What does it mean when teachers' plagiarize?

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This paper highlights some of the concerns regarding plagiarism among education students at the University of the South Pacific (USP). It is based on the author’s personal views and experiences in this area over a nine year period. While no conclusions are drawn, it raises a number of questions regarding the behaviour of students’ enrolled in teacher education programmes at USP. The author makes no claim that academic dishonesty is more prevalent in teacher education programmes than it is in any other programme at USP. Rather, the concern expressed here is the implication of such behaviour on future or current teachers. What, if anything, do these practices tell us about the kinds of teachers that are and will soon be in classrooms? Does such behaviour say something about teacher ethics? Is this a reflection of declining moral standards in academia?

John Milton is quoted as saying “Copy from one it’s plagiarism; copy from two it’s research.” Ten years ago as a secondary school English teacher, I quoted this to a group of seventh formers who were embarking on their first real attempt at research. We laughed at the humour of his musings and went onto discuss what plagiarism was and the fine lines of do’s and don’ts in action research. Today, I find very little humour in this quotation as my professional journey has led me to the realisation that many students believe that there is nothing wrong with a little copying.

As a secondary school teacher, I was expected to guide students’ learning and when they produced mediocre pieces of writing and engaged in poor or unethical research practices, we collectively discussed what went wrong in the process so that students’ could improve on their work. I first joined the University of the South Pacific as a full-time staff member in the Department of Education and Psychology in 2002, with great apprehension. I read books on adult learning and made every effort to treat my students as the adults that they were, ensuring in every way possible to engage them in critical and independent thinking. I made a point of explaining to my students’ that I was merely a facilitator of their learning and that as university students, they needed to engage in more reading and thinking about what was being discussed. I believed that a desire to learn would result in reading, reflection and critical thinking.

1. The University has since undergone a restructure and the Department of Education and Psychology was dissolved. The Psychology section was moved to the School of Social Sciences when the School of Education was established in January, 2006.
Since then, my views about my role have not changed. I still believe that I should facilitate student learning and that one of the most important functions is to create a positive learning environment that encourages and promotes creative and critical thinking. My perception regarding students, however, has changed somewhat. Instead of anticipating sound arguments in their written work, I expect regurgitation of facts and theories and find myself euphorically surprised when I discover a particularly good paper. The reason for my cynicism is two-fold: rote-learning and plagiarism.

This paper is a personal reflection of my experiences as a USP tutor from 1998 and lecturer since 2004. In this time, I have tutored and lectured ten education courses and one English course\(^2\) offered at the University.

**Two peas in a pod: parroting and plagiarism**

Much has been said regarding rote-learning in the Pacific\(^3\) and the consequences that it has for life-long learning. Most recently, Sadler (2000) comments:

Rote learning basically means that learners commit things to memory so thoroughly that they can recall facts almost instantly when given the right stimulus or cue, whether or not they understand them, or can process, apply or extend them…when this occurs, students learn the education system with only a fraction of their educational entitlement. They leave with seriously underdeveloped abilities to reason, to challenge, to extend, to apply, and to transfer knowledge to new contexts.\(^4\)

Sadler argues that in an education system where examinations take precedence, rote learning is commonplace. In many of my own students, the long term effects of this, memorisation of information, seems apparent.

When my students are asked to give an opinion on an issue, more often than not, many will chose to cite some published source. In written work, this translates into marks being deducted for not answering the question. When asked to describe or discuss, most opt to define, again with heavy referencing beginning with the ever

\(^2\) These include ED153, ED252, ED250, ED253, ED255, ED350, ED353, ED355, ED451, ED455 and LL114.


present Oxford Dictionary definition, followed by a series of educational sources. I have found that this holds true also in final examinations, where students show difficulty in expressing their own opinions or experiences, opting instead to cite examples highlighted in the course reading materials rather than provide their own personal experiences unless specifically asked to do so. Others go as far as quoting what I may have said in class referencing this in brackets as *(you said in lecture)*.

In assignments, some students believe that the quality of written work is dependent on the number of direct quotes they present. In some extreme cases, students provide a series of quotes without any real discussion. In other papers, students’ may attempt to discuss the materials read but do so by providing even more citations, without relating any of the material to the Pacific context, their home country or to their own experiences.

In order to counter this and ensure quality university level assignments, it is necessary to spend some time discussing at length the actual requirements of the paper. This includes a deconstruction of the assignment question and an overview of the marking criteria. This is particularly useful for students who have difficulty with the English language.5 I have also found that it is necessary to articulate within the assignment instructions that students are required to relate their discussion to their home country or the Pacific.

Although regurgitation of facts and quotes can be seen as a big problem, it is not the greatest challenge that I face as a teacher-educator. The greatest challenge I would have to say has increasingly become plagiarism.

On the issue of plagiarism, I must admit that the extent to which my students plagiarise is frightening. I teach teachers, would-be-teachers *(pre-service)* and current teachers *(in-service)* and many plagiarise. It is worth noting that over the last five years, there has been a noticeable spike in the number of students’ engaging in dishonest practices, the reasons for which are unknown. Whether it marks an increase in the level of competition and a desire to attain good grades or to maintain scholarships, it is difficult to say.

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5. A very small group of students at USP would consider English to be their first language. Many would have had English used as a medium of instruction at some level of their schooling, and while most speak and write fluently in English, some find some difficulty in comprehension and written work.
The trainee-teachers who take my classes are a combination of pre-service students enrolled in a number of programmes; these include the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science with a Graduate Certificate in Education (BA/BSc GCED), the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGCE) or the Bachelor of Primary Education (BEd Primary).

These students would have successfully completed a number of education courses at both the 100-level and 200-level. In addition, the vast majority would have completed LL114 English for Academic Purposes in which the process of academic writing is clearly defined.

The forms of plagiarism vary in nature. Occasionally, two students will submit the same assignment. In some instances, one assignment may be typed, the other handwritten. In other cases, one student will submit the assignment and wait until it has been marked and returned before the second student submits an exact duplicate. In this scenario, the maker is convinced s/he has seen the paper before but has no way of confirming this. This form of plagiarism requires two players, one I call the ‘enablers’ (those who facilitate the copying process) and the copy-cats (the other who simply makes a copy of the original piece of work).

There is a second group of enablers who complete a course and pass on old assignments to friends. Despite the fact that assignment questions are changed by the semester, some students believe that submitting a copy of last year’s paper will somehow earn them a grade even though the assignment question has changed.

Another common approach is the ‘piecemeal’, where students share parts of an assignment. Here, two students may agree on the parts that each will write and the marker will notice that only certain sections of the paper are identical. These plagiarists may be referred to as sharers as they both facilitate and participate in the enabling and copying.

6. This is a graduate programme for students who already have a first degree and wish to obtain teacher qualifications.
7. This course is a required service course for all programmes offered by USP. Students are required to have successfully completed this course prior to enrollment in 200-level courses at the University.
Most common is the direct ‘lifting; from texts or ‘cut and paste’ from internet sources. This is fairly easy to detect as the language used in the assignment will change considerably between sections. Some students have gone so far as to cut and paste entire sections from one source and then proceed to list a number of references in their bibliography. These I refer to as the cut-and-pasters.

Yet another group exists and that is the hard-core plagiarists. These students simply present an assignment that is a print out of entire online articles or sections of a book or books and somehow manage to produce a bibliography. Thankfully, this latter group is scarce, although a number continue to resurface each semester. In a particular note-worthy case, a student had downloaded an entire paper with the URL and print page numbers of the online article clearly visible. Similarly, another student presented the same kind of assignment but attempted to blot out the URL.

A particularly distressing situation occurred when a student lodged a complaint against both myself and the course tutor because she felt she was being unduly penalised for plagiarism. The student had submitted a series of pages that had been photocopied from the USP course reader as her assignment and expected to receive a mark for her paper. This student was a current teacher at the time of the incident.

Most elusive is the hard-core plagiarist who purchases assignments. While there have been rumours about this happening at USP, there is no real way to determine the extent to which this occurs. Furthermore, because there is no reference point for the work, markers have no cause to suspect plagiarism. In any event, the results are the same; the student receives a mark for a task that s/he has not completed.

What is perhaps even more troubling than the extent to which students’ plagiarise, is the student reaction when caught. A few students attempt to make a case for themselves, providing reasons for their actions such as heavy workload and difficult assignments. One of the more intriguing cases that I have had saw a student arguing that he was poor and that his socio-economic condition led him to plagiarise. Yet another student argued that she had not plagiarised but when given a resubmit option, did so again. This particular student managed to by-pass USP regulations and to my dismay enrolled in the course four times, despite failing time and again.

Another group of students vehemently deny plagiarising even when the sources are provided and sections copied are highlighted. They are boldly straight faced when
they say “It’s a coincidence because I didn’t do it” or even more compelling “I would never do that”. Some go on to argue that they have been unduly penalised and request a reconsideration of grade or make a case to the Head of School.

Yet another group, the more aggressive plagiarists, will make an effort to frighten the lecturer by use of threats. One such student insisted that she would take her case to the University Senate if I did not award her a mark for her paper. When I produced copies of her paper and the sources she had ‘lifted’ from and insisted she make her case to the Head of School, with all the documents, she stopped coming to see me. This student was a teacher with more than ten years of teaching experience. She denied having plagiarised and said that she believed she deserved a B grade at least. She scored a D grade in the final examinations.

Understanding the problem

The problem with parroting and plagiarism is that the instructor is left wondering if learning has taken place. Gehring and Pavela (1994) argue that students who plagiarise and cheat “do not acquire the knowledge to which their degrees are supposed to attest nor do they engage in the intellectual and moral struggles that foster personal development.”8 Until recently, I would have agreed whole heartedly with this stipulation. However, I have found that while some students’ fail a course simply because they have failed to make the minimum requirement in course work due to plagiarism; their examination marks can sometimes be quite high.

Given that the examinations are conducted following strict regulations and supervision, the possibility of cheating is minimal. This would indicate that at least some of these students are capable, intelligent students who for some reason make a conscious decision to plagiarise. In such instances I question what plagiarism indicates about student behavior and about the learning process. If such students are engaging in unethical academic practice, could this be a reflection of the innate need to compete for high grades or is it a deep-rooted problem relating to self-confidence?

In this past semester alone, more than two-fifths of the 27 students who were penalised for plagiarism cases in ED 2559 demonstrated good working knowledge

9. Ed255 Final Results for Semester 1, 2007
10. ED255 is the course code for Introduction to Curriculum Development
of the course content. In this course, assessment is split equally between continuous assessment and the final examination (50%:50%). Table 1 summarises this.

Table 1: Breakdown of coursework of students caught plagiarising in ED 255*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PL Case Number</th>
<th>Course Work 50%</th>
<th>Final Examination 50%</th>
<th>Total Mark 100%</th>
<th>Final Grade</th>
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*The highlighted sections indicate students whose performance in the final examination showed that they were capable students.

What is particularly noticeable is that in ten of the twelve highlighted cases, students almost made the final total passing mark of 50% and some even scored over 50%, but failed the course as they had not obtained the minimum mark of 20 out of 50 for course work.
So why do students’ plagiarise? In my first few years at USP, a handful of students would receive comments and a mark deduction for poor referencing or bibliographical errors. This deduction was usually a half mark to 2 marks depending on the mark allocation for that criterion. By 2003 however, a number of incidents of blatant plagiarism had come to my attention. Students were now found lifting entire sections of their assignments. In one of the courses that I taught in 2004, 31% of the 39 students enrolled received some penalty relating to plagiarism. A year later, after implementing changes to coursework and stressing the seriousness of academic dishonesty, the numbers dropped in the on-campus face-to-face teaching mode. In contrast, in the distance mode, the numbers remained high, despite student counseling on the issue.11

In an attempt to understand student views on plagiarism and dishonest practice, I initiated a small scale study in collaboration with a colleague, Dr Katarina Tuinamuana in 2004. We surveyed 156 hundred 200-level and 300-level education students and interviewed 20 of them. Just over half (51%) of the student survey and 65% of those interviewed knew of at least one case of plagiarism and/or cheating at USP. Thirty-three (21%) of students in the survey and four (20%) of those interviewed admitted to having plagiarised or cheated. Of these, 22 students said they had paraphrased without reference; 14 copied from a source and passed it off as their own work; 10 had copied someone else’s assignment; 7 had cheated on a test; and 4 said that they had let a friend copy from them in a test (Koya & Tuinamuana 2006).

Interestingly, in this study some students were able to rationalise their actions. A few samples of student comments are provided to elaborate this point.

“I can only plagiarise if I cannot find the information I need from a book or article.”

“I have once used part of another student’s assignment, however, we agreed on it, because I did one part of it which she copied.”

“I have cheated in my short tests and assignments because the lecturer did not give enough information about the assignment.”

“I have always plagiarised, sometimes I paraphrase to make it my own work but never been caught. I guess it’s cheating but I don’t have the ideas to maintain accuracy and flow in ideas.”

11. This continues to be a concern in the DFL mode.
A final example of a particularly proud student:

“I am so smart to plagiarise and copy that most of the time, the marker can’t make it out.”

Some of the faculty with whom informal discussions were held, argued that some students were not aware of the various forms of plagiarism and that they were penalized for poor referencing. Others said that, because peer-group discussion and sharing of ideas was a culturally appropriate means of learning, students needed to have the concept of individual work explained to them. I wondered about the degree of congruence of this view, given the amount of time that I devoted to discussing both plagiarism and assignment requirements.

In on-campus courses, I allocate no less than two lecture hours and two tutorial hours each semester for going over the specifics of the assignment and discussing paraphrasing and various methods of referencing. In addition to this handouts are provided. One of the recommended texts I ask my students to purchase is *Three Rs for Academic Success: research, recording and referencing* by Randolph Thaman and Frances Pene. Besides this, at least one full tutorial session is set aside to discuss the assignment question a week before the task is due.

For distance courses, a section on plagiarism and dishonest practice is included in the *Introduction and Assignment Booklet*. A brief summary of assignment writing tips and examples of how to reference are also included in this manual. Materials are uploaded onto class shares and where satellite and/or face-to-face tutorials are held, plagiarism and dishonest practice is always one of the main topics for discussion. As a course coordinator, I wondered what more I could do to enable a clearer understanding about plagiarism?

Despite my efforts to clarify the University’s official stance on dishonest practice, some of my students still plagiarise. This year, in one of my distance courses, about 20 students were penalised, with most receiving a zero grade due to the extent of their ‘lifting’ and ‘cut and paste’.

12. We made use of handouts compiled by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, USP for this purpose.
13. Out of a class role of 207.
Teacher ethics vs. the value of knowledge

What continues to plague me about my students is that they are or will soon be teachers. In our 2004 research, students were asked what might cause a student to plagiarise or cheat. Their responses highlighted a number of factors which they believed contribute to academic dishonesty. These include performance anxiety; staff attitudes and approaches to dishonest practice (laxity in dealing with such incidents); academic pressure (including heavy workload and difficult assignments); non-academic pressure (peer and family pressure and poor time management); personal student beliefs and attitudes about their learning; and institutional factors (big classes and not firmly addressing plagiarism or cheating).

Reflecting on these, I considered the possibility that teacher ethics may need to be more strongly emphasised in our courses and programmes. No matter how you put it, the question of morality and ethics crops up and in the end it is a student’s choice to plagiarise. When I ask my students what plagiarism is, the majority seem to have a good idea of what it is and why it is wrong. The numbers of students, who continue to engage in this practice, seems to indicate that the values of ethical practice have not been adequately internalised.

These incidents say something about the value that these students have of their educational experience as well as student perceptions of their lecturers and tutors. In the fore, there is obviously a devaluing of the learning process and the aim appears to be completing the course by whatever means possible. In the latter, it would appear that some students’ think assignments will not be thoroughly read. Even more demeaning is the assumption that their lecturers and markers are not widely read and therefore would not be able to identify the sources from which they copied (even when they lift from the course book!)

What does this say about our current and future teachers? Is this the legacy of an education system that has a long history of rote-learning and memorisation? Are the two problems related? Have we become so entrenched in an examination-driven

15. In our research, about 90% were able to define plagiarism but only half of these believed it to be a serious academic offence, (Ibid).
system that students have not learnt ability to relate and critique what is being taught? And, what does this mean in terms of the classroom practice that they will or do engage in? Will they engage their students in active learning or will they continue to propagate rote-learning in their classrooms?

The long and winding road to exorcising demons of the past and present

On a positive note, the School of Education (SOE) has decided to take an aggressive approach to dealing with plagiarism. As of semester 1, 2008 staff will be required to familiarise all students with the USP and SOE policy regarding plagiarism and students will have to sign an honor code which was endorsed by the SOE Board of Studies this year. This is promising, as it will emphasise to students the seriousness of such academic dishonesty. Whether this approach will serve to curb the incidence of plagiarism remains to be seen although research seems to indicate that there is a marked decline in plagiarism and cheating when an honor code is introduced.17 In the bigger picture, I would propose that what is needed at USP is a university-wide research on academic dishonesty and the development of a University honor code.

In my situation, I will continue to devise tasks that require an internalisation of the content material that get students to reflect on their own experiences. I am hopeful that, in time and with concerted vigour, this may to some extent help reduce plagiarism in our education courses.

My own concern is based on a belief that if students are allowed to get away with plagiarism, they become more confident and are more likely to do so again. As Whitley & Keith-Speigel (2002: 5) aptly surmise:

Students who cheat in college frequently go on to cheat in graduate and professional school and to engage in unethical business practice (e.g. Baldwin, Rowley & Schwartz 1996; Sims 1993). Because having successfully cheated at the undergraduate and

argues that blatant plagiarism by Asian students may be linked to what he calls “an oriental emphasis on memorisation.”

17. Based on the research conducted by Donald L, McCabe one of the leading researchers in the USA in the area of academic integrity and founder of the Center for Academic Integrity. By 2000, his research had included more than 14,000 students at about sixty colleges and universities around the US.
graduate levels can make it easier to cheat in one’s professional career, failure to deal adequately with academic dishonesty and educate students about the consequences of their behaviour constitutes a disservice not only to the academic community but to society in general.

Of course I am mindful of the fact that too harsh an approach may lead to students reverting to a series of direct quotes resulting in well-cited papers with seriously undeveloped arguments. And, as I learnt the hard way, the best of intentions could go very wrong.

In one such amusing situation, after having raised the extent of my disappointment in the number of students who plagiarised in the first assignment of one of my courses, I picked up an early submission of the second assignment, only to find that the student had taken me very seriously. So seriously in fact that he felt the need to indicate in his assignment the sections that were based on his own experiences by citing himself as (Me:200X). This appeared throughout the assignment. I realised that I had inadvertently gone from one extreme to another: from the frying pan of plagiarism to the fire of pedantry.

In summary, my humble offering ends without conclusion or solution; instead I provide the reader with a number questions which I hope may pique the mind.

- What does it mean when teachers plagiarise?
- Does this mark a decline in teacher ethics?
- Is it a symptom of a devaluation of knowledge and the indoctrination of a certification mentality?
- Is parroting and plagiarism the result of a prescriptive curriculum that is content-full, and examination-driven? (Sharma 2000)
- Is there a link between parroting and plagiarism?
- Have students become so entrenched in memorisation as learning that when we ask them for more, they resort to copying?

It was Mohandas K Ghandi who said “You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.” And so it is by the same principle that I must re-learn the act of trust in my students in the knowledge that for every plagiarist, there are possibly ten or more students who are conscientious learners and have the potential to become model teachers.

I am hopeful, but my eyes are wide open.
References


