Chapter 8

Beyond the Accusation of Plagiarism

Qing Gu and A. Jane Brooks

Introduction

The number of Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom has seen a huge increase since the launch of the British government’s long-term worldwide educational campaign in 1999. These students’ study-abroad experience is likely to be ‘a significant transitional event that brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress, involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes’ (Cushner & Karim, 2004, p. 292). Cushner and Karim (2004) argue that overseas students’ intercultural experiences are moderated by the interaction of multiple, positive or negative, individual (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) and environmental factors (e.g. social and academic support systems). It is within this context that this study was carried out to investigate the myth of Chinese learners’ plagiarising behaviour, which has been receiving increased attention amongst British teaching staff, particularly those in the field of English language teaching (ELT). These people are at the forefront of the internationalisation of British higher education, often working with international students shortly after their arrival in the United Kingdom, and thus may feel particularly strongly about the difficulty of communicating Western academic conventions, of which academic integrity plays an essential part, to their Chinese students.

Drawing upon case studies of ten Chinese postgraduate students over a period of 15 months, this chapter argues that although differences in cultural values have a role to play in the accusation of plagiarism, an excessive emphasis on culture may result in a dismissive attitude towards Chinese learning practices. Evidence from the case studies of students’ intercultural experiences over time suggests that learning to write in an unfamiliar academic discourse requires, at the deepest level, a conceptual understanding of knowledge construction and the conventions of the local academic community, rather than the simple mechanical tasks of learning how to cite and reference. Beyond the accusation that Chinese students plagiarise lies a more complex...
picture. Faculties need to understand the sociocultural sources of their students’ initial frustration, their self-reflection and examination of contrasting cultural values and educational practices, their endeavour to master a different lens through which to view authorship and the ownership of knowledge and ultimately the ‘reborn’ experience of their adaptation and development in a Western academic community.

A distinctive strength of this study is the holistic and developmental perspective that the authors adopt to probe into and understand a learning process that is itself holistic and developmental in nature. The purpose of this chapter is to offer pedagogical implications, including the need for increased awareness amongst faculty, of the differing meanings of plagiarism across cultures and the inadequacy of focussing on writing skills rather than conceptualisation and values when training international and especially Chinese students.

The Concept of Plagiarism

Plagiarism, a notion that carries a strong sense of disapproval, is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Allen, 1990, p. 909) as ‘1. Take and use (the thoughts, writings etc. of another person) as one’s own. 2. Pass off the thoughts etc. of (another person) as one’s own’. Plagiarism originated from the Latin word plagiarus meaning the theft of words as well as of slaves (Howard, 1995). Howard (1995, p. 790) posits that ‘the very etymology of the word plagiarism demonstrates the antiquity of the concept’. With the fast development of modern technologies providing writers with access to vast textual resources, plagiarism is seen as ‘an ever-increasing practice and problem’ both within the academy and in the general population (Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004, p. 172; see also Briggs, 2003; Price, 2002; Sullivan, 2002). Chandrasoma et al. (2004) argue that the widely growing attention to plagiarism is not only indicative of the degree of interest that this topic generates but is also a measure of the divisions in opinion that exist both within the international academic community as well as in the general population regarding exactly what kind of writing practices might constitute plagiarism in the first place, and second, how best to deal with these practices at the levels of both policy and pedagogy. (p. 172)

In the academic community, despite a lack of consensus on the definition of plagiarism (Briggs, 2003; Howard, 2000; Pennycook, 1994, 1996), the prevalent institutional strategy for dealing with students presenting plagiarised assignments continues to be containment and punishment (Briggs, 2003; Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Decoo, 2002; Howard, 1995; Kolich, 1983; Price, 2002; Zobel & Hamilton, 2002). As Howard (1995) observes:

In typical college regulations on plagiarism (which are often grouped under headings wherein plagiarism serves as either a synonym for or a