LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Will promoting our learners' understanding of scientific writing and independent working skills help to reduce plagiarism?

LSIS Research

Kate Joseph, David Sifres and Charlie Joseph

Background

Newham College of Further Education is situated in East London. The college has an open access admissions policy and recruits students from diverse cultural backgrounds and of varying abilities. Students on the Access to Health Science course are usually returning to study with little or no recent experience of education and with ages ranging from nineteen to mid-fifties. They are mostly of African, Caribbean and Eastern European ethnicity with some British born.

Over the years, we have found plagiarism to be a serious problem on the Access to Health Science course when it comes to students completing assignments in their own time. Continual plagiarism would result in students failing units and could jeopardise their successful completion of the Access to Health Science diploma. In the past, plagiarism would result in a disciplinary meeting with senior members of staff to find out if the plagiarism was with intent and, rather than solving the problem, it often culminated with the student feeling totally embarrassed and leaving the course. Obviously, this was not a desired outcome, so when students continually failed to submit original work they were asked to meet with their Academic Progress Advisor in a final attempt for them to prevent plagiarism. With our enquiry, we hoped that we could find a better solution to the problem.

There are five Access to Health Science groups with an average of 20 students enrolled in each group. The group we focused on had 15 students enrolled, with 13 regular attendees.

Three of the students had been studying at the college for two years as initially they were not at the required ability level for the Access course and were encouraged to complete the year-long pre-Access course to prepare them for the level 3 qualification.

Starting point

In our experience, the introduction of the internet has exacerbated the already frustrating and common place problem of plagiarism. The use of Turnitin has highlighted just how widespread and serious the problem is, although it has also in some cases helped to reduce its occurrence. (Turnitin reports on plagiarism by reporting the similarity, i.e. amount of cloning between a student's work and other sources, including the internet and other student submissions).

As most students join the Access to Health Science course with basic education and training, and English as a second language, we expect that they need thorough explanation of referencing. We usually cover plagiarism and referencing during induction and in the first lessons. Later in the course, it is taught in more depth using examples and exercises.

To begin with, we carried out a survey to gain an idea of how much the students knew about plagiarism. As we suspected, the results showed the majority of the students did not know what plagiarism was or how serious an offence it was. They also had not heard of Turnitin. At the same time, it was clear that students did not know how to reference an academic article. With this in mind, we aimed to use the first two assignments set in the Autumn term (reports on Osmosis and Disease) to record the level of plagiarism using Turnitin as a basis for later assessing how effective our teaching and interventions had been.

Our initial results showed that cloning (submitting another's work, word for word, as one's own) was the most common form of plagiarism, which is comparable with the Turnitin survey [The Turnitin White Paper, 2012] which found that cloning was the most prevalent academic offence. None of the first reports on Osmosis were completely free of plagiarism (0%), although pleasingly, none had a very high percentage of plagiarism (76-100%) either. However, 40% of the reports were characterised by low plagiarism (1-25% similarity), and 40% had medium levels of plagiarism (between 26-50% similarity) while 13% had high (51-75%) amounts of plagiarism.

Whilst these results were unacceptable, we were optimistic that our induction activities and lessons on referencing would have an impact on the students' performance. We were therefore disappointed to find the amount of plagiarism with the second report (Disease) one month later was similar, if not slightly higher than with the first report. No students had no (0%) or very high levels (76-100%) of plagiarism, whilst 13% of reports were again characterised by high levels (51-75%) of similarity. Fewer reports (33%) showed low levels of plagiarism (1-25%) and a greater number of reports (47%) showed medium levels (26-50%). This showed that our initial lessons had made little impact on the learners' understanding of referencing and their ability to produce original work.

Teaching and learning processes

There are five Access to Health Science groups which all have different input from the various subject areas across the course. We noticed that the practice of referencing varied from teacher to teacher. Individual teachers referenced differently according to the subject content. At the same time, referencing correctly from the internet seemed to be particularly problematical and this literally compounded the problem as students were getting conflicting advice. As a result, it was decided that all teachers would use the same method and teaching resources to prevent confusion.

To combat and supplement this process, extra sessions were given with exercises that included embedding text using Harvard style referencing from books, journals and websites.

Summary of initial results
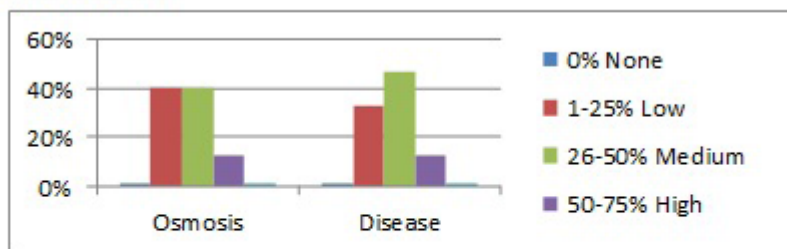
Date	Report	0% None	1-25% Low	26-50% Medium	51-75% High	76-100% Very high
October	Osmosis	0	40	40	13	0
November	Disease	0	33	47	13	0

Some activities were for groups and some were individual to foster independent study skills. The students embraced the exercises and seemed to grasp the techniques and understand how to reference correctly. The students were then shown a number of related techniques, such as how to brainstorm an idea, how to use spider diagrams with just key words or concepts to create original work, how to plan for an essay and how to summarise or rephrase a piece of writing.

The group activities helped the less able students grasp the concepts from their peers, which we found had a somewhat better reception as they could communicate at the same level, or possibly it was the case that the students were more comfortable asking for clarification from their peers. For a few members of the group, this was the final piece to the puzzle and they seemed able to produce reports and assignments afterwards that were correctly referenced. However, for a few students it was not until they were given individual tutorials alongside their Turnitin report, that that they seemed to understand academic referencing. Quite

a few seemed genuinely shocked at the percentage in the similarity report. This process seemed to have a profound an impact as we saw some improvements on the next assignments in terms of correct referencing with several students.

Impact

We tested the impact of the activities through using Turnitin to analyse plagiarism levels in two reports that the students submitted towards the end of the year. As before, we found that none of the reports were totally plagiarism free (0%) and none had a very high percentage of plagiarism (76-100%). The first (Amylase) report showed a similar level (33%) of low plagiarism (1-25%) as before, but the percentage of reports in the medium category (26-50%) had dropped to 26% which was a marked improvement. The second (Pulse Rate) report, which was submitted a month later when more of the intervention had been incorporated, showed a higher percentage (40%) in the lower range (1-25%) and a much lower percentage (13%) in the medium range (26-50%).

This represented a substantial improvement.

A student survey carried out at the end of the study showed that all the students had gained an understanding of what plagiarism is and how it is morally wrong. The students showed that they were now aware of the importance of acknowledging the author when paraphrasing and quoting rather than claiming it is as their own work. All of the students said they felt proud when handing in work that was wholly their own. All the students appreciated it was hard (rather than easy) for students to get away with plagiarism. Whilst the students felt that the individual tutorials had been particularly helpful (they felt that there could be no students who were still unsure of the rules regarding plagiarism) most of the students thought that the individual tutorials would not completely put students off from plagiarising in the future. They commented that when students plagiarised now it was due to laziness or because they had left doing the work until the last minute (rather than not knowing that they were plagiarising as at the start of the study) although one student

Summary of final results
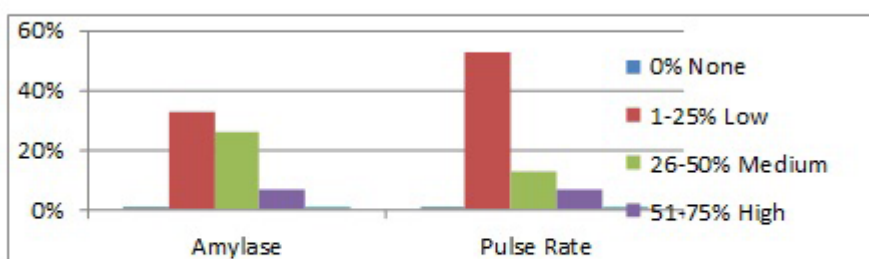
Date	Report	0% None	1-25% Low	26-50% Medium	51-75% High	76-100% Very high
April	Amylase	0	33	26	7	0
May	Pulse Rate	0	40	20	7	0

argued that a reason why some people plagiarised was because they lacked comprehension of the English language and '*must plagiarise in order to offset this*'. But for many, being embarrassed about plagiarising was a big deterrent (a bigger deterrent than the threat of punishment). Whilst they had made great strides with reducing the amount they plagiarised, the students appreciated that there was more they could do in the future, including ensuring that their referencing was more consistent and accurate.

Conclusion

Our study showed how when students do not know how to reference correctly, they inadvertently plagiarise and do not understand the different forms or the consequences of submitting someone else's work as their own. We have come to realise that students need much more time for learning how to reference, paraphrase, rephrase (in their own words), quote and summarise before writing reports than we previously thought. The development of their referencing skills also greatly depended on the amount of time and support given to the development of independent learning skills. Although time consuming and exasperating at times, it was essential that academic conventions were taught in

a variety of ways to allow for differentiation, and taught on a regular basis. We also found it important to instil in students that copying/plagiarism is dishonest (equivalent to fraud and theft) as well as the benefits of writing your own work.

References

Turnitin (2012) The Plagiarism Spectrum. White Paper 5. Available at: http://pages. turnitin.com/rs/iparadigms/ images/Turnitin_WhitePaper_ PlagiarismSpectrum.pdf

Further reading

Pears and Shields (2008, 3rd ed). Cite them right. Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.

Contact

This study was carried out by Kate Joseph and David Sifres at Newham College of Further Education, Stratford Campus, London E15 4HT. If you have any questions or comments, please e-mail: Kate.Joseph@newham. ac.uk , or David.Sifres@ Newham.ac.uk