The Concept of Plagiarism

Plagiarism, like shoplifting and prostitution and smoking marijuana, is wrong. And it is a corruption of academic life, and we should do what we can to end it.¹

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There is a commonly held view that occurrences of plagiarism in student work are on the increase². But precise figures on the amount of plagiarism present in student work are hard to come by. In one recent Australian study across a group of universities it was suggested that around 8% of students had plagiarised substantial amounts of text from the Internet³. More anecdotal evidence suggests that the figure may be considerably higher than this.

Whatever the actual figures may be, it is clear that whilst plagiarism is never going to be prevented altogether no matter what we do, at the same time no-one can afford to ignore the issue, since ultimately the value of the awards that an institution gives to its students are dependent on those awards being seen to have been gained by honest and fair means. "In the future any university which is not seen to prevent plagiarism to the best extent possible will lose reputation." University of Deakin Vice-Chancellor Geoff Wilson⁴

Considerable efforts are currently being made to detect occurrences of plagiarism using automated software⁵ and all institutions include in their student literature dire warnings as to the penalties for it. Typical of these warnings is the statement issued by MMU as part of its Regulations for Undergraduate Programmes of Study, which threatens: ‘The penalties available to a Board include failing the student in all or part of his/her Stage assessments and determining whether or not the student shall be permitted to be reassessed. Additionally such a student may be recommended for expulsion under the regulations for expulsion of students for academic reasons.’⁶

But many believe that what is needed is not better detection methods and increased penalties but rather much more emphasis on ensuring that students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, and more attention by tutors
on ways to reduce the likelihood of its occurrence through alternative assessment strategies and other means.

However, all this presumes that we know what we are talking about. The concept of plagiarism is by no means a simple or unambiguous one, yet unless we are clear on this, then we cannot begin to make any kind of progress on the practical measures that need to be taken to reduce it. In what follows I will attempt to explore some of the confusions and contradictions in the way that the term is currently used, and attempt to re-locate its meaning such that at least some of this incoherence can be removed.

Let’s see where the confusion starts. If a student cannot come up with their own ideas, and time is running short before the hand-in date, then cut-and-paste technology allows them to lift someone else’s sentences or phrases with ease. Indeed students often cannot see anything wrong with this. They say things like: ‘But I changed the words around’. And we say, ‘But it isn’t your original thought’. Or here – an extract from a recent online debate on plagiarism: "One of my students plagiarized sentences from a website, in some cases word-for-word . . ."

To which one respondent replies: “If it was not word for word, it was not plagiarism, paraphrasing is subjective enough to allow someone leeway.”

There is genuine confusion here. So what is plagiarism? The 2001 JISC Report (Chester, G) is very clear where it stands on this:

1.6 Project Definition of Plagiarism

A definition of plagiarism has not been written for this project.

JISC insists that the definition of plagiarism is a matter for individual institutions. How helpful is this?

Unfortunately universities typically go for length rather than clarity in their definitions of plagiarism. A fairly typical one is this from the University of East London: Plagiarism: A Guidance Note for Students

1. **Definition of Plagiarism**

The University defines plagiarism and other assessment offences in Part 10 of the UEL Manual of General Regulations and Policies. All students will have received a copy of this when they joined the University as it is reprinted in Section 0 of "The Essential Guide to the University of East London". In this document, the following example of an assessment offence is given:
(e) The submission of material (written, visual or oral) originally produced by another person or persons without due acknowledgement*, so that the work could be assumed to be the student's own. For the purpose of these Regulations, this includes incorporation of significant extracts or elements taken from the work of an(other(s), without acknowledgement or reference*, and the submission of work produced in collaboration for an assignment based on the assessment of individual work. (Such offences are typically described as plagiarism or collusion).

The following note is attached:

*Note: To avoid potential misunderstanding, any phrase not the students' own should normally be in quotation marks or highlighted in some other way. It should also be noted that the incorporation of significant elements of an(other(s) work, even with acknowledgement or reference, is not an acceptable academic practice and will normally result in failure of that item or stage of assessment.

One useful point here is the use of the term ‘work’ emphasising that it is the ideas and effort rather than the specific words that are at issue in plagiarism. But apart from this, what we have here is desperately confusing (though, it should be said at the outset, no more so than many similar statements produced by other institutions on this matter). It would appear that two offences are here being identified – plagiarism and collusion – although the phrasing suggests that the two might be interchangeable: (Such offences are typically described as plagiarism or collusion).

The UEL Guidance Notes do go on to give further details on both plagiarism and collusion. The latter is explicated as:

3. **Collusion**

Collusion is the term used to describe any form of joint effort intended to deceive an assessor as to who was actually responsible for producing the material submitted for assessment. Students may obviously discuss assignments amongst themselves and this can be a valuable learning experience. However, if an individual assignment is specified, when the actual report/essay is produced it must be by the student alone. For this reason students should be wary of lending work to colleagues since were it to be plagiarised they could leave themselves open to a charge of collusion.
So exactly how are we to understand the relation between collusion and plagiarism? It is here that we begin to come up against one of the key factors generating problems in getting clear about this whole area. Jude Carroll in her generally excellent and authoritative Handbook\(^8\) includes an exercise designed to show the differences between cheating, plagiarism and collusion. (op.cit. p.52) and argues that collusion is a type of plagiarism and that plagiarism is in turn a type of cheating.
Carroll includes in the final section of the Handbook a Venn diagram purporting to show these relationships:

A = cheating     B = plagiarism     C = collusion

(diagram based on Carroll p.92)

A standard way of understanding this diagram would be to say that all instances of collusion are instances of plagiarism and that all instances of plagiarism are instances of cheating.

But there is a major conceptual problem here. Carroll is clear that there is a distinction between cheating and plagiarism, although what the distinction amounts to is never spelled out explicitly in the above text. A commonsense definition of cheating would ally it to such notions as ‘deceit’ and ‘fraud’, and whilst further distinction between these terms could be made, the crucial element they all possess in common is what philosophers tend to refer to as their ‘purposefulness’. That is, that one cannot cheat, deceive or defraud by accident. For example, if a situation looks like one where cheating has occurred, but it subsequently turns out that the alleged cheat did not in fact know the rules, was not aware of the context, or acted involuntarily, then whatever description is given to the situation, it cannot be that of ‘cheating’. Cheating, like promising, can only occur where there is an element of wilfulness. Just as you cannot accidentally promise, neither can you accidentally cheat. Collaboration and collusion act in similar ways. Both involve active cooperation with others, in the latter case for fraudulent purposes. Neither can be accidental or involuntary. ‘We accidentally colluded’ is never an option. Collusion is always deliberate.
So where is the problem? Returning to the UEL guidance notes:

4. **When to Reference**

Since the regulations do not distinguish between deliberate and accidental plagiarism, the key to avoiding a charge of plagiarism is to make sure that you assign credit where it is due . . .

This is entirely consonant with most standard definitions of plagiarism. Carroll’s careful definition of plagiarism at the beginning of her Handbook states:

*Plagiarism is passing off someone else’s work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit* (op.cit. p.9)

As a gloss to this she further points out that the ‘intentionally or unintentionally’ phrase reminds us of the fact that the existence of plagiarism is independent of the reasons why it occurs, although clearly the purposefulness or otherwise of the action may well have a bearing on any subsequent punishment. Clearly if the plagiarism was accidental, then we should probably treat it very differently than had it been deliberate. But the point is that in either case plagiarism has occurred.

There is then clearly an inconsistency here. Cheating can only occur where there is an intention to cheat. Plagiarism can occur when there is no intention to commit plagiarism – indeed the student may not even know what it is. This we can agree upon. But how then can plagiarism be a subset of cheating? It would appear that our categories need re-sorting here. Some plagiarism is cheating, but much, maybe most, is not.

The confusion is present in the above-mentioned JISC Report where in the first paragraph on the extent of plagiarism it is asserted that, “this form of cheating . . . was increasing” (op.cit. para. 1.1). Interestingly, the MMU Regulations do not make this mistake, stating that penalties can be imposed where students have “cheated, plagiarised or [are] found guilty of misconduct in an examination . . . “ (op.cit. para. 14.1) clearly implying that cheating and plagiarism are not necessarily identical, as indeed they are not.

So this part of Carroll’s diagram needs re-drawing as below:
There are similar problems with plagiarism and collusion. Collusion is clearly a kind of cheating. But what makes us think it is also a kind of plagiarism? ‘Collusion [is] a subset of plagiarism’ (Carroll, p. 92) and the UEL guidance notes again:

‘... However, if an individual assignment is specified, when the actual report/essay is produced it must be by the student alone. For this reason students should be wary of lending work to colleagues since were it to be plagiarised they could leave themselves open to a charge of collusion.’

What exactly is being claimed here? The essence of collusion, as with collaboration, is deliberately and actively working together with one or more others. To lend someone else your essay is not ‘working together’. It could certainly count as conniving to achieve for them grades they did not deserve, and therefore rightly be open to censure, but to call it ‘collusion’ risks confusion. And of course the ‘if..then’ claim in the UEL guidance notes is equally suspect. It is not the case that IF the work is plagiarised THEN a charge of collusion could be brought. The charge of academic dishonesty (pace collusion) stands independent of whether plagiarism actually takes place. If I lend you my essay to copy, intending that you plagiarise it, then this is dishonest whether or not you actually use it in that way.

So where does this leave us? It would seem that collusion - deliberately and actively working together with one or more others with the purpose of deceiving third parties - is a subset of cheating, and that in the academic world we need to try to ensure that students understand the difference between collaboration (good) and collusion (bad). This is not easy, but will be helped considerably if we detach it from any discussion of plagiarism.

Carroll’s diagram now looks like this:

A = cheating    B=plagiarism    C=collusion
As to plagiarism itself, this is best seen as *sui generis*. It is not necessarily a form of cheating (since it can happen accidentally) and is largely restricted to the academic world. In the outside world it is normally its sister concept – ‘breach of copyright’ - that predominates in any discussion of using some else’s work inappropriately. It is interesting that academics frequently tend to be strangely cavalier about copyright – at least when it is other people’s – yet take plagiarism almost as a personal insult.

One reason for this may well reside in the original meaning of the word ‘plagiarism’. It began life as being equivalent to ‘kidnapping’ *i.e.* ‘child stealing’ and seems to have been appropriated by the academic world to cover ‘brain-child stealing’ – the appropriation of my ideas by you. And it is this that probably accounts for some of our hostility towards it.

Another reason may well lie in the fact that the essence of scholarship is to be versed in the literature and canons of one’s discipline. The scholar uses the ideas and thoughts of others to synthesise and integrate, to challenge and develop, without ever losing sight of the inheritance with which they work. Eventually their thoughts in turn become part of that ever-growing corpus. And there develops a central core of that corpus that, within the discipline, is common knowledge to those who work with it, and this common knowledge brings with it no necessity to quote and identify sources – they are too well-known for that. But in the case of the novitiate no such body of common knowledge exists and we therefore expect that even the most well-known ideas and works be properly sourced and identified by them. To do otherwise is to pretend to an authority that the novitiate does not yet possess. It is to usurp a role that they as yet only aspire to. It is this that seems to be at the heart of our attitudes towards plagiarism – deliberate or accidental. Do not pretend to use the ideas of others as though you understood them, for if you truly understood them, then you would be able to use them properly.

Yet there is also a thin line between plagiarism and paraphrase. Just as plagiarism does not require a word for word copying of something, similarly it does not count as paraphrasing if you insert large chunks of someone else’s work into what you are writing, effectively making the substance of what you’re saying someone else’s thoughts. (Wilson\(^\text{10}\) has also usefully coined the word ‘plagiphrasing’ for the paraphrasing across several sources and joining them more or less successfully. Even when the sources are included in the reference list, without more detailed referencing this is clearly unacceptable.) Getting students to be able to distinguish for themselves between acceptable and unacceptable forms of paraphrasing is not an easy task, but is essential if we are to make progress here.

It is all too easy to forget how daunting all this can seem to our students. It is often confusing enough for ourselves after years of using academic conventions
and assumptions. But the first stage has to be to get clear what we are talking about. Understanding what plagiarism is comes prior to being able to identify and prevent it. Clarifying the difference between cheating and plagiarism and that between plagiarism and collusion is a useful first step in that direction. A second step would be to identify the different kinds of plagiarism – a task usefully begun by Evans in his paper identifying five distinct types of plagiarism including the wonderfully named ‘cryptomnesia’ or unconscious plagiarism where someone genuinely believes the idea they have is original whereas in reality it came from a past experience or event. (Evans cites the example of George Harrison accidentally plagiarising the work of the Chiffons)

Only when this kind of essential ‘ground-clearing’ work has been done can we begin the task of informing our students what it is that we are taking such exception to – and why – and how they can take steps to avoid it and our wrath. And only then can we also start the equally difficult task of using assessment to deter plagiarism in the first place.

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1 From: DEOS-L - The Distance Education Online Symposium
   [mailto:DEOS-L@LISTS.PSU.EDU]On Behalf Of James M. Nugent
   Sent: 11 February 2002 12:14
   To: DEOS-L@LISTS.PSU.EDU
   Subject: Re: Another Question about Plagiarism

2 Chester, G. (2001) Plagiarism, Detection & Prevention (JISC) para. 1.1


4 see for example in Chester, G. (2001)

5 MMU Regulations for Undergraduate Programmes of Study 2001-2002 para. 14.1

6 From: DEOS-L - The Distance Education Online Symposium
   [mailto:DEOS-L@LISTS.PSU.EDU]On Behalf Of Stephen Lahanas
   Sent: 10 February 2002 03:40
   To: DEOS-L@LISTS.PSU.EDU
   Subject: Re: Another Question about Plagiarism


8 for a classic analysis of this and other similar terms, see J.L.Austin, A Plea for Excuses (1956) in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (1956-57)

11 http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/interactions/vol4no2/evans.htm