

“Plagiarism” and the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) Student

Dr Linda Brennan
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia
lbrennan@swin.edu.au

Ms Juliana Durovic
Monash International P/L, Australia
juliana.durovic@monint.monash.edu.au

Abstract: This paper presents the results of a survey into students preferred learning styles and their propensity to cheat. The survey was conducted in a large Australian University with a high proportion of international students. Anecdotal evidence suggested that students from CHC backgrounds were more likely to cheat and more likely to use surface learning strategies than their westernised peers. The results demonstrate that this is not true of all students and further that perceptions of what constitutes cheating are not the same across cultures.

Keywords: academic integrity, transnational education, values, cross-cultural dimensions

Perceptions of the Problem of Plagiarism

The issue of plagiarism is not new. It is however, extremely difficult to study. The problems begin with the difficulties involved in educating students from a wide variety of backgrounds (and educational philosophies) about forms and conventions, as well as developing systems for policing and finally punishing those caught breaching the rules. Murray (1996) introduces us to a study which shows that 20% of academic staff ignore cases of cheating and do not report their evidence to the university authorities. The raising of accusations of cheating against students can cause significant amounts of stress to both staff and students (Ketchell, 2003; Smith, 2003). The rules of evidence in Australia suggest that the person is “innocent until proven guilty”. This implies that the case must be “proven” before it can be presented to the university authorities. The time and effort it takes to “prove” a case of plagiarism may be substantial and academic staff have limited resources with which to research and report on suspected cases of cheating (Howard, 2001). Consequently, as suggested by Pincus & Schmelkin, (2003) and Maramark & Maline (1993) much suspected cheating is ignored in the interests of time and stress management. Students also prefer to have the issue of cheating handled informally (Jendreck, 1992). The pervading belief held by both students and academics is that “everyone cheats” (Houston, 1976, p. 301) cited in (Bjorklund & Wenestam, 1999) or that cheating is a normal part of life (Baird, 1980). Bjorklund and Wenestam suggest that academic honesty seems somewhat limited if you compare the notes of (Baird, 1980; Jendreck, 1992) who cite cheating rates as high as 85% and detection rates as low as 1.30%. In addition, there is a belief that academic dishonesty is not punished and is, in fact, rewarded by the system (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992 p17).

The methods used by students who cheat are varied and as illustrated by Bjorklund & Wenestam (1999), they can range from direct copying from another student to handing work done by another person. The influence of the WWW on the capacity of the student to cheat has increased. However, it is not known if the incidence of cheating has increased as a result of the WWW, although anecdotally this seems to be a problem.

Reasons for cheating include (all from Bjorklund, et al who cite various authors):

- Student perceived workload
- Stress and pressure
- Too little time
- Culture of cheating
- Low risks of getting caught.

In addition to these reasons, Anderman et al. identified that student's learning styles had an influence on propensity to cheat in examinations and assignments (1998). Their study showed approaches to study which resemble the deep and surface learning strategies as identified by Marton and Saljo (Marton & Saljo, 1976). In addition to Anderman et al, studies by Akande (1998), indicate that students who believe that the purpose of study is to gain a credential (as opposed to learn a skill) are more likely to employ surface learning strategies and to believe that cheating will lead to less intellectually demanding work and a decrease in academic workload. Those who do not cheat are more likely to utilise deeper learning strategies.

While these features are not necessarily limited to CHC students, there may be some unique characteristics which lead to CHC students being more or less prone to plagiarism than their westernised peers.

The CHC Student and their Learning Styles

According to Biggs (1996), students from a CHC educational system, such as those found in China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, face large classes which are highly authoritarian, and use expository teaching methods focused on preparing the students for their examinations. The examinations are highly competitive, creating stress and pressure on both teachers and students and assess low level cognitive goals. The emphasis on examinations has led to a strong reliance on memorisation and rote learning as described by *The Economist* (*The Economist*, 2003).

Ng (2000) and Jones, Robertson, & Line, (1999) believe that the focus comes about because of the reliance on examinations to assess knowledge. According to Jie (2000) the most important innovation of the Emperor Yangdi was the imperial examination system; this was a method by which young men of good families could compete to enter the service of the Emperor (Keenan, 1998). Students who are assessed by examinations are trained from a young age to seek only that knowledge which is important in passing (McKellar, 2002).

In Confucian systems, education forms the basis of an individual achieving personal development, that is, sagehood. Sagehood occurs when an individual develops their potential to the fullest extent. As everyone can become a sage, this reflects the belief in human perfectibility, which forms the basic optimism and dynamism towards education in the Confucian tradition. Sagehood requires effort. In Confucianism, education and learning are always associated with effort, and the driving force of efforts is will power. (Lee 1996 pp25-32).

According to Tu cited in (Lee 1996 p34),

The purpose of learning is therefore to cultivate oneself as an intelligent, creative, independent, autonomous, and what is more, an authentic being, who is becoming more fully human in the process of learning. The process of learning is therefore an inner directed process.

As seen above, the Confucian tradition of learning is more aligned to a deep approach to learning rather than a surface approach. This contradicts the belief that many western teachers have, that students with a CHC background are surface learners.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that CHC students are surface learners more likely to attempt to remember everything than they are to learn deeply. In addition, Biggs (1996 pp 46-47) identified several teachers who were concerned about their CHC students' ability to learn using deep strategies.

In my discipline they all want to rote learn material rather than think...

Students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong appear to be much more inclined to rote learning. Such an approach does not help problem solving...

While these characteristics are evident in the assessments of some students, many CHC students perform at high levels of achievement, and studies by Biggs (Biggs, 1996 p 49) indicate that CHC students prefer a high-level, meaning-based learning strategy.

Therefore, the anecdotal debate that suggests that rote learning leads to blatant copying of texts and websites does not appear to be supported by the evidence. We must therefore look to other possible reasons for apparent plagiarism.

The CHC Student in the Westernised Learning Context

One of the circulating anecdotes about CHC students in the western system is that they appear unaware of the culture of learning in Westernised countries, in addition to being unaware of the culture within their host country. For the purpose of this paper the authors have chosen to use Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions. It could be argued that academic staff educated in Westernised systems are likely to be so enculturated that they will not necessarily see the implications of culture on plagiarism issues. For example, see Hofstede's (1994b) discussion on the implications of westernised thinking on research design. The following uses Hofstede and Bond's (1988) (and others) cultural dimensions.

Individualism

Individualism (promoting self-efficiency, individual responsibilities, and personal autonomy) is the level to which people have learned to act as individuals within their societies (G. Hofstede, 1994a). In contrast, collectivism (promoting in-group harmony and individual sacrifice for the good of the group) refers to the level of cohesiveness within the culture of the society (G. H. Hofstede, 2001). Westernised cultures are more likely to value individualism, while the CHC student is likely to come from a collectivist culture. Consequently, while the westernised academic writing genre idealises the individual's achievement in producing an original

piece of work, the CHC student comes from a culture that doesn't necessarily understand the concept of working alone to achieve academic goals in the same way. CHC students trained in a system which is based on inner and outer circles of mastery (Ng, 2000), may find working completely alone very difficult. The concept of developing original ideas, different from and in opposition to the Masters of the inner circle is against the basic premise of their cultural background. According to Ng, CHC students are often trained from an early age to respect teachers as Masters of all essential knowledge and to repeat back to the Master what is necessary to pass the examination; an examination which may be undertaken alone but which is an outcome of collaborative study with a Master. Thus, the westernised system(s) of individuals competing with and surpassing the Master in the development of knowledge may be a cultural shock to some who are expecting to be told what they should know and how they should convey that knowledge (1996). The fear and anxiety generated by not knowing what is expected in individualised assessment tasks may lead to some students seeking answers from "inappropriate" sources such as the internet (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997). Methods of ensuring that individuals achieve individual success via others are accepted practice in CHC teaching traditions (1999). However, anecdotally, the line between collaboration and collusion is often crossed by CHC students (and others) thereby generating claims of plagiarism. In deeming a piece of work plagiarism, we must first understand if the student understands concepts of individualism, and the implications for academic writing in Western cultures.

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is another of Hofstede's (1998; G. H. Hofstede, 2001) dimensions of culture. UA measures tolerance toward uncertainty and ambiguity. High scores on this measure indicate that people do not like uncertainty and ambiguity; they prefer strong social conventions, formalised behaviour, and rules to make it clear how they should behave. Such cultures tend to enforce conformity, and are guided by the belief that what is different is dangerous. The cultures from which CHC students arrive are often high on UA. Therefore, it is easy to see why these students seek to conform to previously written assignments and are seen to be unoriginal and non-critical in their thinking. They are so concerned with getting it "right" that to be individual and original (different) is that antithesis of everything they have learned in the past. For example, Saywell's (2000) article demonstrates the difficulties faced by Singapore in attempting to change from a Confucian style educational system to one of critical thinking and analysis. Carmee Lim's comment "We only ask for the right answers. That stops the brain thinking." (p 62), is indicative of the societal pressure to produce students who have the right answer in a system which relies on examinations for measures of success (Jie, 2000; Ng, 2000). Worse, for higher UA cultures (our CHC students), communicating with someone from an unknown culture can be uncomfortable because such situations are both uncertain and unpredictable (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Thus, discussing their concerns with lecturers and/or tutors is very difficult. CHC students are most comfortable in structured environments, where the teachers are supposed to have the right answers. Akande (Akande, 1998) demonstrates that learning is not necessarily uniform across cultures. Sometimes, simply getting the "right" answer, by any means, is most important, even if the student does not understand why the answer is right.

Power distance

Another cross-cultural issue identified by Hofstede (1998; G. H. Hofstede, 2001) is Power Distance (PD). PD relates to the issue of inequality, which is present in every culture to some degree. PD is the extent to which

the less powerful members of the institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. In cultures with large PD (from which CHC students studying in Australia largely derive) people accept strong hierarchy-based on inherent differences in status. They easily defer to other people who have higher status and more power in the hierarchy. This causes clashes of culture with teachers who are attempting to get students to criticise and challenge materials rather than simply memorise them (Akande, 1998). Students from cultures with large PD have been trained to believe that those in power KNOW the right answer, and if they do not know the answer – the student had better not expose their ignorance. In a high PD culture teachers are treated with respect. There is supposed to be a strict order in the classroom. Teachers are expected to initiate all communication, and students speak up only when invited. Thus, challenging, criticising and actively discussing are not easy for CHC students. The skills required to produce an original piece of work in the western tradition absolutely require the ability to challenge, criticise and speak up when a mistake appears to be made. This is the converse of what their culture and training has empowered the CHC student to do.

This research comes about because there is strong anecdotal debate about CHC students learning styles and their cultural heritage. In addition, there is a pervading assumption that there is a “plague” of plagiarism (Howard, 2001). In order to examine these issues the following research questions were developed: 1) Students’ from CHC prefer to use traditional (Confucian) methods of learning 2) CHC students *propensity to cheat* is associated with their preferred methods of learning.

Methodology

The development of the quantitative instrument began with a review of the relevant plagiarism and learning styles literature, followed by a focus group discussion held with 10 students from a variety of CHC backgrounds. The exploratory information collected via these preliminary techniques aided in the construction of the quantitative research instrument, and the development of research hypotheses. A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary measuring instrument. Hofstede’s measures were not included in the questionnaire primarily because the students were known to come from CHC backgrounds and Hofstede (2005) cautions against the use of the dimensions at the individual level. It was decided to use students self-reported activities rather than use a pre-existing instrument, as it was hoped that this would be more “real” to the students and validation within the context was not required for preliminary exploration of the issues. The sample frame consisted of first-year, undergraduate students enrolled in either a business or information technology degree studying marketing theory and practice at an Australian university. The questionnaire was distributed to 190 students during their marketing theory and practice lecture. The number of completed questionnaires returned was 125 representing a response rate of 66%.

Outcomes

Hypothesis 1: Students' from CHCs prefer to use traditional (Confucian) methods of learning

Table 1: Data for preferred learning strategies

<i>Item</i>	Means		<i>Sig</i>
	<i>Confucian heritage</i>	<i>Westernised</i>	
(sorted by the means of CHC students preferred learning styles)			
Listening to audio tape or CD	1.71	2.01	0.23
Watching videos	2.04	2.29	0.54
Participating in field trips*	2.61	2.53	0.74
“Surfing” the internet	2.63	2.59	0.66
Working with others on projects*	2.84	3.20	0.10
Participating in debates and discussions*	2.86	2.84	0.95
Actively talking to my lecturer	2.98	2.92	0.79
Having my teacher tell me the right answer so I can remember it	3.00	3.38	0.11
Seeing how others make things work*	3.10	3.16	0.79
Immediately applying my knowledge to something practical*	3.10	3.47	0.11
Interpreting and criticising*	3.14	2.97	0.47
Discussing the issues with my friends in small groups*	3.20	3.30	0.80
Using workbooks to focus my study	3.24	3.00	0.30
Making things work for myself*	3.27	3.55	0.18
Seeing pictures and making images from words in order to make sense of them	3.33	3.29	0.87
Creating summaries of written material to remember	3.35	3.66	0.18
Using a computer	3.37	3.00	0.13
Reading text books	3.39	3.89	0.01
Researching for essay writing	3.41	3.63	0.25
Actively thinking of questions to ask the teacher	3.41	3.09	0.17
Actively talking to my tutor	3.53	3.36	0.39
Attending and listening to lectures	3.54	3.76	0.25
Understanding the patterns in the topics I am trying to learn*	3.55	3.75	0.26
Learning facts about things	3.65	3.47	0.40
Solving problems rather than trying to memorise everything*	3.82	3.89	0.69
Finding real world examples of what I am trying to learn*	3.84	3.66	0.41
Attending and listening in tutorials	4.21	4.20	0.95

The data in Table 1 indicate that CHC students employ a wide range of learning strategies. The asterisks indicate those that are considered by the authors as deep learning strategies based on Marton and Saljo (1976), and Biggs *et al* (1996). While CHC students have a preference for strategies that are considered “traditional”, they are not apparently unwilling to engage in the western styles of learning applied within the Australian higher educational context. Thus, hypothesis 1 is not confirmed, students from CHC cultures do not differ significantly from their westernised peers.

Hypothesis 2: CHC students propensity to cheat is associated with their preferred methods of learning

In order to measure “propensity to cheat”, a number of questions were asked in relation to the stress of studying and the likelihood of seeking an “easy alternative” such as finding an assignment on the internet. These items were analysed using correlation analysis. The student’s preferences for learning activities were categorised as conventional or informal.

Table 2: Correlation matrix for preferred style of study factors and stress

	Infor mal	Conven tional	Stayed up	Used others	Not gone out	Special consid	Style of study	Inter net	No help	Copy paras	50 hours
Informal	1										
Conventional	0.097	1									
I stayed up all night doing assignments	-0.042	-0.050	1								
Used someone else's work	0.121	0.054	-0.029	1							
Decided not to go out in order to study	-0.006	0.130	0.270**	-0.068	1						
Requested special consideration for an assessment	0.111	-0.063	-0.142	0.092	0.038	1					
Felt stressed as a result of the style of study	0.120	0.170	0.178*	-0.034	0.309**	0.178*	1				
Searched the internet for a pre-written assignment	0.242**	0.101	0.080	-0.010	-0.011	0.338**	0.206*	1			
Felt as if I could not ask the lecturer for help	0.220*	0.077	0.084	-0.051	0.186*	0.214*	0.198*	0.313**	1		
Typed up paragraphs from text books in an effort to get it right	0.221*	0.025	0.126	0.208*	0.275**	0.200*	0.390**	0.296**	0.293**	1	
Spent more than 50 hours a week in class and studying	0.176	0.221*	-0.026	0.104	0.398**	-0.040	0.337**	0.189*	0.163	0.381**	1
Tried to find a previously written assignment	0.131	0.025	0.093	0.338**	0.244**	0.122	0.325**	0.333**	0.284**	0.382**	0.333**

* Significant at 0.05 level ** Significant at 0.001 level

As indicated in Table 2, while these correlations may not be representative of the population at large, it is apparent that students who prefer “informal” methods of learning are also more likely to take academic short cuts such as searching the internet for previously written assignments and typing up paragraphs from text books in an effort to get it right. It is significant that these students also feel as if they cannot approach their lecturers for assistance (PD). Those who prefer conventional methods of learning would appear to be less likely to take short cuts and more likely to work long hours. The few differences there are between the students learning styles and their propensity to cheat are statistically significant. However, they may not be of practical significance to educators attempting to improve their assistance to students from CHC backgrounds.

Conclusion

Important questions arise when observing the other relationships within students’ propensity to cheat. Students who believe that they are under stress are those more likely to work longer, type up paragraphs from texts and try to find other assignments as well as searching the internet. In addition, they are also more likely to stay at home and “work” at memorising rather than studying effectively. Thus, we develop a picture of “the cheat” who is overwhelmed by the learning environment and is socially isolated. While this might seem like an apology for the cheats, Howard (2001) may have had a point when she suggested that students who are overworked and stressed search for easy alternatives. The data show relationships between activities, which

would be called cheating by educators, and students' levels of stress as well as their ability to approach the lecturer for advice and support. In addition, the data show that CHC students' learning styles are not as shallow as anecdotal evidence suggests. Furthermore, CHC students who prefer conventional styles of learning appear to be less likely to cheat in the sense of seeking previously written assignments from the Internet or others. This is in direct contradiction to the anecdotal "evidence" and shows, at least from an exploratory perspective that the debate is not ended.

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