Steps Towards Solving the Problem of Plagiarism in Student Projects

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Introduction

It is only in the last twenty years or so that the states of the Arab Gulf Co-operation Council have taken steps to protect intellectual property, and have enacted and enforced copyright laws. The same period has seen an exponential growth in the provision of technical and university education in the Arab Gulf, and the development to the internet.

The Arab Gulf media regularly devote space to stories concerning the confiscation and destruction of bootleg CD's, DVD's audio cassettes and pirated versions of luxury goods, but from time to time, they tackle the wider issue of plagiarism. The *Khaleej Times* of May 22nd, 2003, carried an interesting reprint of a *Newsweek* article (Mnookin, 2003) focusing on the scandal of the *New York Times* reporter, Jayson Blair. Mr Blair resigned when it transpired that he had plagiarized an article from the *San Antonio News-Express*. In the *Khaleej Times,* the story was carried on page 13. On page 14 there was a shorter report stating that a freelance journalist had sold the *New York Post* an article plagiarized from the *National Enquirer*.

Academic Plagiarism

Plagiarism, of course, is not confined to New York newspapers. It is a growing problem in high school and universities in the United States, Europe, and anywhere else where students have easy access to the internet. Indeed, so great is the problem, that a web-search on Yahoo for "academic plagiarism" produced a total of 551,000 different sites. Much of the evidence, however, remains anecdotal, and to some extent, the cause of the problem frequently explains the high rate of detection. It is easy for students to download material from the internet, but if faculty consult a search engine and use exact phrases from a suspect paper, they can often be led straight back to the source.

This was my case when, in June 2001, I helped to assess a number of projects prepared by Arab Gulf students at a military technical college. This work has been described elsewhere (Wissing & Hepple, 2003), but despite the fact the regulations placed a total ban on plagiarism, it continued to occur. In one memorable instance, a student who was writing about Volkswagen cars produced the following:

> . . . orphaned among the ruins of Germany's post-war industrial wasteland, and rejected for adoption by the British, it became affectionately known as "the Beetle."

It is, of course, easy for teachers to become over-suspicious. There is a limit to the ways in which one can state simple facts like "Between 1945 and 1980, global production of Volkswagen cars totaled just over 20 million", but in my example, we have an extended metaphor based on the personification of an industrial product. It was written by a candidate who, at interview, appeared to believe that the Volkswagen had been designed by Adolf Hitler in the mid 1950's. It is a classic instance of project work being turned into "chunks of copying, without understanding" (Cornwall, quoted by Kavanagh, 2003, p. 10) and it is impossible that the words used are the candidate's own.

Even so, the problem of inadvertent borrowing remains, and there are instances where the plagiarism, though direct, is partially sanctioned. In the first of these cases, Cotterall and Cohen (2003) airily dismiss concerns that their teaching of "scaffolding" —the use of set phrases to support argument, particularly in academic essays—might lead to accusations of plagiarism. I wish I shared their confidence. The Armed Forces are accustomed to the use of formulaic phrasing in official correspondence, particularly in the writing of routine letters and signals. Academic writing is a different genre, and one that places a higher emphasis on originality. Any supervisor who reads a series of essays that all begin with the phrase "Before arguing that ...." and go on to urge "it is necessary to consider ...." will inevitably suspect collusion.

Nor am I alone in my concern on this point. As EFL teachers, we should never be complacent about any form of plagiarism, and it is interesting to note that the literature on this topic continues to grow. Hricko (1998) directly addresses the problem of internet plagiarism. Hyland (2001) in a paper entitled "Dealing With Plagiarism When Giving Feedback" accepts that it is happening, but suggests strategies to prevent repetition. Banfi (2003) raises the problem obliquely in a discussion of portfolio work.

Within the Arab Gulf, moreover, the problem of plagiarism has been a particular concern. It was raided by Buckton (2001) at the Excellence in Academic English conference, held at the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. The problem also received several mentions at the 2003 International TESOL Arabia Conference; indeed, given the conference theme—English Language Teaching in the IT Age—it could hardly be omitted. One plenary speaker (Oxford, 2003) pointed out that the internet has made it easy to steal both other people's music and other people's ideas. From Zayed University in Dubai, moreover, an ongoing collaboration between the English faculty and the academic librarians produced an updated presentation on information literacy and the associated problem of

plagiarism (Birks, Hunt, Madalios, Remondi, 2001) with practical suggestions to guide students safely through the web (Birks, Hung, Mandalios, 2003).

Reasons for Plagiarism

The problem, of course, does not occur in a vacuum. There are a number of causes, some of which may be ore excusable than others.

In the first place, there is laziness, though again there may sometimes be mitigating factors. McCourt (1999) tells the story of one of his New York high school students who was tasked with writing a children's story. Being at the center of a nasty divorce and custody battle, he took the easy way out, rewrite a Dr. Suess story, and was unmasked by a triumphant junior school child who identified the true author. The boy was wrong, but in this case we can sympathise somewhat with him.

Secondly, plagiarism may be an act of desperation. This is almost certainly the case with Jayson Blair, who is depicted as a man with a history of manic depression, drug abuse and alcoholism. Placed under impossible stress as a young reporter in the driven world of journalism, he was unable to cope, and resorted to manufacturing quotations, copying material, and using cell phone and laptops to give the impression that he was covering stories when he had never left the New York Times building.

Thirdly, students may plagiarise simply because they have run short of time. In this case, instructors can help with better mentoring, by giving time extensions, or, best of all, by helping students to plan their time more efficiently.

Fourthly, the plagiarism may actually become inadvertent, stemming from a student becoming over-reliant on published sources. I would suggest that this type of plagiarism has been endemic for years. As evidence of this, I cite an experience from my undergraduate years.

A week before the First Year Examinations, one particularly charismatic faculty member delivered a lecture on the poetry of Richard Crashaw. Unknown to his audience, he had also set a question about Crashaw in the year's Seventeenth Century Literature paper. In the examinations, several candidates answered that question, repeating large portions of the previous week's lecture, sometimes word for word.

In a school situation, their action might have actually gained them marks. At university level, it would have been accepted, if they had been capable of paraphrase, but in this situation they were asking a lecturer to give them credit for what was, effectively, his own work.

Finally, and this is probably the closest to the position of Arab Gulf students, many students plagiarise because they do not realize that what they are doing is wrong. They

may be naive, but in many cases there is no intention to "cheat". In Truffaut's 1959 film, Les Quatre Cent Coups, we sympathise when Antoine, trying his best, writes his own version of a famous short story by Balzac and is then humiliated by his French teacher. Antoine is a working class boy of twelve. Unlike Broadhead and Light, he has no knowledge of the academic prohibition placed on plagiarism, while his teacher responds as if his actions were "a moral issue rather than a cultural norm" (Nelson, 2003).

Birks, Hunt and Mandalios (2003) from Zayed University in the UAE give evidence of similar naivety. In one case, a student downloaded over twenty pages straight from the internet, some eight of which were written in French. Furthermore, when it was explained to one student that it was intellectually dishonest to use an essay that someone else had written, the young woman in question became extremely annoyed. "I'm not stealing", she protested. "I paid for this with my credit card."

The problem here is probably global in scope. In many cases, when we ask students to undertake project work, or even a piece of limited research, we are asking them to do something for which they are unprepared. There is an analogy here with Cameron's (2003) observations on Teaching English to Young Learners, "Children learning to read who are confronted with written instructions to a task have a huge decoding and sense-making job to do before they can begin work on the task itself." (p. 108).

Expatriate EFL teachers come from different educational backgrounds and they do not appreciate the "decoding and sense-making job" that confronts their students when faced with project work. The British National Curriculum urges the use of project work in primary schools, to give students the research skills that they will require at secondary level.

In many countries, even secondary school children receive little or no encouragement to become intellectually curious. "Language teaching. . . .is dominated by a traditional, top-down, textbook-orientated, teacher-led methodology" (Daoud & Al-Hazmi, 2003, p. 335). Students are required to learn what is in their textbooks, and repeat it, to order, in the examinations at the end of each semester. Short-term memory is both encouraged and rewarded. The amazingly high marks achieved in the final secondary school examinations tell their own story. It is impossible for candidates to score 99.5% and above if they are being marked on a subjective or qualitative basis. It is only when candidates are required to present answers that satisfy discrete criteria that these scores can be achieved.

Steps to Action

What follows are ideas influenced, in part, by Cohen and Miller's (2003) course in academic writing. In the intermediate level book they offer supplementary materials

that include opportunities for internet research. I would suggest, however, that these opportunities are equally applicable to print sources.

What is interesting about Cohen and Miller's suggestions is that they are open-ended. Instead of offering easily downloaded concepts like Volkswagen cars, the internal combustion engine etc. they call on students to judge, to evaluate, to compare and contrast. These are high-level skills in Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, but they are easily within our students' capability, and they are skills that ought to be encouraged in future engineering technicians.

Step One - Setting a Topic

To begin with, therefore, we should ensure that the topics chosen for student projects exclude information that can be easily referenced or downloaded. Topics should require students to digest information, not regurgitate it to order. For example, students could be given the opportunity to compare and contrast two high performance sports cars, weighing the prestige of the marque against cost, performance, fuel consumption and the availability of spare parts.

Alternatively, students could be given topics that have no "right" answer. Which alternative source of power would be the most beneficial to the Arab Gulf in the 21 Century? Solar power, wave power and wind power all have compelling favourable arguments depending on whether the student lives in the desert, the mountains, or in a coastal region.

Step Two - Locating Resources

Once the topic has been chosen, students should be given positive help in locating resources and learning to select what is relevant from those sources.

There are two linked points here. Firstly, teachers in general, and EFL teachers in particular, are probably more book orientated than most members of even their own societies. To many native English speakers "book" equals what could be dismissed as a thriller, a romance or even a magazine. In general, teachers do not buy their reading matter principally at airports. Many people in Britain, however, buy only one book a year—"a book for the beach".

This problem extends to other countries. At the 1998 IATEFL SIG Symposium at Gdansk, the Heinemann ELT representative surprised her audience by revealing that research figures showing that 38% of Polish households had purchased no books at all in the previous year (Birkenmajer, 1998). This figure is frighteningly high for a country where parents are obliged to buy their children's schoolbooks; where bookshops are plentiful and well stocked; where the

population is almost universally literate and, at that time, was still celebrating the end of 40 years of Nazi/Communist censorship.

The Polish data give us some idea of the scale of the problem we face in less sophisticated societies. When people buy books, they are guided by an almost unconscious kinesthetic that has developed through years of experience. Choice of books depends on the mobilization of unspoken factors—the author; the title; the date of publication; the publisher; the cover; the quality of paper; the bibliography—all these must receive positive evaluation (or, at least, must not be rated negatively) before we will purchase or read.

Many of our students, however, do not have these skills. They may come from bookless homes, or homes where the only books are technical manuals, school texts, or theological works. They may have had limited access to library facilities. Such libraries as they have visited may be little more than rooms full of books, lacking order or presentation.

Step Three - Identifying Relevance

This is the second half of the link. If our students have problems with printed sources, how much more daunting is the task of internet research. On the internet, kinesthetic clues are absent. Anyone can produce a website, and many sites are effectively worthless; "there is hardly anything worth the name to control the quality of academic materials appearing on the Web" (Jayraman 2001, p. 61). Students need to be taught not only how to recognize authoritative print sources, but also how to avoid dependence on biased or misleading websites. "To create information literate adults, it is imperative that students.... Be exposed to a developmentally cohesive and sequential programme of information literacy skills." (Henri & Bonnano 1999, p. 243). It is not good enough to send them to the library and let them get on with it, nor is it good enough to put them on the net and let them surf. They must be taught how to evaluate websites for the source, credibility and timeliness of their information. (Wardschauer, p. 2000).

Step Four - Organisation and Presentation of Findings

Organisation and presentation of findings are again areas where our students require tutorial support, but they are not alone in this. The work on writing scientific articles (Bazerman 1988; Master 1981/1998), theses and dissertations (Dunleavy, 2003) all indicates that English native speakers also require assistance if they are to master the rhetorical conventions of the scientific and social science discourse communities.

Leki (1991/1994) urges the use of the process writing approach, whereby students are encouraged "to experiment with ideas through writing and then share their writing

with their classmates (1994, p. 174). This is an effective beginning. It allows students to sequence their writing, and develop control over "simple rhetorical frameworks . . . . the amplified definition, description of a mechanical part (or body part), description of a process, classification and abstract" (Master 1991/1998, p. 36). The process writing approach also encourages technical accuracy and gives writers a sense of audience.

Hawisher & Selfe (1998) indicate that word processing has already demonstrated that it can improve the quality of student writing, but that we must now attempt to assess how it affects the process of writing and the quality of the final written product. Obviously, spelling and grammar checks automatically eliminate a large number of technical errors, but Bortoluzzi (2003, p. 19) reports that her Italian students found that redrafting their work was also far less demanding "they willingly revised....several times because they didn't have to rewrite the text with each revision."

Under these circumstances, I would suggest that students engaged in project work should be encouraged to draft, write, redraft, revise and save all their work on computer files. These files would then serve a double function. They could be regarded as developmental portfolios, illustrating the writing process, but they could also be available for scrutiny by assessors.

At this stage in the writing process, moreover, students could be taught how to develop their writing by conforming to academic expectations. This particularly applies to the use of direct quotations, but students should also be taught Dunleavy's "Housekeeping issues"—how to list sources and compile a bibliography. At the same time, they should be taught how to follow Hawisher & Selfe's (2000, p. 15) "postmodern literary practices" and list the addresses of websites as an integral part of their bibliography.

Conclusion

What I am suggesting here is simple, but it is not easy. It requires teachers to meet their students and act as language advisors. They must help in the choice of a project topic, help develop a study plan, monitor progress, and generally keep the students on track. The students should be taught to follow a process of discovery, selection, evaluation, organization, and presentation, confident that this process is far more valuable than the final product.

We must be honest here. The projects produced by many students are not intended to be highly original scientific dissertations that extend the boundaries of knowledge. They are intended to show that their authors can synthesise existing information and that they can do so, as far as possible, in their own words.

If we can guide them through this process, and for many it will be a first-time experience, then we will have made a significant contribution to the development of their authorial voices, and a contribution that may be of lasting benefit in their future careers.

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Conference Announcements

Brigham Young University Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER). April 6-9, 2005. Conference entitled, "Business, Language, and Culture: Putting the Pieces Together," Park City, Utah, USA.

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) International Conference. May 19-21, 2005. "Language Assessment in a Multilingual Context: Attaining Standards, Sustaining Diversity," DBB Forum, Berlin, Germany.

8th MELTA Biennial International Conference, Malaysia. May 30-June 1, 2005. "English Language Education: Confronting Changing Realities" at Sheraton Subang Hotel & Towers, Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. E-mail: melta@tm.net.my. Available: http://www.melta.org.net

English Department of National Taiwan Normal University International Conference. June 4-5, 2005. "Teaching and Learning: ESL/EFL Teacher Education and Professional Development."

The 14th World Congress of Applied Linguistics hosted by the American Association for Applied Linguistics. July 24-29, 2005. Madison, Wisconsin, USA

5th Foreign Language and Technology Conference. August 5-10, 2005. "Uniting the World," jointly sponsored by the International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) and the Japan Association for Language Education and Technology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA.