

# WHY THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL FOR THE PLAGIARISM POLICE

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This paper highlights two related developments that are seen as doing profound damage to the UK education system: the increasing propensity to test students (including schoolchildren) on what they have not been taught, and the growth in the number and activity of people who are policing plagiarism. Both developments are taking reasoning out of learning. Because coursework is treated as a test – which teachers are required to police – rather than a vehicle for learning, students are not schooled in marshalling evidence and drawing reasoned conclusions from it, while the activities of the plagiarism police – especially in higher education – place a premium on the cataloguing of sources as opposed to reasoning from them.

Underlying these two developments there appears to be a centrally-promoted ideological presumption that ideas should be treated as property, as possessions that have an owner. Not only does this presumption have no foundation in English law: it is in fundamental opposition to the principle of free and democratic exchange that both education – in its true sense – and the internet embody. Taken together, the two developments have a remarkable resemblance to Margaret Thatcher's poll tax, a wilful aberration that was bound to end in tears.

There has to be a better way! It is suggested that all teaching materials and all student writings that gain a pass grade or better should be posted on the web (the date of posting would be registered and the authors could use aliases if they wished) and made freely available to everyone under a Creative Commons licence. The web would be flooded with free essays. To test a student's understanding of a topic he or she could be asked to analyse and critique an unique handful of these essays and teaching materials, and synthesize them into an essay of their own. Learning would be – as it should – a matter of gaining, assimilating and building on knowledge and ideas from any source. Teachers could go back to teaching. And essay sellers and the plagiarism police would go out of business. Bravo!

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Part 1: TESTING WITHOUT TEACHING

*WRITING MATTERS*: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In March 2006 the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) published a report entitled *Writing Matters: The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education*.<sup>1</sup> This report stems from the experience of the RLF's Fellowship Scheme, now in its seventh year. Under this scheme, which began in 1999, 130 professional writers of repute – all of them published authors – have worked in more than 70 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. They have taken on the task of helping students across the range of disciplines to develop their essay-writing skills, primarily by means of one-to-one tutorials. The report notes that

it became increasingly apparent that [the Fellows] were all facing the same [problem]: **large numbers of students, often very bright, who hadn't the foggiest notion how to write. They had never been taught how to do it**, and so the conventions of discursive prose were either alien or unknown to them.<sup>2</sup>

*[The bold typeface in this and other extracts denotes the present author's emphasis.]*

Fellows consistently found that students are arriving at university without the basic skills which make coherent written work possible:

This is no longer a problem affecting a few, to be dealt with peripherally by special needs units or specially-timetabled remedial classes. **In many places ... the cohorts arriving to start their degrees will have a preponderance of students who are afflicted to a disabling degree by inadequate writing skills.** The problem is not confined to the newer universities; it is being noticed a little more each year in the older ones too.<sup>3</sup>

Lacking basic skills, students inevitably find themselves in difficulty:

To put the problem simply, an inability to employ the resources of written language means that a student cannot function properly. Meagre vocabulary, slack phrasing, tortured syntax, incompetent punctuation: these degrade the work the student is doing ... **Students with both high and low attainments are frequently innocent of rudimentary notions of 'how to write'. Once again the same phrase echoes in the room: 'No-one ever showed me how to do this.'**<sup>4</sup>

Students who are not communicating properly are not thinking properly, since writing skills form such an essential part of the process of thought for most of us. In the experience of many RLF Fellows, students are often more articulate as speakers than as writers. This indicates that native linguistic vigour and inventiveness [are] blunted when the writing process occurs. Writing, which should facilitate expression, is instead blocking it.<sup>5</sup>

The report comments that many institutions seem to have failed to acknowledge sufficiently the need to manage the transition from school to university:

**It seems generally assumed that all students are in the same boat, that writing is easy, and that if staff learned how to do it themselves without help, then students should learn in the same way. [The] apparent reluctance [of institutions] to accept that writing can be taught, and that incapacity is not unusual, can destroy young people's confidence. This is made worse if students suddenly see their undergraduate essays marked more harshly than their school essays. There are many other kinds of institutional expectation (diverging even within the same institution) that create confusion and uncertainty among students about what their teachers want from them. The basic challenge of an essay – to write the answer to a question – is far more complex than it appears for young people who are given little help or guidance.<sup>6</sup>**

**Fellows are confronted on a daily basis by students who are struggling not just with their essay-writing skills but also with understanding the nature of the required exercise and how to formulate a coherent intellectual response to it. Often this begins with problems in understanding the question. ...<sup>7</sup>**

**[T]he efforts of students are often thwarted because their departments have not made their expectations clear. First-year students may not be able properly to understand the question, and when they do, they are unclear about the criteria they must meet in order to achieve good grades. They feel that the key to success lies not in producing a well-structured and well-written piece but in complying with some mysterious, tacit code which they cannot access. This often leads them to attempt to write at a higher academic register than that in which they feel comfortable: they imitate their tutors and/or the academic books and papers they read, and when this imitation happens without full comprehension, without the broad and deep knowledge of the subject which their models have attained, and without experience at writing, the result is ill-digested, pompous prose and a yawning gap between the standard the tutor expects and the work the student can offer.<sup>8</sup>**

This situation helps to foster fear and anxiety in the minds of many students:

**[S]tudents often say that writing is a primary source of fear when it comes to choosing a course; and exams, which also require writing, are another focus of fear.<sup>9</sup>**

**Anxiety is at the heart of many of the problems students experience with their writing. Some of them have not been asked to write an essay or its equivalent for years and few have ever been told how to do it in the first place. Added to that, they arrive on their course uncertain about their place in the new context, faced suddenly with the need to take personal responsibility for their studies, and bewildered by the apparently hyper-**

**intellectual things they're reading and lectures they're hearing. Unfamiliar with academic writing styles, [which] they seek to emulate but without guidance, their writing only worsens. The result is that many of them feel insecure and see that insecurity as evidence that they don't belong in higher education. In short, they feel stupid.**<sup>10</sup>

The report draws attention to a possible connection between poor writing skills and plagiarism:

**Not all students who plagiarise do so because their writing and communication skills are poor. But a significant number of those who find the pressure of writing an essay too much for them may be tempted to cheat. Ensuring help with essay planning and structure for every student who needs such help is a far more practical and cheaper solution. While it will not solve the problem of plagiarism, it may present a more meaningful solution for students struggling to keep up.**<sup>11</sup>

The authors ask whether the root of the problem of poor writing might lie in the very different ways of using language that are normal with a generation coming to educational life in the era of the internet, the video game, the music video, the mobile phone and the text message:

The lives of most young people are dominated by these media. And the domination extends far beyond their leisure time. Their consciousness, their learning, their ways of taking hold of the world, are all subject to the power of the Web and its protocols, in ways that sometimes make those of an earlier intellectual formation uneasy.<sup>12</sup>

The report identifies the 'download culture' as – in the opinion of many RLF Fellows – contributing to

**one of the most frequent shortcomings exhibited by student writers: an unfamiliarity with the discursive mode, a lack of fluency and freedom in written exercises, especially when writing at some length. Creating a living, organic whole is not the same as cutting and pasting blocks of text. The mental movement involved in negotiating the internet, passing from hyperlink to hyperlink, is fundamentally different from the linear progression of the old-fashioned essay or trawl through the library stacks. Many students find it difficult to work their way around a book and its index and source notes. The failure of so many to grasp the point about plagiarism is a by-product of this kind of information-acquisition culture in which plagiarism, rather than a guilty secret, can be seen as a good piece of pragmatic problem-solving: 'I need to fill this space and, look, here is the stuff.'**<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

To sum up: There are numerous features of the student experience in HEIs that give grounds for concern:

- Students are embarking on degree courses without having been taught writing skills.
- Once they have started their courses they are expected to be able to write but are not being taught how to do so.
- Students are confused and uncertain about what their teachers want from them.
- Students are not taught how to understand and interpret questions they are set, nor how to formulate coherent intellectual responses to them. Nor do they comprehend the criteria that their work must meet in order to achieve good grades.
- Students fail to achieve success because the requirements for achieving it are a mystery to them.
- The requirement to write is a source of insecurity, anxiety and fear to many students.
- Students are not helped to overcome the difficulty that many experience in 'working their way' around a book and its index and source notes.

The cumulative consequence of these features of the student experience is that students in effect find themselves involuntarily playing in a game the rules and scoring system of which they do not know; a game, moreover, for which they do not have the proper equipment. Being tested on what they have not been taught is but one very obvious aspect of this game.

From this perspective, plagiarism by students can be seen as an expression of resistance to the confusing and disorienting situation in which they find themselves.

POOR FEEDBACK = POOR TEACHING = POOR LEARNING
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The RLF Fellows found students to be confused and uncertain about what their teachers wanted from them in terms of written work. While many teachers and departments do provide 'guidelines' of some kind, it is questionable how useful these are to a student sitting down to write an essay. For example, guidelines might tell a student that an essay will fail if the question is not properly understood, there are gross inaccuracies and inconsistencies, relevant issues are not identified, a poor range of material is covered, and/or the essay is badly organized. In my experience, gained through one-to-one work with nearly 1500 students over the past seven years, general guidelines such as these do not actually help students to understand the question, avoid gross inaccuracies and inconsistencies, identify relevant issues,

cover a good range of material, and organize their essay well. They are too abstract, too unspecific, for students to be able to relate them to the job in hand.

What students need, if they are to take in the significance of the guidelines and learn to improve, is 'feedback' on their work. Giving feedback is potentially one of the best ways of teaching, because the comments can be targeted directly to the issues raised by that particular student's approach, and students who have engaged with a topic are able to see the relevance of those comments and make use of them. However, in 1997 the Dearing Committee commissioned a survey of students which revealed that 'fewer than half ... were satisfied with the feedback they got from staff about their work'.<sup>14</sup>

I know of no evidence that matters have improved since then. Indeed, the increase in teachers' workload in the past decade, together with pressure to use a systematic framework for marking, appears to have given rise to a 'tick the box' approach to marking, with a concomitant reduction in specifically targeted comments. Less feedback means less teaching. Essay writing is increasingly a test for students rather than a means of learning.

There are also questions to be asked about the use that is made of dissertation work. A dissertation project can be a valuable means of learning, enabling a student to explore a subject in depth. If the student is given a supervisor who takes an interest in his or her project, provides guidance as it progresses, and comments on a first draft of the dissertation itself, they benefit from a stream of feedback that teaches them how to carry out and write up a dissertation project. If, on the other hand, the dissertation is treated as nothing more than an examination sat in one's own time, with the project carried out over the summer, when teachers/supervisors are not around, students are not taught how to do a dissertation project and write it up. Once again, they are tested on what they have not been taught.

#### EXAMS: TESTING SKILLS THAT HAVEN'T BEEN TAUGHT

Unseen examinations in higher education appear to me to have undergone a gradual but profound change over the past two or three decades: they have become a test of candidates' ability to decode and interpret the question, rather than a test of their knowledge of the subject.

As exam time approaches, the refrain 'You must answer the question' is increasingly drilled into students by their teachers. An inspection of recent past exam papers, especially in the humanities and social sciences, reveals serious difficulties in discovering and deciding precisely what the question *is*, what it is that the examiners want candidates to do. Occasionally difficulty is experienced because the question is a subtle one: much more often, however, the cause of difficulty is that the question is very open and/or confusingly worded. (As it happens, while much has been heard over the years of the decline in students' writing abilities, I have noticed a marked

decline over the years in the ability of examiners to compose exam questions and essay topics in clear, straightforward, grammatical English, and especially to punctuate them properly.)

Here are some examples:

- A very common format for exam questions is that they state a proposition and instruct the candidate: 'Discuss.' In my experience it is almost unheard of for students to be taught what to do – e.g. by demonstrating with worked examples – when they see this instruction.
- Some questions are ambiguous. Questions that allow different interpretations force candidates to spend time playing word games and to risk failing not because they lack knowledge and understanding of the subject but because they chose the wrong interpretation. The skill of dealing with ambiguity is not taught.
- Some questions are ungrammatical and/or incorrectly punctuated. Frequently examiners fail to use quotation marks to distinguish material that candidates are invited to challenge from material that they are expected to take as given. When this isn't done, candidates don't know what is expected of them, and are unsettled, which distresses them while serving no academic purpose whatever. Again, students are not taught how to deal with such questions.
- Some questions have unnecessarily complicated and convoluted instructions. Questions beginning 'Discuss how far you agree that the question is not whether ...' and 'To what extent can it be argued ...?' exemplify this category. Not only do such questions confuse candidates: they are usually positively misleading, since they do not – when teased out – correspond to what the examiners actually want candidates to do. I know of no instance where teachers teach students how to make sense of complicated and convoluted instructions.
- In the social sciences and humanities, some examiners make liberal use of colloquial language – e.g. 'Does it matter that ...?' – and metaphors. This does not test anyone's ability to think like a social scientist, historian or whatever, and is particularly confusing for candidates whose first language is not English. Students are not taught how to 'operationalize' colloquial language and metaphors, to translate the question into a form that they can use their specialist knowledge and understanding to answer. Consequently yet again they are being tested on what they have not been taught.

In short, in some subjects today exams don't test candidates' knowledge and intellect so much as their ability to play the game of reading the examiner's mind. And this is a skill that is not taught. Candidates find themselves playing a game where they haven't been told what the rules are.



COURSEWORK IN SCHOOLS: FOR TESTING, NOT TEACHING
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What's going on in schools? At the present time concern is being expressed about three aspects of 'pre-higher' education in the UK: (1) Increasing numbers of school-leavers entering university with writing ability below the level required for them to benefit from higher education; (2) Pupils who are doing coursework receiving undue assistance from teachers and parents; and (3) Plagiarism by pupils who are doing coursework.

Concern about the writing ability of entrants to university is widespread and well-attested to by the RLF report's comment, cited above, that Fellows found themselves facing 'large numbers of students, often very bright, who hadn't the foggiest notion how to write. They had never been taught how to do it ...'.<sup>15</sup>

How has this situation come about? School pupils have to do a lot of coursework these days, and that necessarily involves writing. Aren't they taught how to write up the projects they are expected to carry out? The answer to this question appears to be 'No', and a thoughtful paper published in March 2006 by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) explains why. It notes that examination coursework was originally (i.e. in the 1980s) intended to be work carried out during the course itself:

For example, the early requirements for examination coursework in English Literature were for assessments by teachers of pieces of work produced during the course of study across a range of genres, periods, etc. – work which arose naturally as part of the study of literature over two years. This approach leads to a wide range of work being produced and assessed and requires significant professional participation in standardising and moderating the work.<sup>16</sup>

Now, however, coursework has become 'an additional examination requirement in terms of an extended essay or project':

Between the 1980s and the present day, coursework has changed its nature and the perception of it has changed equally. Concerns expressed, but never justified with substantial evidence, about the extent to which the original approach involved trusting in the professionalism of teachers, led policy makers to seek increasing amounts of control over the nature of the work assessed and direct moderation of the marks awarded.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the role of coursework has been changed. Instead of a vehicle for learning, policymakers have transformed it into a vehicle for testing. The AQA paper spells out some of the effects:

The consequence is the situation we now have where a more formulaic and controlled approach leads to less motivation for students and more of a sense of burden for teachers. **The very tight definition of the coursework which**

**candidates have to do facilitates plagiarism and other practices which are now causing such concern.** [My emphasis.]

In essence, the historical attempt to reduce risks relating to teacher professionalism by increasing amounts of control, has created different risks relating to the authentication of coursework as the work of the students themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Many teachers want to do their best for their students, and seem to have resisted this change in the use and role of coursework, from learning experience to examination requirement. An investigation carried out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 2005 found that

Most teachers in the sample treated coursework as a method of formative assessment until the deadline date was reached, whereupon the same piece of work was treated as an item for summative assessment. This is perfectly understandable, but demonstrates the need for awarding bodies to give much clearer direction on the nature of activities permitted during the developmental phase, and to be more specific about the transition from development to final assessment.<sup>19</sup>

The response to this perceived need for 'clearer direction' was a leaflet published by the QCA in March 2006, *Authenticating coursework: a teacher's guide*, which contains 'advice on how to check that the work is the candidate's own independent work',<sup>20</sup> and a notice *Plagiarism in Examinations: Guidance for Teachers/Assessors* produced by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). This says:

If you are a teacher or assessor entering candidates for a qualification with a coursework component, you must accept the obligation to authenticate the work which is submitted for assessment. You must confirm that the work produced is solely that of the candidate concerned.<sup>21</sup>

What the JCQ and QCA are effectively aiming to do with these guides is to conscript teachers into the plagiarism police. One would have no objection to this at all if the purpose were simply to identify cases where text had been 'lifted' – whether in its original form or paraphrased – and passed off as the candidate's own: this is clearly not permissible, and the prevention and detecting of such 'passing off' has always been well understood by teachers and pupils to be part of the former's role.

But the JCQ in particular is going much further. The JCQ's Guidance for Teachers/Assessors defines 'plagiarism' as 'The failure to acknowledge sources properly and/or the submission of another person's work as if it were the candidate's own' but goes on to say: 'A strict interpretation of the term "work" would include the original ideas, as well as the actual words or artefacts produced by another.'<sup>22</sup> This seems intended to inhibit teachers from offering ideas to pupils or making comments on pupils' work that arise out of their own ideas, although many teachers have always done this; indeed, they are conditioned by their vocation and temperament to do so.

The JCQ and QCA, as part of their crusade against plagiarism, have also been issuing warnings to children and parents. The JCQ has produced a *Notice to Candidates* which deals with coursework and plagiarism in GCE, GCSE and other exams. It tells pupils: 'Coursework provides you with an opportunity to do some independent research into a topic' and warns them 'If you copy the words or ideas of others and don't show your sources in references and a bibliography, you will be committing plagiarism – and that's cheating.'<sup>23</sup> At the same time the QCA has produced a leaflet *Coursework: a guide for parents*.<sup>24</sup> This is intended for the parents of children who are completing GCSEs or A levels. It follows a question-and-answer format. Here are some excerpts:

*What is coursework?*

... Coursework is an excellent way for students to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have gained throughout a course. ...Students are encouraged to use research sources such as textbooks, encyclopaedias, journals, TV, radio and the internet.

*What rules do students have to follow?*

**Coursework must be a student's own original work**, and they will have to sign a declaration saying that the work is their own. ... [My emphasis.]

*How can I help my child?*

You can encourage your child to spend time on their coursework, do it well, hand it in on time and stick to the rules. This, along with providing a quiet place to study, will help them to achieve their best.

*How much can the teachers or I help?*

Teachers can provide guidance on what should be included in coursework projects. They can also explain what they will be looking for when they are marking the project. But the teacher cannot tell students how to do the work – **the point of coursework is for your son or daughter to work independently**. [My emphasis.]

You can encourage your child to do well, discuss the project with them and provide access to resource materials. You must not put pen to paper – you must not help with the coursework.

The JCQ's notice to candidates and the QCA's guide for parents support the AQA's observation, noted above, that the role of coursework has changed in a major way since the 1980s. No longer is it used primarily to enrich the learning process, with students working under the watchful eye of the teacher and being steered along their path. Its main use is now as a means of testing pupils, as the stress on 'original work' and '[doing] independent research', and the statement that 'the point is to work independently', make clear.

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What's missing from the official publications is any indication that pupils could or should be *taught* how to do coursework and write it up. The QCA's and JCQ's suggestion to 'use the internet/world wide web' is trite: to make good use of the web requires knowledge of search engines and how to select the one best suited to your needs, of what to do when your first try yields 1 million possibilities, of how to assess the reliability of the information you find, and more. But none of the official literature suggests, let alone requires, that this be part of the curriculum. It is noteworthy that the QCA tells parents that coursework is an excellent way for students to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have *gained*, not the skills and knowledge they have been *taught*.

The notion that children can just 'do' original work and independent research would be laughable if it were not so tragically misguided. In higher education, it is taken for granted that students undertaking research need courses in research methods. And even the University of London Regulations for the MPhil degree do not stipulate that the thesis must be based on original work. Yet the QCA and JCQ are expecting schoolchildren – *children!* – to do and write up original work and independent research unaided. The mind boggles! And the consequence is that pupils, some of them still in primary school, are being tested and examined on skills they haven't actually been taught and that even adults need careful instruction to master.

In these circumstances one might feel justified in taking a more charitable view than the authorities do of plagiarism by pupils and 'illicit' help by parents. If parents see their children about to be examined on what they have not been taught, if they see teachers keeping their distance rather than involving themselves in pupils' project work and writing, and especially if they have a sense that their children are caught up in a system that has no discernible educational rationale, they may well feel that fair play calls for them to redress the disadvantage their children are under by giving them unofficial help. It is hard not to have some sympathy with them.

## Part 2: THE PLAGIARISM POLICE

### TAKEN FOR GRANTED: PLAGIARISM IS RATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

The extracts from *Writing Matters* cited above contain numerous references to the state of mind of students whom the RLF Fellows saw. Students were encountered who were struggling with understanding the nature of the required exercise and how to formulate a coherent intellectual response to it, having problems in understanding the question, unclear about the criteria on which they were graded, feeling that the key to success lay in complying with some mysterious, tacit code which they could not access, experiencing writing as a source of fear, and feeling insecure, out of place, and stupid.

Similar references are found elsewhere. Lynn Errey cites an international postgraduate student:

When I get nervous about writing up my thoughts in poor English even when I know the subject okay I can't think. So I use other people's words.<sup>25</sup>

And a recent item in *Online Scene*, published by Southampton University Students Union, adds a corroborative piece to the jigsaw:

Plagiarism! Every student attempting to write an essay has the word ringing in their ears. It provokes the same fear in everyone whether you're a first year or you're writing your dissertation.<sup>26</sup>

The fear and bafflement that surface in these reports are entirely consistent with finding oneself in an Alice-in-Wonderland world where one is tested on what one has not been taught. From this perspective plagiarism can be seen as resembling the action of a drowning man clutching at a straw, and about as rational. Yet, to judge by the language they use, most if not all of the authors of published research and policy documents on plagiarism take it for granted that a student who plagiarizes does so as the outcome of a rational calculation. Thus we find references to students who take '[a] decision to plagiarise',<sup>27</sup> to students 'choosing to carry out plagiarism',<sup>28</sup> to perceptions of 'common reasons for cheating',<sup>29</sup> and to 'reasons' for plagiarism<sup>30</sup>. We also find questions – 'Why do students cheat?'<sup>31</sup> and 'Why do students involve themselves in such activities?'<sup>32</sup> – which again imply that student behaviour is a premeditated act, the outcome of a rational calculation.

There is no shortage in the literature of suggestions for deterring, detecting and dealing with plagiarism, suggestions that are aimed mainly at creating negative motivations and reducing opportunities. But very few of the plagiarism police and others who have written on the subject have paid attention to the emotional state of students and the effect this may have on the extent to which their behaviour conforms to norms of 'rationality'. None has identified the element of 'being tested on what has not been taught' and consequent stress (if not alienation) on the part of students as factors possibly contributing to plagiarism. They have been tinkering with the symptoms of a dysfunctional system, not addressing the causes of the dysfunction.

#### HUMPTY DUMPTY SPEAKS

'When I use a word... it means just what I choose it to mean ...' These immortal words of Humpty Dumpty (as recorded by Lewis Carroll<sup>33</sup>) seem to have been adopted as their motto by the plagiarism police. The consequences are absurd. Not only does a trawl through university regulations and guides issued to students reveal numerous different definitions of the word 'plagiarism' itself:<sup>34</sup> we find the indiscriminate equating of 'plagiarism' with 'cheating' and 'copying', and frequently the failure to say whether by 'copying' is meant reproducing someone else's writing and presenting it as one's own, or merely making a photocopy of it for private study purposes. And

what the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service describes as ‘the TurnitinUK plagiarism detection software’<sup>35</sup> doesn’t actually detect plagiarism: it detects similarities between two pieces of text, which is not the same thing.

Frequently the phenomenon of plagiarism is described using very judgmental language. Here’s an example. Arts students at Glasgow are told: ‘Plagiarism’ means theft of intellectual property: basically, stealing other people’s ideas.<sup>36</sup> This definition gets endorsement from Professor Jean Underwood of Nottingham Trent University, who was been advising the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority on the technical aspects of detecting internet plagiarism, and helping it to develop a detection strategy.<sup>37</sup>

She has recently been reported as saying that children should be taught in school that copying is theft unless they attribute quotations and ideas<sup>38</sup> and has put on record her view that plagiarism is ‘taking someone else’s ideas and claiming personal authorship by copying information ... without clearly referencing the source’.<sup>39</sup>

What’s wrong with this? First, ‘theft’ is defined in English law as follows: ‘A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it ...’<sup>40</sup> Clearly someone who plagiarizes is *not* doing so with the intention of permanently depriving the original author of it. Nor could plagiarism fall under the criminal (as opposed to civil) law, as theft does.

Second, consider this business of ‘stealing other people’s ideas’. The Intellectual Property Team at the UK Patent Office demolishes this notion succinctly and comprehensively. ‘Can ideas be protected by copyright? No. Although the work itself may be protected, the idea behind it is not.’<sup>41</sup> In other words, ideas are not possessions, property that can be owned. And if they can’t be owned, they can’t be stolen.

In short, whatever ‘plagiarism’ may be, it is not theft and it is not the stealing of ideas.

It’s worth adding here that plagiarism experts themselves have a problem with citing ideas. Jude Carroll and Jon Appleton, in their report *Plagiarism: A Good Practice Guide* (sic), acknowledge that some of their suggestions and recommendations

are gleaned from the experience of colleagues or more experienced practitioners, from conversations with a wide range of people at conferences, and from consultations with student representatives ... Where appropriate, sources and research findings are cited but **it has not always been possible to unearth the exact origin of ideas** or to use publicly available sources.<sup>42</sup> [My emphasis]

If plagiarism experts can’t unearth the exact origin of ideas they have used, how can they legitimately expect students to do so?

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A common mantra among the plagiarism police is that students should ‘use their own words’. But given that Professor Underwood and numerous writers of regulations and advice notes for students don’t use their own words with accuracy and consistency, but demonstrate a somewhat slack command of the English language, their qualifications for setting standards for student writing must be open to question.

\* \* \* \* \*

But there’s more to all this than just the use and misuse of language. In more than one sense, the plagiarism police are Thatcher’s children. First, they are presenting themselves as promoting an ethical stance, yet by persistently describing plagiarism as ‘theft’, ‘stealing’ and ‘cheating’ they are revealing themselves to be motivated by anger and resentment, just as Thatcher’s promotion of the poll tax as remedying the unfairness of the council rates which it superseded was revealed in her memoirs to have masked her view that poor people who had benefited from the rebate provisions of the rates system were undeserving, and taking advantage of those provisions.<sup>43</sup>

Second, the plagiarism police are, like Thatcher, apostles of the market. They are promulgating the concept of ideas as possessions that can be owned, indeed the concept of student writings as commodities, as ‘tradable units of intellectual property [“knowledge packets” which have] an exchange value in a system of advancement and certification’, as Lisa Maruca puts it.<sup>44</sup> And their academic audience, as they encounter and become accustomed to that terminology, themselves become conditioned to thinking in those terms. They find themselves buying in to what Maruca calls the ‘turnitin culture’.<sup>45</sup> I return to this point below.

### LAZY CITING

There is more to using and citing a source than presenting a quotation – either directly or in paraphrase – from an original text, and naming its author(s). Good academic practice requires something else too: it requires that the writer make a judgment as to the ‘status’ of the quotation – whether, to give an elementary example, it is a factual statement or an opinion – and inform the reader of it. Thus a writer might use the expression ‘X points out that ...’ when citing a fact, and ‘X feels that ...’ when citing an opinion.

This is important because when we are composing a piece of writing we are doing more than just stringing words together on the page or screen: we are *reasoning*. We are making inferences about the significance of quotations, we are basing meanings on them and conveying those meanings to our readers. If, say, we treat an opinion as a fact, our inferences will be faulty and the meanings that we present will be erroneous. It thus behoves us to be clear about the status of a quotation when we are reasoning from it for ourselves, and clear about it in what we write for others to read.

It follows that academics – indeed, everyone working in HE in a professional capacity – should conform to this practice, meticulously. If students are to learn to do it, it is incumbent on academics to set them an example by doing it in their own writings.

However, many academic writers do not clearly convey the status of quotations they are using. Their citing is lazy. They ‘fudge’ the citation, as one might say. They do this in two ways. One is to use unspecific language in their citation; e.g. ‘X states that ...’, ‘X indicates that ...’, ‘According to X, ...’, and – most objectionably – ‘X argues that ...’ even when X was not putting forward any kind of argument. The other way of fudging a citation is to make a statement and at the end of it place the name of the author(s) in parentheses, like so: ‘(Smith 2004)’. This avoids conveying any indication whatever of the status of the material.

Writers on plagiarism are prone to these malpractices. Here are some examples:

Vigue (1997) points out that there has always been the filing cabinet at the fraternity house where students could swop assignments ... Connors, on the other hand, argues that the Internet has made access to information and to pre-written essays very easy ...<sup>46</sup>

[Park] states that ‘plagiarism is doubtless common and getting more so’ ...<sup>47</sup>

When stresses rise, students see plagiarism as a reasonable and reasonably risk-free way out of difficulties (Bannister and Ashworth, 1998)<sup>48</sup>

Hart and Friesner suggest that studies of cheating behaviour in the USA date from the 1940s ...<sup>49</sup>

Ward (2005) ... argues it is considered important that a culture should have a religious or spiritual dimension, ...<sup>50</sup>

Waldmann states that because all mature professions have a well-developed code of ethics, this should be reflected in the education of the future professional.<sup>51</sup>

The emphasis placed by the plagiarism police on the requirement to catalogue one’s sources distracts the attention of academics and students alike from the crucially important matter of their status and the use one makes of them. In particular, lazy citing as in the above examples does nothing to help students gain the important skill of critical reading. Indeed, it obscures the fact that such a skill can be acquired, and can only encourage students to think that essays should take the form of cobbled-together strings of points rather than a chain of reasoning from question to answer.

#### THE DEMEANING OF MEANING IN THE TURNITIN CULTURE

The Turnitin ‘plagiarism prevention’ technology marketed by iParadigms, LLC, has been adopted by a number of HEIs in the UK. When a paper is submitted to Turnitin it is checked against ‘billions of pages’ from the internet, ‘commercial databases of journal articles and periodicals, and ‘millions of student papers previously submitted



to Turnitin'. It is then returned with an 'originality report' showing any matches with previous material.<sup>52</sup> Only 'the smallest fragments of text' can escape detection.<sup>53</sup>

Thus the material in the paper is placed into one of two categories, original or potentially plagiarized. A student's work is either original or inherently suspect. It is for the recipient of the originality report to determine whether a particular match is a consequence of plagiarism or not.

Ironically, Turnitin is taking millions of previously submitted papers, in each of which the copyright resides with the student author, and – without the freely-given consent of the author – using them to make money. There appears to be some divergence here from the supposedly ethical stance adopted by the plagiarism police. Although the author is not being deprived of his or her work, and no criminal offence has been committed, the terms 'stealing' and 'theft' do rather come to mind. As it happens, these are two terms which Turnitin applies to plagiarism<sup>54</sup> – inaccurately, as pointed out above. Turnitin also muddies the distinction between ideas and the expression of them:

[C]an words and ideas really be stolen? According to U.S. law, the answer is yes. The expression of original ideas is considered intellectual property, and is protected by copyright laws, just like original inventions.<sup>55</sup>

(Original inventions are of course covered by patent laws, not laws of copyright, and the protection of patents lapses after a certain time.)

Maruca has described the attitudes, the 'taken-for-granted' – such as the presumption that student writing is a commodity – and the practices associated with the use of this technology as constituting the 'turnitin culture'.<sup>56</sup> She points out that the very name 'turnitin' creates an association between 'turning in work to be graded [and] turning in ... a criminal violator'.<sup>57</sup> To be a writer is to be a potential criminal. Given the central place that writing occupies in our educational system, in thinking as well as presentation, I find this a very worrying development. It would not take a huge step for the plagiarism police to become the thought police.

Moreover, the culture posits an extreme polarity between originality and potential plagiarism. To ask for 'originality' is to demand an extraordinarily high standard from a student following a taught course and grappling daily with new material. And when the penalty for failing to be original is to be branded a criminal – or to risk being so branded – the world that HEIs have created for students is a nightmare one indeed.

The turnitin culture and technology also cause me two further concerns.

First, we have this exclusive emphasis laid on a physical manifestation, a commodity, the string of words on paper or screen. No mention is made of how quotations have been *used*, of how their status has been assessed, of the part they have played in the writer's chain of reasoning and making of meaning. If a student has been careless in crediting sources but has clearly learned a great deal in the course of writing the

piece and has presented some worthwhile reasoning, in the turnitin culture he or she would nevertheless be treated as a criminal.

Second, the system gives the recipients of 'originality reports' a considerable amount of discretion. There is no guarantee that this discretion will be exercised wisely. If a lecturer puts notes for a lecture on the web, a student who attended the lecture and took in a telling point and later recollects and reproduces it verbatim in an essay without accreditation, could be open to an abusive accusation of plagiarism.

### BETTER RESEARCH NEEDED

There is no shortage of one-off surveys of and investigations into the extent and causes of plagiarizing, but the soundness and value of most of them is questionable. In most cases the questionnaire used is not published; some have asked questions that are capable of being interpreted differently by different respondents; hardly any have explored the emotional state of students who are said to have plagiarized.

And there appears to be no organized monitoring and evaluating of the workings of HEIs' systems for detecting and punishing plagiarism, despite the existence of the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service. Individual institutions keep remarkably quiet about the number and kind of cases that they detect, their distribution among subjects of study and categories of student, the punishments meted out, etc. Dunbar, with the support of the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, has carried out a useful survey of Psychology Departments in UK HEIs, which revealed wide variations in practice,<sup>58</sup> but this approach does not appear to have been replicated for other subjects.

Otherwise what has emerged has usually been snippets of information. Thus Larkham describes six cases of plagiarism at the University of Central England,<sup>59</sup> and the Joint Council for Qualifications briefly summarizes three cases at GCE/GCSE level.<sup>60</sup> The interesting thing about this admittedly small sample is that all involved the 'lifting' of material without attribution from various sources – web pages, books and journals, and fellow students. None involved the 'purloining' of *ideas*.

Last March, the *Daily Telegraph* carried a piece by John Clare, its Education Editor, that began: 'Plagiarism at Oxford appears to be rife ... the university admitted for the first time yesterday.' He cited and quoted from an article in *Oxford Magazine* by Professor John Grafen, senior proctor and Oxford's chief disciplinary officer, who had evidently carried out an investigation of plagiarism.

Prof Grafen ... said the number of students copying other people's work without acknowledgment threatened to undermine the worth of an Oxford degree. ... Although only 10 cases of 'intentional or reckless' plagiarism were detected at Oxford last year, Prof Grafen said the evidence suggested that 'the incidence exceeds the observed events, perhaps by a considerable margin, perhaps by a considerable multiple'.<sup>61</sup>

The following day *The Guardian* website carried a similar story, under the headline 'Plagiarism "rife" at Oxford'. Alexandra Smith reported that Prof Grafen had referred to "the prevalence of simple copying" and said he 'warned the plagiarism problem had become so prevalent at the university that some guilty students had been permanently expelled from the university'.<sup>62</sup>

Prof Grafen took exception to John Clare's use of the word 'rife'. According to the BBC news website, he said: "I would not, and did not, say that plagiarism is 'rife' at Oxford." And: 'He said the university had dealt with just 10 cases out of a total of 17,660 students'.<sup>63</sup>

Whatever the rights and wrongs of this disagreement – perhaps plagiarism at Oxford is not rife but merely prevalent – it illustrates the difficulty of extracting reliable quantifiable information from HEIs.

### Part 3: THE WAY FORWARD

#### WHAT DO TEACHERS REALLY WANT OF STUDENTS?

At the heart of the plagiarism-policing industry there is a paradox. It is this. A major part of published academic writings comprises extracts from and citations of other people's writings, as witness the lengthy bibliographies attached to most academic articles. On the face of it, then, all that students have to do to in order to avoid or rebut an accusation of plagiarism is to cite the sources they've used, not conceal them.

Would their teachers be satisfied if they received essays composed of properly cited quotations and paraphrasings? Almost certainly they would not. Why not? If the quotations are relevant, and the paraphrasings accurate, and both are properly referenced, what is the problem?

Having spent nearly 40 years in academia – as a researcher, teacher, educational developer and student mentor – and having perused a variety of guidelines for students issued by a variety of institutions, I would anticipate getting answers like the following:

- A string of quotations isn't an essay.
- I want my students to show they can read critically, so just quoting isn't good enough.
- I want my students to show they have understood the question, and an essay cobbled together from quotations doesn't show that.

I want my students to show they've done some reasoning of their own. It's not enough for them to parrot someone else's reasoning.

(Interestingly, I cannot imagine getting the answer ‘I want to see if my students are able to use their own words’, or ‘I want to see the source of every quotation cited’. These might be second-order requirements; they aren’t primary ones.)

So what do teachers really want? What they primarily want is to see students demonstrate their ability to interpret questions, to read critically, to find and marshal relevant evidence and draw reasoned conclusions from it, to ‘digest’ and make sense of what they discover in the literature. But, in my experience and that of the RLF Fellows and others, **these skills are not taught to students!**

### REFRAMING THE ISSUE

At the present time huge resources are being devoted to tackling the ‘epidemic’ of plagiarism. It is my conclusion that plagiarism is not the primary issue that we need to tackle; that concern with plagiarism is based on a lack of understanding of how students learn and of the situation in which students find themselves, and is consequently largely misplaced; that the resources currently devoted to policing plagiarism are largely being wasted; and that the activities of the plagiarism police are having a damaging effect on student learning.

It is not plagiarism that is the key issue, but the fact that students – at all levels in the education system – are being tested on their use of skills that they have not been taught. The key issue is: How can teaching and learning in our education system be improved? We can then go on to assess whether, if they were improved, there would be a need for the plagiarism police as presently constituted.

### SYNCHRONIZING TEACHING AND TESTING

Rectifying a situation where students are being tested on skills that they have not been taught implies bringing testing and teaching together, synchronizing them. How can this be done? Where to start?

My impression is that although the examination system badly needs spring-cleaning – examiners need re-educating in order to eradicate convoluted, poorly expressed and badly punctuated questions, which test candidates’ ability to divine the examiners’ meaning, not their subject knowledge and ability – in general examiners are on the right lines in that they are aiming to test candidates’ ability to reason, to marshal relevant evidence and draw reasoned conclusions from it, using the appropriate conceptual framework.

What, then, can be done to bring teaching into ‘synch’ with exams? In some respects it is perfectly clear what measures are required.

Coursework in schools should revert to being a vehicle for learning. Teachers should actually teach children how to carry out projects: how to formulate interesting questions; how to look for and gather appropriate material from their environment, the

internet, books and other sources; how to assess the reliability of that material; and how to use that material to find the answer to their questions. Some of this teaching can be done by demonstrating; much of it will require one-to-one tutoring. While this will clearly call for more resources than the arm's-length supervision of projects intended as tests, we may expect a sizeable payoff in terms of children being more engaged with their tasks and gaining more in the way of skills, knowledge and understanding. We may also expect a lessening of the alienation from the education system that both parents and children are currently experiencing. This should have a further payoff in that the incentive to plagiarize and, for parents, to give illicit help to their children, should be much diminished.

At tertiary level, the situation is less straightforward. One learns at second hand, as it were, from the recorded experience and thoughts of others. As Diana Laurillard puts it: 'It is a peculiarity of academic learning that its focus is not the world itself but others' views of that world'.<sup>64</sup>

In effect, higher education is driven by the written word, and much of that written word is 'academic-speak', the special language of the subject. Anthony Giddens, former director of LSE, has outlined the role of academic-speak: 'I'd spent most of my life writing books for an academic audience, and I used to make those more obscure than they needed to be because that sort of brought you esteem for your scholarship.'<sup>65</sup>

Students need help in learning and familiarizing themselves with academic-speak, as a crucial first step towards learning to think like their teachers – learning to think like an historian, a lawyer, a physicist, an engineer, or whatever. This requires more from their teachers than the mere delivering of lectures and issuing of monster reading lists: it requires them to work *with* their students.

The students I see have never had a teacher pick up a book or article in front of them and say: 'Notice what I do with this publication. See whether I start at page one and carry on reading till I get to the end, or do something different. Observe what I look for and how I find it. Notice what I pay attention to and what I make a note of.' They have never had a teacher demonstrate to them how to interpret an essay topic or past exam question. They have never been shown any kind of methodology for digesting and making sense of material from a variety of sources: for example, they have never been shown how to cross-check between sources, to read between the lines of a publication, to test reasoning, to look for unstated assumptions, or to arrive at their own view when they encounter a disagreement in the literature.

When, mostly in one-to-one sessions, I have demonstrated these skills to students they have been, with very few exceptions, delighted and relieved. They have seen, impressively quickly, how to apply them for themselves. Their essay grades have improved impressively too. Their fear and anxiety have fallen away. I would be astonished if any of these students have subsequently resorted to passing off other people's writing as their own: once in possession of the requisite skills they have no need and no reason to do so.

With regard to writing, like Theresa Lillis I have met a number of students who are unfamiliar with the 'hidden conventions' or 'rules of the game' of academic writing, which their teachers have not made explicit to them. And I share her conclusion that providing students with a set of guidelines on essay writing is of little help unless they are shown how to apply these in the context of their own 'acts of writing'.<sup>66</sup>

People who become university teachers are mostly dedicated to their subjects and have a flair for them. Many are leading thinkers in their field. Unfortunately these very characteristics put a distance between them and their students. Not as a group renowned for their social skills, they have enormous difficulty in putting themselves in their students' place, in imagining what it is like to come fresh to their subjects, and needing to pursue them step by step rather than taking great intuitive leaps. Moreover, they are usually so immersed in their way of thinking and seeing the world that they are unable to stand outside it and describe it to anyone else.

Accordingly, I come to the conclusion that what is required is a corps of non-subject specialists to take on the role of 'skills tutor'. Interestingly, the Royal Literary Fund Fellows have done precisely that, to – it appears – the considerable gratitude of the students with whom they have worked.

The RLF report *Writing Matters* proposes the establishment of 'Writing Centres' in every HEI, and I would endorse their proposal, with one proviso. **The brief for 'Writing Centres' should explicitly include reading and reasoning as well as writing.** Before one can write one must read – reading in HE is crucial to a student's success: the Oxbridge maxim that one reads for a degree is in my view well-founded – and to move from reading to writing one must employ reasoning.

#### RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE PLAGIARISM POLICE

The first step in rethinking the role of the plagiarism police must be to do some proper, methodologically-sound research into how the system is working at the present time. There have been more than enough lightweight surveys of student opinion and self-reported behaviour, more than enough headlines of the '1 in 3 students cheat' variety, and more than enough debating whether plagiarism is rife or merely prevalent. We need to know more about how the policies of different institutions are working out in practice; about the different forms that passing off other people's work as one's own takes; about whether various categories of student are over- or under-represented among those found to have offended, and how that comes to be; and about what goes on in the minds of students who offend.

There also needs to be some rethinking of how students are communicated with, on the matter of plagiarism and the citing of sources. Dunbar found that '[t]he only method used systematically by nearly every [psychology] department was giving initial guidance to students'.<sup>67</sup> Academics possess a touching faith in the power of the spoken word. John Clare's article in the Daily Telegraph quoted Professor Grafen:

[He] called for all new students to receive a lecture on plagiarism in which they were told that ‘any six consecutive words identical with a source need to be acknowledged, and an unacknowledged string of 10 consecutive words is pretty watertight evidence of malpractice’.<sup>68</sup>

That should do the trick! Or maybe not. It’s worth repeating the conclusion of people who have actually been close to students writing essays: providing them with guidelines on essay writing is of little help unless they are shown how to apply them.

The plagiarism police also need to clean up their language. The use of emotive terms – ‘cheating’, ‘stealing’ and ‘theft’, for example – gains nothing and helps no-one. Moreover, as demonstrated above, some of these words are often used in contravention of their established meanings, which scarcely befits anyone with claims to be considered seriously as an academic. (Interestingly, and thankfully, there is a neutral, non-emotive word – ‘lifting’ – which is beginning to be employed as a description of offending behaviour.)

The phenomenon of ‘lazy citing’ – ignoring the status of sources – is another which does no credit to the plagiarism police. They have reduced the citing of sources to a matter of mere cataloguing, and seemingly failed to notice that the status of a source is absolutely crucial to what a writer does with it. Lazy citing has no place in academic or academic-related writing.

#### TIME FOR A CULTURE CHANGE

More fundamentally, the present role of the plagiarism police in promulgating the turnitin culture, in which ideas and writings are treated as commodities, needs to be challenged. I hope others will join with me in reasserting the notion of ideas and writings as gifts to other – especially junior – members of the academic community. I have no interest in claiming credit for an idea of mine that a student picks up and runs with: the fact that he or she has done so, and thereby shown their appreciation of it, is reward enough. I make a plea for the reinstatement of generosity as a central value in our education system.

As a natural follow-on from this, it seems to me that there is a case for organizing the whole of our education system on the ‘Creative Commons’ principle.<sup>69</sup> I suggest that all teaching materials and student writings that gain a pass grade or better should be posted on the web (the date of posting would be registered and the authors could use aliases if they wished) and made freely available to everyone under a Creative Commons licence. A variant of Turnitin should be made available to students to use without charge, as a kind of ‘search and discover’ engine (preferably under another name, to remove the association with criminality).

This scheme would see the internet flooded with free essays. This can only be beneficial in terms of education: students often learn more from essays written by other learners than they do from books and articles written in academic-speak by

authorities on the subject. Their understanding of a topic could be tested by asking them to analyse and critique an unique selected handful of posted essays and teaching materials, and to synthesize these into an essay of their own. The selection could be random or tailored to their particular needs by their teacher. Learning would be – as it should – a matter of gaining, assimilating and building on knowledge and ideas from any source. Teachers could return to their vocation: teaching, not policing. With the internet flooded with free essays, essay sellers would be driven out of business.

Under this scheme, because students writing essays are tackling unique tasks it would not be possible to pass off anyone else's work as one's own. So there would be no need for any plagiarism police. Last year Oxford Brookes rebadged its 14 academic misconduct officers as academic *conduct* officers:<sup>70</sup> it would be good if this actually signalled the start of a conscious move from catching students out to helping them to succeed.

My guess is that in a few years' time we shall look back on the great plagiarism crackdown of the early 21st century in the same way that we look back on the great poll tax fiasco of the 1980s – as a costly and futile attempt by a few to control the many. The Thatcherite attempt to treat ideas and student writing as commodities runs contrary to the free and democratic exchange that the internet and education in its true sense embody: it is a head-in-the-sand aberration that is bound to end in tears.

## Peter Levin

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