A blended learning approach to developing students' understanding in academic honesty

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Introduction

McCabe (2003) maintains cheating has been prevalent for years with contributing factors ranging from laziness to ignorance – and not just on the part of students. However, there is an emerging trend that it is worsening particularly with business students and in later years of study. The Internet and the increasing diversity of educational and cultural backgrounds of students have been singled out as possible reasons. Software is a possible solution for making plagiarism detection simpler and commercial providers, including Turnitin.com, have become major university stakeholders. However, building blocks for standard learning management systems (e.g., *Blackboard*) have more recently become available (e.g., *SafeAssignment.com*).

Rather than detection after the event, we propose a strategy that uses plagiarism detection software primarily as an educational tool. We posit that this approach will develop students' understanding of academic honesty, promote honest academic practices, support the development of students as ethical professionals (a common generic graduate attribute) and promote the pursuit of life long learning. In this paper we present the results on students' attitudes to this process and their feedback on the educational benefits of using the detection software in this way.

Aim and motivation of research

The aim of this pilot project is to provide students with a tool that allows clear self-evaluation of plagiarism in written work prior to assessment as part of a set of measures to develop academic honesty. The aim of the research is to investigate students' perceptions towards taking an educational approach, rather than a punitive approach, to addressing the issue of plagiarism in higher education. A number of factors have contributed to the motivation for conducting this research:
* ethical professional understanding is a key graduate attribute;
* academic honesty is a core University of Sydney value;
* Academic Board responsibility 'best practice detection';
* student feedback that plagiarism is a growing concern;
* staff concern of growing difficulties;
* Vice Chancellors have lost jobs over it; and
* recognition that can't prevent but can better deter.

Methodology

The focus for this pilot study was students from Commercial Law in the Discipline of Business Law at the Faculty of Economics and Business, The University of Sydney. During first semester 2005 a pilot project provided students with the opportunity to submit draft written assessments for evaluation by SafeAssignment. Students then had the opportunity to detect incidences of plagiarism provided by the matching score of their work against both peers and existing published documents, and amend their assessments before final submission. Participation was optional for students enrolled in the class and 30 opted to submit their assignments in draft mode. At the end of semester students were asked to complete a questionnaire which consisted of three Likert scale questions and four open-ended questions.

Results

This section presents the results on students' attitudes and their feedback on the educational benefits of using detection software in draft mode.

Approach before using
Students were asked if they changed their approach to writing the assignment knowing that detection was coming:
- 31% reported in favour of a change in behaviour and/or attitude: 'Yes – maybe more careful'.
- 17% reported there was some shift in their awareness: 'A little – did not alter but was an issue in back of my mind'.
- 34% reported no change in behaviour: 'No – I am an honest individual'.

Perceptions of impact
Students described three different perceptions towards plagiarism detection software and how it would impact on a new student.
Plagiarism checker (31%):
- 'It checks to see if you have plagiarised'
- 'It helps recognise possible plagiarism even if accidental'
- Provides security (10%):
- 'I felt more secure after using the Safe Assignment in terms of plagiarism'
- Prevents copying (10%):
- 'It really means you can't get away with copying - it forces you to learn to rewrite in your own words'.

Learning experience after use
Students were asked if using detection software provided any benefits to their learning experience. 41% reported more cautious and conscious of consequences when referencing:
- 'Makes you more careful in terms of referencing and quoting.';
- 'Does make you more conscious of how accurate your referencing is. But it hasn't helped me to learn how to reference better.'; and
- 'Gave me a list of websites with good material'.

Benefits after use
The pilot showed positive impact on student approaches to preparing assessments after submitting draft to detection software:
- 45% reported better understanding of plagiarism/honesty;
- 28% reported a changed approach to researching and referencing software; and
- 38% reported improved assignment.

Conclusion

This pilot study investigated student's perceptions towards a strategy that uses plagiarism detection software primarily as an educational tool. Results indicate that an educational approach can provide value as one of a number of measures to promote academic honesty.

References

McCabe, D. (2003), 'Promoting academic integrity: a US/Canadian perspective in Educational integrity: plagiarism and other perplexities', *The Proceedings of the Australian Educational Integrity Conference*, University of South Australia, 21-22 November 2003.