Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Using collaboration to foster academic integrity

Journal Item

How to cite:

Prescott, Lynda (2016). Using collaboration to foster academic integrity. Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning, 31(2) pp. 152–162.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2016 The Open University

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/02680513.2016.1169162>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Using collaboration to foster academic integrity

The problem

Somewhere back near the start of the century, when there was still a wire in-tray on my office desk, I found in it one day, under the usual pile of committee papers, a slim booklet entitled *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education* (Carroll, 2002). Apart from the rather mysterious manner of the book's appearance (and in fact I never discovered where it came from) the main question in my mind as I flicked through its hundred or so pages was of the 'What have we come to?' variety. A dozen years on, like most of my colleagues, I am now inured to the fact that, like the 'toad work' for Philip Larkin (1955), so the brute plagiarism squats on that part of my working life concerned with student assessment. Assignment-setting must now always be approached with a view to making tasks as plagiarism-resistant as possible, and, more depressingly, once students have submitted their assignments, time and resources have to be expended in what are familiarly referred to as 'plagiarism checks' using text-comparison software. However, in the years since my first encounter with Carroll's book I have also become more aware that plagiarism is, in the words of Wendy Sutherland-Smith, 'a concept that changes across textual space and historical time' (2008, p.28). It is widely acknowledged that the arrival of the internet has impacted both on students' assignment-writing behaviour and on institutions' methods for policing plagiarism; more profoundly, perhaps, the internet challenges notions of authorship and textual stability (Hannabuss, 2001). But whilst we grapple with these challenges, students still need to understand and put into practice those principles of academic integrity that underpin honest scholarship. This case study describes one example in which learning design has helped first-year students at the Open University develop their appreciation of what constitutes good academic practice.

A distance-learning institution like the Open University faces particular challenges in this area. One problem derives from the OU's distinctive open entry policy: students whose previous educational experience may have been extremely patchy in terms of understanding principles of referencing, etc., are plunged into an academic context where such principles, and practices, need to be mastered very quickly. Although adult learners can be adept in acquiring these academic skills, since the 2012 changes to funding the composition of the OU's student body has changed markedly, with a sharp decline in the average age and an increase in rates of study intensity. This last factor does not favour the gradual building up of sound academic practices that we have been used to observing in previous generations of part-time students, and in many respects new cohorts of OU students have more in common with full-time undergraduates at brick universities than with previous generations of part-time adult learners. Another problem derives from the scale at which the University operates and the fact that, despite best efforts to build in personal contact between students and tutors, the distance-learning model means that some students work entirely on their own. Since attendance at face-to-face tuition events is not compulsory, the relationship between students and the part-time Associate Lecturers (ALs) who provide this direct teaching and, importantly, mark students' assignments, is in some cases fairly minimal. Continuous assessment plays a major part in students' accumulation of credit, but ALs often find themselves marking work from students they have never seen, never spoken to, and with whom they may not even have had online contact. This potential impersonality of the teaching relationship can enlarge the opportunities for plagiarism (Lanier, 2006).

OU students are steered away from both deliberate and inadvertent plagiarism by a combination of positive approaches (an entire website is devoted to 'Developing good academic practices') and repeated warnings of the dire penalties that can follow from infringements of policy in this area. Assignments are routinely processed through text-comparison software, and the results scrutinised by members of academic staff – a task that, on some modules with four-figure student populations, is inordinately time-consuming. A sub-branch of the plagiarism-detecting industry has grown up in individual faculties through the appointment of Academic Conduct Officers who adjudicate on cases of possible plagiarism and respond to the students concerned, offering guidance where appropriate and imposing penalties when necessary.

All of this means that policing plagiarism is an increasingly expensive activity, taking academic time away from more productive tasks. The impetus to head plagiarism off at the pass therefore seems quite urgent, and the work described here was designed with this objective in mind. In 2013-14 a project was set up in the OU's Arts Faculty to probe some of the by-products of an assessment activity that had been introduced some years earlier, involving online collaborative writing. The explicit aim of this activity was to help students develop their skills in working with others, but there were signs that it might also be conducive to the development of good academic practice, and thus help students avoid some of the pitfalls commonly associated with plagiarism.

A chance observation

The project was based around an interdisciplinary first-year Arts module, 'Voices and Texts' (A150), in which students' first piece of assessed work involved collaborative writing in small teams, using a wiki. Thereafter the module's continuous assessment strategy took students through two solo assignments, one with a choice of tasks related to English Language Studies or Creative Writing, and the third consisting of a conventional essay. The module complied with faculty policy by running two of the three assignments through text-comparison software, Copypatch and Turnitin, and since Copypatch would have been inappropriate for the collaborative task, these module-wide checks were reserved for assignments 2 and 3. At the level of the individual student and tutor-group, plagiarism checks can also be initiated by Associate Lecturers – a process that applies to every assignment on every module. During the first three years of the A150's life, very few problems were reported in relation to the Creative Writing task for Assignment 2, rather more with the alternative English Language Studies task, a short essay, but it was the third assignment, a full-length essay on nineteenth-century history or literature, that was evidently the most plagiarism-prone.

The collaborative writing task for Assignment 1 was also effectively an essay with a choice of topics, requiring students to find and use online sources, but I noticed that in the course of three years we seemed to have had no instances at all of ALs reporting plagiarism on the first assignment. This observation seemed unsurprising – I realised that we had *assumed* the assignment's design steered students away from rather than towards plagiarism risks – but we had never quite articulated the thinking behind this assumption (we had been too busy getting students to engage in online collaborative work at all – new territory for OU Arts students and ALs). But as instances of plagiarism revealed by Turnitin checks on Assignment 3 began to rise, though slowly, year on year, I began to ask what would happen if we applied the same checks to Assignment 1. I felt fairly confident that the absence of AL-reported plagiarism meant that the collaborative work was truly plagiarism-resistant,

but I also wondered whether we could make use of learning from this collaborative work to help students build defences against inadvertent plagiarism later in the module. An opportunity arose during the fourth year of the module's life to set up a project that would enable us to explore such questions.

Project premises and teaching aims

The project's major premise, based on A150's record of reported plagiarism across the varied assignment tasks, was that students working together in groups are often better at self-monitoring in relation to their use of sources than they are when they work alone. A second premise related to the *kind* of group work that A150 students were engaged in, where the end product was a piece of collaborative writing, and here the term 'collaborative writing' needs to be defined more precisely.

There are numerous design possibilities for wiki-based group tasks, but very often the 'project' element is the most prominent, with each student taking responsibility for a different section of the overall task and the wiki functioning as a gathering-place for individual contributions. Even in instances where the outcome can fairly be described as 'collaborative writing', the resulting wiki is often polyphonic in character. However, A150's essay-type assignment did not lend itself so easily to this 'chunked' approach: the question required each group to select and write about two textual extracts from different subject areas, but, since there would typically be 6-7 students in each group, even if a division of labour principle were employed, there would still be a smaller group of students working on the same text. The assignment's essay structure also demanded a degree of concern for the overarching coherence of the finished product, and thus a more integrated approach to the writing process. This approach is, of course, fraught with difficulties, as it requires students to intervene in what are initially perceived as the 'private' spaces of each other's work, editing, blending and refining their jointly-authored text. A150 ALs often found themselves engaged in background mediation work, smoothing over ruffled feelings and gently inculcating strategies for effective online negotiation. However, since one of the module's key themes was 'voice' and the topic-area for Assignment 1 was 'authority', these issues could actually be related, directly or indirectly, to the concepts being explored in the module material, where the links between the terms 'author' and 'authority' were explicitly discussed. In *Singular Text/Plural Authors*, Ede and Lunsford note that '[c]ollaborative writing potentially challenges the hegemony of single, originary authorship' (1992, p.119) and A150's Assignment 1 brought this challenge to the fore. Later comments from ALs sometimes pointed to a constructive synergy emerging between, on one hand, the academic content of A150's first book, on voices, texts and authority, and on the other hand the collaborative writing activity that students were engaged in during their assessment on this topic. In essence, then, the second premise of the project was that collaborative writing is a particularly potent vehicle for developing awareness of 'voice' and thus authorial identity. I would argue that students can more effectively avoid inadvertent plagiarism when they have begun to develop a sense of their own writing 'voice', and can feel a degree of confidence in their own authorial identity.

This second premise led directly to the main teaching objective of the project, which was to identify and embed good academic practice during the collaborative writing phase of the module so that these practices could then be adapted and used as part of each individual student's repertoire of study skills.

Project design

For the purposes of the project, a small group of the 100 or so ALs teaching this module across the UK in 2013-14 adapted their tutorials very slightly in the weeks leading up to the first piece of assessed work, with the aim of directing students' attention to the issue of referencing in their collaborative essay. The group of project tutors, five altogether, were responsible for the teaching of over 160 students, all in the same geographical region. We also identified a similarly-sized control group in a neighbouring region, where ALs continued to approach their tutorials as they had always done in earlier presentations of the module; limited resources meant that investigation of student behaviour in the control group was confined to Turnitin checks on Assignment 1, described below, in Findings (1).

The main tutorial adaptation for the project groups was for ALs to introduce a simple 'reading and referencing' log (figure 1) to students before they began work on their wikis. The log was designed to reinforce the study skills advice students had encountered on their previous module, about careful recording, during the preparation phase of an assignment, of where information has been found; in particular, students were reminded to mark any direct quotations that were transferred from original sources to their own notes. The project tutors took care to contact every student who did not attend the face-to-face tutorial at which the log was discussed, and e-mailed them both the log itself and guidance on using it.

Figure 1

A150 Assignment 01: READING AND REFERENCING LOG				Name..... Team.....
Date (when did I read this?)	Source (what did I read?)	Notes/quotations (did I make notes? Yes/no) (did I copy possible quotes? Yes/no/where are they?)	Will my team need a reference for this source? (Yes/no/maybe)	Source details for bibliography (the reference as it should appear in the finished assignment)

Shortly after this tutorial session, students were divided up into groups of 6-7 to work on their collaborative assignment, and, in another variation from previous practice, each wiki-team in the project groups was advised at the outset to nominate a 'bibliographer' for their collaborative work. The project ALs used this stage in the team-building process to steer students explicitly towards later practice, suggesting that they would be able to carry forward relevant learning points from the team experience to their work on individual essays.

Thereafter, students and ALs in the project groups worked in exactly the same way as all the other A150 groups. After Assignment 1 had been marked, Turnitin checks for students in the project cohort of students were compared with checks for the neighbouring control group. The Turnitin results for Assignment 3 were also compared across the project and control groups.

At the end of the module, students in the project groups who were eligible to be surveyed (the OU operates a system which prevents the same students being surveyed too often in the course of their studies) were sent a short questionnaire about the experience of handling referencing in their wiki-groups, and in their individual essay-writing. They were also asked about their levels of confidence in their referencing skills. 26 students completed the questionnaire, and 9 of these volunteered to take part in follow-up phone interviews, for more in-depth responses. The anonymized questionnaires were collated and analysed by the OU's Student Statistics and Survey Team, who also compiled a demographic profile of the respondents, and the results were then passed on to the project team.

Findings (1): Software-comparison checks

The numbers of assignments run through Turnitin were large enough to be statistically significant: for Assignment 1, 167 students from the project group submitted work (having been divided into 24 teams), and 177 from the control group (also divided into 24 teams). By the time of Assignment 03, some drop-out had occurred, but the numbers of individual essays from the students in the project groups and those in the neighbouring region were still very similar (142 and 140, respectively). The percentage rates of Turnitin matches are shown below:

Table 1

	Students in project group	Students in control group
Assignment 1 Turnitin matches	9.5%	10.5%
Assignment 3 Turnitin matches	11.8%	12.5%
Assignment 3: percentage of students with Turnitin matches above 25%	5.7%	8.2%

The actual percentages of Turnitin matches for both groups across both assignments are unremarkable: the nature of both questions was such that quotation was essential, and, where properly referenced, there is no problem if around 10% of an essay consists of quotation (and Turnitin also picks up bibliography entries, which can be quite lengthy and are indicators of good academic practice rather than its opposite). However, what was noticeable in Assignment 3 was the difference in the proportions of students with worryingly high percentages of Turnitin matches: all those above 25% were scrutinised by a member of the module team, in line with Faculty policy, and three students from the control group had to be referred to the Academic Conduct Officer. The actions taken at this stage can vary, according to the student's level of experience and previous conduct. For the three students in question, one case, with 49% of largely unacknowledged quotation from both the A150 module materials and Wikipedia, resulted in disciplinary action, with the essay being re-marked only on the legitimate content. In a second case, where 44% of the essay was derived from unacknowledged internet sources, a formal warning was issued. A third student whose essay included 25% of unreferenced material from the A150 module material was given study skills advice.

No students from the project groups were referred to the Academic Conduct Officer, since in the few cases where Turnitin matches were high (the most extreme being 35%), quotations were actually referenced.

Findings (2): Questionnaire results

The end-of-module questionnaire was deliberately quite short and simple (see Appendix 1), and the response rate was 19.5%, with 25 complete responses and 1 partially completed response being returned. The majority of the respondents were experienced students (only two were taking A150 as their first OU module), balanced almost evenly between female and male students (14/12), and the majority were in the 35+ age-group. In comparison with the A150 cohort as a whole, the respondents had quite high levels of previous educational experience, 19 of them possessing A-levels or higher qualifications, but it seemed that developing their skills in referencing source materials was, for many, still perceived as a work in progress.

The questionnaire responses revealed that 88% of the respondents felt that their referencing skills had improved in the course of the module. 68% of them continued using a version of the initial 'reading and referencing' log for Assignment 3, and about two-thirds of that number adapted or customized the approach they had used for Assignment 1 – a promising sign of independence and confidence. As for the strategies used during Assignment 1 itself, 18 respondents reported that their wiki-team had, as advised, assigned responsibility for their group's bibliography to one member, and half of this number had, as individuals, contributed references for the wiki bibliography from their own reading and referencing logs. 19 of the 26 were confident or very confident about their team's accuracy of referencing and bibliography, and 18 said that they intended to use some sort of reading and referencing log for future modules.

Responses to question 4, about the degree of confidence students felt in the accuracy of their team's referencing and bibliography in the course of their wiki-task, were overlaid in some cases by comments about the new and demanding experience of online collaborative work, but a few responses indicated some collective learning going on. One student noted that 'levels of referencing skills varied within the group, but a satisfactory compromise was reached' whilst another said, 'I paid more attention to detail as our referencing at the start of the course was poor.'

There were quite a lot of comments in response to the final open question, no.9, which asked those students who had said they intended to continue using some form of reading and referencing log in future to identify what for them were the most important aspects of this strategy. Respondents referred to saving time, avoiding mad dashes at the end of the assignment-writing process, and referencing 'correctly'; one student simply answered 'Accuracy, consistency, transparency.' Another more extended response began with the expected point about the log making the process of compiling sources to support the assignment much easier and clearer, but then went on: 'It leads me to think deeper about the assignment question, its nuances and complexities' – indicating, I think, that well-managed work with sources is serving deep learning processes.

Findings (3): Interviews

The individual interviews were conducted by a member of the project team, using a semi-structured format. Detailed notes from each interview formed the basis of subsequent analysis, and were shared with the project's ALs, along with questionnaire results. The 9 students who agreed to take

part in follow up telephone interviews were all continuing rather than new students, 6 male and 3 female, with 3 in the 30-39 age range and another 3 in the 50-59 age range; one was in the 40-49 age range and 2 were 60 or older. 6 of the 9 had A levels or higher qualifications. One student said that she still felt anxious about plagiarism, and in particular about whether she needed to reference if she paraphrased ideas from her sources rather than quoting directly. Although OU students have access to a forum on the module website moderated by their own AL, many of them also join Facebook groups, and this student remarked that fellow students she had talked to on Facebook shared her anxiety. She did, however, say that she was becoming more comfortable about these issues by the time she reached A150's Assignment 3, but still found that anxiety about when to reference and how to format references could distract her.

In general, though, the interviewed students were positive about the development of their referencing skills as a result of working collaboratively with other students. One reported that writing collaboratively had made her concentrate more on how she worked, including how she referenced; she said she had become more conscious of the need to make exact links between points in her essay and references to the source of evidence, rather than putting in some kind of generic link at the end of the paragraph. Another student commented that the sense of collective responsibility in putting together a wiki made him more aware of the need for careful referencing, which would seem to confirm the first premise of A150-based project.

The project tutors' perceptions

The 'findings' stage of the project also fed into a face-to-face meeting with the 5 project ALs, so that they could see the results of the Turnitin checks, the questionnaire responses, and receive a summary of the telephone interviews. But besides sharing the findings, this meeting provided an important opportunity to gather insights from the tutors themselves, who, besides being uniquely placed to observe students' progress from a close vantage-point, were able to compare the work of the students in the project groups with cohorts they had taught in earlier years. The ALs agreed that the standard of referencing amongst the student groups included in the project was at least as good and in some cases better than with previous cohorts. They were also unanimous in their view that the task of referencing would be a more positive one if, as part of their overall learning on first-year modules, students could develop a clear idea of its purpose and were made less anxious about issues of correct presentation and plagiarism.

As evidence of more positive approaches to the issue of developing good academic practice, one AL noticed students taking the initiative themselves in their team-forums by starting up discussion threads about referencing (further support, perhaps, for the idea that this topic can be profitably tackled through group processes). Another AL suggested that it is perfectly feasible to generate some enthusiasm amongst students on this topic by encouraging them to follow up references to material they find interesting, and thus foregrounding understanding of how to use sources rather than simply prescribing dry referencing rules. This strategy was floated in fairly general terms during the course of discussion at the meeting with ALs, and within the context of what might be done in face-to-face tutorials, given suitable openings. However, it helped to stimulate our thinking about how distance-learning materials could be shaped to pique students' curiosity about relevant topics, using references as a focus.

Outcomes

A150 has now been absorbed into a larger (60-credit) module in which students have the opportunity to practice wiki-based collaborative writing through a piece of formative assessment before they embark on an assignment on the scale of A150's Assignment 1. This development has been warmly welcomed by ALs, as a way of addressing some of the challenges of online group-working before the higher stakes of assessment come into play, and the standard of the later, assessed, collaborative writing task has reportedly been very good in most cases. But another development that we have been able to build in because of the larger scope of the new module is an online activity focused specifically on using historical and literary sources. The activity employs the kind of 'enthusing' strategy reported above by one of the A150 ALs, with content that complements related chapters in the printed module materials, introducing points about referencing in an integrated way. This then leads into an unassessed online quiz that encourages students to consider some of the nuances of referencing historical and literary sources, before they form groups to put their newly-refined skills to work in an assessed piece of collaborative writing. The A150 project proved invaluable in developing these aspects of assessment design in the new module.

We have also tried to address the 'anxiety' issues raised by both students and ALs by re-vamping the generic Level 1 Arts guidance on using sources, so that the principles of referencing are explained before the risks of possible plagiarism come into the frame. Both the new module and the new generic guidance make frequent use of the term 'using sources', to emphasise the active nature of the processes involved, and although plagiarism still has to be explained and warned against, we have followed the lead of the 'Developing good academic practices' website by choosing terminology that emphasises the positive and constructive aspects of this topic.

Another practical outcome of the project is that, as well as individual A150 students taking forward their own versions of the reading and referencing log, this simple tool has been main-streamed as part of the learning apparatus that ALs can offer to students on a number of Arts modules.

Implications

A study of ESL students by Abasi, Akbari and Graves suggested that unintentional plagiarism often occurs 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' (2006, p.114). Much the same could be said about many OU students, especially those who may have limited previous educational experience, and thus lack confidence in their own academic skills. One of the implications of the A150 project is that the group dimension of collaborative writing, by making each student 'visible' (in the online sense) to others, obliges them to see themselves as writers, with all that that entails. The self-awareness engendered through group activity can in turn lead to more effective self-monitoring when engaging with sources.

The very activity of using a wiki for collaborative writing also impacts on students' perceptions of where authority lies in academic work. As Jon Dron points out, 'Social software...has an emergent structure, formed from bottom-up control rather than top-down design' (2007, p.62). For inexperienced students this factor is often at first disconcerting, but sensitive facilitation by ALs can steer them towards a greater sense of autonomy that is both individual and communal. Cultivating awareness of this kind can be directly linked with the development of good academic practice, as Ashworth et al. recognised in their article on 'students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment': advocating an emphasis on positive reasons for accurate academic

referencing, they suggest that such messages 'should include the idea that students are junior members of a scholarly community' (1997, p.202).

One of the key learning goals in A150 and its successor module is for each student to develop confidence in their own academic 'voice'. Although the A150 project's scope for tracking students' progression was limited to statistical plagiarism checks in Assignment 3, there is potential for more detailed (and probably AL-led) analysis of links between proficiency in using and referencing sources effectively and the development of writing skills. At the same time, we are deepening our understanding of how students use the opportunities for online collaborative writing provided by wikis. The A150 project holds out the possibility that students' experience of collaborative writing can be a useful step on the way to engaging in solo writing that is confident, authentic and academically sound.

REFERENCES

- Abasi, A.R., N. Akbari, and B. Graves. 2006. Discourse appropriation, construction of identities, and the complex issue of plagiarism: ESL students writing in graduate school. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 15, no. 2: 102–17.
- Ashworth, P., Bannister, P., and Thorne, P. 1997. 'Guilty in whose eyes? University students' perception of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment', *Studies in Higher Education*, 22, 2: 187-203.
- Carroll, J., 2002. *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education*. Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University.
- Dron, J. 2007. 'Designing the undesignable: social software and control', *Educational Technology and Society*, 10, 3: 60-71.
- Ede, L., and Lunsford, A. 1992 [1990]. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press
- Hannabuss, S. 2001. 'Contested texts: issues of plagiarism', *Library Management*, vol.22, 6-7: 311-318.
- Lanier, M., 2006. 'Academic Integrity and Distance Learning', *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, vol.17, 2. pp.244-261.
- Larkin, P., 1955. *The Less Deceived. Poems*. Hessle, Marvell Press
- Sutherland-Smith, W., 2008. *Plagiarism, the Internet and Student Learning: Improving Academic Integrity*. New York: Routledge

Appendix 1: Student questionnaire

Reading and Referencing on A150

Most of these questions can be answered with a simple 'yes/no', but longer responses can be given to those marked 'OPEN'.

ASSIGNMENT 1

1. Did you, as an individual, use the 'Reading and referencing log' in your preparation for Assignment 01?	YES / NO
2. Did your Assignment 01 team assign responsibility for compiling your wiki bibliography to a specific team-member?	YES / NO
3. If the answer to question 2 was 'yes', did you supply any references based on your own 'Reading and referencing log'?	YES / NO
4. (OPEN) How confident did you feel about the accuracy of your team's bibliography and referencing throughout the wiki?	

ASSIGNMENT 3

5. Did you use some form of reading and referencing log in your preparation for Assignment 03?	YES / NO
6. If the answer to question 5 was 'yes', did you adapt or make any changes to the approach you had used for Assignment 01?	YES / NO
7. (OPEN) If the answer to question 6 was 'yes', please briefly describe the changes you made.	

LOOKING FORWARD

8. Do you intend to use some form of reading and referencing log when working towards assignments on future OU modules?	YES / NO
9. (OPEN) If the answer to question 8 was 'yes', what do you think are the most important aspects of this strategy for you?	
10. Do you feel that your academic skills in the area of acknowledging other people's work and compiling references have improved (or not) in the course of your work on A150?	YES / NO

Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. If you would be willing to answer some further questions in an informal telephone conversation with a member of the project team, please complete and return the attached consent form.