

Ephedrine Case Study

Introduction

This case study was originally written as an exercise to teach Internet search skills to first and second year computing students. The purpose at the time was to emphasise the variety of sources and contents of information sites, and to question their validity, as a means of justifying the purpose and value of referencing and citation. The extension into the realms of patch writing and peer-review of plagiarism case studies was in response to repeated cases of plagiarism, despite “awareness raising” activities.

In its current form, the Ephedrine Case Study (Reddy 2004) presents a practical activity, which has been commissioned by the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service to give students and staff an understanding of research and evaluation of research, using a topical case study to justify the need for citation, referencing, and the assessment process that is at the heart of academic offence. Explicit justification of these protocols is often absent: “Where did citation come from?” “Why is it useful?” “Is it still relevant?” “Is it obvious?” Similarly, the student perception of the assessment process - the underlying medium of plagiarism - is poorly understood, because the skills required to complete specific assignments are often rendered as invisible as possible, in order to aid staff in their task of delineating between members of the cohort. Support for students to learn the why, what and how of academic skills are not experiential, but require instruction, and an apprenticeship and integration into the academic community.

“Another way to design out plagiarism opportunities is to include information gathering skills as an outcome in its own right. A course where information gathering was valued explicitly would, in many instances, include the Web as a key source of information. Macdonald (2000) argues that collecting and using information is much closer to the employment experience of graduates than many others stressed in HE so it may also offer vocational value as well as encourage individual learning.” (Carroll & Appleton 2001 p9-10)

The original brief from JISC PAS was to oversee development of a ‘game’ to teach plagiarism awareness. However, it was recognised that only an activity developed from the student perspective, which provided useful skills to motivate students, rather than academics’ preference. While McDonald Ross (2004) is correct when he states, “Even outside academia, it matters what sources have been used, since some are more authoritative than others”, this is not sufficiently recognised by students to motivate them to abide by academic protocols. What is needed is to instil the value of information, its origin in a meaningful way and a real purpose for citation. However, an awareness of the lecturers’ view of assessment, a “poacher turned gate-keeper” experience, was also incorporated to improve cultural awareness. More importantly, the exercise was intended to show that “copying and collating” is a first stage, only bad practice or an offence when you stop there. The case study is intended as a “hands on” activity over a week or two for students, as an information giving and transferable skills activity, rather than a plagiarism awareness raising session designed to teach students about university regulations and corresponding punishments. It has four stages:

1. Guided Research Session – Students are asked to use search engines to answer a series of questions on a scenario (see table)

2. Essay Generation – Retrieved web sites are used to generate a ‘web scrapbook’ and a ‘how I did it’ description
3. Essay Marking and Validation – Scrapbooks are swapped among participants who are expected to find the sources by manually searching the internet
4. Feedback and Evaluation – Guided inspection of results and comparison with ‘originality’ reports including Turnitin®UK

These have trialled these with over 1000 of students over the last 8 years in both FE and HE, with the emphasis on personal skills development, and more recently with lecturers and postgraduates as a cultural awareness exercise.

Acknowledgements

The developer would like to thank too many students to remember, but particularly those who have survived his teaching on the “Internet and the World-Wide Web (IW3)” module over the last few years. One of whom, Jonathan Bishop, deserves special mention, as he took great interest in the activity and subsequently provided much useful feedback from the students’ perspective; if the Devil needs and advocate, I will provide Jonathan with a reference.

The input of colleagues is also greatly appreciated. Many readers of the JISC PAS Plagiarism Mailing List (see <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/plagiarism/> for details) have contributed to this exercise, specifically in the preparation for the recent plagiarism conference. Those deserving special mention include: Verity Brack, Siobhan Devlin, Burkard Shafer, Chris Willmott and several others who’s names escape me.

Further details of the activity are included in the proceedings paper, entitled “A Socio-cultural approach to Plagiarism: A Practical Exercise” by M. Reddy & V. Jones (2004), PLAGIARISM: PREVENTION, PRACTICE AND POLICIES 2004, A conference for FE and HE organised by the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service on 28th June 2004 - 30th June 2004 at St James' Park, Newcastle upon Tyne.

The original scenario of a child interested in sports asking about the use of the drug Ephedrine, was a real person, whom I was tutoring in Maths at the time. For the record, I sat down with the child and we went through a web search together, after which I left the rest to the child’s own conscience. For the original spark of the idea, I am indebted to the trust and faith placed in me, which allowed the question to be raised in the first place.

Feedback

Generally, students have seen this activity as a favourable way to represent the need for good academic practice, and the use of explicitly showing the source of information in order to justify an argument or to test the value of a piece of writing. The exercise has always been couched as a “life affirming” event, rather than a “here’s what not to do” piece of propaganda. In that vein, it has been well received.

The following are extracts from both university lecturers and students who have done the exercise. Some very interesting issues were raised about the educational benefits of ‘patch writing’ and ‘web scrapbooks’ themselves, which might suggest some interesting directions for this exercise in future:

“Attached my ephedrine essay, and a separate document with my sources and methods. I was very tempted to buy one online (for \$25) but my Faculty refused to disburse me...”

“I felt that I actually learnt quite a lot by creating this essay even though I used chunks of other people’s text. So perhaps plagiarism like this isn’t quite so bad!”

“This essay is much more plagiarised than I would have expected from first reading (and I was suspicious immediately); there's nothing of the student's own words at all.”

“I was slightly suspicious that the style was too professional for a student, and that coupled with the odd words/phrases made me check the web. Having then found a large chunk of plagiarised text, I checked for more and found it! At least 75% of this essay is plagiarised...”

“These I found. The first one in particular is so often plagiarised in other internet sources that I'm not sure if the others are actually used, or simply used the same "reformulations" as the paper by co-incidence... [the second] plagiarised in turn by several news articles...”

“If this essay had been referenced properly and had a conclusion, I probably would not have suspected it.”

“In my department this student would fail the assignment on plagiarism grounds, have to have a little chat with the head of department, and then have to re-take the assignment but as an exam, not an essay. Afterwards we'd take extra care checking subsequent work.”

“In particular the first half of the first paragraph sounds as though it comes straight from a medical textbook - would a student really write like that?! There are some Very Big words...”

“It took then much longer (and I still haven't succeeded) to find where some of the more clinically worded sentences, especially at the beginning, come from- Medical texts seem to use stock-phrases (plagiarise??) to such an extent that search engines return too many hits.”

“The only one I failed on was for the first half of the first paragraph, that I suspected was from a medical textbook. It is actually from Medscape DrugInfo but this is a password protected site so wasn't picked up by the search engines.”

References

Macdonald, R. (2000), *Why don't we turn the tide of plagiarism to the learners' advantage?*, Times Higher Education supplement, 24/11/00 (cited in Carroll & Appleton 2001)

Carroll, J. & Appleton, J. (2001), *Oxford Brookes Guide 2: Designing out opportunities for plagiarism*. Available at <http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk> (Accessed: 28/04/04)

McDonald Ross, G. (2004), *Plagiarism in Philosophy: Prevention better than cure*
Available at: <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/plagiarism/gmrphilplag.html>
(Accessed 28/4/04)

Reddy, M. (2004), *The Ephedrine Case Study*, Centre for Astronomy and Science Education, University of Glamorgan, Trefforest, Pontypridd, RCT CF37 1DL. Soon to be available at: <http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk> (13/10/04)