

Who Struggles with Academic Literacy? Challenging Common Assumptions of which Students Engage in Plagiarism

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Abstract

This paper reports unexpected findings arising from the evaluation of an online tutorial designed to assist students in preparing their assignments at the University of Western Sydney. The tutorial attempts to fill a gap that cannot be met in universities struggling in the current fiscal and aims to help students produce quality work free of plagiarism. Using a mixed methods approach, we found that students in general struggle to understand academic writing and referencing and that a freely available online resource is beneficial.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the notion of what universities are and how they operate has altered dramatically. In the western world, as a response to commercial imperatives, many universities now rely on international students as a significant income stream (Bretag, 2005; Handa & Fallon, 2006) or intensify courses in order to graduate students as quickly as possible. Typically this places increased pressure on academics to demonstrate the quality of their graduates. One measure of graduate quality is compliance with the core value of academic integrity (Flint, Clegg, & Macdonald, 2006).

In assessment tasks students are required to demonstrate academic integrity. In other words, their work must be original or accurately attribute other authors. Failure to do so is considered academic misconduct, regarded by some to be “a crime against members of the academic community” (Leask, 2006, p. 183).

Such failure is frequently referred to as plagiarism and is a serious concern for universities (Alam, 2004). Arguments around plagiarism include the claim that as “a western intellectual preoccupation” (Clarke, 2005, Section 5.4), it has reached “epidemic proportions” (Miall, 2005, p. 168) and that, if left unchallenged, threatens the reputation of universities and devalues both the qualification and the educational experience (Flint et al., 2006).

Complying with principles of academic integrity is problematic and challenging to students (Nitterhouse, 2003), not least because of the contested perceptions and interpretations that students and academics have towards the concept and value of

academic integrity. Studies demonstrate that the complexity and confusion surrounding plagiarism confuses the diverse range of students typical of today's universities (Given & Smailes, 2005; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Introna, Hayes, Blair & Wood, 2003; Lahur, 2004; Marshall & Garry, 2005).

Academics conceptualise student plagiarism from an idiosyncratic interpretive framework (Flint et al., 2006). That is, they use their own particular interpretation of plagiarism in deciding if plagiarism has occurred and how or whether a student should be punished. Some academics believe that students intentionally plagiarise. Others link plagiarism with language capabilities so that for example Australian academics regard students with limited English language skills as more frequent plagiarisers (Bretag, 2005).

Much of the literature on student plagiarism focuses on international students. It suggests that they are “desperate, embattled and inferior learners” (Leask, 2004, p. 185), lacking in integrity (Handa & Power, 2005) who are likely to submit written work that contains deliberate plagiarism because they have difficulty learning about and understanding the academic culture of the institution (Banwell, 2003) and are culturally inferior “others” who know how to learn only by rote and imitation and whose learning style and strategies impede critical thinking and result in plagiarism. The negativity of the language used to describe international students assumes a deficit, blaming the students. This negativity is an important issue as it tends to colour academics' attitudes towards international students.

Although international students find it challenging to understand the demands of academic integrity (Handa & Fallon, 2006; Kell & Vogl, 2007), much of their confusion is also shared by domestic students (Pickering & Hornby, 2005). In analysing student use of an online tutorial designed to assist them in preparing assignments, we found that there was not a consistent failure to understand academic integrity on the part of international students. This made us question the accuracy of current deficit assumptions that view students from different ethnic heritage or education backgrounds as the ones most likely to struggle with academic literacy and engage in plagiarism.

Our task then became finding the common features of the student experience that impaired students' ability to comply with the principles of academic integrity. With a more accurate picture of who struggles with academic writing, we can tailor our approach to assisting them. Our aim is to alleviate student concerns, advance graduate outcomes and enhance the domestic or international student experience.

Background to the Study

The authors, academics in an Education faculty, “disturbed by the poor quality of writing and referencing and incidents of inadvertent plagiarism observed in student assignments”

(Kell & Gregson, 2007, p. 1) applied for and received internal university funding to develop a WebCT based online tutorial. The philosophy underpinning development of the modules is that education is better than punishment. We would prefer students to learn about academic writing and referencing rather than being penalised for poor or inaccurate work.

Get it! Write

Get it! Write is a tutorial providing students with practical, accessible advice and activities to guide their academic writing. Students are introduced to the tutorial at the beginning of each semester and are able to access it freely to help them develop academic writing and APA referencing skills. It is currently free to all students studying education at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and is available on the same online platform as their coursework. At the time the research was conducted it consisted of 10 self-paced modules.

Each of the modules can be used independently or as part of a whole and students may enter or exit the program at any time, allowing them to practice skills as often as they desire. The structure of each module is similar. Each addresses a central theme followed by practical examples and templates.

Student Cohort and Patterns of Study

About 2500 domestic and international students study education (early childhood, primary and secondary) at UWS. Of these students about one third completed their undergraduate qualifications outside Australia and in a language other than English. The term international student has a particular meaning in this study. None of the students were studying under exchange arrangements. All students who have an undergraduate degree earned overseas are immigrants or have resident status in Australia.

All students preparing to teach in the primary and secondary school sectors complete an eighteen-month (or 12-month intensive) masters degree. The primary and secondary teaching courses offered at UWS are coursework-only, professional degrees. Students from these programs participated in the research. The only time that majority of students come together is during orientation activities at the beginning of each semester. Data for the study reported in this paper were collected from the cohort commencing in February 2007.

Research Design

This study used a mixed methods approach to data collection. Quantitative data was collected on several occasions during 2007. At a lecture during orientation students were introduced to *Get it! Write* and were invited to attend “hands on” workshops in a computer laboratory in the first few weeks of semester. From this exercise three forms quantitative data were collected:

- an evaluative survey was completed by students in the introductory lectures;

- pre- and post-session surveys were completed by students who attended practical workshops; and
- an online survey was completed at the end of the semester by students.

Qualitative data were collected from:

- a focus group of 10 students studying primary and secondary education who did not attend workshops; and
- individual telephone interviews with five students who attended workshops.

All interview questions were open ended and students were not asked to disclose if they had engaged in plagiarism. The interviews were audio tape-recorded but not fully transcribed. Field notes were used to draw out themes that formed the basis of analysis. Data from the interviews reinforced and triangulated data from the surveys.

Participant Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit all students for participation in this study. As participation was voluntary some students attending the introductory lecture declined. Students studying education subjects at UWS were invited via the School's web site, or the online platform, or at lectures and tutorials to participate in the online survey. Students who attended workshops were approached individually via e-mail. Again all participation was voluntary. In all cases students were informed about the research and asked to give written consent for their participation. During orientation 334 students studying primary (n = 171) or secondary (n = 163) education responded to the initial survey. This cohort included students who gained their undergraduate degrees in the UK and Canada as well as India, Bangladesh, and Fiji (10% of primary and 8.5% of secondary students indicated that they had gained their first degree outside Australia). The importance of this range is that some "international" students studied for their degree in English.

Data Analysis

In a multi-staged process that allows cross-interrogation of both qualitative and quantitative data (Burns, 1994; Kumar, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994) all of the survey and interview data were sorted independently, coded, and categorised to establish themes and provided "a comprehensive picture of [the students'] experiences" (Aronson, 1994, paragraph 7). This approach enables researchers to focus on one or more aspects revealed in the quantitative data and explore them through targeted qualitative data. Since a range of data was collected, this paper will concentrate on the characteristics of students who reported that they found academic writing and referencing difficult.

Findings

Analysis of data from both cohorts indicates that the percentage of students who find academic writing difficult is significantly higher than the percentage of students whose first degree was obtained outside Australia (see Table 1). It is apparent that the ability to write in an appropriate academic style is a source of tension for many students who have completed undergraduate degrees in Australia. This finding was unexpected and should lead to enhanced academic teaching practices.

Table 1: Students Who Find Academic Writing Difficult

Program	n = (%)	Total who gained 1 st degree outside Australia
Primary	39 (22.5%)	18 (10%)
Secondary	47 (29%)	14 (8.5%)

Almost 40% of primary students found getting started and organised very difficult or difficult and 30% of students found academic writing and formatting and oral presentations very difficult or difficult. It is interesting that fewer than 20% claim to find referencing in APA very difficult or difficult. This implies that about 80% of students in the primary program feel confident or very confident about referencing. It is impossible to know if this perception is reality for these students although anecdotal evidence from academic staff does not substantiate this claim with regard to the errors found in referencing in student assignments

Secondary students also indicate that academic writing is difficult for more than those students whose first degree was not in English. The secondary students have concerns about getting started and planning their work, are reasonably confident about interpreting the question or task but find note taking, reading and writing very difficult or difficult. Although a greater percentage of secondary students than primary reported that referencing was difficult, the majority of students express confidence in being able to accurately reference. The same comments about reality apply to this cohort.

Does Degree Matter?

Comparing results from the survey and demographic data students across programs indicated a wide range of undergraduate degrees such as law, business, nursing, music, recreational therapy, arts, psychology and a range of mathematics and science. We grouped these in to four generic fields, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Generic Undergraduate Degree Fields of Students Who Report Academic Writing as Very Difficult or Difficult

	Secondary	Primary
Science	28	13
Arts	12	18
Performance/Drama	7	0
Business	0	8

For students in the secondary program there is a strong correlation between those who have an undergraduate degree in the maths/science area and difficulty with academic writing. This aligns with the students' comments indicating that they were rarely required to submit pieces of extended writing in their undergraduate degree.

The correlation for primary students is a little less clear. While about one third of the students who found academic writing difficult had an undergraduate degree in the maths/science field, almost half had an arts degree. This is a puzzling finding which we are at a loss to explain since achieving an arts degree requires deep reading, critical thinking and extended writing. Perhaps the reason is that some students who have graduated with an arts degree have taken a major that does not have these characteristics.

How Useful was *Get it! Write*?

This section examines at the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the online survey, the focus group, and the interviews with students who attended *Get it! Write* workshops. Since there was no requirement that students participating in this phase of the study had actually used *Get it! Write* some data are from students who did not use the tutorial.

The Online Survey and Focus Group

Of the 25 students who completed the online survey, 6 did not have English as their first language. The majority (20), including those 6, had accessed the *Get it! Write* site during the year.

In general students found *Get it! Write* was a good or very good resource. As one of the students noted, "I have learned everything about writing assignments and referencing from *Get it! Write*" (E). Others found specific aspects important. "It provided the important tips one needs when writing a form of literature such as definition of key words in questions as well as the blue print in terms of structuring your literature" (G).

There were several comments about the usefulness of Module 8 (Referencing) as, e.g., "The *Get it! Write* website helped with APA referencing, which I had not used prior to

this course” (VG). One student directly related his/her undergraduate experiences with *Get it! Write*:

During my undergraduate degree I used many forms of referencing depending on the unit or discipline I was writing in (such as history). I therefore, with a simple style guide given to me, was able to adapt to the use of the APA style of referencing very easily. (DNU)

Not all students found *Get it! Write* useful. One student comment that he/she did not know how to access the site and another commented that navigation was too difficult: “It is very difficult to navigate — you are forced to jump through hoops to get to the information you want or need” (P). Other students commented on the clear structure and detailed examples provided on the site. Another student who was a confident writer was happier using a monograph guide to APA.

Students in the focus group found other problems with *Get it! Write*. Several reported that the advice on referencing conflicted with what their lecturers *believed* was accurate APA. Others found that there was so much information on the site that they were spending time on it which they felt should be allocated to actually writing assignments.

Individual Interviews

Students who were interviewed individually were able to respond fully and independently without being influenced by the comments of others, as may happen in a focus group. The seven students interviewed had a greater understanding of *Get it! Write* than the majority of other student as a result of attending a hands-on workshop. Two female students had a first degree from a country other than Australia.

These students had accessed *Get it! Write* between 5 and 20 times over the year and rated it very good to excellent. This comment from a student whose first degree was not in English summed up the value that students saw in *Get it! Write*:

It has been more than ten years after I have got my first degree. I have not done many essay writing for a long period of time. I was worried about how to write the assignments. . . Before I did my first assignment, I read all the modules in *Get It! Write*. The languages and formats the program uses are very easy to understand. I follow all the steps. Even though I get a pass, my confidence has built up. When I do my second assignment, I went back to Get It Write, and went through the areas I didn’t do well in my first assignment. I did better in my second assignment. I feel confident about writing assignments now because I know that I can always get help from *Get it! Write* program if I have problems about essay writing. (F)

Asked the value of the workshops, all comments were favourable, ranging from developing confidence in breaking down the questions (GA) and definitions of key terms (SA) to learning the importance of time management (SG). Unlike students who had not

attended workshops, these students found *Get it! Write* easier to access and navigate if they were competent computer users.

In terms of developing their skills most students who attended a workshop noted an improvement in their results. AJ found there was a distinct improvement between semester 1 and semester 2. He felt he had gained confidence in accurate referencing: “I was able to synthesise and analyse information better.” He attributes this to *Get it! Write*.

Discussion

Quantitative and qualitative data provides a student perspective of *Get it! Write*. Although the initial design drew heavily on research that characterised students who have not studied in the dominant language as poor academic writers and major plagiarisers, the research indicates that many students find academic writing difficult. This is exacerbated if students have qualifications in disciplines that have a mathematics or science base.

The evidence is that *Get it! Write* can be a useful and important tool for students, under certain circumstances. Most students are introduced to *Get it! Write* by means of a lecture during orientation. This is a busy time for students when they are inundated with new ideas and new protocols and are forced to make decisions about study program options. The realities of organising, preparing, writing, and referencing assignments probably pale into insignificance when students are trying to arrange time schedules around study, work and families. So, it is not surprising that some students do not understand the significance of the initial lecture.

Evidence from students who attend a subsequent hands-on workshop indicated that these students access *Get it! Write* more often, find it more useful, and are able to achieve higher marks for their assignments. None of them used all the modules but all of them return to the modules they find most useful. They rate *Get it! Write* more highly than students who did not attend a workshop.

Get it! Write is not compulsory nor should it be. However, some of the difficulties students had can be ameliorated to make the tutorial more student-friendly. For example, the site can be easier to navigate and more examples, one feature that students really liked, can be incorporated.

Many students, especially those in the focus group, commented on the tensions they saw between the demands of their lecturers and the information given on *Get it! Write*. This is not so much a problem of the design of the tutorial but the way other academics understand it. The evidence from this study is that academic staff need as much education as students.

Conclusions

We thought we were writing a tutorial for the few students who were struggling with academic writing. Researching student response to *Get it! Write* indicated that it is not just students who are learning in a second, third or fourth language who struggle. Assuming that particular students will find academic writing difficult is erroneous and creates stereotypes in the minds of academics. In many ways this knowledge has strengthened the *raison d'être* and validity of a tutorial such as *Get it! Write*. The philosophy underpinning *Get it! Write* is evident in student's positive responses. They see it as a tool for developing their skills. It also provides them with a basis for discussing issues of writing and referencing with their lecturers. Most important it provides an opportunity for teaching rather than penalising.

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Robyn Gregson has been employed at the University of Western Sydney for 10 years. She completed a doctorate in science literacy and has been teaching in primary and secondary master's courses in science, literacy, pedagogy and special education. Research interests include engagement in science and scientific literacy. Of greatest significance is the Australian Federal Government report *Motivation and Engagement for Boys: Evidence Based Practices* (2006) published on the DEST website. She collaborated with Marilyn Kell to develop and prepare a web-based program that assists tertiary students with the successful preparation of assignments. She is currently editing two books on literacy and science education while continuing her work with schools and teachers to develop engaging programs of literacy and science.