

## **Plagiarism and attribution: an academic literacies approach?**

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### ***Abstract***

In many higher education courses in the UK, the ability to write extended academic prose is central to assessment and therefore to student success. One aspect of academic writing which students find a particular challenge, is incorporating the work and ideas of others, using appropriate attribution conventions. This can lead them to fall foul of their university's plagiarism policies. Advice on plagiarism often focuses on plagiaristic behaviour in the process of collection and use of sources or on the mechanics of referencing within the writing up of an assignment. This paper discusses a small-scale action-oriented study which explored international postgraduate students' understandings of, and questions about, plagiarism. It argues that a culturally sensitive approach to plagiarism education needs to take into account the role of linguistic strategies, rhetorical practices, disciplinary knowledge and epistemology in academic writing.

**Keywords:** international students; academic literacies; academic writing; writing development; plagiarism; referencing; learning development; academic skills development.

### ***Introduction***

With increasingly diverse student cohorts, the academy's implicit expectations and assumptions need to be understood and articulated. Attribution practices, central to academic writing, are an example of this. Attribution refers to the complex socio-linguistic practice (Chanock, 2008; McGowan, 2006) of using other written texts in the construction of one's own. This is distinct from referencing, used in this paper to refer to what has been called the mechanics of referencing and citation (Gourlay and Greig, 2007). It has been argued that efforts to familiarise students with attribution practices have been overshadowed by the increased emphasis on plagiarism detection (McGowan, 2006;

Magyar, 2009). Shifting the focus from detection to pedagogy creates opportunities for learning and even empowerment (Burns et al., 2010; Hendricks and Quinn, 2000; Klitgard, 2010).

The increase of international students studying in the UK has been accompanied by a perception that such students are the most likely to plagiarise (Hayes and Introna, 2005, p.213). These authors argue that this perception can undermine the ability of educators to '[respond] to issues of plagiarism among international students...in an ethical manner'. As a writing developer working with international students, my interest in attribution came out of witnessing the different perspectives that lecturers and students brought to a shared concern about plagiarism. Lecturers appeared worried about the threat the (perceived) rise in plagiarism posed to the integrity of the courses they taught, perceiving international students as most likely to plagiarise. International students, intimidated by the 'plagiarism' talks at the beginning of the year, were meanwhile tied up with anxieties about plagiarising. What seemed to be causing confusion was a lack of distinction being made between 'evidence of an intention to defraud' and 'inappropriate textual borrowing' (Abasi and Graves, 2008, p.221); in other words, between intentional and unintentional plagiarism.

Student anxieties seemed to rarely stem from a misunderstanding of plagiarism itself. Their questions and confusions, I would argue, indicated not a deficiency on their part but rather, the complexity of attribution practices in the context of extended written assignments. To understand these complexities as experienced by international students, a number of individual interviews and focus groups were conducted. Insights from the research were then used in designing a resource aimed at helping students to understand, and successfully use, attribution in their writing.

The key research questions were:

1. What does 'avoiding plagiarism' involve for students in the context of writing extended assignments?
2. What barriers do students face in implementing the plagiarism advice they receive? (in induction lectures or skills workshops, for example).
3. Does feedback regarding plagiarism that students receive in their assignments help them to avoid plagiarising in subsequent assignments?

The next section gives details of the methodology of the research and the participants. The findings are then presented and discussed thematically. To illustrate how research of this kind can inform the work of learning developers, a resource which was designed using these research insights is then described using as a framework the three approaches to student writing (study skills, socialisation and academic literacies) as elaborated by Lea and Street (1998). I conclude by arguing that in discussing plagiarism with students, the cultural, linguistic and epistemological dimensions of attribution need to be included and that such discussions are most effective when embedded within the teaching and learning of the academic content which students are studying.

### ***Methodology and participants***

Data collection for the study described in this paper (funded by a HEFCE teaching fellowship in 2008) and analysis of the data was informed by an academic literacies approach to writing. By 'academic literacies' I do not mean simply the 'acquisition of required linguistic, rhetorical or cognitive structures' (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.6) but I refer to a pedagogical approach and a field of enquiry 'with a specific epistemological and ideological stance' which asks 'what does it mean to participants to 'do' academic writing?' and 'what is involved and at stake in student writing' (Lillis and Scott, 2007, pp.7-9). Central to this field of inquiry are participants' perspectives on the processes and practices pertaining to academic writing, along with 'observation of the practices surrounding the production of texts' (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.11). Lillis and Scott argue that the field is therefore inherently ethnographic and in this sense, the study described in this paper adopted an ethnographic approach.

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited by distributing an information sheet in Masters programme seminars. Masters students were the focus for two reasons: firstly, because the proportion of international students is far more significant in postgraduate programmes; secondly, because the relative brevity of Masters programmes highlights the significant transition students have to make to an entirely different academic and institutional culture in such a short space of time. Participants were recruited from different countries, cultures

and disciplines (see Figure 1) more or less representative of the profile of the international Masters student body at University of East Anglia (UEA). For example, circa 70% of students studying International Development were international students in 2008 and Mexican students at UEA tend to choose International Development. Thus the study benefitted from both cultural and disciplinary diversity, reflecting some of the 'peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of the community' (Bartholomae, 1986, p.4) and how these peculiarities shape understandings about, and use of, attribution.

**Figure 1. Participants: countries and disciplines.**

Countries	China (4), France (1), India (1), Iraq (1), Japan (3), Jordan (1), Malaysia (2), Mexico (5), Poland (1), Portugal (1), Syria (1) Thailand (3)
Disciplines	American Studies (2), Biological Sciences (1), Business Studies (3), Computing (1), Economics (2), Education (2), Environmental Sciences (2), International Development (5), Law (1), Nursing and Midwifery (3), Social Work (2)

Not all international students were strictly speaking second language users of English, certainly in an academic context. The Malaysian and Indian students, for example, had been educated in English from secondary school onwards, and the student from Jordan had studied their first degree using English as a medium of instruction.

### ***Data collection***

To generate a range of student perspectives, I conducted 16 semi-structured individual interviews and three focus groups, two of which were cross-disciplinary and one where all participants were from the same discipline. As an example, the first group interview comprised students from International Development (Syria), Environmental Sciences (Portugal), Law (Malaysia) and Social work (India). Decisions about composition of focus

groups, and whether or not a participant was interviewed individually, were made for pragmatic rather than methodological reasons. For example, student availability and whether a student was happy to participate in a focus group. The focus groups (four students in each) and interviews took place between March and May 2008. They were conducted in parallel but in four cases, students who had participated in the focus groups were then interviewed individually. This provided an opportunity to follow-up and discuss in more depth issues they had raised in the group.

Focus groups can be an effective way of accessing the opinions and feelings of participants, as individuals respond to and are stimulated by each other (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998). The individual interviews provided a space to discuss in more depth the experiences and difficulties participants had encountered in writing assignments. The cross-disciplinary focus groups worked well in gaining insights into students' understandings. Participants shared their experiences and collaborated in articulating and reflecting on their difficulties with, and questions about, plagiarism. Participants knew what the general topic was, but the group controlled the direction of the discussion, with the researcher acting as facilitator (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

### ***Confidentiality and consent***

Participants were sent a consent form with information about confidentiality. This was particularly important given the anxieties students displayed regarding unintentional plagiarism. Further information about the interview itself was also given (see Figure 2) Students were then asked for oral consent to tape record the interviews and discussions.

**Figure 2. Info sheet for participants.**

*You do not need to 'prepare' anything for this discussion. I am simply interested in your experiences.*

*By 'your experiences', I mean:*

*Your thoughts about what plagiarism means.*

*Your opinion about the guides and advice that we provide to help you.*

*Your experience of avoiding plagiarism in written assignments.*

*Your strategies for developing your writing.*

*Your thoughts about the feedback you get.*

*What available resources you use and how you use them.*

**Data analysis**

Transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews were analysed to determine overarching themes and then were analysed a second time using these four emerging themes – language, rhetoric, epistemology and cultural practices.

**The findings: four dimensions of attribution**

Analysis of the data indicated that student concerns and perspectives about the complexities of attribution fell into four loose but nonetheless distinct categories: linguistic practices, rhetorical practices, epistemological issues and cultural practices and values. These are discussed in turn using quotes from the transcripts. Pseudonyms are used and countries have been left out for the sake of anonymity but the disciplines the students were studying have been kept. The discussion draws on research from the fields of second

language learning and student writing in higher education, as well as my experience as a learning developer in higher education.

### **Attribution as linguistic manipulation**

I thought plagiarism was nothing to do with me because I would not copy other people's work, because I respect ancient knowledge. I did not understand the plagiarism rules here. I did not understand that even if you reference, you are still plagiarising if your words are too close to the words in the text you are referencing.  
(Ayesha , studying Law)

If avoiding plagiarising was simply a matter of referencing, Ayesha had followed the rules as she understood them. She also understood the moral and ethical dimensions involved and was all the more upset when told she had plagiarised. Ayesha had attributed the text she used but she had not transformed it sufficiently. She had not, to reuse that ubiquitous and problematic piece of advice often given to students 'said it in [enough of] her own words' to make it different enough from the source text. In other words, the difficulty was with paraphrasing.

To some extent, the emphasis on paraphrasing in plagiarism education can be seen to privilege native speakers, since paraphrasing is predicated on having sufficient linguistic resources to manipulate language, and in the case of academic writing, generic academic and disciplinary specific uses of language. However, it creates tension for every student, as they mediate between relying on their existing linguistic resources and extending their repertoire as they learn the terminology of the discipline (Gourlay and Greig, 2007). Nuk, studying Nursing, explains her dilemma succinctly: 'my English vocabulary is simple and limited. If I use my own words, it will not be academic'. Thus for a writer to be able to take a chunk of language and transform it to fit the purposes of a particular piece of writing requires considerable linguistic resources, including familiarity with discipline-specific terminology and general vocabulary with specific meanings and uses within the discipline.

If one views language as a 'culturally shaped resource for making meaning' (Coffin at al., 2003, p.11) and writing as sets of practices which differ according to context and purpose, rather than a discreet and transferable skill, then university is a place where international

students can develop both their second language repertoire and their academic writing. Indeed, a legitimate language learning strategy (Swales and Feak, 2000) is viewed as students developing their writing by picking up generic academic phrases and language chunks and using them in their writing. In this sense, what has been referred to as 'patchwriting' (Pecorari, 2003) and Carroll (2006) calls 'plagiphrasing' can be seen as part of the developmental process of learning to write in an academic context.

### **Attribution as rhetorical practice**

Students attend courses to learn new ideas, and ways of thinking, and this involves language. However, linguistic proficiency is just one element of the business of transforming language. It cannot be done without both a conceptual understanding of the topic being discussed and an understanding of particular disciplines and their preferred rhetorical practices.

At Masters level, students may be familiar with the discipline to varying degrees and so their challenge may be one of translating their conceptual understanding into English. On the other hand, they may be quite unfamiliar with the discipline or come across concepts and ideas that have no equivalent in their own language. Being told that of course they don't have to find synonyms for 'technical' or 'disciplinary specific' words is not always helpful, especially if students are travelling across significant cultural, philosophical and epistemological distances. As one student put it 'I will have to put quotation marks around everything – it is all new to me' (Jing Ma, studying Education). Beyond the specific terminology of the discipline there are also the rhetorical devices and patterns preferred by different disciplines and academic contexts.

Another question is what to reference: 'So how do we know what to reference? Do we have to reference every sentence?'. I ran a workshop in which I trialled some discipline specific materials I had produced in collaboration with a lecturer from that discipline. Using a section of a research article, we had worked out which sentences needed and did not need referencing, and were able to justify the reasons why to our mutual satisfaction. However, when I asked a multi-disciplinary group of lecturers to do the activity, there was an uproar: 'it depends' I was told again and again. It depends on many things: the purpose of the text, the topic of the text, the audience, what has gone before and what comes after. And yet, what is clearly a complex textual practice (attribution) is often presented to

students as a matter of applying one or other among a number of citation styles (e.g. Harvard referencing).

### **Attribution and epistemology**

Attribution in academic writing is not only about acknowledging other people's work that one has used and knowing when to do so. It is also used to strengthen or lend authority to one's own arguments. In other words, other people's work becomes evidence for our own, and there is an assumption here that such work must be published (Canagarajah, 2002). Attributable knowledge is also often contrasted with 'common knowledge' (Magyar and Robinson-Pant, 2011) and with personal experience or practice. Questions about the status and value of different forms of evidence in specific disciplines can be seen as an epistemological issue.

Prior to coming to the UK, Nitya, a social worker, had been encouraged to use observation and her practitioner experience as primary sources for her writing, rather than relying on what could be seen as 'second hand' accounts. She considered herself a good writer who had enjoyed writing about her work:

My ideas have gone out the window...I feel bad about that. If a culture has taught you to be strong in something and then you come to a different country, you are told that it doesn't work like that and you have to deviate now and, get something that is already existing and back it up and then on top of that, you get nailed for plagiarising! So it's very disheartening for international students who want to do well.

Indeed, the emphasis on referencing can lead students to hear mixed messages concerning having one's own ideas:

I was told that you have to back up everything that you say so no original ideas. So I always struggle with the fact that, do I put in my point at all? If I have to back it up with references, maybe I won't find a reference. Maybe no one on earth has ever had that thought. But my professor says 'no, someone must have said it'. So that becomes a struggle. (Maria, studying International Development)

One student claimed that 'good' assignments on his course were ones where students had identified a number of good quotes and then built a text around them. He saw this as a mechanical exercise which undermined critical thinking:

If everyone is constantly saying you have to be critical and you have to have ideas and so on and then in an essay I cannot express those ideas, then what am I, a collecting machine of other people's ideas? I can't have a new idea? Why not?  
(Martin, Environmental Sciences)

### **Attribution as culturally situated practice**

At the heart of the notion of plagiarism is the view that ideas belong to someone and whoever first formulated the idea has to then be acknowledged in future texts. Layla, studying law, explains how acknowledgment works in a very different context, that of the Koran:

When we quote something from the Koran we acknowledge who said this, there is a chain of people who quote the thing. But the purpose is not in order to say the quote is from him but merely to see whether this person is reliable or not, whether we can trust him or not, not that this knowledge is from him. (Layla, School of Law)

This aspect of attribution as conferring authority and reliability works in a similar way in academic writing. It is in the notion of ownership that a very different perspective is brought to bear by this same student:

In my culture knowledge is for everybody. We share knowledge. Knowledge is from God. So 'this idea is mine, this idea is his' does not fit with our values. I understand that we have to acknowledge. God may give you knowledge and God may give others knowledge but you may simply be the first person to write it, to work on that idea. Others may have the knowledge but they haven't done anything about it. So you can't say the knowledge is yours or 'you have to quote me'. In this new context, for me if someone is using my work, I do not feel that they are taking my work. I feel glad that he is benefiting from something I did. I will get my reward from God.

Thus it can be seen that attribution is not a straightforward value-free academic convention involving referencing the work and ideas of others. Rather, it is a complex practice predicated on culturally and historically situated ideas about texts, knowledge and ownership (Pennycook, 1996). The process and practice of attribution is multi-dimensional. It involves linguistic strategies, namely paraphrasing and referencing, our ability to paraphrase and our ability to manipulate the language of in-text referencing. Rhetorical issues are involved such as knowing how to incorporate, build on and critique others' work. Disciplinary knowledge is needed, in other words, knowing what is 'general' knowledge and therefore does not need to be referenced. Attribution is also to some extent an epistemological practice, since it is about the value attributed to various potential sources of evidence in different disciplines. Attribution practices are predicated on ideas about the ownership of knowledge in general and the production of academic knowledge in particular. Furthermore, through attribution, particular relationships and roles are forged for and between individuals. Finally, mastering attribution practices involves developing an academic 'identity', finding or simulating an authoritative voice with which to critique others.

### ***From theory to practice: an academic literacies approach to learning about attribution?***

The three approaches to student writing outlined by Lea and Street (1998) (the skills approach, the socialisation approach and the academic literacies approach) have tended to be described in terms of their differences. Recently however, Lea and Street (2007) have emphasised the extent to which these can be seen as complementary approaches to writing pedagogy. In the context of plagiarism education, they can be seen as distinct approaches which each contribute to helping students attribute in their writing in accordance with the expectations of the academy.

The skills approach is based on a view of language as a transparent/autonomous system. Skills and behaviours are discrete and transferable and this can be seen in the generic games and quizzes presented to students to help clarify plagiaristic behaviours, as well as a focus on referencing as a decontextualised skill to be mastered. From an institutional point of view, and from the point of view of the learning developer, the benefits are that

materials can be developed and administered centrally, online or on paper, regardless of discipline.

The socialisation approach regards language as discourse and focuses on the genres and linguistic features that are used in particular contexts. It identifies differences in language use between disciplines and genres (e.g. research writing, reflective writing). Socialisation is associated with the notion of induction into the discipline, and with describing the conventions and rhetorical patterns of the genre (Hyland, 2004). The socialisation approach is particularly helpful to second language writers since it focuses on expanding a student's linguistic repertoire. In terms of attribution, this might involve drawing students' attention to the different ways of in-text referencing characteristic of the discipline. For example, scientific referencing tends not to make reference in the sentence itself to the writer or the research, whereas in social science, one is more likely to find the author or the study itself as part of the sentence. A socialisation approach will also pay attention to linguistic resources associated with specific disciplines, for example, whether and when to use 'argues that' or 'claims that' (Swales and Feak, 2000).

An academic literacies approach would view plagiarism and attribution in the context of textual and institutional practices. Implicit assumptions and conventions underpinning these practices would be made explicit. Attention might be paid to associated practices, such as notemaking and reading (for example, Burns et al., 2010, in Issue 2 of this journal). Academic writing involves 'learning not only to communicate in particular ways, but...learning to 'be' particular kinds of people, thus emphasizing writing as involving personal and social identity' (Coffin et al., 2003, p.10). Therefore, a strong element of discussion and reflection are likely to feature. Care will be taken to highlight the contested and provisional nature of academic conventions. Students might be invited to question why we reference and to explore in depth how it works in specific disciplines, making the connection between language and the epistemology of the discipline.

I will now describe a discipline-specific online resource bearing in mind the four dimensions of attribution discussed above and the academic literacies approach to developing academic writing. Firstly, despite making a careful distinction in this paper between 'referencing' and 'attribution', in designing the resource, I chose to use 'referencing' as a short hand for attribution. Students instantly recognise the term 'referencing'. Using 'attribution' would potentially create confusion, alienating students and

leading to the resource not being used. Lecturers were found in three departments (Business, International Development, and Nursing and Midwifery), who were interested in collaborating to create a resource. They provided the disciplinary texts, student assignments and comments for the activities. They also reviewed the final storyboard in the light of the aims and learning outcomes of their course and their perspective as disciplinary 'insiders'.

To create a dialogue around the assumptions underpinning attribution, the first activity lists reasons why both academics and students might reference and invites students to comment on them. Students use a 'drag and drop' feature which gives them instant feedback and provides further comments on how this applies to their particular discipline (see Appendix 1).

Since attention to the technicalities of referencing does not help students in working out when and what to reference (Chanock, 2008; McGowan, 2006), in the second activity students are given a paragraph from a well-used discipline-specific text from which the references have been removed. Students are asked to identify which sentences need referencing. Guidelines are provided to help students decide when referencing is necessary or appropriate, drawing on discipline-specific attribution practices and the learning outcomes of the department the tutorial is designed for. After each answer, the feedback provided underlines the fact that there are no hard and fast rules (see Appendix 2).

The focus of the third activity is paraphrasing. Using an extract from a core course specific text, a number of alternative paraphrases are provided. Students have to decide whether the paraphrase is okay or not. The feedback underlines that there are a number of possibilities, depending upon the assignment, and illustrates different ways in which a text might be used, from close paraphrasing to a brief reference to the key idea (see Appendix 3).

Lastly, to provide structured practice in integrating the work of others in one's own writing, students paraphrase an extract from a core text. The feedback comprises possible paraphrases which students can then compare theirs with. This was more difficult in a virtual environment where individual feedback is not provided.

The question remains as to the extent to which the resource created goes beyond a normalising (albeit more nuanced) model of socialisation. As Lea asks (2004, p.745) in relation to designing an online course based on an 'academic literacies' model, 'how do designers provide pedagogic spaces for exploration of all the different and contrasting textual practices that are involved?'. Time constraint is a primary, but not sole, factor. A resource that is time consuming is unlikely to be used and students have assignment deadlines to meet. They also work with their own meanings and towards their own goal. Moreover, with a resource which does not accommodate two-way discussion it is difficult to convey complexity whilst meeting the student's need for certainties.

Nonetheless, it is hoped that these discipline-specific tutorials will contribute, alongside other more generic resources, to plagiarism education and to supporting international students in particular who may be less familiar with (UK) higher education practices. However, despite the flexibility and possibilities of virtual learning, I believe face-to-face subject seminars still provide a unique space within which to explore the relationship between attribution, writing, the construction of knowledge and the epistemologies of particular disciplines.

## ***Conclusion***

The study discussed in this paper set out to understand how international Masters students negotiate and grapple with attribution, given the central role of extended pieces of writing in assessment, which require the use and attribution of other texts. The challenges of attribution faced by international students were found to be only partly language-based; nor were they solely attributable to cultural difference. It can be argued that the questions and views of students quoted in this paper identify issues of relevance and importance to all learners and teachers in higher education. They also point to some of the 'practices of mystery' (Lillis, 1999) that are unwittingly maintained in higher education, which can undermine student participation and confidence. The study shows that listening to the perspectives of international students, who inhabit what has been called a 'transnational space' (Rizvi, 2010), helps us as learning developers in thinking critically about UK academic practices. I hope the resources described contribute to demystifying attribution, thereby helping students to participate in the practices of their discipline.

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## ***Appendix 1: Reasons for referencing***

### **From the Business Studies resource**

Marketing assignments are often about applying theory to case studies and organisation.

So you will be referencing to show your lecturer:

- The theories you have used.
- That you are aware of the different schools of thought in marketing plans (e.g. planned strategy versus emerging strategy).
- That you are able to apply theories to practice.
- That you can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of those theories when applied to particular cases/situations/companies (you may find others have similar views and you can refer to these to support your view).

## ***Appendix 2: Deciding what to reference***

### **From the International Development resource**

Three guiding principles to help you decide whether or not you need to reference:

1. You must reference when you have directly quoted someone else's work.
2. You need to reference 'truth statements', specific 'facts' and 'generalisations', unless they are considered general knowledge.
3. You need to reference other people's opinions and arguments, whether paraphrased or summarised by you.

### **From the Nursing and Midwifery resource**

Theories and concepts have authors, as in the example above. Once a theory has been developed, other researchers and academics will apply and discuss that theory, and evaluate it in terms of its usefulness to their area of practice or research. In fact, you are asked to do the same thing as part of learning about the theories which relate to nursing and midwifery.

### ***Appendix 3: Paraphrasing and summarising***

#### **Criteria for paraphrasing:**

1. Is it more or less saying the same thing or is there a big change in meaning?
2. Is it far enough from the source to be called a paraphrase or is it more of a quotation?
3. Is it correctly referenced?

#### **From the Nursing and Midwifery resource**

Comment:

The student has not simply paraphrased what is said in the NMC code but has related it to the aims of her assignment, one of which is to 'discuss how the midwife may respond to the parents who may present this article to the midwife'. In doing this, she is demonstrating that she knows how to apply 'general' guidelines to the specific everyday situations she finds herself in as a midwife.

#### **From the Business Studies resource**

Comment:

Here the student has summarised a key finding from Porter's article and applied it to their case study – they have borrowed key words such as 'neutralize' and 'buyer power'.

Comment:

The student has referenced and has rephrased the source text, so this is not plagiarism. This paraphrase has changed the meaning of the original and so should not be attributed to McDonald, as it does not discuss the consequences of separating operational and strategic planning for the firm's longer term success.

#### **From the International Development resource**

The writer has used a direct quote from Escobar, which is okay. They have introduced it with a sentence that summarises one of the key ideas from the source text but is not copying the source text. So, the meaning has not been changed and it is not plagiarised.

However, they have forgotten to reference. Inserting (1995:22) after Escobar's name or at the end of the quote will make this an acceptable use of the source text.