Strategies for tackling plagiarism through assessment design

This guide aims to encourage and develop effective practice in the design of assessments that best allow students to demonstrate their achievement of expected learning outcomes without inadvertently providing opportunities for plagiarism, including discouraging the use of commissioning assessable work from outside sources.

It is important to note that Lancaster University operates a Plagiarism Framework. The framework clarifies Lancaster’s position on plagiarism, provides general guidance for the prevention and detection of plagiarism, and details the procedures for managing instances of plagiarism.

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism involves the unacknowledged use of someone else’s work and passing it off as if it were one’s own. This may occur for many reasons. For example, the University recognises that students may submit plagiarised work because of poorly developed study skills (e.g. inadequate paraphrasing), and that some students, particularly those from different cultures and educational systems, may find UK academic referencing/acknowledgement systems and conventions unfamiliar.

However, some students do plagiarise deliberately, sometimes because they are unable or unwilling to do the required work, and with the intent to deceive and gain academic benefit. This is a conscious, premeditated form of cheating and is regarded as a serious breach of the core values of the University and damaging to the reputation of the University and its programmes.

Issues of plagiarism in Higher Education have been of considerable concern across the sector in recent years, compounded by the rise in students’ use of commissioning to generate assessable work. (QAA, 2016; Newton, 2018).

Accompanying this sector-wide challenge is the complex task of actually detecting instances of plagiarism when it occurs, whether intentional or not. Despite the availability of text-matching software, this process still fundamentally relies on the person who is marking student work to have spotted the issues. Consequently, prevention is desirable.

Fortunately, research into plagiarism practices has led to the emergence of several strategies for preventing it in the first place. (Carroll, 2013; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Brown & Janssen, 2017; Medway et al, 2018) These ideas include the raising of awareness of expectations around academic integrity, supporting students to understand the benefits of good study practices in their learning, provision of study skills advice and guidance, and focusing on the design of assessment tasks.

Helpfully, these strategies propagate principles of effective assessment and feedback practice more generally, advocating approaches that place learning and development at the heart of assessment design.
Strategies for assessment design

Carroll (2013) has developed a series of strategies for designing assessment in such a way that makes it more difficult for students to choose, intentionally or unintentionally, the option of plagiarism. It is also a strategy for designing assessment for learning – what we understand as formative assessment. These strategies have been shared by Jude Carroll – with her permission – following her input into an Educational Development workshop held at Lancaster University in 2015.

Making an answer, not finding an answer

The idea of a ‘make, not find’ strategy is that through the design of the assessment task students are in some way required to create an answer for themselves. They would not be able to find the answer out by searching for it in secondary sources, and then regurgitating it for the purposes of the assessment task.

“Assessment that says to the student ‘You have to make this, you can't find it’, is actually saying to the student ‘You have to learn this’. Learning is about activity. It’s about doing. It’s not a spectator sport. You can't learn yourself by simply showing that you've found another learned person. So when you say to a student ‘here is an assessment task that you're going to have to make, you're going to have to construct’, you're saying to the student "learning is going to have to go on here" and I think that is quite a useful thing.”

Make, not find examples

- Giving each student individualised data, contexts, characteristics or situations.
- Requiring students to collect and include primary data (questionnaires, case histories, personal experiences / reflections etc).
- Setting a topic that is local, recent and/or specific. Avoiding topics that are well established or generic.
- Asking for a new or novel format or discourse style/ (e.g. A radio play, a patient information leaflet, a submission to a Parliamentary enquiry.)
- Asking for a new focus or point of view for a ‘tried and tested’ task. (Last year, we looked at xxxx’s impact on India. This year, Japan.)
- Specify inclusion and use/application of a specific theory, of a particular resource, of lecture material, or of an event.

Focus on process

A ‘focus on process’ is about structuring assessments so that progress and learning can be observed as it develops over time. This strategy is about finding ways to value stages of learning that contribute to an assessment task, and making those stages visible in some way.

“It is much harder to simulate, find, copy or steal a process than it is a product. There are many times where a focus on process is the best way to get students working on task. It is also possibly the most effective strategy for dealing with commissioning – paying someone to do the work for you. Plagiarism, copying, finding, faking, cheating is often a last minute decision because the student feels they have no other choice.”

Jude Carroll, Designing plagiarism out of assessment workshop, Lancaster University, 2015
Getting students started on task, and making the process valuable and visible, and getting them to develop work over time are crucial to a focus on process approach. This is particularly important if it’s high value work, if you don’t know your students very well, or where you are working primarily online.”

Jude Carroll, Designing plagiarism out of assessment workshop, Lancaster University, 2015

Focus on process examples

- Observe one or more stages of production of the assessment artefact.
- Require students to demonstrate activity at stages in the production process.
- Verify, do not assess that the stages were completed. (for example, ask for and sign an outline, first draft, literature review etc.)
- Peer review of an interim stage. (e.g. Peers look at and feedback on a draft.)
- In class demonstration of the assessment / students’ learning (for example, a debate, in class essay on an unknown topic from prior research, presentation.

Authentication

The principles of the authentication strategy is simply to devise mechanisms by which the teacher / marker can check who actually did the work. This might include requiring students to perform a task under observed conditions, but may also introduce approaches that check students’ comprehension of their own work.

Authentication examples

- Public use, discussion of the results of the assessment task (a presentation, students meeting clients, showcasing etc)
- Meta-writing task without giving a pre-warning, under observed conditions (e.g. ‘Write a summary of the three most significant points’. OR ‘Which sources were most useful and why?’)
- Meta-analysis task. (e.g. ‘What two things would make this better?’)
- Making a specified change (for example, in a computer programme) under observed and timed conditions.
- Viva / oral investigation of content or process – either conduct individual interviews with the whole group / cohort or interview a randomly selected subset.

“Authentication means checking who did the work. Asking ‘who did this?’ Sometimes authentication is really the best way to reduce plagiarism. If the strategy is getting students to think ‘will I get spotted if I cheat?’ at the outset, then they are less likely to do so.”

Jude Carroll, Designing plagiarism out of assessment workshop, Lancaster University, 2015
Reflective activity (c. 30 mins)

What does plagiarism mean to you? Do you have experience of it? Is it an issue for you in your subject area, and if so, why?

In this task you are encouraged to think deeply about assessment designs in your immediate context through the lens of plagiarism. The aim is to reflect on the robustness of assessment designs using the ideas in this short guide.

Consider Jude Carroll’s strategies for assessment design. Think about an example of assessment that you currently use in your own teaching practice, or elsewhere within the programme of study to which you contribute.

- To what extent has the method been designed in a way that satisfies any of the three strategies outlined?
- Consider ways in which assessment methods could be adapted to reduce the chances that students may plagiarise in their assessment work.

References


Simon Allan, Educational Development
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