Engaging Midwifery Students in Academic Integrity through a Multi-Faceted, Integrated Approach

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Abstract

As part of an Australian Government funded Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) project, a Midwifery Program Coordinator and an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) adviser worked together to integrate academic integrity into the discipline content in a first year subject in the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery. The Program Manager and ALL adviser shared responsibility for developing and assessing academic integrity activities. The activities formed a scaffolded approach, beginning with a workshop to explicitly engage students with the concepts, followed by an assignment where students could test out their knowledge of paraphrasing, in-text referencing and synthesising from refereed journals in their discipline. Both summative and substantial formative feedback was provided, designed to assist students in identifying what they did well and any issues that needed to be addressed before they engaged with their literature review assignment. The rubric for the literature review was changed to give greater emphasis to academic integrity. Results showed that students developed a deep understanding of how to achieve academic integrity, and focus group feedback on the activities was positive. We argue that this multi-faceted, scaffolded, integrated approach is the most effective way to engage students in academic literacy skills such as academic integrity.

Keywords: Academic integrity; plagiarism; integrating academic skills; postgraduate midwifery

1.Introduction

The practice of academic integrity has generated much research and public commentary. The current dominant rhetoric in universities is the promotion and implementation of academic integrity rather than penalising plagiarism. At the same time, however, there is a pervasive belief that plagiarism is leading to falling academic standards, verging on what Bertram Gallant (2008) calls 'moral panic'. Although plagiarism is only one aspect of academic integrity, the use of text comparison software aimed at detecting and preventing plagiarism is now standard in most universities, and students are still seen as the perpetrators of plagiarism (East, 2009). The rising incidence of plagiarism and a pronounced emphasis on avoiding it within universities (HEFCE, 2009) has resulted in students, lecturers and university policy-makers grappling with it as a problem.

In an attempt to address this problem in a postgraduate midwifery program at an Australian university, a project was developed that aimed to highlight the importance of academic integrity. A series of resources and activities was integrated into a first-year subject that aimed to teach the necessary skills to avoid student plagiarism. The project was innovative in that the activities were developed jointly and team taught by the Program Coordinator and an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) adviser.

The project was funded through a grant from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), which, among other aims, supports the embedding of good practice in learning and teaching (OLT, 2013). This particular project was part of a larger multi-university OLT project entitled 'working from the Centre: supporting unit/course co-ordinators to implement academic integrity policies, resources and scholarship'.

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The brief of the larger project was to identify and trial means of addressing academic integrity within the curricula and to identify examples of good practice in Australian universities.

1.   Review of the literature

Given its importance, a substantial body of research exists around definitions of academic integrity and plagiarism, how, where and with whom it occurs and how to avoid it. Academic integrity is generally about 'promoting an honest community' (East, 2009. p. 38). However, although East (2010) identifies various perceptions of plagiarism as ignorance, lack of competence, transgressing standards, and poor morality, she also points to the lack of consensus in defining it (2009). Sutherland-Smith (2008) attempts to resolve this through her model of a plagiarism continuum in two modes: first through the differing views of people and institutions, and second, by understanding the concept as not static, but changing over time and space. She warns that any definition of plagiarism therefore needs some degree of flexibility.

A common perception in universities is that breaches in academic integrity are more common among international students from 'non-Western' backgrounds (Park, 2003). Cross-cultural issues are often cited, where, in particular, Asian students are understood to have collectivist cultural attitudes to ownership of text and ideas (Mundava & Chaudhuri, 2007). However, this has been disputed: East (2009) warns academics that student background is an inadequate predictor of plagiarism; similarly, Amsberry (2010) argues that the reasons Asian students plagiarise are complex. Although she concedes that some culturally-based influences generate copying behaviour, such as repetition of texts from memory as a sign of respect for the writer and the 'safety' of copying to mask difficulties in writing academic English. Amsberry (2010) cites a study by Russikoff and colleagues who found little difference between American and Chinese students in understanding when citations were needed. Further, Amsberry (2010) identifies a lack of familiarity with academic writing conventions, including citation practices, as a major factor leading to plagiarism, a situation that can affect all students new to these conventions.

Not only is plagiarism seen in all student cohorts, it also exists in all academic disciplines, and nursing and midwifery programs are not immune. Logue (2004) found, for instance, that of 74 nursing degree students, 50% admitted that they had paraphrased in assignments without citing the sources. Similarly, in a study of 655 South Korean undergraduate nursing students, 76.8% admitted to assignment-cheating behaviours and 48.7% admitted to exam-cheating. Although these figures could lead to a belief that academic integrity is a particular problem in nursing and midwifery, the prevalence of academic integrity breaches is similar between students of these programs and other disciplines (McCabe, 2009). Further, Arhin and Jones (2009) found that behaviours that nursing students perceived as breaching academic integrity were the same as students from other disciplines.

Perhaps more importantly, the issues around breaches of academic integrity in the disciplines of nursing and midwifery have significant consequences. For example, Semple, Kenkre and Achilles (2004) point out that those with a professional qualification as a registered nurse or midwife embody particular values and standards of behaviour, and they are concerned that evidence of an increase in plagiarism among students in these programs is causing unease around the trustworthiness of those in the profession. Further, Harper (2006) found that nursing students who breach academic integrity in the classroom are more likely to engage in unethical clinical practice in the workplace, such as 'falsifying blood glucose results to avoid initiation of an insulin drip and its concomitant monitoring' (p. 369).

Plagiarism and other breaches of academic integrity are therefore particularly difficult issues for universities, and students need opportunities to develop skills in this area. In fact, a deep understanding of academic integrity is just part of a suite of academic abilities that university students need in order to engage successfully with academic practice, such as for example, academic writing and critical reading. Many students at the beginning of their studies have a minimal grasp of these, particularly in understanding academic integrity (McGowan, 2005), and this can lead, in particular, to unintentional plagiarism (MacDonald & Carroll, 2006). Occasionally, students learn these skills by 'osmosis', and sometimes they survive through surface learning strategies of accumulating facts and opinions uncritically (Bourner, 2003) but sufficient to reach a 'pass' level. Some students are referred by their lecturers to seek support from advisers in Academic Language and Learning (ALL) centres in their university, and many other students independently seek this support.

ALL support has traditionally focused on generic 'study skills', but more recently an academic literacies approach has been adopted (Lea & Street, 2006) involving collaboration between ALL advisers and discipline specialists. The ideal collaboration is where academic literacy is embedded into the discipline, which has the benefit of clear application to discipline content (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Less often practiced, is integration, an even deeper level of embedding, where academic literacy becomes an integral part of the curriculum. Through integration, the specific literacies required by the discipline are made explicit and become integral to the programs in which students study (Barthel, 2008). Further, students develop a disciplinary identity by understanding the 'specialist knowledge frames' (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008, p. 233) and 'discoursal silences' (p. 250) in which they can position themselves within their profession. Integrating academic integrity skills, in particular, has the advantage of reinforcing in students that the rules apply to them and their writing (Carroll, 2007). It involves collaborative work between the discipline lecturer and the ALL adviser; the former has a deep tacit understanding and knowledge of the culture and discourses of the discipline and the ALL adviser is able to analyse the patterns within the discourses and explicitly articulate this information back to the discipline lecturer for ratification and to the students (Jacobs, 2005). Through this, the academic skills and strategies are 'made visible, explicit and accessible and, importantly, integrated within specific disciplinary contexts' (DEEWR, 2009, p.2).

There are numerous studies of successfully embedding academic literacy in disciplines such as education (Devereux & Wilson, 2008), business (Cochrane, 2006; Sin, Jones & Petocz, 2007), and health and environmental sciences (Hammill, 2007). Similarly, whole subjects can be embedded into programs, such as communications skills subjects which sit alongside other discipline-based subjects (Brooman-Jones, Cunningham, Hanna & Wilson, 2011; Shaw, Moore & Gandhidasan, 2007). In all of these approaches the discipline lecturer and ALL adviser co-taught and academic literacy was not separated from discipline content (Wingate, 2006). However, few of these embedded approaches feature a truly integrated strategy where academic literacy outcomes are assessable. A notable exception is the study by Brooman-Jones, et al (2011) where, although academic integrity is not mentioned and the subject area is business, the academic literacies relevant to the discipline were scaffolded and assessed throughout three of the core subjects. Integrating academic integrity into curricula is perhaps even more important in nursing/ midwifery schools. These schools have an obligation to promote integrity to students, and lecturers therefore, need to be consistent in maintaining academic integrity (McCabe, 2009; Bavier, 2009; Baxter & Boblin, 2007). However, no studies were found in this discipline that deeply integrated academic integrity into the curriculum.The current research therefore adds to the scholarship on integrating academic literacy generally, but more specifically on integrating the principles of academic integrity. Although some of the studies mentioned above involved embedding academic integrity to some extent, none focused on it to the same degree as this study. Similarly, studies that seek to integrate academic integrity specifically into nursing or midwifery programs are absent. The present research seeks to address these gaps.

2. The strategy

The aim of this intervention was for first year students in the Graduate Diploma in Midwifery to view academic integrity as part of the general moral and ethical responsibilities encountered in the midwifery profession, to develop an understanding of the importance of academic integrity when writing, and more specifically to avoid accidental plagiarism through improved skills in paraphrasing and referencing. This Graduate Diploma in Midwifery is a two year part time course for nurses to become midwives, consisting of all local students. The midwifery program coordinator and the ALL adviser met several times to discuss learning activities and the assessed task and where to place these within the curricula. The nature of academic integrity elements added to the rubrics for the major written assessment was also discussed. A total of 13.5% of the semester-long subject was to be devoted to academic integrity, where previously, this had been assessed only within vague rubrics for the major written assessment, a literature review. The teaching and assessment occurred in the first semester of Year 1 of the program in a subject called Midwifery 1. The teaching strategy involved a carefully scaffolded, constructivist approach. This included a pre and post test, use of tip sheets, interactive workshop, academic integrity self-learning assignment and a literature review. Each of these will be discussed in detail. Prior to commencing the intervention, students were given a multiple choice quiz containing 10 questions related to academic integrity. This test was co-developed by the midwifery Program Coordinator and the ALL adviser. These questions were designed to assess the student's baseline knowledge in order to help develop the interactive workshop and the academic integrity assessment.

Students completed the pre-test on the first day of their subject before the workshop, and then completed the same test on their last day. This pre- and post-test was worth 5% and included in the student assessment.

The intervention began with students familiarising themselves with the basic concepts. Before the first learning activity began, a series of generic tip-sheets on paraphrasing, synthesising and avoiding plagiarism was made available to students, and a further tip-sheet was developed that contextualised this material specifically for the Midwifery 1 students. These tip sheets were designed to give the students the basic skills they needed to fully engage in an interactive workshop. The two-hour interactive workshop was given in the second week of the subject and team-taught by the Program Coordinator and the ALL adviser. This was based on a PowerPoint presentation (which was later posted on the students' subject Blackboard), but a key feature was the number of group activities and whole class discussion, where students were encouraged to engage with the content through being aware of what they already knew, or did not know. The workshop was designed to be informal and provide continual opportunities to ask questions. It covered broad issues first, beginning with a brief discussion of university practices and policies. Plagiarism was identified as just one element of academic integrity, and then contextualised in relation to professional nursing and midwifery ethical and moral standards and expectations. The workshop then focussed on what constituted plagiarism and how it can occur accidentally, before addressing more specific issues such as avoiding unintended breaches of academic integrity in written assignments by learning effective paraphrasing and citation strategies.

An academic integrity self-learning assignment was then given, worth 10% of the total subject marks. This was divided into three sections. The first section consisted of five questions with the focus on avoiding accidental plagiarism through effective paraphrasing. The second section comprised five excerpts in which students identified referencing errors. In the third section, students used this knowledge in context, writing a paragraph synthesising elements from three journal articles that were provided. Although summative feedback was given, an important feature of the assignment was the level of formative feedback given, designed to be absorbed before students began their major written assignment. It was hoped this would provide a depth of understanding in avoiding academic integrity issues when applying this knowledge in an authentic task, their major written assignment. The learning of academic integrity, therefore, was not merely incidental; the taught components, teaching methods, assessed tasks and outcomes were all aligned (East, 2009). Students were then required to write a literature review of 2,500 words, on an area of contention in midwifery practice worth 35%. The rubric for the students' essay was changed from previous years, with marks for academic integrity and general writing increased to be worth 10 out of a total of 35 marks of the assignment. The specific academic integrity rubrics were more explicit and precise, replacing the vague rubrics used in this assignment in previous years. This provided a better focus for students Ethics approval was given through Victoria University as the lead university of the larger OLT funded project. In addition, ethics approval was given from RMIT University.

3. Results

Thirty students completed the pre-test and twenty-six completed the post-test. Between the pre- and post-test, there was found to be a clear improvement in scores for all questions except one. A general comparison between pre- and post-tests showed that 15 students improved their scores, 7 students had the same score and 1 student scored lower. Notably, no student scored 10 out of 10 in the pre-test, but seven scored the top score in the post-test. The academic integrity package marks ranged from 5 to 9 out of a possible 10. One student received 5, the mark of 6 was gained by 7 students, 7 out of 10 was gained by 13 students, the mark of 8 was gained by 9 students and 3 students scored 9 out of 10. There was no comparison with the previous year for the test or the package as this was the first time these were used. The academic integrity elements of the students' literature review marks generally showed that they understand and could apply knowledge in this area. Students paraphrased well and, both in-text citations and reference lists, were mostly excellent or only showed one or two minor problems. Similarly, only one Turnitin report gave slight cause for concern. The similarity ranged from 2 to18% (2013), with an average of 8.68%, standard deviation 4.78%, the majority being less than 9% (2013). In comparison to 2012 results where the range was 0 to 22%, average of 9.14%, standard deviation of 6.7% and one student being greater than 20%. This then translated to the overall marks of the literature review assessment being an average of 20.58 (2013), (18.93 for 2012), 3 high distinctions and 2 fails (2013) compared to 1 high distinction and 4 fails in 2012. The informal verbal evaluation held on the final day of the class indicated that students were generally positive about the information and activities related to academic integrity. In addition, students commented that they felt confident in maintaining academic integrity in their assignments.

Most felt that it helped with their ability to write a literature review in terms of greater capability in paraphrasing and adhering to referencing conventions, both with in text referencing and their reference list. Students commented that the academic integrity activities were useful in helping them understand and was very worth undertaking. Some students commented that they wished that they had had such knowledge and skills to help them during their previous academic studies.

4. Discussion

The writing standard of the students had certainly improved compared to the previous year's assignments, with a slightly higher mark, fewer fails and less similarity on their Turnitin reports. They also showed a greater level of confidence in their abilities. We believe that this was largely achieved by the discipline lecturer and the ALL advisor collaboratively planning and teaching the implementation strategy. Various learning and teaching approaches aided the success of the learning intervention. Perhaps the most important was integrating the idea and practice of academic integrity into the students' subject rather than running an adjunct workshop outside of lecture times. This seamlessness encourages students to perceive that if academic integrity is valuable enough to be integrated into their subject as a curriculum component, it is in their interests to engage seriously with it. Integrating academic integrity skills emphasises the importance of these skills to students (Carroll, 2007). Further, because the Program Coordinator taught with the ALL adviser, she was able to guide students into understanding the academic culture and discourses (Lea & Street, 2006) of the nursing/midwifery discipline and the often tacit understanding of disciplinary identity (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008). However, perhaps the element that motivated the students to learn most was the substantial assessment marks given for addressing academic integrity in their assignments. As Tinto and Pusser (2006) articulated, this reinforced the benefit of integrating academic integrity skills into subject knowledge.

A further likely reason for the success of the intervention is the constructivist approach used to ensure learning was scaffolded; activities of increasing complexity were given, beginning with base knowledge and building up to an authentic task where students needed to *use* this knowledge in an appropriate manner. Students were first exposed to academic integrity through the multiple-choice questions, then provided with information through the tip sheets, particularly through the resource specifically designed for Midwifery 1 students. Once they had the basics, the two-hour activity-based workshop allowed them to explore this content further and practice avoiding plagiarism in a variety of ways. Group work, class discussion and encouraging students to ask questions meant that all students were focussed, engaged, and developed a deeper understanding of the issues. Once developed, students then had the opportunity to consolidate this understanding through the self-learning assignment. When they had worked through the sections on developing effective paraphrasing and referencing strategies, they had an opportunity to work on a more authentic task, synthesising elements from journal articles and referencing correctly. The degree of substantial amount of formative feedback the students received on this assignment aimed to affirm or reinforce their knowledge and skills before they began their major assignment, a literature review.

Through the activities just discussed, this project also addressed individual preferences in learning. There is a complex relationship between knowledge and learning processes (Smith, 2013) and little scientific evidence that identifying students' learning styles is effective for teaching (Willingham, Hughes & Dobolyi, 2015). However, there is evidence for a variety of preferences students have about how information is presented and that students feel that they have abilities to think and process information in different ways (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer and Bjork, 2008). Our approach to learning was therefore multi-modal, incorporating a variety of learning strategies. At the basic level, students were able to engage in both self-learning and facilitated learning through written texts and visual PowerPoint. At a deeper level, we provided students with learning elements that feature in Kolb's experiential model (Kolb, 1984), such as practical work and the chance to link theory to the practice. Students also engaged in discussion through group work, and were encouraged to build their own academic integrity knowledge.

Previous studies citing interventions through embedding academic literacies, for example, in business (Sin, Jones & Petocz, 2007), education (Devereux & Wilson, 2008), and health and environmental science (Hammill, 2007) showed good student outcomes. However, it is reasonable to believe that the outcomes would have been greater had the academic literacies been truly integrated into the curricula by incorporating specific assessment, as they were in the study by Brooman-Jones et al (2011).

It could also be argued that teaching academic integrity, rather than general academic literacies, is a more difficult task given the complexities around degrees of plagiarism and definitions, paraphrasing to avoid accidental plagiarism, and incorporating the literature seamlessly within students' writing, added to the technicalities of referencing. We feel that the results obtained through our project, therefore, show that it is a particularly effective example of good practice in the learning and teaching of academic literacies.

Despite the success of this project, the findings from this study are limited due to the small numbers and we can therefore not draw substantive conclusions. A further limitation was the fact that there were no international students in this cohort. A recommendation is that further research in this area should be carried out with larger cohorts of students that include an international cohort.

5. Conclusion

Integrating the teaching of academic integrity into the curricula of this subject using a constructivist pedagogy was found to be an effective strategy in improving the students' ability to write a literature review. With universities needing to ensure their students adopt effective academic integrity principles and practices despite the difficulties of encouraging students to see the importance of this, an intervention that truly integrates academic integrity into the curriculum would seem to be the most sensible solution. An unexpected consequence of this project was that working collaboratively led to substantial collegiality. Because we were from different disciplines (nursing/midwifery and academic language and learning), we needed to negotiate particular aspects of academic integrity and how they would work within the disciplinary context; along the way, we learned much about each other's discipline and different understandings about learning. We aim to share this suite of learning activities with other lecturers in the School of Health Sciences. Through general staff meetings, we hope to encourage other program coordinators to contextualise and incorporate these resources into their subjects. We believe that working at the level of the program coordinator is an effective way to spread the activity downwards.

6. Acknowledgements:

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