

A tutorial on plagiarism and collusion

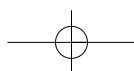
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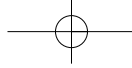


Ruth Barrett
Principal Lecturer
School of Computer Science
R.Barrett@herts.ac.uk, ext 4363

Summary

This report describes a tutorial on plagiarism and collusion that has been used successfully in Computer Science and Psychology. Students analyse ten different scenarios for acceptable practice and, if unacceptable, they decide whether plagiarism or collusion has taken place. The questionnaire and subsequent discussion take place in an environment in which issues around plagiarism and collusion can be discussed openly. It has been found that students actively participate because they can relate to the different situations in which they might find themselves. Lecturers have the opportunity to pick up on points raised in the questionnaire and by the students. The questionnaire was originally designed to investigate staff and student perceptions of plagiarism and collusion (Barrett and Cox, 2005) and an amended version has continued to be useful in raising students' awareness of plagiarism and collusion.





Introduction

At the University there are mechanisms in place to give guidance to students on plagiarism and collusion: for example information in programme handbooks, Faculty guidelines for students, talks by tutors in induction weeks, and the necessity for a student to sign that work submitted for assessment is the student's own. Additionally, there should be an ongoing programme by lecturers to help students learn how to cite sources, paraphrase correctly and to understand the difference between legitimate collaboration and collusion.

Plagiarism is representing another person's work as being your own, or using another person's work without acknowledgement. Each discipline may have its own conventions in the way sources are cited and referenced, and students will need help in applying these correctly. Furthermore, the practice in a previous institution may differ from that in a new institution. Accidental or unintentional plagiarism arises because of ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism (Hricko, 1998; University of Alberta, 2004; McDowell and Brown, 2001) and so activities which reinforce students' understanding of academic conventions and the University regulations will help to reduce plagiarism.

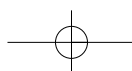
Collusion is working together to produce assessed work in circumstances where this is forbidden. This is more likely to occur in disciplines such as Engineering, Mathematics and Science which require students to work on a problem which may have a 'correct answer' rather than in disciplines which assess by essays or reports. Collusion may occur because students have been encouraged to work together on non-assessed work, but then must work individually on an assessment. Carroll (2002) states that 'whereas many staff and students find defining plagiarism difficult, almost everyone has difficulty identifying where collaboration stops and collusion begins.' This is

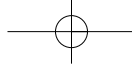
borne out by the study by Barrett and Cox (2005) in which acceptable practice and plagiarism situations were identified by the majority, and there was most disagreement about situations in which collusion might have taken place. In this study it was also found that both staff and students felt that collusion was less reprehensible than plagiarism because some learning was taking place.

The tutorial described below helps with the ongoing education of students and has been used in personal tutorial sessions, in induction for overseas students and for larger BSc level two and MSc groups. At the time of writing, the tutorial has been used with over 600 students. Additionally, six sessions, taken by different lecturers, have been observed and students' reactions noted. The questionnaire has also been used as an 'ice-breaker' on staff workshops on plagiarism and collusion on two occasions, one internal and one at another institution.

The tutorial design

The tutorial can be delivered in an hour: a short introduction to plagiarism and collusion, ten minutes for the students to complete a questionnaire, thirty minutes for discussion, then a short summary. The questionnaire consists of ten scenarios to cover both acceptable situations, in which students can legitimately work together and correctly use source materials, and situations involving the most commonly reported cheating behaviours such as allowing copying of coursework and copying without reference (Franklin-Stokes and Newstead, 1995). Students are asked to decide whether each scenario is acceptable or unacceptable and, if unacceptable, whether the behaviour constitutes plagiarism or collusion. The descriptions of the scenarios are necessarily short and so open to interpretation, but this helps stimulate debate. Phrases in the scenarios such





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as 'worked independently' are picked out by students to justify their answers. Some pairs of scenarios encourage discussion about the difference between legitimately collaborating and stepping over the line into collusion and have key words in the description such as 'gives him a disc'. An obviously acceptable situation was used for the first scenario to ease the students into the questionnaire and into the discussion. The questionnaire is given in Appendix 1.

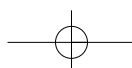
The scenarios

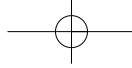
Scenarios one and two describe acceptable behaviour and plagiarism respectively and students' responses were fairly unanimous. Scenario three can be taken as acceptable behaviour, but with the caveat that it is a question of degree. This scenario has led to some discussion about showing your work to another. In Computer Science it was felt that this should be done with caution, whereas in Psychology it could be helpful to let another student critically evaluate your essay. But the general consensus among the students was that the situation was acceptable because the student in the scenario was writing in his own words. A student commented, 'acceptable, but would the examiner think so?' and this led to an opportunity to talk about similarity in students' work. Scenario four probably prompted the most discussion in the Computer Science tutorials, ranging from sharing discs: 'why would someone want to do that?', and helping friends: 'give him a break!', to the extent to which work must be different from someone else's and other cheating behaviours. Scenario four could be interpreted as either plagiarism or collusion or both and gave rise to some disagreement, but this led on to questions about who is caught for investigation. Scenario five is acceptable, but only just: 'acceptable because the student is only suggesting ways to do it' and 'your mum does it!' By contrast, scenario six describes collusion, and students

were asked what was the difference between scenarios five and six in order to reinforce their understanding. Scenario seven emphasises that plagiarism is stealing and students had no problem with condemning it: 'crime', 'theft' and 'also stole money, because that's printer money!' The main concern was what would happen to the student whose work was stolen. This was an opportunity for lecturers to talk about the duty of care that students have with regard to their own work, and to avoid situations that could lead to an investigation of plagiarism. Scenario eight prompted the most discussion in Psychology, with questions about correct referencing and paraphrasing practice: 'Is it OK to put quotation marks when you have changed a few words?' Scenarios eight and nine gave an opportunity to talk about plagiarism and collusion in more depth as well as about the use of electronic plagiarism detectors. Scenario ten describes acceptable behaviour and no further discussion of it was needed.

Conclusion

In all tutorials the students participated actively and found it easy to ask questions. In some tutorials there was quite a lot of hilarity, which may have been a way of coping with a serious topic that was being discussed openly. There were also a number of plagiarism incidents described by students and these added to the general understanding. The main issues that came from the students were: being accused of collusion because work was similar to another's, being accused of collusion or plagiarism when work is stolen, what happens to someone who is caught, and how to reference work correctly. The main issues that lecturers could bring to the discussions were: the seriousness of plagiarism and collusion offences and the actions that the University will take when potential cheating is discovered, that students should not work too closely with friends on assessed assignments





and should never share electronic copies of their work, and that students must learn how to cite sources correctly. Equally importantly, lecturers could also reassure students who may be worried about unintentional plagiarism: lecturers are not out to 'catch' students but to help them with their studies, emphasising the ways in which students can seek help, and that students should help each other to learn whilst being aware of the difference between helping and cheating.

Appendix 1

Plagiarism and Collusion Questionnaire

This exercise is to help you clarify your ideas about what is acceptable practice in assessments (e.g. the extent to which you can work together or can use another person's work) and what constitutes cheating. Some simple definitions are given below:

Plagiarism:

Representing another person's work as being your own, or using another person's work without acknowledgement.

Collusion:

Working together to produce assessed work in circumstances where this is forbidden.

Study the following scenarios about an individually assessed assignment. Provide an answer to each of the questions after each scenario by circling either Y or N. There should be only one 'yes' for each scenario.

1) Student A finds a good source of information and tells student B about the source. They talk about it. They write the assignment independently using this information and identify the source in their text.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

2) Student A and student B find the same source of information independently. They write the assignment independently and both use exact words from the source without identifying the source in their text.

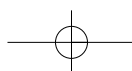
Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

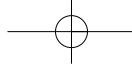
3) Student A doesn't know how to start the assignment and so asks student B who helps him by showing him his own work. Student A writes up the assignment in his own words but there are some similarities with student B's work.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

4) Student A doesn't know how to start the assignment and so asks student B who helps him and gives him a disc of his own work. Student A changes student B's work and adds some of his own material.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N





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5) Student A knows that student B is very good at the subject and asks Student B for some help. Student B goes through A's work pointing out mistakes and suggesting ways of tackling them. Student A changes his work using some of B's advice.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

6) Student A knows that student B is very good at the subject and so asks student B for some help. Student B goes through A's work pointing out mistakes and telling A the correct answer. Student A changes his work and puts in B's ideas.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

7) Student A knows that student B is very good at the subject. Student A finds B's work on the printer and takes it. Student A retypes B's work and makes some changes.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

8) Student A and student B find the same source of information independently. Each writes the assignment independently, using the source of information by changing a few words. They acknowledge the author but do not put quotation marks around the text.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

9) Student A and student B work together to produce the assignment, sharing an electronic copy of the work. They produce similar but not identical work.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

10) Student A and student B talk about the assignment together and each makes their own notes. They write the assignment independently.

Is this acceptable? Y/N
if N: Is this plagiarism? Y/N Is this collusion? Y/N

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Biographical notes

Ruth Barrett is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Computer Science. She is the Chair of the Learning and Teaching Group in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences. She is also the Programme Tutor of the MSc Computer Science (online), a programme taught and assessed entirely online through StudyNet. Her research interests are in plagiarism and in e-learning.

