

Monitoring and Reducing Plagiarism: A Case Study at South East European University, Macedonia

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Abstract

Most teachers of English language and literature are aware of the widespread prevalence of plagiarised student work and most responsible teachers use measures to detect and deter plagiarism in their classes. However, without clear institutional support and guidelines, the efforts of individual teachers may appear insufficient, especially in the age of ‘copy paste’ plagiarism from the internet.

This paper uses a case study from the English Department of South East European University to explore this issue and it describes the development of an anti-plagiarism strategy at departmental level. By using a plagiarism report form to enable teachers to report cases of plagiarism to a departmental committee, an effort was made to quantify the extent of the problem. This paper analyses the data thus gathered with reference to several international studies on plagiarism. The paper explores student and staff attitudes to plagiarism, their level of understanding of the rules of citation and makes recommendations for institutional policies in this area. The paper concludes that a collective and ongoing effort is needed at all levels of the University in order to have a meaningful impact on student behaviour.

Key terms: plagiarism, policy, internet, English, behaviour, dishonesty, guidelines

Introduction

At South East European University, staff in the English Department have long been aware that there are students who plagiarise other people’s work, either deliberately or unintentionally, and that there has been a need for concrete steps both in reducing plagiarism and supporting students in producing valid, original material. This paper outlines some concrete steps which were taken in the academic year 2010-11 and it outlines the extent of their usefulness and success. Based on this experience, the paper reflects on the institutional conditions needed to tackle this growing problem and how our experience might be applicable to other universities in the region.

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Literature Review and Context

Plagiarism is clearly a serious issue and generates complex debate in all higher education institutions and amongst quality organizations. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1989) defines the word *plagiarism* as “to take (somebody else’s ideas, words, etc.) and use them as if they were yours” (p. 943). Historically, the word emerged in Elizabethan times with the meaning of “literary theft” from the earlier English word *plagiary* derived from the Latin *plagiarius* meaning “kidnapper, plunderer or literary thief” with the root word *plagium* meaning “kidnapping” (Park, p.472). It is notable that plagiarism has always been a word and concept which has been hotly debated both inside and outside the academy and that its evolution and contemporary meaning is linked to the development of legally enforceable intellectual property rights. Just as these rights have varied historically and culturally, so the boundaries of the concept of plagiarism have been, to some extent, permeable and unclear. The treatment and punishment of students for plagiarism may be said to vary from a ‘zero tolerance’ attitude in US and UK/European universities to something resembling ‘tacit acceptance’ in less-developed countries. For example, at Harvard University, a first offence of plagiarism will result in expulsion from the University while in most universities elsewhere it will result in a warning or minor penalties.

Trying to track plagiarism is a huge concern among High schools and Universities around the world and it has been researched in almost all countries. While there is no consensus on how best to tackle the problem, many studies suggest that academic dishonesty is not always a black and white issue. For example, important book-length studies by Joel Bloch (2012) and Bill Marsh (2007) together with numerous articles suggest that a simple identification-deterrence model for plagiarism, one which assists teachers in identifying plagiarism with anti-plagiarism software together with strong sanctions against students who are caught, may not be the only answer and may not necessarily lead to long term improvements in academic integrity. To take one example from the vast literature on this subject, Tshepo Batane (2010) tried to investigate the effect of the plagiarism detection software *Turnitin* on student plagiarism at the University of Botswana. Batane’s findings suggest that social behaviour is a factor as to why students plagiarize. She used a pre-test / post-test approach and triangulated her study with interviews. More specifically, she put students’ first assignments on the software without telling them and only afterwards, when she brought the tests back, did she tell the students about the ‘checking’, which meant that for the second assignment, students were already informed about the process. However, the outcome was that there was a reduction of plagiarism of only 4.3% (from around 20% to around 16%), despite the deterrence of anti-plagiarism software. During the interviews, students claimed that they knew how to cite and about the software as well, but they chose the easy way out. Therefore, Batane concludes with a sceptical warning:

If students know how to write properly, but still choose to plagiarize, then it is a clear indication that plagiarism itself is not the main problem, but is a symptom of a bigger problem — in this case the students’ lack of responsibility towards their learning. (p.8)

Batane’s research raises two very important issues: first, that we have to make sure students know how to cite properly and are aware of the rules of correct and incorrect citation and, secondly, we need to find ways to work on their beliefs and lack of

responsibility before introducing any software or punishing them.

These findings confirm that plagiarism is a multi-factorial problem with no single solution. In the USA, a number of leading universities have adopted a 'carrot and stick' approach to incentivize students not to cheat. This approach includes an 'Honour Code' which students sign at the beginning of their studies, together with training in correct citation and a clear statement of the disciplinary consequences for students who plagiarize (Park, pp.482-3). Such an approach seeks to pre-empt and modify student behaviour from the outset and to encourage them to take responsibility for the writing they produce.

We must keep in mind that there are many possible motives for plagiarizing which include: ignorance and inadvertence, indifference and laziness, cultural misunderstanding, poor study skills, the wish for a higher grade and there are also different degrees of plagiarism, ranging from an honest mistake which covers one or two sentences of an essay to premeditated cheating involving an entire assignment. Of course, intentionality – the deliberate intention of deceive a teacher – does not technically lessen the offence, but it may influence the teacher's assessment of a given student's degree of culpability. Faced with this minefield of factors, it is perhaps understandable that not all teachers are willing to face up to the problem in a consistent and rigorous way.

Background of the Study

In June 2010, the Instructional Support Centre at SEE University, in liaison with the English Department, took the first steps in combating plagiarism at SEEU and a Plagiarism Workshop was held with English Department staff in order to raise awareness among staff and to share good practice. The aim of the workshop was to assist staff in identifying instances of plagiarism and to guide them in relation to correct and incorrect citation. A follow up activity was the organization of workshops with first year students in order to inform them about the ethics of proper citation and raise their awareness on plagiarism as a global issue affecting their studies. Only students from the first year were given the workshops and other students in second and third years were not. They were only informed orally by the respective teacher of each course.

The outcomes of the workshops were discussed at a subsequent English Departmental meeting and it was agreed to proceed as follows:

1. To appoint a Plagiarism Monitor and committee for the English Department
2. To design and implement the use of a Plagiarism Report Form
3. To train first year students in the rules of citation and how to avoid plagiarism
4. To investigate the best way to obtain anti-plagiarism software
5. To design and implement the use of a Thesis Declaration to be signed by the candidate and mentor on submission of an MA or Ph.D thesis.

However, even though most of the agreed points in the departmental meeting were implemented, there was a feeling that more action needed to be taken from the higher levels of the university and that teachers needed more support from top management in order to successfully implement the initiative.

The Aims of the Study

This paper describes the implementation of these procedures in the English Department at SEE University in the academic year 2010-11 and it looks at the data gathered to analyse and review the extent and scope of plagiarism amongst students in the

English Department at SEEU. Therefore, during 2010-11, the full implementation of this plagiarism initiative was undertaken and an analysis made of its effectiveness. This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. How widespread is plagiarism across the different subject disciplines in the Department?
2. Was the Plagiarism Report Form fully adopted and used by all staff members?
3. What evidence is there regarding the level of student understanding of the rules of citation?
4. Can we identify any quantitative differences between different year groups and what can we attribute these to?
5. What feedback was provided by staff about the usefulness of this initiative for them as teachers in their assessment of students?
6. What evidence is there of heightened student awareness of the need to avoid plagiarism?

The Study and Methodology

The study was conducted during the year 2010-11, second semester, and participants were students from BA and MA level. All teachers were informed and asked to report any detected plagiarism among their students. Gathered data was analysed using content analysis (Berg, 2007; Silverman, 2006), to analyze the reports and assignments. To triangulate the results, interviews with three teachers and students were conducted. The study is small in scope and one of its limitations is that the study reports are for only one semester period. The other limitation is the difficulty of interviewing all teachers who had detected plagiarism and all students caught plagiarizing.

Results and Data Analysis

The study showed that plagiarism was widespread in seven courses in undergraduate studies and to a smaller extent in the postgraduate ones (see table 1 below). However, unfortunately, the plagiarism report form (see appendix 1) was not fully adopted and used by staff. Out of 22 staff engaged at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications at SEEU only 6 used the form and reported detected plagiarism. This means that only 27% followed the procedure.

Related to the different semesters, plagiarism was detected with students studying in semester one, two, four, and six. Most of the detected plagiarism occurred in the second semester 36%, then fourth 25% and sixth semester 23% with each and finally in the master studies 19%.

Table 1. Reported Plagiarism, Study Semester and Subject

Course	Topics in Literature	English Literature 750-1642	Literature and ELT	English Literature 1776-1900	Classroom Inquiry	Electives	English Language Skills	Cultural Elements in ELT	Total
Semester	6th	2nd	2 nd	4 th	6 th	2 nd & 4 th	4 th	1 st	
BA	6	18		9	4	2	3		42
MA			8					2	10

The interviews and reports show that most of the students admitted being aware of plagiarism but their understanding, as suggested by the reports and interviews, seems to vary from student to student. As one student claimed: “One sentence is not plagiarism”.

Some other students seemed not to care by claiming that they did not know why they had done it, whereas another one stated “I wanted to use more beautiful words and language and I did not believe you would catch me”. Surprisingly, many of those caught plagiarizing are successful students whose English is at a very high level.

From the teachers’ interviews, the study demonstrates that different teachers approached the ‘plagiarism issue’ differently because they were not sure if one sentence or paragraph should be reported or not and what concrete actions they were supposed to take, for example, whether they should fail the student, or lower his/her grade, or something else. As one teacher claimed: “I found some students from the MA plagiarizing a few sentences and did not know what to do. I talked to them and made them change those sentences. I was not sure what to do and let them go without reporting the case.” Another teacher claimed to have failed the students involved and making them come back to the next exam session, whereas some claimed to have reported the students and lowered their grade by one level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While this is only a pilot project of the English Department at SEE University, nonetheless, the results of the study give some insight into the extent of the plagiarism problem and whether the procedure was workable and with this, questions for further consideration. Although less than one third of academic staff followed the procedure and reported students who had infringed in their classes, the fact that a total of 52 assignments were found to be plagiarized across BA and MA year groups suggests that the problem is widespread. It is likely, based on this data, that a 100% report rate might have found over 200 plagiarized assignments which would amount to a plagiarism rate of over 50% of the student body, even allowing for cases of repeated plagiarism by the same students. One notable failure of this project was to successfully identify ‘repeat offenders’, students who plagiarized in more than one class. It is likely that the limited amount of data gathered and low report rate accounts for this shortcoming. It is clear also that, in order to have a clearer picture of how the new procedure would impact upon student behaviour, there needs to be a continuity of the study in the following semesters, something that was not achieved in 2011-12. One of the recommendations of this study is that this initiative should be urgently shared and expanded among other Faculties at SEEU and in fact, this goal was partially achieved in April 2012 when a Plagiarism Detection and Prevention workshop was held for all SEEU academic staff.

A further recommendation from the study is that SEEU needs to design some written procedures and guidelines for teachers in how to deal with cases of plagiarism. The study shows that no real assessment tool or sanctions were provided for those caught plagiarizing and teachers were not sure how to proceed after reporting students to the committee. Therefore, different teachers handled the situation in different ways by ‘punishing’ those plagiarizing in assessments in the way they thought was the most appropriate, or, in certain cases, with no punishment except a warning. Clearly, this inconsistency should be dealt with through institutional guidelines and it is regrettable that even now, SEE University lacks a coherent anti-plagiarism policy. Indeed, the Regulations for First Cycle Studies do not explicitly mention the problem of plagiarism while the University Policy on Second Cycle (MA) Studies contain strict policies that have never been enforced. Even though a student can be asked to leave the University for plagiarism

at MA level and his/her mentor can be brought before a Disciplinary Commission, no case of these rules being implemented have so far been reported despite several cases of identified plagiarism at the MA thesis level. It is partly because of this lack of institutional oversight that the Macedonian Education Ministry has recently implemented new laws to include all MA and Ph.D theses in a mandatory plagiarism check before they can be formally defended. Although this is a step in the right direction, it still doesn't deal with the problem at student-teacher level and give the teacher a viable set of guidelines on deterring, preventing and punishing plagiarism.

Despite the fact that students claimed to be aware of the plagiarism issue and the correct way of citing, this study has shown the opposite. The fact that other people's work has been used across all semesters shows that even students at MA level may not have mastered the techniques of correct citation and paraphrase necessary to avoid plagiarism. Therefore, one of the most important recommendations must be to continue with the workshops with first semester students and to encourage teachers in higher year groups to reinforce correct citation practice in their classes. Teachers might follow Michael Hanrahan's suggestion that "Successful instruction in plagiarism must strive to increase the awareness of the difference between the creation of new and the appropriate use of existing content" (Hanrahan, p.8). As Hanrahan also makes clear, the multi-media environment students inhabit should be harnessed in a responsible way.

Some of the current academic literature on plagiarism also argues that the technology which encourages a 'copy/paste' mentality in students (ie. the ready availability of information on the world wide web) and the use of similar technology to detect plagiarism in the form of *Turnitin* and other anti-plagiarism software actually creates a vicious circle of infringement and detection and punishment. In order to break this circle, as we have suggested, teachers can address this problem at the behavioral and attitudinal level by appealing to students ethical responsibility towards their learning. But at the same time, teachers can also adapt their assessment and teaching methods to take advantage of the technological tools now readily at students' disposal.

Thus, as Michael Hanrahan suggests, the use of web-based tools such as blogs can be an innovative instructional or assessment tool where the emphasis lies not so much on the originality of the materials as on the information gathering tasks laid out by the teacher. The use of web-quests is analogous because students must use the internet actively and will hopefully learn in the process. In relation to blogs, Hanrahan's arguments are interesting:

That which has secured their popularity and wide reception (the rapid creation, publication, and circulation of information) also represents their greatest potential for instruction. Librarians, technologists, and instructors can capitalize on blogs for making available a range of resources and information to targeted users – students, staff, faculty, and colleagues . . . They can do so, moreover, with their own content or with content developed entirely by other institutions . . . blogs can reinforce the responsible and productive use and circulation of information. (Hanrahan, p.8)

Of equal interest, as a way of harnessing technology for positive instructional ends, is the potential of the internet to assist, as well as (if misused) hinder, the teaching of academic writing in English (or other languages) to students. In her article on 'Integrating discipline-based anti-plagiarism instruction into the information literacy curriculum', Lynn D. Lampert suggests how a process-based approach to writing (as opposed to the more

traditional product-based approach) can yield better results and actually allow students to learn from their mistakes, and to correct errors of citation, before these become a disciplinary issue. Instead of policing the end-product of student writing, Lampert argues that teachers should engage more with the compositional process and thereby adopt what she calls “a proactive approach through process-based learning” (Lampert, p.349).

These arguments suggest a fourfold strategy in preventing plagiarism amongst third-level students. Teachers should aim to appeal to students ‘better nature’ in fostering academic integrity while also adopting a firm and consistent line of sanctions in cases of clear-cut plagiarism. Teachers must also consider assessment techniques and aim to design courses in which the assessment is transparent, but also flexible, taking account of the realities of web-based resources and instructional methods. Teachers deserve the support of an institutional framework in which plagiarism policies and guidelines are clearly set out and implemented. And finally, the education of students in the rules of citation is paramount. It is clear that only by fostering personal and professional responsibility in *both* student and teacher, within a supportive institutional framework, can the plagiarism problem be effectively addressed.

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Appendix 1- Plagiarism report form

PLAGIARISM REPORT FORM

Date:.....

Name of Teacher:.....

Couse:.....

Semester/Year:.....

Undergraduate/Postgraduate (MA):

Name of Student:

Type of Assignment (eg. essay, project, journal) and Title:

.....
.....
.....

Type of Plagiarism: 1. Internet (give details)

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.....

2. Printed book/article (give details)

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3. From another student (copying)

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.....

4. Other (please specify)

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Comments (to include your impression of the student's academic level and whether they understand rules about citation and plagiarism):

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