Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model, multimedia and modern culture to promote academic honesty

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Many students act as if academic honesty is an arcane nicety that does not apply in the world outside academia. At the same time, academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, is recognised as a chronic problem. This paper reports on a project that was undertaken to combat these problems. The project adopted a positive rather than punitive approach and used multimedia resources, examples from popular culture and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo 2000) to foster student engagement with academic honesty within a classroom setting and the adoption of its practices with assessable tasks. As academic honesty, or rather its negation through dishonesty, continues to occur, an innovative approach was required. The ELM is a model of how individuals process information, but it has not been used often as a framework for introducing new teaching and learning resources within educational institutions. The evaluation of the resulting resources by academic staff and students suggests that whilst this approach of using resources inspired by the ELM will not alone eradicate academic dishonesty, it will contribute to an understanding and acceptance by students of the need to pursue academic honesty. Furthermore, the resources have created sufficient momentum to see them adopted in subjects in other degree courses as well as emerge as a foundation for other similarly styled projects at the home institution.

Key Words: Academic honesty, plagiarism, multimedia, Elaboration Likelihood Model.

1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty, and one of its common manifestations, plagiarism, is recognised as a chronic and worsening problem by many academics (Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, 2006; Barry, 2006; Brooks & Ellis, 2005; Carroll, 2004, 2005; Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Caterson, 2004; Victoria University, 2012). At the same time, many students complain that academic honesty, and especially the avoidance of plagiarism, is irrelevant and does not apply in the “real” world ie. the world of work. This view is often reinforced by the way universities typically deal with plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty; with heavily textual websites, in obtuse language which obscure the rules and regulations, and with threats of punishment for any transgression (O'Regan, 2006). Some institutions have focussed on “practical solutions” by offering instruction on paraphrasing and the technical aspects of correctly citing work. However, these approaches seem to miss the key point, particularly when
juxtaposed against the principles of higher education, that is, that students need to develop an understanding of the underlying theory and principles of academic honesty, rather than learn simple editorial tasks and processes by rote, often without understanding (Emerson, Rees, & MacKay, 2005; Valentine, 2006).

The paper reports on a project that was undertaken to combat the problems of academic dishonesty. Rather than persist with the typical approach of most universities in trying to reduce academic dishonesty, this project sought to inculcate academic honesty. To do so, the project adopted a positive, upbeat approach characterised by a number of key aspects, all of which were driven by the underlying principles for processing information and changing attitudes which have been conceptualised in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 2000).

2. Literature Review

Plagiarism is widespread in Australian higher education (Devlin, 2006; O'Regan, 2006; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). It can also be argued that this situation is not unique to Australia (Bennett, 2005; Darab, 2006; Gallant & Drinan, 2006). Data from several countries show plagiarism, collusion and cheating to be increasing (Berlink, 2011; Carroll, 2004; Walker, 2009; Youmans, 2011) and the advent of plagiarism detection software has not stopped students plagiarising (Berlinck, 2011; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Gullifer & Tyson, Hill & Page, 2009; Mastin, Peszka, & Lilly, 2009; Park, 2003; Warn, 2006). However, there is evidence that plagiarism detection software, in conjunction with specific class-based activities can help reduce the incidence of plagiarism (Youmans, 2011).

Whilst there is evidence to suggest that students are not openly dishonest (Yeo, 2006; Yeung, Wong, & Chan, 2002) and that they recognise that cheating is wrong (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992), they still do not consistently demonstrate their awareness that academic dishonesty is a critical and punishable form of cheating (Devlin & Gray, 2007; Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Walker, 2009). It may be that students see cheating in everyday life, which reinforces that it must be acceptable to cheat, or euphemistically “bend the rules a bit”, to get ahead (Davis et al., 1992; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Ellery, 2008). Other authors, such as Hayes and Introna (2005), suggest that the pursuit of plagiarism is loaded with cultural and political traps with potentially dreadful consequences for international students not familiar with western academic traditions.

In response to this situation, some authors have called for changes to the way students approach the issues of academic dishonesty (Ellery, 2008; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Madray, 2008). “Students need to develop a stronger commitment to the educational process and possess or activate an internalised code of ethics that opposes cheating to deal with the problem of plagiarism more effectively” (Davis et al., 1992, p. 17). Davis and his colleagues argued that there is a key role here for academics who should routinely discuss with students why they should not cheat, rather than just telling them “don’t cheat”. Academics who follow the Davis recommendation anecdotally report lower levels of plagiarism (Madray, 2008) than colleagues who do not follow Davis’s advice, but system-wide quantifiable and verifiable data is limited. However, the emergence of specialist academic publications dealing explicitly with academic integrity and special editions of general educational journals dealing with plagiarism suggest that this is a problem that is relevant, significant and seemingly intractable.

Many universities have resorted to a hectoring approach to dealing with academic dishonesty. A survey in 2010 of University based academic dishonesty and plagiarism websites in Australia and around the world identified a number of common characteristics:

- a citation of the university policy on plagiarism;
- a strong focus on the punitive implications of plagiarism;
- overly textual in a style that is typically written by academics for academics;
- an absence of discussion of the underlying principles behind academic honesty, dishonesty and plagiarism; and
• some “helpful hints” on how to cite and paraphrase correctly.

These dot points indicate what it is that is often “codified”, according to O’Regan (2006): While plagiarism, and its more positive counterpart, academic integrity, are variously presented as being criminal, educational, unequivocal, or complex, universities grapple with ways of dealing with it; ways that become codified in universities’ policies. (p. 114).

However, these approaches, especially those involving plagiarism detection software, official warnings, guidelines and policies do not appear to be sufficient to help students understand and develop the necessary skills to avoid plagiarism (Hayes & Introna, 2005).

To address the problem of student plagiarism, as an alternative way of thinking about teaching and learning, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) which emerged from communications theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 2000) was explored. The ELM suggests that individuals process messages in one of two ways; high elaboration or low elaboration wherein elaboration is “the extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant arguments contained in a persuasive communication” (Petty & Cacioppo, 2000, p. 191). With high elaboration, also known as the central route, messages are carefully scrutinised and evaluated for logic, internal consistency and merit. With low elaboration, also known as the peripheral route, individuals are less motivated to think about the arguments and tend to concentrate on peripheral clues to assess the relevance and credibility of the source, and by implication, the merit and value of the information. Petty and Cacioppo (2000, p. 192) argue that the high elaboration route is taken when the subject matter is deemed relevant and vital to the recipient, while the low elaboration route is employed when the recipient deems the subject matter not entirely relevant and so relies on a “lazy, short hand” of visual and audio cues to assess the merit of the argument.

The ELM is extensively employed in public service education programs, such as road safety and better eating habits (Withers, Twigg, Wertheim, & Paxton, 2002), where the peripheral routes of using humour, shock, or media personalities are used to grab the viewers’ attention, which is necessary for any form of engagement. This seems to be more successful than the central route of simple, fact driven messages, the lasting impact of which within the context can be questionable. Perhaps the most notable exponent of the peripheral route as conceptualised in the ELM was the late Australian conservationist, Steve Irwin. Rather than belabour viewers with complex theories about threatened species and ecological balances, Mr Irwin used his “larger than life” personality to entertain and engage people with the explicit intention that this engagement would lead to people becoming actively aware of the matters being presented and their implication and thus become financially involved conservationists.

In terms of the ELM, attitudes towards academic honesty are particularly perplexing. One assumes that students should be keenly interested, given the grave consequences involved, in understanding all of the issues related to academic dishonesty, especially plagiarism. As such, simple text based messages, including policy statements, should be sufficient to get their attention and engagement and thus change their behaviour. However, the aforementioned research suggests that students do not heed the text-based approach, as a means for central route processing. Reasons for this situation may range from delays in feedback, overly complex or non-engaging information, to insufficient instruction on the implications of academic dishonesty. As the ELM model is able to address these reasons by use of the peripheral route to secure the recipient’s attention in order to get them to engage in the key message of the topic at hand (Petty & Cacioppo, 2000, p. 194), it guided the developmental requirements of the resources that would address academic honesty meaningfully. Additionally, the ELM indicates that whilst an individual may be interested in the message, the individual still needs to have the cognitive capacity to process the arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 2000, p. 193), that is, engage in central route processing.

With this understanding, the project team used the ELM to inform the development of a suite of resources and delivery modes that ensure students attend to, receive, and process the key messages of academic honesty and adopt its attendant practices. The positions outlined above inform the fundamental orientation of the project. That is, given that central approaches to
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academic dishonesty do not appear to be successful, the message may be acquired via a peripheral route which, to differ from the text-based, factual and procedural material previously used, should be engaging, use cultural references, and be expressed in a multimedia format which is less text-based, factual and procedural; hence more accessible, understood and accepted by students.

Influenced by Petty, Priester, and Brinol (2002), the success of the project was evaluated in terms of the recipients’ recall, understanding and behavioural changes.

The success of media campaigns depends in part on: (a) whether the transmitted communications are effective in changing the attitudes of the recipients in the desired direction, and (b) whether these modified attitudes in turn influence people’s behaviours. (Petty, Priester, & Briñol, 2002, p. 161)

A brief review of the various theories of innovation and evaluation of pedagogical practices suggests that an innovation has to be planned and sustained to be meaningful. Several models and strategies for developing, promoting, implementing, evaluating and disseminating an innovation are recommended (Kiely, 2006; Murphy, 2000). Of importance to this research is the evaluation, which can focus on the whole or part of a program, teaching or the materials / resources (Carter & Nunan, 2010) and / or the purposes for evaluating (Rea-Dickens & Germaine, 2001). Thus, in this instance, it is the evaluation of the new resources, whether they improve academic honesty and by default, the applicability of ELM as a resource development model for promoting academic honesty.

3. The project

The underpinning strategy for this project is that academic dishonesty is best dealt with in a positive manner by focusing on the academic and life skills that not only will help the student avoid the problems of academic dishonesty, but will also enhance their academic performance and career potential; in other words, by promoting the benefits of academic integrity. Indeed, a “stentorious” approach of what one must do (or not do) is not sufficient; the students need to develop a level of self-confidence and self-efficacy to persist with the development of these skills. Therefore, three key messages were developed:

- academic assessments are an opportunity for the student to demonstrate his or her skills of critical and creative thinking, and the nature of academic performance should be formative; hence “obtaining” a near perfect paper should not be the sole aim of the exercise;
- in Western liberal economies and societies, the skill of critical analysis is vital for academic, career, and life success. Similarly, creative thinking, much of which is based on critical thinking, is also a vital skill for success; and
- whilst elements of these skills may be innate, one still has to start, practise, persist and work hard to become proficient, just as with sporting prowess or other valued skills.

These messages form the cornerstone of the project.

The principles of the ELM required the project to engage the students in a manner that was accessible, understandable, relevant and meaningful to them. As well, the materials had to be entertaining and involving in order to encourage the students to consider the message, reflect upon it, and then change their thinking and subsequently their practices. Hence, the project sought to use contemporary multimedia technology (streaming video and websites) to establish a framework for a proactive exploration of academic honesty and the ways and means by which students can pursue academic honesty and thus avoid the pitfalls of academic dishonesty. The project developed four key elements: a website, a streaming video, a series of in-class activities and an assessment activity. Each shall be described in turn.

The website features a set of pages, each one dealing with a key theme addressed in the video as well as a series of resources that show students how to use various assisting technologies such as online databases, bibliographic management software and RSS feeds, as well as a suite of
quality resources from other institutions. The five pages that mirror the key themes of the video are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Key themes and messages represented on the website.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEB PAGE TITLE</th>
<th>KEY THEME AND MESSAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting started</td>
<td><em>The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step</em> – Lao Tzu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No matter how daunting an assignment, the best thing a student can do is to get started. The students are directed to a note called “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Students” which is a play on Stephen Covey’s book, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Makes Perfect</td>
<td><em>Many of life’s failures are people who did not realise how close they were to success when they gave up</em> – Thomas Edison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using examples like Tiger Woods and JK Rowling, this section discusses the need for persistence and practice – that there is no such thing as an overnight success. Resilience and mental toughness are identified as key ingredients of highly successful people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Using an example from the book, <em>Critical Thinking: An Exploration of Theory and Practice</em>, by Jenny Moon (2007), the students are introduced to the four major styles of writing: description, analysis, synthesis and reflection. The obvious and subtle differences between each of these styles is discussed in detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td><em>The world leaders in innovation and creativity will also be world leaders in everything else</em> – Harold R McAlindon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This is an unusual section; it uses Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, as an example to explore how other musicians (such as Paul Anka and Tori Amos) have used this song (which they have fully acknowledged as being written by Kurt Cobain) and created a new sounding song. It also looks at how other artists have drawn inspiration from a variety of genres to create radically new styles of music. The section finishes with a discussion of “music covers” wherein a band plays a famous song in a very similar fashion to the original, for example, Ugly Kid Joe’s version of Harry Chapin’s 1974 hit, “Cat’s in the Cradle”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famous and Recent Cases</td>
<td>Finally, the downside and legal consequences of academic dishonesty in the “outside” world is discussed in terms of copyright breeches in fashion, film, gaming and science. The bottom line is that whilst the project promotes a positive approach to academic honesty, the severe penalties for academic dishonesty remain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each page of the website has a common style, starting with a succinct quotation or two from a famous person to set the tone. For example, on the Introduction page is the quote from Thomas Edison, “Education isn’t play – and it can’t be made to look like play. It is hard, hard work. But it can be made interesting work”. There is also text highlighting the main principles as well as some hyperlinks to alternative sites wherein the principle is elaborated and discussed in more detail, often with a practical example and some tips on how to approach the topic. A series of photos on the right hand side of the page present a stylistic montage representing the physical manifestation of the topics.

The video uses a highly personalised narrative of two university students (one “good”, the other “naughty”) to explore the challenges confronting the typical student in terms of writing term papers, demonstrating critical thinking, appreciating the value of originality and understanding the key principles of academic honesty, and by implication, how to avoid academic dishonesty,
especially plagiarism. However, the video, like the website and subsequent classroom discussion, uses popular culture, in particular cinema, television and music to highlight the key elements of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. For example, the issue of plagiarism and recycling is dealt with by looking at musicians who have been ridiculed and even successfully sued for blatant breaches of copyright. On the other hand, critical thinking and creativity are dealt with by looking at the way Quentin Tarantino has successfully mixed a variety of film noir styles to create what is now known as the “Tarantinoesque” style of film.

The third element involves a series of classroom discussions wherein the students discuss current popular music and cinema and the notions of originality, derivation, homage and inspiration. In particular, the students are required to nominate their favourite films and music and then identify the various sources that influenced the various artists involved. Despite claims that students do not understand plagiarism in an academic sense, many students are capable of identifying plagiarism in areas of interest to them and in which they have some expertise, for example, in music, television and cinema, and prose. On several occasions the comment, “lazy rip-off”, by a student to describe a particular song or film heralded a breakthrough in getting students to appreciate an academic’s position on academic dishonesty, especially plagiarism. Furthermore, the role of subject expertise, be it the student’s knowledge of music or film, or the academic’s content expertise in the subject area, is discussed as a key element in developing the philosophy and practices of academic honesty.

The fourth and final element is a short interactive assessment based on the content of the video. Using the axiom, “assessment drives learning”, an assessment was included to ensure that students’ attention was secured. Whilst the assessment item places more emphasis on recall than analysis, it nonetheless forces the students to engage with the material and pay some attention to the content.

Within the framework of the ELM, the students are entertained so as to be positively encouraged to engage and interact with the material. The content is relatively simple and explained in the form of a friendly, first person narrative and the key messages that assessment is an opportunity for learning, and that critical and creative thinking are whole-of-life skills that take time and effort to develop are strongly emphasised.

Given these four activities and the three key messages, the project was evaluated to assess whether it achieved any of its goals in terms of the ELM. That is, did the students:

a) develop an appreciation for the importance of academic honesty?

b) develop a critical understanding of the concept of academic honesty?

c) refrain for engaging in academic dishonesty?

4. Evaluation

The evaluation used similar tools to that which Brooks and Ellis (2005) used to evaluate the Academic Honesty module within the ArtsSmart e-resource for students new to The University of Melbourne.

4.1. Methodology

The project was evaluated by way of a student survey and a survey of academics as well as a comparison of the academic performance and levels of academic dishonesty of this cohort to previous cohorts. The survey was developed by the project team and operationally and semantically trialled with students who had not viewed or used the resources. The final survey was distributed and administered electronically.

The students surveyed were in their first year of their undergraduate degree in hospitality management at an Australian university. They were undertaking a food services studies unit which incorporated all the above resources / activities. They were asked to answer eighteen closed item questions using a five point Likert style scale relating to the mechanics of the website and video as well as their experience in using the resources. There was also the
opportunity for the students to offer their opinions via open-ended comments. A total of twenty-seven students, representing ninety percent of the student cohort, provided responses.

In terms of the academics, a total of 500 hospitality and tourism academics from around the world were invited to review the resources and answer eighteen closed item questions using a five point Likert style scale. These items were essentially the same as those for the students but were phrased in terms of the academics’ expectations regarding their students. A total of twenty-seven academics out of 500 (a response rate of approximately 5%) responded to the invitation. It is merely a coincidence that both cohorts comprised twenty-seven respondents.

Finally, the academic performance of the cohort was evaluated in comparison to previous cohorts of the same unit of study in terms of grades achieved and incidences of plagiarism.

4.2. Results

The results of the student and academic survey are presented in Table 2. The values are a mean on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The vast majority of results were in excess of 3.5 with several above 4.0 suggesting that the resources were very well-received and had some impact.

Table 2. Views of academics and students about the quality of the project’s materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Students (n = 27)</th>
<th>Academics (n = 27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The video loaded in a reasonable amount of time</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The video was easy to view on my monitor</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The video was about the right length</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interactions on the video were fun and engaging</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The interactions on the video added to my overall experience</strong>a</td>
<td><strong>3.81</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.26</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website was logical and easy to navigate</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The illustrations and layout of the website were visually appealing</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The external website links were relevant and engaging</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The external website links helped me to understand more about the content that was already on the websitea</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned a lot about academic literacy from the videoa</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned a lot about academic literacy from the websitea</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website and video have inspired me further develop my academic literacya</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The website and video have helped me improve my critical thinking skills</strong>a</td>
<td><strong>4.15</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.74</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website and video have helped me improve my creative thinking skillsa</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident that the website and video will help me improve my gradesa</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to use the website and video in future to refresh my understanding of academic literacya</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Because of the website, I am confident that I will not commit any act of academic dishonesty either here at this university or in the future</strong>a</td>
<td><strong>4.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.37</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bolded numbers differ significantly at the 0.05 level of significance.

a These items were expressed in terms of “my students” for the academics.
There are three aspects worth noting:

- the “mechanical” aspects (those dealing with the speed of download, the ease of reading the website) were generally rated more highly than the qualitative aspects (being interesting or engaging) or impacts (changing behaviours);
- there were only three items where there was a significant difference in the attitudes and values of the students and academics; and
- there was no clear pattern in the differences between the students and staff.

When asked about the future application of the resource, the students were clearly in favour of using it as an optional resource, whilst, not surprisingly, the academics were overwhelmingly in favour of making it a compulsory element ($\chi^2 = 5.962$, df = 1, $p = 0.019$) (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Students’ and academic’s views about whether the resource should be compulsory or optional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Should the resource be compulsory or optional?</th>
<th>Students (%) (n = 27)</th>
<th>Academics (%) (n = 27)</th>
<th>TOTAL (%) (n = 54)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of academic performance, the grade distribution of this cohort was almost identical to that of the previous cohort. It is also worth noting that whilst a couple of incidences of academic dishonesty are identified each semester, typically about 10%, there were no incidences of academic dishonesty identified with this cohort. However, it is possible, that this may be due to the increased attention and focus on academic dishonesty and plagiarism during the project, a sort of Hawthorne Effect.

### 5. Discussion

In the teacher-led situation, the students watched the video, surfed the website, participated in the class activities and undertook the assessment. The principles of the ELM would suggest that the students were entertained and persuaded by the “stories” in the video and by doing so became aware of the importance of academic honesty. That is, the peripheral approach was used to get the students to engage with the critical message. This message is then reinforced through the website and classroom activities. However, given the students’ response to make the activity optional, one could argue that any ongoing participation was more a function of the imperative “assessment drives learning” rather than responding to the characteristics of the ELM. In that sense it was compulsion rather than any sense of entertainment that enhanced the students’ interest in academic dishonesty. Even so, the students do appear to value and appreciate the resources. The results from the evaluation were relatively high, being in the vicinity of 4.0 on a scale of 1.0 to 5.0.

In terms of the ELM, the students:

a) were engaged, in that they participated and completed all activities;

b) learned about academic literacy, in that they gave an average score of 3.93 (4.07 for academics commenting about their students) and 4.22 (3.89 for academics commenting about their students) for learning about academic literacy from the video and website respectively; and

c) were confident of changing their behaviour for the better, or at least of not engaging in academic dishonesty, in that they gave a score of 4.00 regarding not engaging in academic dishonesty. For academics, the comparable score about their assessment of their students was 3.37.
Perhaps the most encouraging aspect is that the students claimed to have learned something about academic honesty as well as academic dishonesty and plagiarism and consequently think that they will not engage in academic dishonesty. This suggests that the insights of the ELM have helped. The peripheral approach of making a complex and challenging problem (academic dishonesty) readily accessible and engaging by using multimedia and popular culture to convey a meaningful and complex message (in this case a series of simple multimedia vignettes about good academic behaviour) has worked.

Whilst the scores for each item on the survey were slightly different, the pattern of results across all items for both students and academics was similar; however, it is worth noting that the academics are significantly less optimistic about their students refraining from academic dishonesty because of the website and video. This suggests that there is still some reservations amongst academic colleagues and that dealing with academic dishonesty requires more than a clever website and video.

6. Conclusion

This paper reports on a project that sought to create a “breakthrough” understanding of academic honesty on the part of students by using a variety of modern technologies within the broad principles of the ELM.

The results suggest that in the first instance, compulsion in the form of assessment may still be the best means to focus students on issues of academic honesty. However, there is also evidence that by using popular cultural material and making the message more appealing and accessible to students, the key messages of academic honesty, especially those relating to avoiding plagiarism, are recognised and understood by students. On the matter of whether or not this message is internalised and shapes future behaviour there is some conjecture. The students claim they will not plagiarise and they did not in this instance (but that was in a setting where undue focus was placed on academic honesty and plagiarism), whilst the academics were not completely convinced that their students will adopt the appropriate behaviours.

Furthermore, given that university learning should be self-directed with an emphasis on the “why” rather than the “how”, the current project explains and demonstrates to students why plagiarism is wrong, as well as detailing what academic honesty is and showing how it can be practised. The alternative approach would be to focus only on punishment for breaches and the technical and mechanical aspects of producing correct citations. Such a negative and punitive approach tends to encourage superficial engagement and limited skill development rather than deep understanding, a positive outlook and well developed skills.

The findings from this project are that as academics we need to be more actively engaged and vigilant in ensuring that our students focus on the critical issue of academic honesty, but we also need to exert more effort to ensure that students understand, even if in their own idiom, exactly what academic honesty is and why it is so important, not just at university, but also in the workplace and life in general.

Additional versions of the resources are in the planning stages, subject to the usual funding issues. Recognising that not all students are interested in music and movies, a version that uses fashion, design and architecture is planned. This version will look at how fashion in particular ebbs and flows over time and the fashion designers are particularly adept at taking inspiration from past designs to create “new and original” fashions, and that “stealing designs” is the fashion industry’s version of plagiarism.

There is still some debate about the cultural specificity of academic honesty, although the authors reject the arguments that dishonest practices such as plagiarism are encouraged in other cultures. Nonetheless, in response to this pressure, two versions for international students are also in the planning stages. One version will use Chinese cultural norms and examples to explore the issues of academic honesty and dishonesty whilst the other will use Indian examples. It should be noted that Chinese and Indian students comprise more than 70% of the home university’s international student cohort.
Finally, it has become apparent that the resources cannot operate as standalone resources wherein the students independently watch the video and visit the website at their leisure. In response, a set of teachers’ resources have been proposed. These resources need to reflect the level of the student, the discipline of their course, to some extent their cultural background, and the need for the students to actively engage with the material. Therefore, the resources will help academics identify topics, class discussions and activities, self-paced independent learning activities and assessments so as to maximise the benefits to be derived from the project resources.

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References


