

# Taking pedagogic responsibility for the difference between plagiarism and cheating

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## Abstract

The Swedish Higher Education Ordinance states<sup>1</sup> in Chapter 8, section 1 (Svensk Författningssamling [SFS] 1993:100) that disciplinary action can be taken against a student who “attempt to deceive during examinations or when academic work is otherwise assessed”. Suspicion of such behaviour is to be reported to the disciplinary board, which in turn has to establish the students *intent*. The main focus of the teacher, however, is to uphold the quality of the education and thus the teacher typically cares less about intent and more about scientific quality and progression.

Contrary to popular belief the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance does not force teachers to report every suspicion of *plagiarism* to the disciplinary board. The ordinance forces teachers to report well-grounded suspicions of *cheating* (SFS 1993:100, Chapter 8, section 9). Once the pedagogical challenges of teaching academic conduct are recognised, suspicions of plagiarism may well take another turn: The differentiation between obvious deficiencies in the ability to formulate oneself independently and suspected attempts to cheat require pedagogic insights and actions.

## Background

In the Swedish Higher Education system, the universities had once their own legal institutions and even the right to sign and carry out death sentences. Today the legal authority of disciplinary boards of Swedish universities is constrained to such things as temporary suspending students for cheating. Plagiarising students typically get suspended 1-2 months but there is a considerable range in suspension lengths between Swedish universities (Högskoleverket [HSV] 2004). The students’ prior experience of studies in Higher Education is taken into account when establishing intent, but seems often to be limited to establishing whether or not the student “knows the rules”.

Knowing the rules, however, might be rather non-trivial. Wilson (1997) points out four different levels of plagiarism that Biggs (2003) links to the SOLO taxonomy, also adding a fifth level:

1. Repetition (simple copying): *Unistructural* and unacceptable
2. Patching (joining phrases from different sources): *Weak multistructural*
3. Plagiphrasing (joining several paraphrased sources): *Multistructural*
4. Conventional academic writing (Repackaging ideas from multiple sources): *Relational*
5. Genuine Originality: *Extended abstract*

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 8 in the English translation of the Higher Education Ordinance corresponds to Chapter 10 in the Swedish version as the former Chapters 8 & 9 in the Swedish version are obsolete and thus not present in the English translation.

Implicit in Biggs way of looking at plagiarism lies the idea that originality is the opposite of plagiarism. Since the SOLO-taxonomy can be used at many different levels of education one might easily combine Biggs ideas with the idea that there is a progression as to what is regarded as plagiarism.

The aspect of plagiarism that is perhaps most commonly discussed in higher education is plagiarism in the sense “not giving due credit”. Thus Carroll (2007) notes that a typical academic definition of plagiarism is

“Plagiarism is defined as submitting someone else’s work as your own”

Although this definition might seem trivial there is, as Carroll duly points out, several ways of understanding this definition. One of the interesting words in this definition is the word “work” and the underlying assumption that work can belong to someone, an assumption that the concept of copyright builds heavily upon. The many possible interpretations of the word “work” and “someone else’s work” once again imply the possibility for a progression in what is regarded as plagiarism:

The implicit moral contract with the reader that lies in being the author of a text varies with context in a rather non-trivial fashion: While, e.g. including someone else’s text in your PhD-thesis without proper quotations and references is considered a serious offence, the very same behaviour is often totally accepted on a written exam—as long as you know the words by heart. There is at least one example (HSV 2004, page 173) where a student asked to hand in personal *notes* he had prepared for a presentation was accused of plagiarism based on these notes. Although this accusation did not hold in the disciplinary board, the mere fact that the disciplinary board got involved indicates that plagiarism is a non-trivial issue.

Thus, even if we within a specific educational setting only focus on students with a deep approach to learning, there is still a considerable pedagogical challenge in conveying and making explicit the essence, the inner purpose, of the learning activities and assessments to the student if we take the question of progression in our educations seriously. For a student who, within that setting, takes a surface approach to learning it may be important to design out possible advantages in taking unintended shortcuts like plagiarism and collusion. This is just one example of the pedagogical challenges that teachers do encounter and that need to be addressed by any policy on academic conduct. If we strive for constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003) one might therefore argue, in line with e.g. Carroll (2002) that a holistic strategy is needed with regard to academic conduct, including detection strategies as well as appropriate course and assessment design.

## **Where we are today**

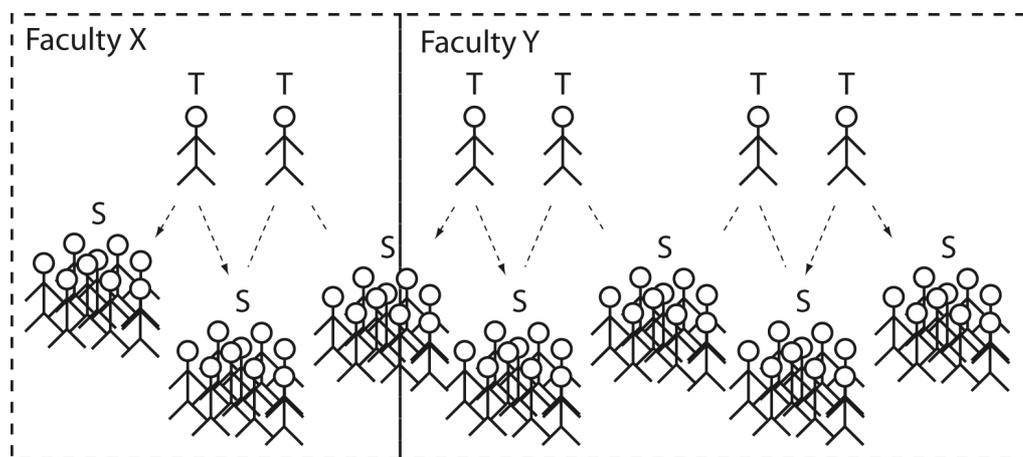
Based on discussions we have had with students and teachers before and at the NU2008 conference, it seems to us that a teacher’s view on what plagiarism is all about can be categorised using the SOLO taxonomy as

1. **Prestructural:** Turning a blind eye, unawareness, not my problem, etc.

2. **Uni-structural:** Plagiarism=Cheating/Avoiding work. Plagiarism has simple causes and since there are no excuses for plagiarism the solution is also simple: Tell the rules and punish those who do not follow the rules.
3. **Multi-structural:** Understanding and accepting that
  - a. There are many reasons why a student might plagiarise
  - b. Plagiarism=cheating OR poor ability to formulate oneself independently OR etc.
  - c. There is a progression in student abilities through an education programme

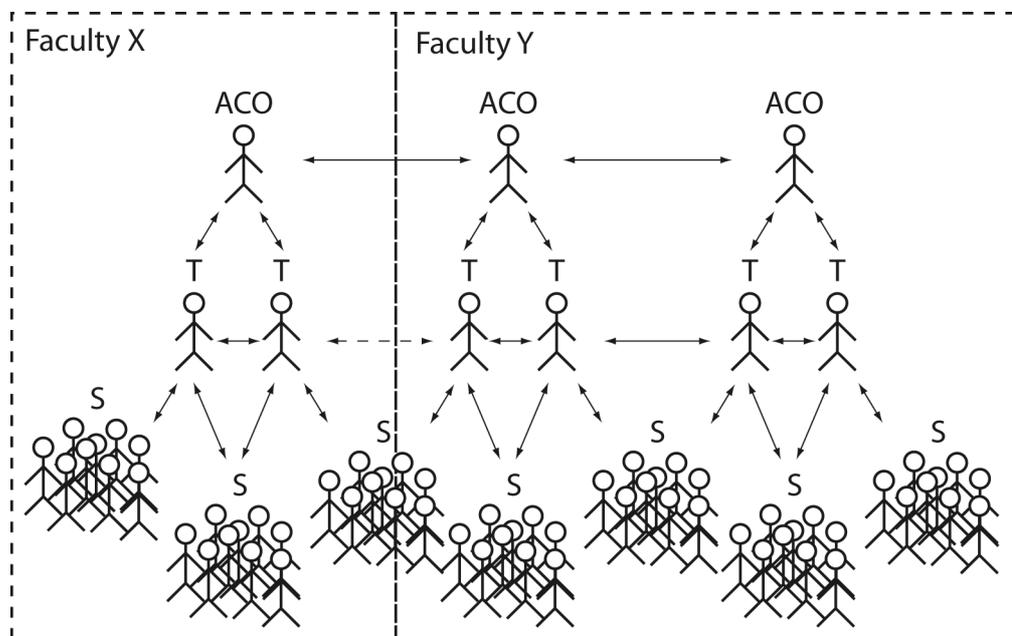
At this level the teacher might have a tacit understanding that the points above are related somehow and the teacher might thus question whether the students understand the rules. Thus, the solution is to engage the students in discussions on the interpretation of the rules and to punish those who nevertheless (i.e. intentionally) do not follow the rules.
4. **Relational:** Focus on learning and demonstrated learning. Causes/rationales for plagiarism are many and interconnected and are furthermore related to other processes such as progression, socialisation, etc. The student writing a text should focus not only on the content as such, but also on making sure that it is obvious for the reader that the student has understood/masters the skill. Independent writing is a skill to be taught and learned.
5. **Extended abstract:** Focus on “Learning as changing as a person” (Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty, 1993). The teacher and the students together have moved beyond the issue of plagiarism versus cheating and now discuss issues of plagiarism in relation to scientific quality & originality on different abstraction levels, i.e. regarding choice of words, structure, communicated ideas, tacit versus explicit attribution, etc.

The attitudes of the teachers have implications on the organisational level. Having teachers at level 1 & 2 (see Figure 1) precludes effective strategies on the University level, as these teachers will limit themselves to telling the students what to do rather than engaging with them in discussions on academic conduct. On the other hand, effective strategies on the university level are a pre-requisite for a teacher to be able to reach level 5 (see Figure 2), at least if the students move between departments and faculties.



**Figure 1.** Teachers (T) on the prestructural level do not tell the students (S) about the “rules of the game” since they think the rules are too obvious (dotted lines). Teachers on the unistructural level do tell their students the rules, but do not engage in discussions with the students about the interpretation of the rules (dotted arrows). These teachers can thus be said to adhere to the teaching paradigm rather than the learning paradigm (compare Barr, 1995) with respect to plagiarism.

In addition, our experience is that many teachers lack knowledge regarding on what grounds their disciplinary board decides on disciplinary actions in instances of student plagiarism. University level strategies that do not address this lack of knowledge therefore seem likely to fail.



**Figure 2.** For a teacher to reach level 5, the teacher needs organisational support for discussions (double arrows) on the interpretation of what is to be regarded as academic conduct so that these discussions can be carried out not only with the students but also with other teachers. One way to organise such support is to appoint Academic Conduct Officers (ACO) to which teachers can turn for guidance and support e.g. when attempts to deceive are discovered.

## The way forward?

The complexity of the issue of plagiarism as discussed above precludes every possibility of leaving the entire responsibility for dealing with plagiarism to the disciplinary board since that would simplify the issue to an issue of intent only. We, as university teachers, rather need to accept our pedagogical responsibility to engage in discussions on academic conduct, plagiarism, etc. with our students and colleagues and be prepared to take our responsibility in distinguishing suspicion of cheating from obvious deficiencies in formulating oneself independently.

Based on our experience, we argue that a more efficient approach than the top-down approach in bringing about a change towards better promoting student academic conduct is likely to involve teachers, and preferably also students, in making and updating strategic plans and action plans for improving academic conduct. This process should also include other relevant parties within the University, such as the disciplinary board, that administer the legal aspects of disciplinary actions in instances of plagiarism.

The pedagogical course “Academic conduct: Students beyond plagiarism” that we offer to teachers at Lund University is one attempt to initiate a bottom-up process that has explicit support from the University management and at the same time provides decision support for the University management. However, as Carroll have stated many times at meetings and seminars, e.g. at the HSV conference on plagiarism 2007: It takes years to go from taking the first steps to having a holistic, university-wide approach to deterring student plagiarism.

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