

Plagiarism, cut-and-paste etc

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Students are often uncertain about how much use they can make of sources and how they should flag their use of them. Plagiarism is a nasty business, and students don't like being accused of it. And tutors do not like to have to deal with it. What can we do? One thing we can do is clear up a few misunderstandings, and it always helps to keep an eye on our long-term aims.

As usual, the way to understand a situation is to go back to basics. The question only ever arises with courseworks (the situation is clear in an exam!) so we have to ask ourselves what coursework is for.

Here there is the first of many possibilities of misunderstanding. Coursework is an opportunity to monitor the student's progress. That's what it's for. If the tutors can see a representative sample of what is going through the student's head, then they know how to help.

False Pride

Some students find it hard to admit that they don't understand things, and this makes them backward in coming forward. Altho' intellectually almost all students know that their tutors are there to provide help, a surprising number of students think that they should be trying to impress their tutors rather than going to them for help. This means that they strive to convey in their coursework a picture of their current understanding that is as *rosy* as possible rather than one that is as *accurate* as possible. Students in this mindset tend to think "Well, if they want an explanation of (as it might be) wombats, then how can I do better than use the explanation in the course materials or the textbook?" The point is not that the tutor wants to see a correct explanation of wombats, they want *your* explanation of wombats, beco's it is *you* they are trying to help. (If all they wanted was to see a correct explanation of wombats they could write one themselves: if they couldn't do that they wouldn't be there!)

I don't like seeing students' energies—which should be expended on learning—being side-tracked into attempts to impress their tutors. When students are being side-tracked like that the system isn't working properly.

Incentives

Another thing that can go wrong if students do not realise that coursework is their-and-our way of monitoring their progress is that—if coursework is not compulsory—many students will simply not submit any. This does mean that the tutors have less to do (yipee!), but it also means that problems can go undetected and that avoidable problems do not get avoided. This is not in the students' interest!

It might seem odd that students would not avail themselves of a vital support structure, but it's but true: some seem to require an additional incentive. This incentive could be chocolate, access to fast cars, drugs etc, but the usual incentive given is marks, in the form of credit towards a final assessment for the course.

This sounds as if it ought to be a good thing. Indeed it might seem to have extra advantages beyond the provision of incentives, since there are plenty of students that get alarmed by exams and do not give of their best in them; an arrangement that gives credit for coursework makes their life easier. That's on top of providing the—apparently necessary—incentive to the students as a whole. What's wrong with that?

The drawback is twofold. For one thing it reinforces the tendency of some students (mentioned above) to try to paint a rosy picture rather than an accurate one. It also encourages *all* students to mistakenly think that the primary purpose of course work is to rack up marks towards a final assessment. It's a confusion of ends and means.

What I have been describing so far is really just a kind of under-use of resources that results in waste of tutors' and students' time. But there is worse to come. The fact that courseworks attract marks which count towards the final assessment mean that students have an incentive to pass off the work of others as their own work, and thereby obtain marks they haven't earned. This is worse than inefficient: it is dishonest. It's just the same as cheating in the end-of-module exam. It defrauds the university and through it the students who have not cheated. Honest students deserve to have the credibility of their qualifications protected. Since protecting the value of the qualifications we issue is of paramount importance, it is hardly surprising that the punishment for cheating is severe.

The ambiguity

Sadly we use the word 'plagiarism' for both phenomena: not only the painting-of-rosy-pictures but the actual out-and-out-cheating. It is because of this dual use of the word that students often become indignant when told that they have been committing plagiarism. If you have been trying to put on a good show and make your coursework look as good as possible (you probably take pride in your work after all) you probably won't take kindly to someone using a word that makes it sound as if you were being dishonest.

(My personal preference would be for coursework to be used exclusively for

monitoring and feedback, and not to attract marks that count for credit towards the final assessment. I think it's probably clear from the forgoing why I think this. I want all my interactions with my students to be interactions in which i am trying to help them, not interactions in which I am trying to detect or forestall wrongdoing. I want to be a teacher not a policeman. However I am enough of a realist to know what the obstacles to this ideal world are.)

How not be be accused of plagiarism

People with no dishonest intent can nevertheless find themselves accused of plagiarism if they are trying in their coursework to paint a *rosy* picture rather than an *accurate* one. So the way to avoid all misunderstandings is to make sure that what you write down is not something-you-can-quote-but-have-not-made-your-own, but a clear picture of your understanding. If you remember what the primary purpose of coursework is, and use it for that purpose, you will be helping us to help you and you will not get embroiled in any misunderstandings.