

Should students acknowledge significant learning assistance with their assignments or theses?

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Abstract: *In light of increased institutional focus on the issues of academic integrity and plagiarism, this paper asks the question of whether students should acknowledge any significant assistance with their assignments or theses provided by a Learning Adviser (LA). It is argued that given that academics and other writers consider it right and proper to acknowledge significant help (e.g., thanking colleagues for ‘fruitful discussions’ or for ‘helpful feedback on the manuscript’), then it is somewhat anomalous that students generally do not acknowledge significant assistance from LAs. It is further argued that lack of acknowledgements also leads to a ‘muddying of the waters’ regarding academic integrity because on the one hand course profiles tell students that individual assignments must be ‘entirely their own work’, but on the other recommend students seek help with assignment writing from LAs. While student acknowledgement of learning assistance would force an explicit resolution of such seeming contradictions in policy, and have the added benefit of making the work of LAs and its value more visible to the wider university community, it does appear to be at odds with learning assistance being offered as a confidential service. It is argued however, that confidentiality can still be maintained to a large extent even if students are required to write acknowledgements. Other issues, such as how the required policy changes might come about and the possibility of students giving inappropriate acknowledgements like thanking a LA for ‘proof-reading’ their assignment, are also addressed.*

Key words: *plagiarism, acknowledgement, learning assistance*

Introduction

Learning Advisers (LAs) work with students on various aspects of their academic writing from first year essays through to PhD theses. Such work can include helping students conceptualise the task; explaining academic expectations, such as referencing conventions and what constitutes a critical review; helping to clarify arguments and expression; and working on improving overall structure and the logical flow of ideas. The value of writers at all levels getting feedback on their writing, including the kinds mentioned above, has been widely discussed (e.g., Grierson, 1996; Koprowski, 1997; McLaine, 1997). Furthermore, the work of LAs with students is consonant with universities' goals to develop 'generic skills' in their graduates (such skills go under the name of 'graduate attributes' at the University of Queensland (UQ, 2004)). However, because such work is usually done on student work that is still to be assessed and can have a considerable impact on the quality of the final product, several ethical questions arise. First, how much and what kinds of help with work that is still to be assessed is acceptable to the lecturer of the course and to the institution as a whole? Second, if the help is significant, should such help be acknowledged by the student on their writing? And finally, consequent to the second question, what of student confidentiality if they are required to acknowledge significant help?

In the absence of institutional answers to the first question, it and variants are regularly debated within our Learning Assistance Unit and elsewhere (e.g., Grierson, 1996; McLaine, 1997; Scott, 1998, as cited in Bartlett, 2002, p. 1; Bartlett, 2001, as cited in Bartlett, 2002, p. 1). What might or should be acceptable interventions by LAs in student work is a contentious issue, however (e.g., McLaine, 1997, p. 456; Chromik, 2002), and will not form a focus of this paper. Rather, we will take it as given that many LAs or their equivalents around Australia and further afield do work with students on texts that are still to be assessed, and so will focus mainly on the second and third questions raised above. We argue that this is possible to do even without a precise and detailed exploration of all the ways different LAs might work with students because the question of acknowledgement is relevant to a wide variety of forms of assistance.

The second question raised above regarding acknowledgement of assistance does not seem to have received much attention. Of the literature that does discuss it, McLaine (1997, p. 453) raised the question in the context of how lecturers and LAs should deal with increasing numbers of requests for the English grammar and expression of NESB students' assignments and theses to be 'checked' in a 'policy vacuum' about what 'extent of intervention [is institutionally] acceptable in the assessable written work of students.' However, while this paper proposed the possible recommendation that editing interventions should be formally acknowledged (p. 458), the main focus was to present arguments on why there is a need for editing services and for whom these services should be provided, how they should be provided, and to what extent they should be provided. That is, the issue of acknowledgement was not explored to the same extent as it will be in our paper. In addition to McLaine (1997), Bartlett (2002, p. 3) has also addressed the question of acknowledgement briefly in a paper arguing against LAs doing any editing/proofreading, and Gunn-Lewis (1998, p. 7) has raised it as an issue for LAs to consider. A Unilearn discussion on the topic initiated by one of the authors of this paper in early 2003 (Symons, personal communication, 20 March 2003) generated only very limited comment. In a related area where the question might also have arisen, namely

what is called ‘peer editing’, a Google search revealed that while the practice seems to be quite widespread, the available on-line literature tends to only discuss how it is done and its value for students (e.g., Clifton, n.d.; Koprowski, 1997). Despite this seeming lack of attention, we argue that the issue of acknowledgement is an important one for institutions and LAs to address. As this issue is central to all three questions we have raised above, it will form the focus of this paper. We also argue that while much of the material we use to support our arguments is of University of Queensland (UQ) origin, on the basis of discussions with colleagues at other universities and the papers presented at Language and Academic Skills conferences, we believe that this material is representative of what prevails in many Australian universities.

Acknowledgement as normal academic practice

As the following examples will attest, it is somewhat anomalous that coursework students do not, as a rule, acknowledge significant assistance with their assignments. Consider first that one of the reasons for the insistence on correct academic referencing in student assignments is to induct students into academic practice. Yet if an academic were to get the kinds of help with one of their papers as students often do from LAs with their assignments, they would at the end of their paper acknowledge, ‘benefiting from fruitful discussions with colleagues,’ or ‘thank X for helpful comments on the manuscript.’ This is done to ‘give credit where credit is due.’ In addition, while a research thesis is supposed to be an original piece of scholarship, it is rarely produced without any form of assistance at all. Consequently, research students in their theses often have quite extensive acknowledgements of significant assistance given by different people, such as their supervisors, providers of technical assistance, and sometimes LAs. While research students have always done this, UQ’s Graduate School has gone further and it is now UQ policy to have a formal ‘Statement of the Contribution of Others’ at the beginning of a thesis. As the following excerpt from the policy statement shows, this includes contributions to the written work to which LAs sometimes contribute significantly:

Research . . . may be done and/or written with the technical, theoretical, statistical, editorial, or physical assistance of others. A statement precisely outlining the contributions of others to the intellectual, physical, and written work must be set out at the beginning of every research higher degree thesis. (UQ Graduate School, 2004)

In accord with this policy, it is also the policy of the Council of Australian Society of Editors (CASE) that ‘when a thesis has had the benefit of professional editorial advice, of any form, the name of the editor and a brief description of the service rendered . . . should be printed as part of the list of acknowledgements’ (CASE, n.d.). LAs do not generally provide professional editorial assistance as such to research students. Nevertheless, by working with students on language issues, their work may overlap with what editors do, and in discussing matters of substance and structure, go beyond what some editors do (CASE, n.d.).

The above observations raise the question: If academics and research students do it with their work and research students are also *expected* to do it with their work, why do coursework students not acknowledge significant assistance with their work? Although

not commonly done, in some cases they are expected to. For example, in the instructions (unpub.) for the requirements for Assignment 1, a 2500 word report for LPWM2003 Principles of Wildlife Management at UQ, the students are told that their report should have an acknowledgements section which 'is to tell the reader who else helped you along the way, and to give those people just recognition.' In addition, the sons of one of the authors of this paper (MS) are expected to acknowledge in writing any help given with grade 11 projects/assignments. Gunn-Lewis (1998, p. 4) also reports that of a survey of 62 tutors at the UNITEC Institute of Technology, New Zealand, 45 believe that proofreading assistance should be acknowledged, though only 6 of the tutors actually asked their students to do so. These examples appear to be the exception rather than the rule though, and so the questions of why coursework students do not acknowledge significant assistance, and what are the possible ramifications if they did, still need to be addressed.

Student misconduct and plagiarism

An issue of relevance to the discussion is that of academic integrity because acknowledging significant help from others in the preparation of a piece of writing is a question of integrity as argued above. The issue of academic integrity, and in particular the issue of plagiarism, has received considerable attention worldwide in recent years. For example, the First Australasian Educational Integrity Conference (University of South Australia, 2003) was held in Adelaide in November of 2003, and The Center for Academic Integrity (n.d.) in the US came into being in the early 1990s, and is now a consortium of over 320 institutions. One result of this attention is that most if not all students at UQ have to sign a 'statement of original authorship' or equivalent when submitting their assignments (e.g., UQ Ipswich, n.d.; Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, n.d.), as is the case at other Australian universities (e.g., Monash University, 2003; University of Adelaide, 2005, p. 3), and UQ course outlines/profiles are required to include information on plagiarism and academic integrity. As noted by McLaine (1997, p. 453) though, such statements and policies rarely seem to take into account the work of LAs, and consequently apparently contradictory messages like the following appear. In the course outline for LTCS1000 Issues in Contemporary Asia (Hartley, 2005), assignment marks are allocated to 'presentation, spelling and grammar' (p. 3) and yet despite being formally assessed on these aspects, the course outline also encourages all students, and particularly NESB students, to not only proofread their assignments themselves, but to get someone else to proofread their essay for them as well (p. 3). In the course outline for EDUC2060 Literature in the Secondary School Context (Moni, 2004), the marking criteria specifically mention that the markers will be looking for 'logical, convincing and well-supported arguments' and 'written communication [that] demonstrates professional control and use of language' (p. 12) and yet also refers students to LAs for help with assignment writing, including help with 'improving logical coherence and flow' (p. 11).

How can the apparent contradictions outlined above be reconciled? One possibility is that lecturers consider the 'real' work of an assignment to be the research and analysis and that the marks for 'written expression' are just 'carrots' to encourage students to take such matters seriously. Hence, helping a student to 'explain myself more better' as a paper by Chanock (1999) was partially titled, is apparently acceptable, at least to some lecturers, despite the fact that marks are awarded to these aspects of student work. We would also argue that since it appears to be generally acceptable for the writers of text books

and journal articles to claim authorship of their work even if they have had considerable substantive (i.e. focussing on whether the paper fulfills its intended purpose, is logically coherent and flows well, and is clearly presented) and copy (i.e. is grammatically correct and punctuated and referenced correctly) editorial help, it seems reasonable that students should be rightly able to claim ownership of their work even if they have had significant help from a LA, an argument also made by Grierson (1996). However, the statements of originality on the cover sheets of assignments would need to be reworded to acknowledge that.

More difficult to reconcile with learning assistance are policy statements like the following: 'the written work you submit must be *entirely* your own' [emphasis added] (UQ Business School, n.d.); 'students can discuss assignments with other students and their tutors' but 'should, however, write their assignments independently' (Academic Development Unit, La Trobe University, 2005); and as noted on University of Adelaide assignment cover sheets: 'Collusion: another person assisting in the production of an assignment for submission without the express requirement, or consent or knowledge of the assessor' (Centre for Learning and Professional Development, University of Adelaide, 2005). Can a student say that the written work is *entirely* their own or that they have written their assignments independently if a LA has helped them to improve logical coherence and flow, or has helped them to think more critically about the issue than they had done so to that point in time, or in the case of students who have completely misinterpreted the assignment, helped them to understand what was really required? Again it can be argued that the 'law' is not to be taken too literally, as lecturers often provide students with a list of questions to consider in addressing a topic, so guiding students in their thinking through of the topic. And we have seen some UQ Business School course outlines where the instructions on what is expected in each section of a report are spelled out in such detail as to fill two or more pages with a small font text! However, having to make arguments about which 'laws' are to be taken literally and which ones not is an invidious position to be in for both students and LAs and one that therefore it would be desirable to address.

The questions of what constitutes both acceptable and effective kinds of help are ones regularly addressed within our unit, and presumably within other learning assistance units as well. The recent developments discussed in this section, however, have in our minds made these questions more difficult, since maintaining our current practice seems to require us in some instances to work according to what we *believe* to be the 'spirit of the law' rather than according to the *literal* 'letter of the law'. If students were required to acknowledge the assistance of LAs, then a resolution to this conundrum would need to be achieved, making our work somewhat easier. Before pursuing this idea further though, a consideration of student confidentiality is in order.

Confidentiality

Another significant issue that arises if students are required to acknowledge assistance with their assignments is the issue of confidentiality, for if students had to acknowledge significant help, the fact that they had seen a LA and the broad terms of what they saw the LA about would no longer be completely confidential. We would argue that whether this is an important consideration or not depends on the reasons for confidentiality. The ethical considerations underlying confidentiality are to cause no harm to the client and to

respect privacy, and one work practice issue has to do with creating an environment in which the student feels 'safe' to discuss their issues or reveal their lack of knowledge or competence. Certainly for some aspects of the work of a LA, confidentiality is essential. For example, when it comes to cases of a research student wishing to discuss problems with a supervisor, the student's very real concern is the potential damage to the relationship with that supervisor if confidentiality were to be breached. Hence the unquestioned need for confidentiality in cases like this.

What of help with essays, reports or theses however? What are the potential harms that might result to a student if confidentiality were to be breached in these cases? From the student's perspective there are at least two. One is the perception (real or imagined) that they would 'lose face' by perhaps appearing incompetent, stupid or 'needy' if it were to be known that they had sought help from a LA. Even if such fears are unfounded, they nevertheless both deserve and need to be respected.

The second possible harm that students might fear is that they might be marked more severely if the help given by a LA on an assignment were known to their lecturers; or research students might fear their supervisors would think less of them if they knew about similar help with their theses, thus prejudicing their future career prospects. As stated above, such fears, even if unfounded, deserve some measure of respect. However, the fact that some journals have a blind refereeing process indicates that it is not just students who fear that humans can not (always) be trusted to give completely unbiased evaluations of a piece of work independent of external factors. And, if such fears are grounded in reality, that lecturers really would look askance at students receiving help with their assignments from LAs, then that raises serious questions about the ethics of what we do and, we would argue, of the difficulty of balancing the conflicting goals of formative and summative assessment.

With regards to the possible fears mentioned above, the question arises as to why the writers of books, theses and journal articles are not afraid to acknowledge the valuable help they receive from colleagues, editors and so on (though not always that from LAs in the case of theses). One probable reason is that such acknowledgement in these forums is the norm, and because it is the norm, this consequently makes it 'safe' and acceptable to do and so nothing to be concerned about. This suggests that if most lecturers normalised both the getting of help from LAs ('look at it as professional development training') and the acknowledging of significant but acceptable forms of help from LAs or others ('look at the acknowledgements section of the journal articles that you read'), then the problems would be resolved. This could be done both verbally and in course outlines. In doing this, lecturers would also need to make clear to all concerned which pieces of assessment students could get help with and which not, and the types of assistance acceptable and those unacceptable. That is, they would need to make clear which pieces of assessment were both formative and summative, and which summative only. As an example, our Unit's policy is to treat take home exams as being purely summative and so we do not provide learning assistance to students with these.

To some extent though, acknowledging help from a LA on an assignment is only a very limited violation of confidentiality. Even if students had to acknowledge the assistance given by a LA, LAs could still tell students that they would not discuss the details of any

of their sessions with anyone else without their express permission, thus protecting their privacy in large measure.

Institutional implications

The issues raised in the section on confidentiality mean that requiring students to acknowledge significant help with assignments or theses is not something that LAs themselves could require; any change would have to be institutionally driven. For a start, institutional policies on academic integrity and plagiarism would need to explicitly acknowledge and sanction, in general, the kind of work LAs do. This is not commonly done as evidenced by the fact that an online search of several Australian universities' plagiarism policies revealed that, if Language and Academic Skills Units are mentioned at all in such policies, it is in the context of where students can go to be educated about acceptable referencing practices (e.g., Australian National University, 2004, Section 2.3). The situation does not appear to be any different in the US either. A search of a sample of more than a dozen academic integrity policies of tertiary institutions in the US found through The Center for Academic Integrity's (n.d.) website located only one site, that of Brandeis University, which explicitly acknowledged the existence and work of the equivalent of LA units. The relevant part of this University's policy states: 'Aid from personnel associated with University-sanctioned tutoring services [these include their 'Writing Center' which appears to offer similar services to Australian Language and Academic Skills Units (Brandeis Writing Center, 2005)] is acceptable; tutor-assisted work submitted for a grade should be done with approval of the instructor' (Brandeis University, 1999).

While such explicit sanctioning of the work of LAs would go far in addressing our concerns, we would, however, argue that rather than requiring students to seek approval for getting help, lecturers should provide blanket approval (or explicit disapproval) with assessment items on their course outlines. We see this as necessary to remove any ambiguity in the acceptability of our work in each instance (as opposed to 'in general'), and because it would remove two psychological barriers to students seeking help. The first barrier is simply the time and effort required to get explicit approval, and the second is that students may not want to draw attention to the fact that they want help for fear of 'embarrassment' or 'losing face'. Thus, we see it as necessary that university policy also requires each lecturer to explicitly state on their course outlines which pieces of assessment students can or can not seek help from a LA with. For example, the lecturer of a course with 100% assignment-based assessment might consider it acceptable for students to get help with their first assignment(s), but not their last one so that the last one effectively becomes like a final exam. Another, perhaps less satisfactory solution, would be for assignment cover sheets to have an acknowledgements section added, with the general policy being that students can assume it is acceptable to seek help from a LA unless explicitly told otherwise. The existence of an acknowledgements section, with perhaps a brief policy statement with it, would go some way to normalising the practice and hence make it 'safe'. Such a policy statement might state something like the following:

Acknowledging significant assistance from others in the preparation of a piece of writing is standard scholarly practice. If you have consulted with or received significant help from a lecturer, tutor or Learning Adviser with this assignment,

or if you had someone proofread it for you, or if you had technical or other assistance with a practical project, then please acknowledge all such help here.

Possible implications for LAs

A possible benefit for LAs that might arise from greater acknowledgement by students would be that our work with them and its value would become much more visible to the wider university community, though it could also lead to an ‘explosion’ in demand that would be difficult if not impossible to meet. Another benefit would be that it would force the resolution of some inconsistencies within course policies, thus removing some of the ambiguity in how LAs work with students.

On the other hand, as argued by Bartlett (2002, p. 3), there is a danger that poorly worded acknowledgements could undermine our work and standing in several ways. For example, if a research student were to thank a LA for ‘proof-reading’ the thesis (as has happened to one of us), then this might suggest to the reader that the LA aimed to turn the final draft into a word perfect document. If the final document were still quite flawed in many ways, then this would not reflect well on the LA’s competence, even though this is not what was done. In addition, describing as ‘proof-reading’ a close, careful and critical reading of parts of a thesis, together with many suggestions on how to clarify wording, structure ideas and so on, could perpetuate misconceptions amongst both students and staff that LAs are little more than ‘grammar checkers,’ which could lead to a devaluing of our work by staff and an increased number of students seeking our help to check their grammar. These potential problems could be addressed though, by providing ‘training’, at least in the form of some proforma acknowledgements from which a student could choose, or from which to model an acknowledgement. Examples might be:

‘I acknowledge X (a LA from ...) for valuable feedback on an early draft of this assignment.’

‘I acknowledge X (a LA from ...) for help with structuring the ideas in this assignment.’

‘I acknowledge X (a LA from ...) for help understanding what was expected for this assignment / stimulating thinking on the topic.’

In addition, for a research student with whom a LA has worked extensively and built up a close relationship, the LA might *request* to see the acknowledgements so that more appropriate phrasings might be suggested if what the student has written does not accurately reflect the work.

One other possible negative consequence of students having to acknowledge the assistance of LAs is that students do not always believe what they are told and so may not believe that their work will not be marked more severely if they acknowledge the assistance of an LA. If that is the case, then there may be a decline in the number of students seeking

individual appointments, at least initially until the practice of acknowledgement becomes commonplace.

Conclusions

So should students acknowledge *significant* help from LAs with assignments? Yes, because it is standard scholarly practice to acknowledge such help (because it is the right and proper thing to do) and so it is anomalous for them not to do so. Yes, because it would lead to greater institutional valuing of the work LAs do to improve students' generic skills/graduate attributes. Yes, because it would bring greater transparency to the work that LAs do and would encourage academics to clarify what is acceptable practice and what is not. This would be fairer to students because both they and LAs would not have to guess the 'intent of the law' as opposed to its literal meaning. Can we expect students to acknowledge the assistance of LAs as matters currently stand? We argue 'yes' for theses, but not for coursework assignments unless both institutions as a whole and lecturers individually take account of LA work in their assessment policy statements. Is this likely to happen? It may happen, though perhaps LA units should take the initiative in raising the issue as a policy development item with their institution's teaching and learning committee. Certainly PhD rules appear to have moved this way, and there is some isolated evidence of moves in this direction at lower levels.

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