

Student Authorship project

A joint project of Thames Valley, London Metropolitan and Middlesex Universities

Funded by the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network
under the Departmental Teaching Enhancement Scheme

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1. Introduction

The Student Authorship project was an initiative to develop and evaluate teaching on 'authorship' in psychology. It was funded through the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network under the Departmental teaching Enhancement Scheme, and the project took place in the psychology departments of Thames Valley, London Metropolitan, and Middlesex Universities.

The project aimed to address the growing problem of unintentional plagiarism, which occurs when students rely so heavily on their sources – websites, text books or journal articles – that they put themselves at risk of being accused of plagiarism, because such large portions of their written work consist of unoriginal material pasted from the web or copied from other sources.

Most of the instructional approaches to the problem of plagiarism have consisted of informing students about what plagiarism is and then directing them not to engage in it. This emphasis on not doing things means that the messages to students are mainly negative ones about prohibitions, sanctions and so on, with little in the way of positive messages about what to do in an active way to avoid being accused or suspected of plagiarism.

The concept of authorship provides a more positive approach. Authorship is the opposite of plagiarism, so if students understand what an author is, and know what they need to do to be genuinely the author of their written assignments, they should be able to avoid unintentional plagiarism. The project therefore aims to improve students' knowledge about authorship, and improve their sense of themselves as an author (their authorial identity).

The project developed materials for talks and workshops for students that were evaluated with a before and after questionnaire. The materials are available on this website and can be downloaded for use in other settings. The project focused on psychology students, but all the materials could be applied or adapted for other subjects, and we would be interested to hear from anyone considering using them in other disciplines. The only conditions attached to their use are that potential users inform us that they intend to use the materials, that they are

used only for educational purposes, and that the project is acknowledged (see teaching materials). We hope you will find these resources useful.

2. Background

Student plagiarism is a considerable challenge for universities. Plagiarism prevention programmes have tended to focus on systematic detection methods using software like Turnitin (Warn, 2006) or honour codes to promote ethical values and standards (McCabe & Treviño, 1993; 2002). However, there is increasing recognition that plagiarism is often unintentional, occurring, for example, 'when a student fails to adopt (perhaps because they do not know) proper protocols for referring to academic material, including appropriate ways of quoting, acknowledging ideas and compiling reference lists' (Park, 2003).

In one UK study, 46% of students reported copying an entire paragraph into their work without acknowledgement and 23% reported doing so more than once or twice (Bennett, 2005). In another study 57% of students had paraphrased without references and 53% had copied without references (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995). A student interview study showed that plagiarism was viewed as a less serious form of cheating and was more likely to be seen as a matter of academic etiquette than intellectual theft. There was also considerable fear of accidental plagiarism, and much confusion about what practices constituted plagiarism, including whether students could claim an idea as their own when the inspiration for it came from another author, and whether practices such as copying or paraphrasing paragraphs of text counted as plagiarism if the source was referenced (Ashworth et al, 1997).

It is good practice for students to be instructed at the beginning of each course about what plagiarism is, and why it is undesirable, and what the institutional rules and practices are (Culwin, 2006). There have been calls for a more holistic approach to plagiarism that acknowledges that not all students are adequately prepared for higher education, and that makes efforts to develop students' academic skills (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006).

'Author' has been defined as 'the person who creates a written work, such as a book, story, article or the like... (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/authors>), while 'authorship' has been defined as 'an explicit way of assigning responsibility and giving credit for intellectual work'. (<http://www.hms.harvard.edu/integrity/authorship.html>) The concept of authorship can go further than these rather technical definitions, however, to address issues like the relationship between the writer and the facts, ideas and arguments expressed in their work, and the way in which the writer can find a 'voice' in writing even when the written work draws heavily on other sources, as student writing inevitably often does.

Authorial identity is the sense that a writer has of themselves as an author and the textual identity they construct in their writing. The concept of authorial identity was developed from analyses linking academic literacy and textual identity construction, which suggested that much unintentional plagiarism could occur because of 'students' failure to represent themselves as writers who should make a novel contribution, however modest it might be, through critically engaging with sources' (Abasi et al, 2006). If poorly developed authorial identity is an important cause of unintentional plagiarism, then plagiarism countermeasures should include instructional interventions that target how students see themselves as writers, as well as technical aspects of writing such as paraphrasing and citation. The concept of authorship also provides a means of instructing students in more positive ways about how they must approach written assignments in order to avoid plagiarism or the appearance of plagiarism.

The assessment criteria for written assignments have provided a focus for recent efforts to improve student writing, (Elander et al, 2004) and research shows that specific types of

learning are associated with meeting those criteria. (Elander et al, 2006) Workshops on writing skills that focus on the assessment criteria for student writing have been successfully integrated in psychology programmes, (Elander, 2003) and have been shown to be effective in improving student learning. (Harrington et al, 2006a; Norton et al, 2005) The concept of authorship, however, is usually absent from the formal assessment criteria for student writing.

Interviews with students about authorship and authorial identity showed that they tended not to identify spontaneously with the role of author, and perceived an authorial approach to writing as likely to lead to lower marks being awarded (Pittam et al, 2009). Research on students' beliefs about what is required to meet the assessment criteria for written assignments (e.g. 'critical evaluation', 'integration', 'analysis') shows that many students believe the criteria can be met by 'finding' the relevant type of material and 'placing' it in their work. (Harrington et al, 2006b) Therefore, as well as understanding the qualities that their work must have to meet the assessment criteria, students must also understand what is involved in taking responsibility for how the relevant information, ideas and arguments are presented in their work. Efforts to improve students' understanding of the assessment criteria would therefore be expected to have much greater impact on learning and achievement when they are linked with tuition in authorship.

3. Teaching materials

The materials available here consist of a PowerPoint presentation together with some notes for presenters (a 'script' for a talk) about authorship. This is intended to be a light-hearted (in places humorous) introduction to the concept of authorship, followed by an exploration of how this applies to different types of written work. To give the talk, the script need not be followed exactly; in fact it is important that the delivery be tailored as far as possible to the context in which it is being used. The talk ends with points about different types of written assignment, which can be edited to focus on the most relevant type of assignment. It is intended to be a 30-40 minute talk in a one-hour session, so there is time for discussion and interaction in places.

The materials can also be used for more interactive workshops and seminars. To use them in this way, focus on a smaller part of the materials (for example the brief extracts of writing about eating disorders) and provide these handouts for discussion in pairs or small groups. Alternatively, the materials can be combined with other materials, such as specimen essays.

It looks at cases where professional academics have got into serious trouble over plagiarism (for example the well known media psychiatrist Raj Persaud), and examples from outside academic life where there were accusations of plagiarism (such as popular novelists and the government's 'dodgy dossier' on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction).

The materials were used in the project with psychology students, but could be adapted for other subjects, and we would be interested to hear from anyone considering using them for use in other disciplines. These materials can all be downloaded free of charge, provided that:

- You inform us about how you intend to use them
- They are not used for commercial or profit-making activities
- The origin of the materials is acknowledged in the following way: "These materials are based on those designed and produced by the Authorship Project <http://www.writenow.ac.uk>"
- We hope you will find these resources on authorship teaching useful!

Authorship presentation:

PowerPoint file:

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/studentauthorship_pptpresentation_march09.ppt

PDF file:

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/studentauthorship_pdfpresentation_march09.pdf

Notes for presenters:

Word file:

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/studentauthorship_notesforpresentersword_march09.doc

PDF file:

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/studentauthorship_notefopresenterspdf_march_09.pdf

4. Student Authorship Questionnaire

The Student Authorship Questionnaire (SAQ) was used to evaluate teaching sessions on authorship and is downloadable below. This is an 18-item questionnaire designed to measure beliefs and attitudes to authorship and writing and to provide a measure of student understandings of the positive qualities of authorship as opposed to their knowledge of the meaning of plagiarism (Pittam et al, 2009). The SAQ gives scores on six scales:

1. Confidence in writing: five items (e.g. 'I enjoy writing in my own words') measuring the extent to which students know what it means to express an idea in their own words, enjoy doing so, and are confident about their writing.
2. Understanding authorship: two items (e.g. 'I know what the responsibilities of an author are') measuring the extent to which students understand what it means to be the author of a piece of written work.
3. Knowledge to avoid plagiarism: three items (e.g. 'I know how to show which parts of my assignment were not written by me') measuring the extent to which students know how to provide citations and references and are confident they will not be accused of plagiarism.
4. Top-down approaches to writing: two items (e.g. 'When writing an assignment I begin by thinking about what I want to say, and then look for evidence relating to that') measuring the extent to which students believe that writing is about making an argument based on their own thoughts.
5. Bottom-up approaches to writing: two items (e.g. 'When writing an assignment I begin by looking for material I can include and then think about how I can put it together') measuring the extent to which students approach writing by first looking for material and then thinking about how to arrange it.
6. Pragmatic approaches to writing: four items (e.g. 'I get better marks when I use more material taken directly from books, journals or the internet in my assignments') measuring the extent to which students use more secondary materials to improve their grades or save time.

In the evaluation conducted as part of the project, the SAQ was used immediately before the teaching, and then afterwards to assess short-term changes.

Downloadable Student Authorship Questionnaire (SAQ):

PDF file:

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/studentauthorshipquestionn_pdf_march09.pdf

Word doc:

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/studentauthorshipquestionn_word_march09.doc

5. Evaluation of the intervention

The teaching sessions on student authorship were delivered to 364 undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students as part of timetabled classes at three large post-1992 universities in London, UK, all with diverse student populations. Students completed the Student Authorship Questionnaire before and after attending the teaching sessions. 340 students completed evaluation questions after the intervention and 19 of these students also took up the invitation to take part in a focus group. Full details of the evaluation methods and results can be found in Elander et al (in press).

The results of repeated measures analysis of variance on the results of the SAQ completed before and after the intervention showed significant improvements in each of the scales of the questionnaire, meaning increased confidence in writing, understanding of authorship, knowledge to avoid plagiarism, and top-down approaches to writing, and less bottom-up and pragmatic approaches to writing. The changes were greatest for year one students, supporting the common sense case for providing instruction in the avoidance of plagiarism as early as possible in students' university careers (Elander et al, in press).

The evaluation questionnaire asked students what they would say to someone considering attending one of these sessions in the future and approximately 90% of the 307 students that responded gave a positive response and indicated that they would advise other students to attend. This positive reception was echoed by the comments made by students in the focus groups, which also explored what students found good or helpful about the intervention and any improvements that they would like to see (Elander et al (in press)).

6. References

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Resources can also be downloaded from the Write Now website at:
<http://www.writenow.ac.uk/outcomes/resources/student-authorship>