Using draft SafeAssign to allow students to take responsibility for reducing plagiarism

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Abstract

Plagiarised text in student assignments is a continuing issue in universities. Draft SafeAssign (SA), embedded in Blackboard, allows students to submit their piece of writing to text matching software without penalty. Draft SA was used as a formative assessment tool in Cell Biology, LFS100 (enrolment 428). Students submitted text one week before final submission. Instructions were given for students to retrieve and interpret their report in order to make any changes before their final submission to SafeAssign. A nominal mark (2%) was awarded for correct use of the tool. The number of students identified as having suspect text and needing an interview was reduced from 50 in 2011 to 23 in 2012 (mostly minor issues). Efficient use of Draft SA allowed for students to take responsibility for correct paraphrasing of their academic writing, whilst reducing the workload of the course coordinator in the counselling of students with suspect text.

Introduction

Plagiarism is an ever present and seemingly growing problem in undergraduate academic writing (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; Rolf, 2011). In a review of 2006 data from Australian universities nearly 9645 students were the subject of disciplinary action and of these >70% were for plagiarism (Lindsay, 2010). Students often misunderstand what constitutes plagiarism and the serious nature of plagiarism compared to the attitudes of academic staff (Yeo, 2007). The modern cohort of students who have grown up with a free and readily available internet believe it is “freely available information” for them to cut and paste as they see fit with no understanding that this is in fact cheating (Wood, 2004).

Why do students plagiarise? The reasons why students plagiarise are multifactorial. Students may: be time poor and/or lack adequate time management; feel overwhelmed with transition and lack the skills in academic writing; have insufficient understanding of complex concepts; or there could be cultural and/or language skills issues (Ashworth, Bannister & Thorne, 1997; Introna, 2007; Shi 2012).

Plagiarism detection software systems are available, including Turnitin and SafeAssign, but in most cases it is used at the end point when students submit their final assignment (Butakov & Scherbinin, 2009) rather than as a formative learning tool to assist with academic writing (Rolf, 2011).

Plagiarism is not only a problem for students who run the risk of shame, loss of reputation, loss of marks and grades, failure of courses and even possible expulsion from university. For the academic staff member it can be an even bigger stress with increased workloads identifying and investigating allegations of plagiarism and dealing with students including counselling and education. The administrative processes surrounding the reporting of
instances of plagiarism can be prohibitive, regardless of whether it is a minor or serious case. For the university as a whole, there is a real risk to its reputation when cases of plagiarism are uncovered.

**How to deal with plagiarism - the Draft SafeAssign strategy**

*The issues and context*

The strategy described below was run in a 1st year course Cell Biology, LFS100. The majority of students enrolled are in their first semester of university study. It is an open entry course. Coordinating a 1st year course in the first semester with enrolments of approximately 400 students meant I always had to detect and deal with a higher proportion of incidences of plagiarism. In addition, I also coordinate two 2nd year level physiology courses with combined enrolments of 300 plus. Believing that prevention was always better than cure, I devised tutorial exercises on how to paraphrase and reference and how to avoid plagiarism. They were conducted in LFS100 well before assessment was due.

In 2011, however, a “horror semester” ensued with multiple instances of suspected plagiarism from a single assignment. For the CSI Assignment in Cell Biology, LFS100, we had students investigating a specific cell of their choice. They had to describe its structure and function, as well as describe some current research on the cell type. Part of the choice associated with this assignment was an option to complete it as a group of up to four students. All assignments had to be submitted to SafeAssign via Blackboard for plagiarism checking.

Whilst it was relatively easy to determine from the SafeAssign reports who needed to meet with me as course coordinator, group submissions required further investigation to determine who wrote the section of ‘offending’ text. This only added to the stress and time of dealing with the plagiarism issues. Whilst the final number of assignments with suspect text finally came down to 50, over 100 students needed to be contacted initially to determine which student(s) were at fault. The incidences ranged from mostly minor to some more major issues, but the policy at the university was that each incidence had to be dealt with.

*Draft SafeAssign strategy*

Draft SafeAssign (SA) is similar to SafeAssign in that the software checks text against available sources on the internet, databases and assignments already submitted to the institutional database. It differs in that it does not add the uploaded assignment to the database, so a subsequent submission of the final assignment will not cross-reference and flag as suspect against itself. I had previously made Draft SA available to my 2nd year physiology students on a voluntary basis but the uptake had been minimal. After semester 1 2011, the decision was made then to use Draft SA in a more formal setting with nominal marks allocated to ‘encourage’ use. After the successful trial in the semester 2 physiology course and some fine-tuning of the grading rubric Draft SA was rolled out for the CSI assignment in LFS100 for 2012. It was referred to as the CSI Checkpoint 3 Draft SA submission and was part of the scaffolding for the assessment task.

The tutorial on referencing, paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism was conducted in week 7 of semester. In the week 9 tutorial, students were given instruction on how to upload their assignments to the Blackboard link and then retrieve the Draft SA report. The students were shown a mocked-up sample assignment which had several incidences of matching text. Firstly, they were told to ignore the “matching” percentage given at the top of the webpage. This can be misleading and in most cases can give a false impression of the matching rate of...
Using draft SafeAssign to allow students to take responsibility for reducing plagiarism; Nuts & Bolts

By week 10, students submitted the text for their assignment to Draft SA (at least one week before the final due date). All text was to be submitted, including in-text references and reference details. If students were working in a group then all members had to submit their own section of the assignment individually. A minimum of 150 words applied for each student, but in total the entire assignment’s text was still to be submitted. Each student was required to download their own Draft SA report from Blackboard. They then read and interpreted the report and fixed any suspect text according to the instructions given in week 9. Students working in groups were encouraged to work together using the Draft SA reports in the final editing of their text. The final assignment was then submitted to SafeAssign by the
due date in week 11. A hard copy of the Draft SA report “Print version” was to be included with the final submission of the assignment.

Using Blackboard I, as course coordinator, scrutinized the Final SafeAssign submissions and reports to identify any assignments with suspect text. The list was then cross referenced with the Draft SA reports submitted by the students. The need for students to submit their own Draft SA reports had two proposed benefits. Firstly, the requirement for the student to download and attach a hard copy of the report increased the likelihood that they would look at the report and take any necessary actions. Secondly, it reduced the administrative time taken to assess and grade the use of the tool. A nominal 2% of the final course grade was allocated for correct use of the Draft SA tool. Marks for use of the tool, which essentially reflected marks for academic paraphrasing were assigned using a simple rubric (Table 1).

The incidence of ‘suspect’ text, and therefore plagiarism, was substantially reduced after using Draft SA in 2012 (Table 2). Moreover, identifying the ‘offending’ group member(s) and contacting them was made much easier and allowed for far greater discretion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number students enrolled</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of assignments submitted</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students identified by Final SafeAssign with ‘suspect’ text</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of assignments with ‘suspect’ text</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Results of analysis comparing

Discussion

The use of Draft SA substantially reduced the incidences of plagiarism detected in the CSI assignment. In addition, it allowed for an easier identification of which student(s) wrote the ‘suspect’ text in the final submission, especially in group submissions. There was a reduced workload for the course coordinator especially post assignment submission in checking for incidences of plagiarism.

As an added bonus, having to submit the text to Draft SA at least one week before the final submission allowed for better time management in completion of the assignment. Poor time management and leaving assignments to the last minute often leads to poor decisions and poor paraphrasing resulting in plagiarism. Taking the time to reflect on the writing process of the assignment as a student waits for the Draft SA report and then acting on it gives opportunities for improving on a draft. It uses positive reinforcement with a reward in marks for correct paraphrasing of academic texts. In the group situation it allowed for every group member to contribute to the writing and sufficient time to meld the separate sections of writing together into a more coherent assignment.
This strategy encourages students to take responsibility for their own academic writing in a scaffolded and safe way so as to avoid plagiarism. Likewise it allows the course coordinator to focus on being a teacher and facilitator of learning, rather than the police, judge and executioner.

As a caveat it should be noted that use of SafeAssign alone is not sufficient. The sources that SafeAssign has access to are not unlimited. There will always be books not in electronic form or journal articles which limit free public access. SafeAssign cannot help with checking in-text citations and referencing (Rolf, 2011). So the academic marker must still be vigilant and 1st year students, especially, need instruction on and practise with their academic writing in a supportive context.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do students plagiarise?

2. What strategies can we employ to minimise plagiarism?

3. Should we take a zero tolerance perspective in first year courses?

4. Do the policies surrounding plagiarism at your institution help or hinder your dealing with plagiarism?

References


