

Preventing and designing out plagiarism: making the most of VLEs and CAA tools

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Introduction

Plagiarism is an issue that has recently become a heated topic of discussion, attracting the attention of scholars, institutions and the media¹. Although plagiarism has always existed, the development of new technologies, especially the increased use of the Internet for academic purposes, have lately been blamed for the growth of opportunities for plagiarism (Baty, 2000). The role of new technologies is such that new terms like “cyber plagiarism” or “digital plagiarism” (Park, 2003: 481) and “cyber cheating” or “e-cheating” (Jones et al., 2008) have been coined to refer to the use of new technologies for dishonest purposes. However, this paper aims to take a very different approach by considering technology not as a temptation or an enemy in the fight against plagiarism, but rather as a powerful ally. The emphasis is on appropriate strategies that could be implemented using Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and Computer Aided Assessment (CAA) tools to prevent and design out plagiarism in a specific context: the MA Applied Translation at London Metropolitan University.

Strategies to design out or reduce plagiarism

In general terms, plagiarism could be defined as “cheating in assessments by using ideas or words from other authors without explicitly acknowledging the source of information” (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007: 235). Although this definition seems to be straight forward, ambiguity might arise when applying it to a specific context. As McDowell and Brown (2001) argue, distinguishing the different degrees of plagiarism, and determining and ascertaining its intentionality could also be problematic.

Judging by the wealth of workshops and resources available aimed at reflecting on and promoting appropriate strategies to minimise the opportunities for academic

¹ See Frean (2006), Sugden (2008) and Lightfoot (2009), among others.

misconduct, it could be deduced that the motto “prevention is better than cure” is widely shared amongst the academic community. Whereas the media seems to take a more simplistic approach through worrying headlines, academic literature and the many initiatives that have been implemented lately (i.e. the various projects undertaken by the Plagiarism Advisory Service) are generally geared towards promoting and disseminating good practice.

Some of the solutions, initiatives and strategies are addressed to students, but many are designed for lecturers and institutions. As far as lecturers are concerned, as McDowell and Brown (2001) suggest, strategies can range from devising strictly controlled assessment and designing assessment instruments that make plagiarism more difficult to developing a climate that encourages learning, and educating students on cheating and plagiarism. In this sense, the objective seems to be to “engender a deep understanding of plagiarism” (Plagiarism Advisory Service, 2008) amongst students.

With regard to the strategies that could be implemented to design out opportunities for academic misconduct, several guides have been published in order to enable lecturers to reflect on how a specific assignment can encourage plagiarism. Although most of the strategies suggested could be relatively easily implemented - which is one of the main purposes of short guides, often aimed at "busy lecturers" (see Lee, 2008) -, in some cases it will be necessary to take a deeper approach and rethink the whole assessment task. As will be shown in this paper, the integration of the wealth of technologies available in the present day will allow us to adopt a more effective and innovative approach when implementing these good practices and strategies, “whilst encouraging original contribution” (Plagiarism Advisory Service, 2008).

Designing out plagiarism in “Translation Tools and the Translator”

Having experienced the unpleasant situation of discovering that some of my students had plagiarised when writing an essay, and the even more disagreeable experience of reporting cases to the Student Casework Office, I decided to examine the current assessment practices that are undertaken. The assessment component under analysis is a 2,000 essay where students are asked to discuss the impact of a specific technology “on the work of the translator and the translation industry, weighing up the positive and negative aspects of using such software”. My first reaction was to blame students for not making the effort to submit an original assignment. However, the approach changed gradually as I realised that the assessment task given to students might encourage “find and faking” information instead of “making” it (ASKe, 2009).

As one of the main aims of the module in question is to demonstrate how the efficiency of the translation process can be improved by an enhanced knowledge of

the relevant electronic tools, I considered that the use of the learning technologies available at London Metropolitan University (specifically the Blackboard VLE known as Weblearn) to implement some of the anti-plagiarism strategies suggested above could be suitable and beneficial. The strategies put into practice to design out plagiarism in this module, as well as further suggestions to be implemented in the future, are explained below.

Educating students: Weblearn quizzes and interactive learning materials

As pointed out by Stefani and Carroll (2001), if lecturers can be certain that students understand what plagiarism is, and that students are also aware of the potential consequences, they will feel easier about expecting them to comply with the rules and suggesting penalties. In order to achieve this, the obvious solution would seem to be to provide students with information on academic misconduct, referencing guidelines and the institutional policy applied. However, experience and research (Carroll and Appleton, 2001: 13) show that this information is not always read and/or understood. Also, some students might find it difficult to interpret these rules, especially if they are different to those they are used to, as is the case of international students (Leask, 2006: 196), who abound in MA Applied Translation Studies. In order to avoid this difficulty, more interactive and appealing learning materials could be provided to students. These materials could be delivered using the learning technologies available and adopting “more friendly approaches” as suggested by the National Union of Students (Carroll and Appleton, 2001, 13).

In addition to hosting essay banks and providing a wealth of resources that could potentially be plagiarised by students, the World Wide Web offers plenty of interactive and user-friendly resources to educate students on plagiarism. These resources are the result of successful initiatives and programmes developed to minimise plagiarism, such as the podcasts created by the Oxford Brookes University², the Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs) created by London Metropolitan University and the University of Nottingham³, or the online surveys, tutorials and learning materials created by the TLTC at London Metropolitan University⁴. All these resources could be recycled easily, embedded in Weblearn, and integrated into the module. Customised resources could also be designed within a specific course (i.e. MA Applied Translation Studies) not only in English but also in different languages. With the view of integrating these materials within the curriculum, students could be asked to translate the podcasts or videos from English into their native language. By doing so, they will not only practice translation related skills but will learn the vocabulary and concepts related to plagiarism, cheating and academic

² See <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/library/podcast/wheatley/ep6.html>.

³ Reusable Learning Objects are defined by the RLO-CETL as “web-based interactive chunks of e-learning designed to explain a stand-alone learning objective”. See http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk:8080/open_virtual_file_path/i1405n11004t/referencing/index.html, http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk:8080/open_virtual_file_path/i1967n5604t/index.html and http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk:8080/open_virtual_file_path/i1405n10233t/referencing_websites_rlo.html.

⁴ See the site Preventing Plagiarism (2008).

misconduct in general. These resources could be further reused and made available to students from different courses.

Computer Aided Assessment could be used for formative purposes to increase the students' awareness and knowledge on this topic. Some scholars have made available quizzes⁵ that could be adapted or used as a reference to create an online quiz. My experience integrating this online resource into the curriculum has shown that it can be successfully used to help students to distinguish what is acceptable and is not when referencing others' work.

Finally, essay banks could be discussed (and even assessed in class, applying the marking criteria given to students), and free electronic detection tools could be introduced to students to learn more about plagiarism, and distinguish between good and poor referencing practices.

Providing opportunities for discussion, practice and feedback: using online discussions

Asynchronous online discussions are extremely useful tools, which provide numerous opportunities to encourage learning (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007: 214) and minimise plagiarism. Asking students to discuss a specific topic or answer a question related to a case study, which would be similar to the one they will be answering for their final assessment, has proved to be an effective strategy in "Translation Tools and the Translator". Students would receive formative feedback from both peers and the tutor and, in order to offer model answers, the tutor would post a message showing examples of good practice. This approach encourages learning, the integration of assessment tasks, and educates students on plagiarism and referencing, thus minimising academic misconduct. It will also "encourage forward planning" (Carroll and Appleton, 2001: 11), as well as the development of those abilities tested by the main assessment instrument.

Blogs, wikis and e-portfolios: effective tools to register and monitor progress

Many scholars agree in highlighting the benefits of designing intermediate tasks to monitor progress in order to avoid plagiarism (Carroll and Appleton, 2001: 12; McDowell and Brown, 2001). E-portfolios and Web 2.0 applications such as blogs and wikis provide an ideal platform for this purpose. E-portfolios have been successfully integrated in translation programmes (Rotheneder, 2007) and their suitability as anti-plagiarism tools has been explored by some authors (e.g. Dalziel, 2008). Regarding blogs and wikis could be easily created using a VLE and, in an age where students communicate via social networking tools such as Facebook and

⁵ See Neville (2007: 37-41), and the following online tutorials: Preventing Plagiarism (2008), and Avoiding Plagiarism (2008).

Twitter, these social networking tools could offer them a more informal and friendly environment. Students could be asked to submit a brief commented bibliography, links to the main online resources they have consulted, early drafts, logs, etc. As all these activities will be recorded in the system, the tutor will be able to assess the progress and for instance, find out if the student has completed the logs the day before submitting the assignment or identify students with difficulties.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a description of how technology can be used innovatively to encourage original student work, drawing on my own experiences and applying those suggestions made by experts in the field to the particular context of the MA Applied Translation Studies at London Metropolitan University. Examples have been provided using an assessment task which contained, according to the reflection undertaken, some aspects that could encourage plagiarism. Whereas some of the strategies suggested have already been put into practice and proved to be successful, others should be tested out in order to ascertain their effectiveness. However, these are individual initiatives which must be implemented across the board and supported by the whole faculty and institution if we really want to make an impact, increase awareness among students and reduce those plagiarism figures that worry lecturers and scandalise the media⁶.

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⁶ According to an article published by The Times Online (2008) "cheating at London Metropolitan University is worse than at any other of 73 universities giving information on the problem". Although it is almost impossible to determine how many students actually plagiarise in our institution, it is worth noting that, according to the information provided by the University Student Casework Officer in a conversation with the author via e-mail, "in 2007/8 there were 1,032 cases of which 42 did not receive a penalty".

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