In search of an authorial identity: looking beyond plagiarism

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Plagiarism happens so quickly and easily when text can be copied and pasted, especially when students feel under pressure to get good grades and are working to multiple, fast-approaching deadlines. Some students pay a high price, for a survey of 93 UK higher education institutions identified 9,229 formally recorded cases of plagiarism in one academic year, which resulted in 2,192 formal warnings, 2,372 assignments having to be resubmitted for reduced or capped marks, and 143 student expulsions (Tennant and Duggan, 2008). Many more students than that are at risk, for in one UK study 46% of undergraduates reported that they had plagiarised an entire paragraph in their assignments (Bennett, 2005). Universities therefore need active strategies to help students learn not to plagiarise, and one approach focuses on improving students' 'authorial identity'. This is increasingly being used to help students to understand the values of integrity and transparency associated with academic writing, and write assignments without plagiarising.

My interest in this began when I sat in on a first year induction session about plagiarism. It struck me that the messages were mainly negative – that plagiarism is something *not* to do – and there was not much positive advice about what to do to avoid plagiarism. The emotional tone was also negative, especially about the dire consequences of being caught plagiarising. As I listened, I began thinking about how anti-plagiarism messages could be framed in a more positive, uplifting way. I asked myself, what is the opposite of plagiarism? Surely the answer to that is authorship, and if authorship is the desired outcome, what are the behavioural or psychological characteristics needed for students to achieve that? To qualify genuinely as the authors of their written work, students must understand the role of an author, and must be able to identify with that role, so it is their *authorial identity* that must be strengthened. That reflection was the starting point for several projects with different groups of colleagues to help students not to plagiarise.

The process began with focus groups to explore psychology students' views about authorship. These confirmed the need for students to see themselves more as the authors of their university assignments. For example:

- "It seems a bit grand to describe yourself as an author … it's just not a word that I would associate with myself so much unless I wrote a book. I just thought of myself as a student writing an essay."
- "You think of an author as a professional person who writes a book, not us."
- "We're just picking out what everyone else has done and trying to put it in some kind of order." (Pittam et al., 2009, p. 156.)

There were some more positive views, however, and some of these indicated the types of assignment that could help students see themselves more as authors:

- "Now I'm starting to think that we are authors … it might be since we've started doing projects as well, because it feels like it is your own work." (Pittam et al., 2009, p. 156.)

Students also explained the conflict they experienced between evidencing their work with references and giving their own analysis or evaluation:

- "I understand that we need backup from some scientific research … but still I can't help thinking that I am editing everything, not putting my idea or opinion … or something new."
- "… to try and get the opinions and facts sorted out rather than, well I've got loads of ideas, and suddenly it's not even science-based." (Pittam et al., 2009, p. 157.)

We developed a workshop intervention to help students understand the concept of authorship, identify more with the role of an author, and approach their assignments in ways that helped them qualify fully as the authors of their work. This consisted of a flexible framework of concepts, activities, and materials for exercises, which could be adapted for use with large or small groups.

Some parts of this were motivational or attitudinal, aiming to encourage and inspire students to see themselves more as authors, and to regard their university assignments as pieces of work that merited authorship. For example, we asked students about their favourite authors, and looked at statements from well-known authors about the act of writing and the role of the author.

The workshop then considered *how* a writer qualifies as the author of their written work. This part centred on the 'authorial decisions' that enable a writer to take the role of author. These include decisions about:

- What the message of the writing is
- What material to use as evidence
- How to interpret the material or evidence
- How much importance or emphasis to put on different parts
- What words to use and what tone to adopt
- What conclusions to reach.

To help students understand the authorial decision process, we designed exercises where examples of writing were deconstructed to analyse the decisions that led to those pieces ending up the way they did. For example, what decisions did the writer of a magazine article make that were different from those made by the writer of a textbook chapter on the same subject?

We also presented examples, from inside and outside academic life, where well known public figures had got into trouble because of plagiarism. This put authorship and plagiarism in a wider context, as issues that are not confined to university students but also affect much more experienced writers of different kinds.

The case of Raj Persaud was a helpful example, and not just because he was a well-known psychiatrist and psychologist who had been accused of plagiarism. Raj had got into trouble after copying from previously published work in his books and articles, and as a result had been found guilty of bringing his profession into disrepute, and was suspended from practice. The explanations he gave in mitigation – like the stress he was under at the time, the multiple deadlines he was working to, and the word processing errors and other mistakes that led to references being left out of his work – were just like the excuses offered by students accused of plagiarism, and the case

showed how plagiarism does not affect just students – even successful, high achieving professionals can get into hot water by not giving enough care and attention to their authorial roles.

The essence of this part was to have a more light-hearted look at plagiarism, in a way that takes the threatening focus away from students, and puts the spotlight on professional academics. We even had an example of a plagiarism expert who produced a report about plagiarism that caused him to be accused of plagiarism. That controversy centred on how material from another source was presented in the document, and the case illustrated what heated views there are about plagiarism, and how careful all of us should be about how we present our written work and source material.

Another useful example was the Labour government's 'dodgy dossier' of 2003 on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, which proved too similar for coincidence to a PhD thesis published online the previous year. More recently I have illustrated talks and workshops with examples like the case of Saif Gaddafi, son of the former Libyan dictator, who was accused of plagiarising his PhD thesis at a UK university, or the US Senator Paul Rand, who gave a speech in 2013 at a university in the United States and was soon accused of copying part of it from Wikipedia. Once I started looking out for them, I realised there are quite a lot of useful examples!

In the last part of the workshop we turned to university assignments and discussed the role of the author and the risk of plagiarism in essays, critical reviews, problem-based learning reports, research project reports, and group work assignments. In each of these there are specific lessons about how to approach them in an authorial way. This part was designed to be adapted so that the presenter could bring the discussion round to the students' current assignment or the coursework for the module in which the workshop took place. Students could then apply the concepts and principles they had been discussing to a real writing task of their own.

A before-and-after evaluation using the Student Authorship Questionnaire showed that the workshops improved students' understanding of authorship, knowledge to avoid plagiarism, and confidence in writing, and that the impact was greater among first year students than second or third years or Masters students (Elander et al., 2010). When students were asked afterwards about the workshops, 86% agreed they helped them understand how to avoid plagiarism, and 66% agreed they helped them write better psychology assignments. Focus groups after the sessions suggested that at least some students had taken the authorship messages to heart:

- "I actually did come away with a much greater sense that you really should move things on a bit and not be afraid to put more of your ideas and understanding about where you think research is heading or any other sort of ideas."
- "I like the way that you were encouraged to think about what you were going to say, which for some reason hadn't really dawned on me … so you are really in the driving seat, and then take from sources to support your own perspective. So you've got a standpoint right from the start." (Elander et al., 2010, p. 166.)

However, only 52% of the students in the workshops agreed they had saved them from having to ask for advice or support about writing psychology assignments, and only 40% agreed they helped them enjoy writing psychology assignments (Elander et al., 2010). So even if the workshops changed some attitudes about authorship and plagiarism, it by no means provided a complete answer to all students' concerns about academic writing.

The general approach was also received quite enthusiastically, and before long many educators and researchers around the world had been in touch asking to use the workshop materials or the questionnaire, or both, including researchers and practitioners in Bulgaria, Canada, Portugal, South Africa, Taiwan, the UK and the USA (the materials themselves and the questionnaire are available from http://www.writenow.ac.uk/outcomes/resources/student-authorship/).

Julianne Kinder applied the concept of authorial identity to the ways dyslexic students approach academic writing, showing that dyslexic students had less strong authorial identities than non-dyslexic students (Kinder and Elander, 2012), and other researchers published reports of authorial identity among students in accountancy (Ballantine and Larres, 2012) and nursing, midwifery and health (Maguire et al., 2013). However, many outstanding issues remain. One of the key issues is the absence of a valid and reliable measure of authorial identity, for the Student Authorship Questionnaire developed by Pittam et al. (2009) was shown to have serious psychometric limitations (Ballantine et al., 2013). This was addressed by Kevin Cheung, whose PhD research focused on the nature and measurement of authorial identity, and the development of a psychological model of authorial identity (Cheung, 2014).

We hope the work on authorial identity as a psychological phenomenon can lead to more effective interventions and teaching methods to help students improve their authorial identity. For example, one application could be to tackle the problems faced by overseas and international students, for whom cultural factors or prior learning experiences are sometimes an additional obstacle to developing a stronger authorial identity. Perhaps different or specialised pedagogic interventions could be developed to help those students avoid plagiarism by adopting more authorial roles in their writing.

Another application could be to improve the development of students' academic writing in the transition to higher education. Pre-university students often have inaccurate expectations about what is required in academic writing at university, because they misunderstand the nature of things like argument, evaluation and analysis, while at the same time overestimating their ability to perform those complex skills (Jessen and Elander, 2009). Improving students' authorial identity might help them to understand and demonstrate academic argument, evaluation and analysis, which could help improve their learning and achievement at university, as well as reducing plagiarism. Workshops for students before they begin university can help to correct some misconceptions about writing at university (Jessen and Elander, 2009), so it is possible that pre-university authorial identity initiatives could also help students adjust quickly to learning and writing at university.

Authorial identity provides a very positive and satisfying focus for pedagogic work to help students improve their writing and avoid plagiarism. It can be applied in many ways to different aspects of student writing development, and it involves a very psychological approach to plagiarism prevention.

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