

WORRIED ABOUT PLAGIARISM

Anne O'Dwyer interviews Lindsay Williams

Anne O'Dwyer

Studying at university is an exciting and challenging time for all students, but it can also bring with it concerns as you start work on your assignments, not least around the area of plagiarism. I'm Anne O'Dwyer and I'm joined by Lindsay Williams, Senior Lecturer and lead Academic Conduct Officer (ACO), in the Business School here at Oxford Brookes University, to discuss this area of concern and help dispel any worries you may have regarding plagiarism. Lindsay, perhaps you could start by clarifying for us and explaining what exactly plagiarism is.

Lindsay Williams

Yes. Well plagiarism means submitting the work of someone else as if it was your own. When you write an assignment or an essay you need to be building your own academic argument, drawing on ideas of others, and therefore, when you include someone else's ideas in your assignment, you must provide a reference for that in the text. Now you may want to include what we call direct quotations, which is using someone else's words verbatim. Now you can do that, but you must show clearly in the text how much was actually copied, by using quotation marks, as well as referencing the source correctly. You also need to include detailed information regarding the sources that you've used in a reference list at the back of your assignment. You'll be given guidelines on how to do that and be shown how to do it properly.

AO'D

So how serious an issue is this?

LW

Well, it is serious, especially if you've plagiarised and breached the student conduct regulations. Unfortunately though, some students don't reference correctly which can result in plagiarism. But there is a difference between making what we call technical errors in referencing and plagiarism, so, for example, you may put your reference list in the wrong order, it's not in alphabetical order for example, that's not plagiarism; that's a technical error and that will be dealt with within the assessment criteria for your assignment. But if, for example, you were directly quoting somebody, but you didn't put the quotation in speech marks or provide a page number, then that would be plagiarism because you're not attributing the original source correctly.

AO'D

So you've explained the difference between technical errors and unintentional plagiarism. But there are also issues of intent, aren't there?

LW

Yes, some students do intentionally plagiarise and there are a number of reasons. It could be that they're not confident about their own work so they copy and paste others; it could be that they've run out of time and they thought they could get away with just copying text from a journal or a book so that they can make their deadline. But some people just generally try and use other people's work and pass it off as their own anyway and we take it very seriously. Certainly here at Oxford Brookes academic integrity is something that we're proud of and we want all our stakeholders to be confident that a Brookes' graduate has achieved their success through their own merits.

AO'D (2' 40")

So what happens, Lindsay, when you suspect a student of plagiarism? Can you just talk me through the process?

LW

Well what happens is, that when a student submits a piece of work that the assessor may suspect the student has plagiarised, or that there is some plagiarised material within that assignment, that assignment will then get forwarded to what is called an Academic Conduct Officer and what they will do is contact the student and arrange what's called an 'investigative interview'. Now that terminology is important to understand. It is investigative. It's a chance for the Academic Conduct Officer and the student to talk about that piece of work and for the student to demonstrate that actually it is theirs and that it is original. If the student can't demonstrate originality or the Academic Conduct Officer has evidence to suggest that parts of the work, or all of the work, is plagiarised, by using software such as Turnitin, then the process moves on to the disciplinary interview stage and during that stage the Academic Conduct Officer will summarise the key facts of the case and explain what the outcome of the interview is. Now there is a range of penalties that can be given. It will very much depend on the extent of the plagiarism in that piece of work and also the intent behind the plagiarism. First year students, for example, often plagiarise because they don't understand how to do it properly and that's what we were talking about earlier with the unintentional plagiarism. That would have a different penalty to that given to someone who has repeatedly plagiarised, perhaps plagiarised an entire dissertation, for example; that would invoke a far more serious penalty.

AO'D (4'06")

Lindsay, you mentioned Turnitin there, the software that's available. Can you just tell me a little bit more about that and how that's used?

LW

Yes, Turnitin is a text matching software programme, which, I guess, is like a big database of electronic journals, books, students' work from all over the country, the works of academics and so forth. And what we can do is upload students' work, run it through that programme and it provides us with a text similarity report. We analyse the results and look at other factors to help us determine whether or not a breach has been made. It is therefore an extremely useful tool for us, and as such Turnitin has been implemented across the university not only to help us detect plagiarism, but also, and just as importantly, it is being used to help students to learn for themselves about plagiarism, using work which isn't being assessed, to see if they are making errors in referencing which could actually result in them plagiarising.

AO'D

So Turnitin can be a really useful tool to help take some of the worry out of plagiarism. What other tips have you got, Lindsay that would be helpful to them?

LW

One of the key areas is note taking and being able to paraphrase what people are saying. And it's important to note that paraphrasing isn't just about changing every third word; it's restating a piece of text in a different way. The meaning needs to be the same but the way in which it is expressed is different. And I think it's also important that students get into the habit of being able to summarise a person's views on a particular subject. For example, once you've read a book chapter or a journal article you should be able to summarise it very succinctly in one or two sentences, which you can then include within your work to present a particular viewpoint.

AO'D

Well, I think that distinction between paraphrasing and summarising is a helpful one for students, Lindsay. What else could they do that would help them?

LW

Something else you could do is to keep a good track of your sources as you're going along, so when you're reading, for example, a journal article, and you're taking notes and you're paraphrasing, make sure you jot down the name of the author, the publisher, the page numbers and all the details that you need so that when you come to write your assignment you have that information there.

Following the referencing guide is obviously critical – you need to be able to reference correctly so therefore make sure that you have the referencing guide, put it next to your computer if you need to, and follow it every time you write an assignment.

In terms of suggestions for demonstrating your own originality of work, one of the key things is to rename different versions of your work, so when you first start an assignment, and certainly if you type straight into a computer, you obviously give that file a name. Every time you go in and edit it quite significantly or quite substantially, give that file a different name; call it xxx Version One, Version Two or Version Three or something similar – a system that works for you.

Also keep notes of your mindmaps or spider diagrams. They show how you're tackling that particular assignment, how you want to structure it and therefore demonstrating some originality for you, so that if you do have to meet an Academic Conduct Officer for an investigative interview you can prove that your work has developed over time, and therefore it is your own work and therefore original.

So I guess to summarise. If you're reading widely, you're acknowledging the sources correctly within your work and referencing them properly and you're following the guidelines and suggestions I've already talked about then you shouldn't have anything to worry about, but if you are concerned remember that you can always talk to your personal tutor or your academic advisor and get some advice from them.

AO'D

Thank you Lindsay.

(7' 17")