature age students)	3rd year public relations students
Group 7	3 women students (no mature age students)	3rd year advertising students

*Mature age refers to students who enrol at university and are over 21 years of age.

Procedure

[20]   Following ethics committee approval, piloting the interview schedule occurred with Group 1. Following guidelines by Wilkinson (2008), our aim was to explore if the schedule was likely to engage the students in discussion, and whether the questions themselves flowed logically and allowed for a variety of viewpoints. We felt satisfied that students were engaged with the structure of the interview schedule, and were quite willing to openly discuss issues **deemed** relevant to them. Consequently, only minor changes were made to the wording of some of the questions so that they were more open and less ambiguous.

[21]   Potential participants were initially sought by contacting the subject coordinators for **consent** to approach students during tutorial sessions. This was followed by a small presentation at the beginning of each class, or relayed by the subject coordinators. Interested students contacted the research assistant, who then organised a convenient