

## RESPONDING TO PLAGIARISM: GATEKEEPING OR BRIDGE BUILDING?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper uses narrative to explore responses to plagiarism by culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students. I conclude that academic integrity involves much more than the (Western) educator acting as a gatekeeper to knowledge and its construction. Rather, it is a lifelong-learning process involving mutual exchange and a commitment by all parties to ethical conduct.

### INTRODUCTION

Educators of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students have a responsibility to demonstrate respect, sensitivity and cross-cultural awareness as they work with students in the new academic environment. At the same time, they have a duty to maintain the standards of Australian higher education. As the issue of *soft marking*, particularly in relation to plagiarism by international students, has recently gained centre stage in the media (Giglio, 2003, p. 23; Lane, 2003, p. 24; Spender, 2003, p. 36; Sinclair, 2003, p. 38; Illing, 2003, p. 31) and in the academy, this contradictory position has begun to be tentatively explored. An online forum, "Perspectives on Plagiarism" on the electronic journal EJ-TESL, sparked numerous responses from academics, varying from those with an educative approach to teaching Western academic conventions, to those who blame the higher education sector's low language-entry requirements, and those who advocate a more punitive approach (EJ-TESL, 2002).

The Centre for Study for Higher Education (CSHE, 2002) presents three aspects of plagiarism that need to be considered by academics and administrators pursuing potential academic misconduct. The first is the student's "intent to cheat", with "deliberately presenting the work of others as one's own" placed at the extreme, punishable end of a continuum. The second aspect is "the extent of plagiarism" with "downloaded essay handed in as own paraphrasing" again representing the extreme end of the continuum. The third consideration is the "possible responses to plagiarism" which involve the first two aspects, and take the form of either educative or punitive strategies. The report also refers to the "special case of group work" and warn that this type of project may place students at "particular risk of unintentional plagiarism" (p. 40). Based on my experience as

a lecturer of CALD students at an Australian university, I will use a narrative approach in this paper to explore these aspects of plagiarism.

### METHODOLOGY

"Teacher narrative" is an established practice in educational practitioner research, and is a useful approach for exploring the ethically vexing issue of plagiarism. Not only does plagiarism itself challenge Western notions of academic integrity and ethical practices, but investigating and reporting plagiarism raises complex ethical issues for the practitioner-researcher. Issues of confidentiality (of students, lecturing staff, and even teaching materials) assume centre stage, and it is almost impossible to write a traditional case-study analysis without breaching confidentiality in some way. The narrative approach frees the writer to explore the issue without identifying or incriminating stakeholders.

The following story is a fictive composite drawn from a number of real-life cases. Like Le Guin's 1985 science fiction novel, which sets out to blur factual reporting and storytelling, the facts of my story "seem to alter with an altered voice" (Le Guin, as cited in Bloom, 1998, p. 61), and this is because I am exploring my own sense of "academic schizophrenia" – the contradictory position of both striving to ensure the maintenance of Australian academic standards, while simultaneously being committed to a genuine intercultural relationship, based on mutual respect and exchange, with students.

Many researchers, such as Barone (1992); Reid, Kamler, Simpson, and McLean (1996); and Clandinin and Connelly (1998) regard teacher narratives as a vital research tool that allows the writer to adopt "an openly political stance" (Barone, 1992, p. 144). However, other

commentators observe that the narrative genre (particularly autobiographical narratives) confine the writer to creating victory narratives, with Convery (1999) suggesting that the narrator gains influence over her audience through disclosing personal, sensitive information. I will pay heed to these warnings, even as I embrace the philosophy of Neumann and Peterson who ask, “What will we learn if we view research as a personal and social phenomenon – as an experience within a researcher’s life?” (Neuman & Peterson, 1997, p. 3).

In attempting to integrate my research on plagiarism with my daily practices as a teacher of CALD students, I will follow Lyons’ and LaBoskey’s 2002 framework for narrative practices (2002, pp. 21-22). According to these authors, for narratives to be “exemplars of inquiry” they need to: be intentional reflective human actions, be socially and contextually situated, engage the writer in interrogating aspects of teaching and learning by “storying” the experience, affect the author’s “sense of self”, and involve the construction of meaning. Using this framework as a basis, the narrative approach in this paper combines a number of case studies involving students who have been accused of plagiarism and then proceeded through UniWestEd’s<sup>1</sup> formal academic misconduct process.

## TWO STORIES IN ONE

Eric<sup>1</sup> is a 20-year-old, 2<sup>nd</sup> year business undergraduate from Singapore. He was a student in my undergraduate course, ESL for Business<sup>1</sup> at the University of Western Education (UniWestEd)<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the semester I came to know Eric because of a number of situations that required my intervention. In the first instance, while handing back the first assignment to students in the whole-of-class lecture, he came forward and informed me that his assignment seemed to be missing. I checked my records and could not locate a mark. I apologised to Eric and asked him to bring a copy to my office as soon as possible so that I could mark it. He assured me that, in keeping with UniWestEd policy, he had kept a copy and this would be no problem.

<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the author, the names of people, courses and institutions referred to in this paper have been fictionalized.

Two weeks passed, and I realised that Eric had neither re-submitted the assignment, nor attended his weekly tutorials. I sent a reminder email but did not hear back from him. By now the next assignment (a short research essay) was almost due and I was beginning to doubt Eric’s integrity. I encountered him in the corridor and expressly asked why he hadn’t dropped off the missing assignment. With downcast eyes, he said that he had forgotten and would get the assignment to me the next day. Somewhat to my surprise, I received the assignment and it was of a reasonable quality. Unlike many other students in the course, Eric clearly had a good command of English and an understanding of UniWestEd requirements in terms of presentation and layout.

The following week Eric sent me an email requesting an extension on the research essay. His excuse was that he had a number of assignments due at the same time and had not been managing his time well. Despite my earlier reservations about Eric’s honesty, I followed my usual policy of permitting an extension and of providing advice on how to avoid this situation in the future. When the essay did finally come in, it was quite good. A clear argument had been developed and appropriately referenced. This paper received a mark of 70% (i.e., Credit +).

For the final assessment, students were required to collaborate on an accounting topic, present the case to the class, and then submit an individually-written report. The early collaboration and presentation was designed to provide support to those students without an accounting background. However, as the main focus of the course is to facilitate improvement in written English, each student was required to take full responsibility for his or her written report.

## Unclear guidelines for group work create the potential for plagiarism

This approach had actually caused some confusion the semester before, with one group of students submitting identical reports. They had assumed that they would be responsible for one section each in the report, just as they had done in the oral presentation. In my opinion it was an understandable mistake to make. However, after seeking advice from senior staff, I was instructed to follow UniWestEd policy and

proceed to a formal academic misconduct inquiry.

At the inquiry I found myself in the invidious position of a being both accuser and advocate for the students. I was pleased when the panel agreed with my assessment that the students had not intended to plagiarise. However, this led one colleague to comment afterwards that, clearly, I had a very “soft” attitude towards plagiarism.

### **Making assessment expectations clear**

As a result of this incident, I was particularly careful to explain the nature of the written report in the semester in which Eric was taking the course. Full guidelines were provided in the course outline, online, and in the lectures, and I was pleased to find that each group submitted individually-written reports. The standard of the oral presentations was exceptionally high, with Eric’s group evidently committing many hours to practice and rehearsal. They achieved a mark of 85% (High Distinction).

Marking of the final reports was divided between a number of staff and it was only by chance that I found myself marking Eric’s paper. Within moments, I recognised the report as identical to the one submitted the semester before by the group who had confused the instructions. I retrieved the filed copy and it was a perfect match. I was flabbergasted. Eric had demonstrated satisfactory performance in every assignment submitted during the semester. He didn’t have a problem with English, and as this report was the result of group discussion rather than research there was absolutely no reason why he would need to plagiarise from sources or copy anyone else’s work.

### **Following UniWestEd policy**

I immediately called him to arrange a meeting. I also called the three students from the semester before and asked them to see me. Following UniWestEd policy, all the students were informed that we would be discussing potential plagiarism and that they could bring along a support person. I also arranged for a senior staff member to be present. As it turned out, the three students met with me first, and all seemed genuinely surprised and confused as to how Eric’s report was identical to theirs. None of them even knew Eric. They repeatedly assured me that they had not given or sold their report to

anyone. I believed them, but it just didn’t make sense.

When Eric came to see me, he also seemed confused. What was the problem? He had not copied from books or the Internet. When I asked him what material he had used as the basis of the report, he responded, “Our group discussions”. After a long and torturous conversation, I finally produced the copied report and informed Eric that he and the other three students would have to attend an “Academic Misconduct” meeting, as I had been unable to determine how it was that the reports were the same. At this point, for the first time, Eric seemed contrite. He was very concerned that the other three students did not get into trouble. He finally admitted what had happened.

Last semester, with a number of courses listed as “Incomplete” or “Fail” on his academic transcript, he had decided to enrol in “ESL for Business” the next semester, even though it was clearly designated as a 1<sup>st</sup> year subject. Coinciding with this decision, he had inadvertently come across a report written for this subject in the rubbish bins in the computer barns. It was clearly of a very high standard, so he kept the report on file, just in case the assignment topic had not changed the following semester. When he found that the topic was the same he decided to submit the report, counting on the odds that whoever had done the marking last semester would be unlikely to remember a specific report, and even if they did, would be unable to prove anything. For him, it was the worst sort of luck that I had kept a copy of the report on file.

### **Confronting my own misconceptions**

It was difficult for me to listen to this explanation without getting agitated. More than the outright cheating, I was upset that Eric had chosen this route to good grades when he had already demonstrated his own ability to do it the honest way. Having identified plagiarism on numerous occasions before, I had come to the conclusion that most students resorted to plagiarism because they either lacked the language and/or academic skills, or because they had over-committed themselves to other activities such as paid work (this conclusion is supported by the work of researchers such as Zobel and Hamilton, 2002; and CSHE, 2002). I had never encountered a high-achieving student such as Eric who seemed to have made a

conscious decision to cheat. However, Marsden's (2001, p. 29) research suggests that, in every way other than the discipline area, Eric (male under 25, enrolled full-time in a first-year course, with high grade-orientation but low learning-orientation) fits the "cheat" profile.

Although I am usually empathetic towards CALD students accused of plagiarism – largely because the construction of knowledge is so culturally specific (see Pennycook, 1996) and many students come to UniWestEd not having had a full induction to Western approaches including the attribution of sources in scholarly work (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997) – in this case, I felt like my heart had turned to stone. Eric's behaviour was simply beyond my understanding, given the focus in the course on developing academic skills such as note-taking, summarising, paraphrasing and referencing, as well as very explicit details about UniWestEd's policy on plagiarism. When I asked Eric to explain his actions, he could only say that he did not believe his own work was of a high enough standard. He further explained that he needed to "get the maximum mark possible" in this course to push up his grade point average.

I informed Eric that the matter was now out my hands and that I would be notifying the Head of Faculty of our meeting, and that Eric would be invited to attend a formal inquiry in the near future. For the first time in my teaching career I felt no ambivalence about pursuing UniWestEd's policy. I believed that cultural and language issues were not at stake here, but that a fundamental breach of academic integrity had occurred.

Again, I found myself on a panel with the colleague who had viewed my approach to dealing with plagiarism as "soft". This time, rather than advocate for the students, I maintained a very clear position that the maximum penalty allowed by UniWestEd policy should be applied. Eric said little during the meeting, and the committee unanimously agreed to a 12-month suspension.

### **Making sense of the stories: Reflection, interrogation and revision**

In the case of the three students who confused the group-work instructions, the CSHE (2002) report appears to concur with the outcome determined by UniWestEd ("focus on education rather than punishment" p. 43). Just as the

report suggests, group work does require special consideration because students, both local and international, are "often uncertain about where co-operation and collaboration stops, or should stop, and where copying begins" (p. 40). In addition, the CSHE suggested response of "penalise quickly and appropriately" applied to Eric where there had been "entirely deliberate, extreme plagiarism".

My narrative seems to have ignored Convery's warning not to write a "transformative epiphany" (1999, p. 134); I have written myself as the hero of a plot that could be easily resolved through my own ethical and scholarly efforts. The story as I've written it seems so simple, and the application of CSHE's "plagiarism continuums" easily applied. The narrative suggests a confidence in identifying and responding to plagiarism (in all its various guises) that did not and does not exist in practice.

What *really* happened involved two semesters of distress for everyone involved. The three students who had to face the academic misconduct inquiry stood outside the meeting room, wringing their hands, crying and imploring me to advocate for them. I did so, nervous that I might have been wrong, and that my colleagues would lose respect for me. When the students were finally absolved of any wrong doing, they hugged and cried and thanked me – but could never look me in the eye again. To have to call them the following semester regarding Eric's copied paper was a gut-wrenching experience, as I could hear each of them on the other end of the phone gasp with fear and disbelief. Worst of all, when Eric submitted the copied paper, I began to doubt the honesty of the three students and my own judgement all over again.

While my story states that Eric "said little" during the meeting, I have failed to share the numerous emails and meetings with Eric, where he begged me not to pursue the matter. I have not recounted what it really means for a teacher (and her relationship with her students) when her "heart has turned to stone". Why does this particular form of plagiarism have the capacity to stir such strong, and often dogmatic, emotions? Who did I become when I continued to refuse Eric's plea for leniency? How will this affect my dealings with students in the future? Am I the right person to be teaching CALD students? Each of these questions remains

unanswered, and at times, in managing other academic issues, I get a glimpse of the hard-hearted woman who Eric will remember, probably with some bitterness, well into the future.

I have not mentioned the fact that in being suspended from study for a year, Eric had to return to Singapore and face both his parents and potential unemployment. I have failed to acknowledge the huge emotional work of dealing with a student who, despite having the skills and attributes necessary to succeed, is under so much pressure to do well that he would choose to cheat rather than trust his own abilities. Little mention has been made of the many sleepless nights I have endured over the last few years, wondering which is the best course of action. Should I take the educative or punitive approach? As Briggs (2003) has noted, "...the rush to condemn acts of plagiarism risks riding roughshod over a problem that may turn out to be far more complex – behaviourally, ethically, conceptually, and even linguistically – than has been previously granted" (p. 19).

### **Whose learning?**

It seems to me that in identifying and responding to plagiarism, it is the academic who learns the most. Obviously, for those honest students who have committed inadvertent plagiarism, the educative process (in a supportive environment) will ensure that they do not make the same mistake in the future. However, for those students who view dishonesty, plagiarism, and cheating as part of the academic tool kit, it is difficult to see how they will "learn" through either the educative or punitive approach.

On the other hand, in making a commitment to identify and appropriately respond to plagiarism, my own practice has become more reflective, self-critical, and open to engagement with a range of approaches not necessarily provided in the standard UniWestEd policy. Throughout this (often heartbreaking) process I have learned to change assessments each semester, make instructions explicit, follow up misunderstandings, keep copies of any suspicious or unusual assignments, maintain close relationships with students, and to keep in contact with other lecturers. I no longer view academic integrity as a "yes" or "no" proposition.

Not all plagiarism is a "crime" which must be punished, and neither is all plagiarism a cultural misunderstanding for which allowances must be made. I have learned to treat every case individually, to follow policy, but trust to my own judgement too. I have grown as a teacher/lecturer/facilitator/educator to the point that I am not intimidated by colleagues' judgements, although I have learned the value of always seeking advice from those whose opinion I respect. There is certainly a difference between misunderstandings and cheating, and there will always be some people, regardless of cultural or linguistic background, who are dishonest.

### **CONCLUSION: Constructing the future**

By using Lyon's and LaBoskey's (2002) framework I have attempted to write a teacher narrative which is reflective, situated, interrogative, re-visioning (of myself), and constructive. This approach has provided me with a means of exploring my own contradictory position as both advocate for and accuser of students who have plagiarised in their academic work. This position is made doubly difficult by my role as an ESL (English as a second language) teacher of culturally and linguistically diverse students - many of whom come to UniWestEd with little or no experience of Western notions of knowledge construction. In considering how students might learn about plagiarism and how to avoid it, I have come to the conclusion that this process is more enlightening for academic staff than for students.

I have started to see that academic integrity involves much more than acting as a judge or gatekeeper of academic standards. For me, academic integrity is a lifelong learning process predicated on a dual commitment to cross-cultural understanding and to my own cultural values as they relate to knowledge and learning. If Australian universities are to continue marketing their education services to full-fee paying international students, there will need to be a commitment at every level of the higher-education sector to engage with the complex issues of language, culture, and learning backgrounds. Policies will need to demonstrate a degree of respectful flexibility while simultaneously sending a clear message to dishonest people, both local and international, that knowledge is something to create rather than steal.

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## AUTHENTIC INVOLVEMENT: PREPARING PRESERVICE TEACHERS FOR LEADERSHIP ROLES IN CHANGING TIMES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of preservice teachers' reflections after completion of professional-practice learning experiences in environments characterised by diversity and complexity. Findings support the value of these experiences in the development of new knowledge and leadership skills, increased cultural awareness, and enhanced professional identity.

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### INTRODUCTION

Ongoing concerns regarding the effectiveness of teacher education programs to prepare preservice teachers for future environments have provided the impetus for change to educational practices and approaches to learning, curricula, and pedagogy (Beare, 2001; Gale & Densmore, 2003).

New and flexible approaches are required to encourage the development of high levels of competence and to provide opportunities for the stimulation of innovative practices (Bourner, Katz, & Watson, 2000; Latchem & Hanna, 2001). The challenge is in creating learning environments that provide preservice teachers with opportunities to become autonomous learners who are able to think critically and be open-minded, and who have the capacity to be creative (Jackson, 2003). This is essential if