

Navigating the discourses of unauthorised collusion and collaboration: a UKES narrative

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Abstract

An often misunderstood challenge facing higher education students is the tension of legal regulation of authorial rights discourse and the dilemma which with is reinforced by institutional discourses about student engagement and collaborative learning. This paper draws on the reflections of staff and students in focus group data from the Geography, Law and Mathematics programmes, who were offering feedback on the UK Engagement Survey (UKES).

Keywords

Collusion, collaboration, student engagement, academic integrity, plagiarism

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Introduction

Combating academic misconduct has become a significant issue within HE institutions and the issue has evolved as an academic concern with the maintenance of academic standards within mass higher education. This, in turn, has developed into an aspect of performativity and compliance management within universities. The concern around protecting students and institutional reputation has led to a tightening of policy including increasingly tougher penalties for students (Sutherland-Smith, 2010) which, incidentally, had been the focus of a preceding study, The Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research Report, which identified a range of penalties for academic misconduct (Plagiarism Today, 2012). Many universities, including LJMU, have initiated a criteria-based, centrally managed system of monitoring, meaning that pedagogical approaches to regulating academic misconduct have become less ingrained in favour of more dissuasive discourses around punitive actions (e.g. marks being taken off a piece of coursework).

This paper has been produced in the context of a wider study which examined the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) UK Engagement Survey (UKES). The survey which, up until 2015, had been administered in 32 HE institutions offers some ideas around the way in which students interact with each other. As will be determined below, this case study will highlight the areas of tension that came out in survey data and focus groups around the notions of group working and fears of collusion.

UKES context

UKES is administered to Level 4 and Level 5 undergraduates and is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is applied in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland.

According to the HEA, engagement surveys are designed to provide organisations with feedback on how a student is engaging with their learning. They posit, "The amount of time and effort students invest in their studies and how students engage with learning is closely linked to their level of academic achievement. UKES is designed to help institutions increase student engagement in activities which promote learning" (HEA, nd).

The scales for 2015 (HEA, 2015), included five compulsory categories:

- **Higher-order learning:** The emphasis placed in the course on a range of complex cognitive tasks such as analysing ideas and applying methods to practical problems.
- **Collaborative learning:** The frequency with which students interact with each other in a range of educationally important ways, including working together on projects or assignments.
- **Staff-student interaction:** How often students interact with teaching staff inside and outside taught sessions.
- **Course challenge:** The extent to which students are stretched and challenged by their work.
- **Reflective and integrative learning:** How often students reflect on their own ideas, combine ideas together, and relate their learning to prior experiences and social issues.

In addition, the following optional scales could be applied in 2015:

- **Time spent:** The amount of time that students spend on a range of different activities, including questions about studying and other aspects of their lives such as paid employment, caring for dependants and commuting.
- **Skills development:** The extent to which students feel that their experience has improved their skills and knowledge in a range of different areas, such as thinking critically and writing effectively.

- **Engagement with research and inquiry:** The emphasis that the course places on students learning about the outcomes and methods of research, and on formulating and exploring their own questions and problems.
- **Students as partners:** This explores students' sense of a partnership ethos within their course and institution, and includes questions around students providing feedback, taking responsibility and making active decisions about how and what they study.

In 2015, the Teaching and Learning Academy was awarded funding from the HEA, as part of its Vice Chancellors Strategic Excellence Initiative programme. One aspect of the project (called 'Harnessing Effective Engagement with Engagement Data') focused on determining how students and staff comprehended the survey questions.

Methodology

Focus groups were employed to shed light on the following objectives:

- To determine the meaning of scores through the analysis of student comments;
- To determine the meaning of scores through the cognitive interviews and focus groups with students; and
- To validate student meanings through informed dialogue with programme teams.

There were separate staff and student focus groups and, after purposeful sampling, based on relative strengths and weaknesses appearing in the 2015 data, Geography, Law and Mathematics were the programmes chosen.

The case study presented below, captures debate and discussion around the scores and answers to the *collaborative learning scale only*. Thus, in terms of limitations, it is important to stress that the focus group participants discussed ideas of collusion in addition to

many other separate themes (higher-order thinking, staff-student interaction, course challenge, reflective and integrative learning, students as partners and time spent on course).

Case study: narratives on collaboration

Thematic analysis of focus group data revealed an association between collaborative work and perceived unauthorised collusion. Concerns were echoed by staff and students across all the focus groups when asked about their engagement in either asking, explaining, preparing or directly working on course material with peers.

The recurring student view was one of concern about the interactions they had with their peers outside of the taught session, largely for fear of being viewed as unauthorised collusion. In one focus group in particular, there was a perception that informal collaboration was to be discouraged. For example, an informal mature learners group, set up by students themselves, was reported to have been dispersed by staff despite, as one participant said, had only discussed assessment in general terms. When probed, students confirmed that they were unsure of the guidelines on collusion and were confused about how collaborative learning could be genuinely enacted.

The focus group data enabled us to have an additional insight into student behaviour and strategies to cope with anxiety about unauthorised collusion. One stark example of this, was reflected in fewer students going to the library together for fear that they would access the same resources. Such self-regulation, based on anxiety about collusion may lead to a constrained learning experience and impact on the learning outcomes of the students involved. We can surmise that this misinterpretation of academic regulations could be subject to a number of factors – such as, poor induction, non- or miscommunication by staff or even

guidance on how to work effectively together.

Particular challenges are brought to light when considering students on dual programmes. The student focus group data revealed that modules in the same subject area would have different approaches to encouraging collaboration. For instance, peer design and peer grading was experienced by students who then participated in modules where this was not a feature in the design of that curriculum. This reflects different academic cultures within disciplines which are embedded by staff (Howard et al., 2014), which caused confusion and concern amongst the student group.

Staff described the other side of this narrative as wanting to enable creative learning but feeling that the academic regulations dissuades any form of meaningful collaboration. The issue, therefore, has become one of academic risk management and ensuring mitigation against misconduct. This atmosphere is what Clegg (2007) refers to as a 'moral panic' in higher learning institutions, based on an anxiety about collusion, where performative, legal and penalising aspects of academic interaction override legitimate forms of collaborative learning experience.

The following section illuminates these findings against some literature and policy guidelines in UK higher education.

Discussion

Competing discourses of plagiarism management and academic values of authentic learning and teaching can, as described above, produce a dissonance in terms of an understanding for both staff and students. The narrative of external regulatory bodies such as the QAA is an ever present dynamic in higher education. It has been argued that this has changed the nature of academic work and reduced the agency of both staff and students while

giving a much more effective disciplinary mechanism (Thompson and Pennycook, 2008; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006).

Discourses of plagiarism however, do add some clarity of meaning to discussions about academic standards and quality enhancement for both staff and students alike. Some researchers have argued the benefits of creating a mutually responsible relationship between academic staff and student about the ownership of work and the use of the work of others essentially; the argument is to bring a pedagogical focus back into the structure of regulating academic misconduct (Harvey and Newton 2004; Clegg, 2007; Eodice, 2008; Howard, 2007; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006; Pecorari, 2008; Sutherland-Smith, 2008; 2010; Thompson and Pennycook, 2008, Howard et al., 2014).

Different academic practices between disciplines is only a problem where policy rigidly conforms to generic norms and, thus, consideration of the individual structures or cultures of programmes should be encouraged. An approach to managing academic misconduct that is owned by staff and students within faculties, schools and departments, within the context of a broader teaching and learning strategy, is more likely to uphold standards and raise the awareness of students. Staff in the focus group suggested bringing senior staff into peer reviewed session where feedback and module development could be given a coherent narrative and this could help formalise the input teaching staff have on institutional guidelines in combating unauthorised collusion. Such collaborative practices enhance the agency of teaching staff while giving space for them to consider student perspectives. It is also a desirable goal for teaching and learning to blend institutional strategies and localised management; a fairer, more valid and progressive learning strategy can thus emerge.

Staff spoke positively of formalising small study groups attached to a module but not

necessarily embedding their outcomes into any assessment. Here, the need to ease student concerns about how to engage in proper collaborative learning could be addressed through a supportive dialogue. It has been argued that study groups that are structured into pre-existing sessions could be more readily compatible with the academic framework (Sutherland-Smith, 2014; Bhattacharya and Jorgensen, 2007).

Conclusion

This paper is a snapshot of a wider discussion of student engagement, within the context of UKES. The research enquiry was not focused on unauthorised collusion and was limited to just three subject areas. Nevertheless, the concern of unauthorised collusion was a significant theme in each of the focus groups. In this context, the tension presented by the discourse of guidelines on academic misconduct and student fears of collusion when attempting to learn collaboratively, merits further investigation.

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