Academic Integrity: building discipline specific “stories”

Fiona Henderson, Student Learning Unit, Victoria University, Melbourne

Brian Zammit, College of Arts, Victoria University, Melbourne

Paul Whitelaw, College of Business, Victoria University, Melbourne

Abstract

An understanding of what academic integrity means and engagement with skills that enhance academic integrity is seldom a primary focus of teaching staff or students. Often the requirement for substantial skill development and understanding of academic integrity and its principles is subsumed by the procedures of how to avoid plagiarism which are clearly not the whole story. Often not even a procedural focus is demonstrated in subsequent assignments, whether in the same unit of study or another. This paper argues that there are several occasions in a semester within individual subjects that are “teachable moments” for academic integrity and if these occasions are well used then over a semester a more complete “story” of academic integrity can be given, a deeper understanding developed and an engagement with skill development that promotes and demonstrates academic integrity more likely to be achieved. Three approaches in three core first year subjects are presented.

Introduction

“I have to deliver content!” is the battle cry of many busy lecturers yet in the next breath they cry “My students can’t write!” or “I keep finding cases of plagiarism!” Assuming that lecturers can be convinced of the “Why should I teach Academic Integrity?” argument, the next question is often “Where should I teach Academic Integrity?” followed by “How should I teach Academic Integrity?”

Biggs (2003) argues for “constructive alignment” which is one way of answering the “where” question. Such an alignment could exist between learning objectives, content and assessment tasks. If students are given a learning objective, they can rightfully expect teaching and learning activities that make the objective explicit and meaningful, and then they should undertake an assessment task that checks for understanding and application of the learning objective. The alignment should also occur just as obviously at a micro level. The teaching and learning is not likely to occur through a single activity. For the majority of students learning is incremental; the steps are small, not always evenly spaced, and reinforcement and feedback essential (Shute, 2008).

To answer the “how”, the notion of “teachable moments” according to Havighurst (1952) refers to the best developmental stage for specific learning to take place. More recently it has come to mean the time at which the student has the greatest interest and degree of engagement with a topic (Gladwell, 2002). As a negative, these moments occur when the student sees a need which may only be because the lecturer is applying the rules. Ideally, the “need” is seen before the rule is broken (Miller, Shoptaugh & Wooldridge, 2011).
Creating effective skill development responses to the where and how questions potentially impact on bigger issues such as retention and success of students (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Moreover with a diversifying student cohort responses which are effective are likely to be explicit, well structured, clearly written and with examples, which would be of value to any student.

**Academic integrity (AI)**

According to the Academy JISC Academic Integrity report (2011), the Curtin University of Technology academic integrity website is a good example of a central source of information. This website states that academic integrity is

> essential to the foundation and ongoing viability of an academic community, including managers, researchers, teachers and students. It defines values held by those in the community and which serve to guide the community in its work. In particular, academic integrity involves a commitment to such fundamental values as honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility within all academic endeavours (Curtin University, 2011).

As a subset of academic integrity, academic honesty

underpins respect for, and the search for, knowledge and understanding. Academic staff are honest in their research and in their dealings with other staff and with students. Students are honest with themselves and with others, in their personal ambition, study and particularly in their involvement in the assessment process (Curtin University, 2011).

Building skills that enable students to demonstrate academic integrity is complex as indeed many skills are required. Regular and sustained skill development is more likely to be a positive educational experience. On the other hand, if procedural skills are being acquired simply so that an assignment can be resubmitted, the learning may be superficial and possibly undertaken begrudgingly (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

**Discipline specific “stories”**

Victoria University’s students are typically from low socio-economic status areas and very keen to improve their employment prospects (Victoria University, 2012; 2011). This does not mean that quality and academic integrity can be sacrificed. At the micro level, academic integrity might be of paramount concern to academic staff but at the macro level it should be of concern to all members of the university. The following three distinct approaches can be taken as suggestions for how all universities could embed academic integrity into curriculum design, course content and delivery.

**Introduction to Hospitality**

The purpose of the Introduction to Hospitality unit of study within the Bachelor of Business is to give students a basic understanding of the study of hospitality as an emerging discipline worthy of rigorous study and to orient the students to the hospitality industry and the issues which confront it. This includes introducing students to the depth and scope of hospitality as a social concept, with an emphasis on understanding the forces that shape the industry, and with reference to their own skills and characteristics. Introduction to Hospitality is delivered as a 2 hour lecture and 1 hour tutorial per week. Key concepts, themes and issues are raised in the lecture, whilst the tutorial provides an interactive environment where students discuss and apply the material presented in the lecture. To adequately prepare for the tutorial, students need to read increasingly more complex pieces and prepare increasingly more complex
answers to increasingly more complex questions. They are expected to contribute to the discussion in tutorials.

The AI “story” for hospitality students is quite discipline specific. It revolves around their exposure to various facets of the industry including cooking and recipes, bars, restaurants, nightclubs, hotels and resorts. In looking at these phenomena the students develop an appreciation for industry trends, creativity and originality, and importantly, the professional courtesy of acknowledging sources of inspiration and influence. For example, in terms of cooking and recipes, in the current swathe of cooking shows on TV, there are constantly questions such as “who inspired you?”, “where did you learn this recipe?” and the answers are invariably along the lines of “my grandma” or “I saw this done when I was travelling in…” – nobody dares say “I created this entirely on my own”. It is relatively easy to find Youtubes to insert into lectures that reinforce a point and help make the message engaging. This type of oral acknowledgement whilst not precise enough for written academic work, helps make the step to formal evidence and referencing more meaningful. In tutorials the academic integrity story is continued with discussions about the role, types and use of evidence. Firstly students review secondary evidence for the summary of three simple journal articles and develop an essay plan which incorporates the examined articles. This is a precursor activity to the essay assessment task which requires the synthesis of several secondary sources. Then later in the semester, students in groups have to construct a report which requires them to start making authentic connections between theory and practice, using primary data collected via an interview.

Management and Organisation Behaviour

One of the core subjects in the Bachelor of Business normally undertaken in first year is Management and Organisation Behaviour (M&OB). The subject is not only taught in Melbourne but also at a number of locations offshore, namely Beijing and Hong Kong in China, and Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru in Malaysia. From a pedagogical perspective the range of social and educational contexts makes it difficult to meet the needs of a widely diverse student cohort, however and notwithstanding cultural differences, within the context of transnational education it is critical to maintain comparability of learning outcomes (DEST, 2005). An agreed understanding of academic integrity is essential in this context.

The focus of academic integrity in this subject is to build a discipline oriented story starting with “Ethics as a Manager” and “Ethics in an Organisation” early in the semester (in contrast with a number of Management textbooks that have Ethics as a last chapter). Students who have part-time employment and students who have another understanding are able to contribute their perspectives before the lecturer/tutor narrows the topic to the concept of academic integrity and then to ethical behaviour as a student of this university.

In tutorials the academic integrity story is continued with discussions about the role, types and use of evidence. Firstly students review secondary evidence for the summary of three simple journal articles and develop an essay plan which incorporates the examined articles. This is a precursor activity to the essay assessment task which requires the synthesis of several secondary sources. Then later in the semester, students in groups have to construct a report which requires them to start making authentic connections between theory and practice, using primary data collected via an interview.

Aligned with the use of evidence, are the skills of synthesising, paraphrasing and quoting. These are explicitly noted in the marking criteria for each assessment task with marks allocated differently according to the focus of each assessment task.
Knowing and Knowledge

Knowing and Knowledge (K&K) is a compulsory, credit bearing, foundation unit in the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Creative Arts Industries, Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Laws/Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Youth Studies and Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood/Primary). The unit, which is currently offered across two campuses, has an average enrolment of four hundred and fifty students who are required to attend a weekly one-hour lecture and a two-hour tutorial. It is also offered in semester two each year to cater for mid-year intakes, with some key modifications designed to enhance transitional support.

As a transdisciplinary foundation unit, K&K has a core responsibility in terms of providing the story of academic literacy for students who are new to tertiary study, “helping students ‘learn to be successful students’” (Wilson, 2009, p. 11) and participating as a member of the academic community. The AI story via the lecture content, has a thematic focus on Australian identity, and the dialogic delivery is designed in part with the aim of honing students’ personal integrity and critical thinking skills. On the one hand, then, the “story” for Knowing and Knowledge, is less overtly discipline connected; on the other hand, it is very clearly structured with “developing” and “advanced” level weekly online and face-to-face tutorial activities that help to establish a university mindset and a strong skill base that in and of itself builds academic integrity. These activities use the readings for the week’s lecture topic (eg Indigenous Australians, Religion, Suburbia, Sport) and explicitly address a range of academic skills including critical reading, note-taking and essay-writing, as well as quoting, paraphrasing, summarising and referencing. These weekly activities scaffold the assessment tasks, with academic integrity explicitly discussed at various points throughout the semester as well as featuring in the marking criteria for each assessment. Teachable moments are aided by the use of assessed skill quizzes and additional voluntary workshops.

Conclusion

For any academic integrity program to be successful, there needs to be constant growth and reinforcement of the identified academic integrity skills. On a day-to-day level this may appear more as a course and subject level responsibility but the culture of the university and the actions of teaching and allied staff have a significant impact. As is the case with all units discussed in this paper, teaching staff and Academic Language and Learning staff from the University’s Student Learning Unit have collaborated closely on curriculum development.

The majority of students taking the three units presented above have entered their degree course directly from secondary school. While many have part time work to support their studies, the anticipated outcome of their degree, professional employment, is not yet fully appreciated by all of them from an ethical / integrity perspective and more relevantly, from an academic learning perspective. Hence finding and using teachable moments is vital.

The evidence to determine whether these AI interventions have been successful or not will be gathered through subject level retention and resubmission of assessment task figures during 2013.

Key questions for small discussion groups

1. How is the “story” told at your university / in your discipline?
2. How and when do you decide to teach aspects of academic integrity?
3. How and what do you use as academic integrity materials?
4. How can we connect AI stories and teachable moments more effectively?
5. How important is the AI link to discipline and/or professional employment?

References


