



Book Reviews

A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education

Jude Carroll

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There can be very few colleagues currently teaching in higher education establishments who have not had any brushes with the extremely tricky subject of plagiarism. Even if it has not happened yet on a course you are teaching (well, actually, as this book points out, it may have and you did not detect it), you may well have experienced it in your department, either by it having happened to a colleague, or by taking part in a plagiarism disciplinary committee or appeal hearing. One way or another, it seems, there is no escaping it, even if you teach a subject, as I do, which is practical in nature and where the lack of written resources makes plagiarism more difficult than many theoretical subjects. So the timeliness of this book is indisputable.

The book encourages a certain pick and mix attitude to the subject and the chapter headings, which start at 'Reviewing the Issues' and end with 'Institutional Policy and Culture', passing through 'Designing Courses for Deterring Plagiarism' to 'Detection' followed by 'Punishment', certainly cover all the possible angles to the question. The book is laid out text book style. Little boxes with bullet points abound; supporting statements (almost journalistic in style) occupy the margin. There are even exercises to complete with answers at the back of the book. It is all admirably clear and informative.

So does it do the job the title says it sets out to do, i.e. does it tell you how to deter plagiarism amongst your students? Well, yes, it does. But, like most things, it is not as simple as that. The core of the problem it seems is that it demands a tremendous amount of work detecting plagiarism and many of us just cannot face what is involved or do not have the time to do it. So, to my mind, the real focus of the book is not really about what you can do to avoid plagiarism in the first place or how to detect it, but an ever so slightly hectoring appeal (supported with a lot of evidence) to us all to get our act together and develop policies and strategies for dealing with it. The present situation seems fairly chaotic without any consistent policies across institutions. The book paints a fairly grim picture of current practice,

which I saw absolutely no reason to disbelieve. It is maybe not the message the reader who chooses to turn to this book wants to hear, but it is undeniable that the status quo cannot be justified in this respect. The book is first and foremost a call to arms. Whether the weary troops will heed the battle cry remains to be seen. If they do not, the book suggests, catastrophe may be not too far away. The book is certainly persuasive on this point.

It is extremely hard to write a book about this subject and make it relevant to so many disparate academic disciplines and I think the book scores very highly in this regard. You may not be able to use all the suggested strategies, but at least some of them will be helpful, no matter what your subject area. You may of course be already doing a lot of it, purely as a matter of good pedagogical practice (asking for essay outlines, changing essay questions year by year, making questions and projects as up to date as possible), but you may not have considered how useful these strategies are as a deterrent to plagiarism. Some of us have yet to dip our toes into the murky waters of peer-assessment and this book reinforces the lessons learned at the recent GWAMP¹ conference, which supported the notion that you do have to change the way you teach when you are dealing with large numbers, and that it can be productive and helpful to do so.

Another very helpful aspect of the book is that it is not at all narrowly focused. We may think of plagiarism largely in terms of non attribution of sources culled either from books or increasingly from the Internet, not to mention the awful spectre of 'guns for hire' writing essays for cash or 'paper mills' full of past essays which you are urged to change just a little bit and present as your own work, but of course there are many other aspects to it. Collusion (especially problematic in group work) is dealt with at length and the author does not duck the difficult questions it raises. Nor does she avoid the extremely touchy subject of international students and the fact that they appear to be very over represented in the plagiarism statistics. She makes the rather chilling point that this may simply be because their plagiarism is easier to detect. Food for thought there. She gives us a case study on informing students about collusion which reproduces a handout from a UK postgraduate course. The handout pulls no punches. It tells students that it is not acceptable to ask someone outside the course to read and correct written work they intend to submit as their own, even if the corrections are *only confined to the English language components of the work*². It certainly gave me something to think about, if only the notion that we fudge quite a lot of this with regard to students who do not have English as their first language and that giving out a draconian handout may make things clearer, but will it improve the work submitted? Or just up the drop out and failure rate?

I came away from reading the book feeling a bit depressed rather than empowered to go out and fight my corner on this. The book certainly convinced me that the problem is bigger than most of us think it is and that the currently envisaged solutions do not really work very well. I think most of us are hoping rather pathetically that simply putting everything through some sort of electronic gateway will magically make plagiarism disappear. It is clear that so far, the electronic plagiarism detectors are pretty rough and ready and not all that reliable. The main hope seems to lie in redesigning courses and assessments so that plagiarism is rendered more difficult. There is also the task of how we get the message across to the students. There is no clear answer to this, of course. The book seems to suggest that we simply have to do it by every means possible, but the author acknowledges it is an extremely uphill struggle. Students plagiarize for a multitude of reasons and the gulf between us is never larger perhaps than on this issue. All credit to the author of this book therefore that she does not duck any of the difficult issues raised, including the issue of academics themselves plagiarising.

If you are in any way involved in teaching students, this book will provide you with plenty to think about and it is unlikely that you will not find ways to improve and alter what you do after reading it. The main point is that there is no quick fix to this undoubtedly increasing problem, and doing something about it represents an enormous amount of work facing those of us working in the sector.

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Notes

- 1 GWAMP (Group Working Assessment in Media Production). A HEFCE-funded project which ran from 2000 to 2003. There's a very useful website at: <http://www.gwamp.bournemouth.ac.uk/>
- 2 op.cit p.44. Italics not in the original text.