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Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola_Hills@hotmail.com

Avoiding accidental plagiarism

WHY do so many students get suspected or accused of plagiarism without having intended to cheat? One reason is that when they come to university, students very quickly pick up that they must provide evidence in their assignments, not just their own thoughts and opinions. Some students take this so much to heart that they draw very heavily on material from textbooks, journal articles and the internet, and don't realise that as the authors of their assignments they must also put something into them that did not exist previously. As Fay Weldon said: '...you read because you are hoping to find something. Writers have to provide that – they have to add something' (*Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 22 Sept 2006, p.7). Professor

BY GAIL PITTAM AND JAMES ELANDER

HOW TO BE A GENUINE AUTHOR

- Think about what your own position (opinion) is before you start writing.
- When working from other sources: Read, think, then put the book or journal on one side before writing about it in your work. Think about what you have added to the points made in the source material. Use the source material to support what you are saying in your work – refer to it to make a point of your own.
- When including quotations from other work: Think about what point you are making with the quote. Use the quotation to make a point of your own. Keep the quotation as short as possible. Make sure the other person's words are in quotation marks. Make sure you indicate the source.
- When you think you have finished, ask yourself: What decisions did I take? How many of the sentences did I compose? Can I take responsibility for this writing? Can I really take the credit for it?
- If the answers are not clear, perhaps this version is not your final draft...

Weldon (she is Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University) was talking about creative writing, but the same applies to psychology and other academic assignments.

Many students are told about plagiarism in terms of what *not* to do, but receive much less guidance in what they *should* do to avoid unintentional plagiarism. The Student Authorship Project is addressing this issue by designing and evaluating lectures and workshops that focus on the opposite of plagiarism – authorship – and what students should do to ensure they are genuinely the authors of the work they submit.

The lectures and workshops use Fay Weldon's point to introduce discussion on how student authors can add something to the material they are using by taking 'authorial decisions' about how to use, interpret and present material from books, journal articles and the internet. High-profile cases of unintentional plagiarism are also discussed, like the government's 'dodgy dossier' on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the difficulty that Raj Persaud had in explaining the similarity of an article of his to one published previously by someone else, and even a case where an expert on plagiarism was accused of plagiarising in a report about plagiarism!

In each of those cases, the author got into trouble over the way that material from another source had been presented. The

message to students is that even professionals can very easily find themselves accused of plagiarism through focusing too much on their source material, and not enough on what they, as the author, are adding to their work (see box).

The authorship lectures and workshops deal with different psychology assignments – essays, critical reviews, case studies and research dissertations – and are tailored to support the assignment for the module in which the session is delivered. They are flexible packages of teaching materials that can be adapted for students at different stages in their courses and for delivery to large or small groups. The evaluation consists of before-and-after questionnaires to assess student beliefs about writing and authorship, and focus groups to explore their experiences of writing and their perceptions of the benefits of the project.

Preliminary findings are due to be presented at the Higher Education Academy conference in Harrogate in July. These show significant increases in student understandings of authorship after the lectures and workshops. First-year students showed the biggest improvement, but started from a lower baseline.

The Authorship Project is funded by the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, and is taking place in the psychology departments at three universities in London: Thames Valley University, London Metropolitan University and Middlesex University. It is linked with Write Now, a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) whose aim is to promote scientific literacy in higher education. The project's present focus is on psychology, but we hope the approach could easily be adapted to other disciplines where students produce written assignments.

More information about the project, including downloadable teaching and evaluation materials, is available from the Write Now website at www.writenow.ac.uk.

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