

**Personation- the new plagiarism; implications for pedagogical
practice.**

**Joe MacDonagh & Deryck Payne,
joe.macdonagh, deryck.payne @it-tallaght.ie
School of Business and Humanities
Institute of Technology, Tallaght
Dublin, Ireland**

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A key focus of many educational institutions has been the development of policies to combat plagiarism. Best practice to shape behaviour and curb future plagiarism has involved rigorous instruction on plagiarism coupled with submission requirements involving international detection programs, such as Turnitin.

This paper examines the rise of personation, or someone authoring a college assignment for students, which is a means for students to achieve academic grades while avoiding detection for plagiarism. It explores why students engage in this practice, also known as contract cheating for some forms, and examines ways of quantifying how much personation exists. It analyses whether personation, particularly in the form of “essay mills”, may expand and will examine the best ways for colleges and lecturers to detect and combat these. Some of these ways involve linguistics, on the semantic content of submitted work, and computer science, on the idiosyncratic typed pattern of the work submitted for each student.

The paper suggests approaches to combating personation, including greater emphasis on discussing submitted work with the students concerned, increased use of small group tutorials plus the authoring and discussion of texts in a class environment.

Finally, personation is set in a conceptual framework, particularly Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. Also examined is the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and the need to create a dialogical space in which student texts are open to dialogue within the community of practice; something which personated assignments close off and negate.

This paper will be of interest to all those who are interested in detecting and combating personation and in finding out how to develop pedagogical practice which avoids this in the first place.

Keywords

Personation, Plagiarism, Collusion, Contract cheating

1. Introduction- personation: the new frontier

This paper explores the phenomenon of “personation” amongst third level students where they purchase assignments from third parties in order to fulfil a class, continuous assessment or terminal examination requirement, and thus achieve academic grades while avoiding detection for plagiarism. As a working paper it will examine some of the key issues in personation as it relates to plagiarism and will suggest ways in which lecturers and third level administrators might seek to combat this activity.

The voice and influence of the academic is not heard when assignments and examination material are plagiarised or authored by others. This paper examines how this may be combated and will suggest how colleges may present a consistent, if not united, approach to this.

2. The rise of personation

A key focus of many institutions has been the development of policies to combat plagiarism. Best practice has involved rigorous instruction on plagiarism coupled with submission requirements involving international detection programs such as Turnitin. Frequently this leads to sanctions which seek to shape student behaviour and so to curb future plagiarism.

There is an extensive body of research into the nature of plagiarism and how it may be detected (Lancaster & Clarke, 2009) which is useful when looking at personation. The latter has used a mixture of large databases to compare the sources of student work (Duggan, 2008) and ones which compare the semantic content of the work involved with other possible works (Chong et al 2010) to establish if the semantic content is similar to any other content. Plagiarism research is well developed both in terms of detection and in how best to deal with those whose plagiarism has been detected (Lancaster & Clarke, 2009).

What is examined in this present paper is the relatively recent phenomenon of personation or “contract cheating” whereby students purchase assignments from “essay mills”. Essay mills are usually dedicated web sites which write assignments to order, ranging from class essays, through continuous assessments to postgraduate theses. This has been facilitated by greater access to the internet, with many potential contacts world-wide. This has meant that students can more easily access assignments

which some suggest (Bailey, 2012) were written for them traditionally by others, say in their own college.

Another means of purchasing assignments is through “auction” sites, as was reported by the Guardian newspaper (Shepherd, 2008). To test the quality of assignments purchased from such sites a Guardian journalist posed as two different students seeking to purchase assignments, one for computer science and one from history. The journalist was assured by those writing the essays that they were qualified in the discipline for which they were writing and that the student would achieve far in excess of a pass mark. The essays were purchased and were then submitted to lecturers in both fields. One just achieved a passing grade whilst the other was sent back for amendments as it was not acceptable to the lecturer as submitted.

Some (Bailey, 2012; Shepherd, 2008) have suggested that engaging in personation will leave the student poorer, none the wiser about the subject, in danger of failing and potentially being the subject of disciplinary action. Words such as fraud and cheating are mentioned regularly (Whitley, 1998). Some suggest that personation, like plagiarism, has the potential to undermine institutional degree reputations due to the possible perception that students are not as good as the marks their supposed work has received. Clearly it is a serious matter and we will briefly examine the extent of the problem in the section.

3. Estimating its incidence

A review of the literature shows that while there are many papers estimating the extent of plagiarism and the like (Baird 1990; Haines et al., 1986; Pino & Smith, 2003; Whitley, 1998; Vowell & Chen 2004) as between 40 and 70 percent (Whitley, 1998) there are significantly fewer, if any, on personation.

The dearth of such studies may be due to difficulty of detection or because it happens in smaller amounts than plagiarism. It may also be that those engaging in it may feel it is less justifiable than plagiarism, which they may regard as their “own” work, rather than sub-contracting being sub-contracted from others, and so has not been picked up significantly in studies to date. Definitionally, it is a type of plagiarism as it is as someone passing off another’s work as their own, without attribution. However, those engaging in personation may rationalise their activity by their having commissioned the work, giving them a sense of participation and commitment to the assignment. The

evidence seems to be not of novel essays and theses custom written for the assignment, as essay mill web sites suggest, but rather of pre-prepared works which are adapted, sometimes poorly, and which often do not fulfil the promises of quality made on purchase. Essay mills defend themselves by saying that the purchasing student needs to review the assignment upon receipt. The essay mills sometimes adjust their stock essays by changing city names but often leave American English spellings, and vice versa.

More research needs to be carried out on personation to scope its presence on Irish campuses and further afield. Such research should examine whether plagiarism exceeds personation or is the latter becoming more commonplace due to web based essay mill sites. In addition, Ireland also has the particular problem that there is also a lack of research on any form of plagiarism and that we must presume, or not, that Ireland's experience mirrors that reported in the international plagiarism figures. Some suggest that collusion working with classmates to produce one's assignment, has always taken place (Bailey, 2012), but that now it occurs over the internet.

Finally, there is the problem of computer based collusion which is relatively new and for which there is anecdotal evidence. Though not personation or plagiarism, it shares "moral" elements in that those who engage in it can be in no doubt that what they are doing is not permitted and so it should, we suggest, be subject to greater initial sanction.

This form of collusion arises out of lecturers' or instructors' desire, often based in ideas of best practice, to make assessments available online for students to complete remotely; it may even occur as part of distance courses. In order to safeguard against students exceeding the time allowed for completion of the assessment, often a multiple choice question (MCQ) format, the student can only access the assignment at a particular time or for a set time period once the assessment file is accessed. What then happens is that the student being examined uses the help of a number of other students to divide up the assessment and each student spends time answering a part of the overall test questions.

Since the advent of such online examining, based as it is on a trust or honour system, there has always been the danger that such practices would exist, which are hard to research and which are hard to detect. It is difficult to find evidence of such activity

except through stories and rumours which may be of poor verifiable quality. Nevertheless, one of the purposes of this present working paper is to signpost issues for researchers to examine. In the next section we will examine what justification and rationalisations are provided by those engaging in plagiarism and personation.

4. Why students do it

Personation exists, like any prohibited activity such as plagiarism, because students are able to rationalise its existence and because detection mechanisms are inaccurate or poorly applied; third level institutions often do not take the matter seriously enough or do not wish to allocate resources to it. Due to the paucity of research on personation mentioned above we will examine the reasons students give, the societal context and the institutional shortcomings which lead to plagiarism and will examine the applicability of this to personation.

Individual student rationalisations often involve moral relativising, either in terms of normalising their actions with regard to others by setting it in a societal context which permits or even necessitates transgressions of the moral code in certain circumstances or by comparing it to that student's normal fulfilment of their personal moral code to exceptionalise the behaviour. This exceptionalising may propose their compulsion to engage in that behaviour through time or personal necessity, which serves then to justify that behaviour as something not normally done. However, Sims (1993) and Nonis and Swift (2001) found that those engaging in academic dishonesty as students also engaged in workplace dishonesty.

The "societal" justification involves a type of "others are doing similar things so why can't I?" This line of rationalisation often involves accepting that the act of plagiarism is wrong but that it is less bad than the actions persons engage in to succeed in society, particularly those in "high" finance who bend or even break governmental regulations in order to acquire wealth; which is particularly admired in capitalist societies. Some research has used Beck and Azjen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour to explain such rationalisations. This societal strand also involves understanding education in western societies as being commoditised and where this is the case some students may see the purchase of essays to fulfil assessment requirements as an instrumental economic transaction. Such transactions are then seen

as prohibited by “mere” institutional regulations rather than by statute or even by the criminal law and so not as morally reprehensible as the actions of criminals.

It is against a background of politicians and elite athletes frequently being found to have bent or broken the law that some students relativise their actions and plead that they are, like these individuals, merely doing what they need to advance their career and that they are able to perform competently but needing occasionally to transgress moral guidelines which are flexible and negotiable. It is an argument along the lines that “good people do bad things but they are still good people”.

Ultimately it behoves society to treat all breaches of the moral code, in whatever setting, fairly and with mercy but with consistency. Third level institutions must explain the moral necessity of abiding by their regulations. Given that the moral argument may not work with some students, colleges may seek to close down or to inhibit the work of the so called essay mills. The efficacy of this and other approaches will be examined in the next section.

5. Eliminating personation

In this section we will examine ways for colleges and lecturers to detect and combat personation, which may currently be used for plagiarism. Some of these ways include: linguistics, on the semantic content of submitted work, and on the idiosyncratic typed pattern of the work submitted for each student. Other approaches include discussing submitted work with students, increased use of small group tutorials plus the authoring and discussion of texts in a class environment.

There are a number of commercial products available which detect plagiarism by comparing the work submitted by students against other student works in other world-wide institutions and against international published works. This has proved a very successful means of detecting plagiarism and of informing students of the nature of plagiarism and how it can be detected.

These commercial packages can successfully detect plagiarism if lecturers are prepared to require students to process their assignments through them and then to provide meaningful feedback to students on their submissions, particularly if there is evidence of plagiarism. Some lecturers allow students to submit a number of times to discover their plagiarism “score”. One school of thought suggests this is coaching students in how not to get caught or how to plagiarise in an undetectable manner. The

other school of thought says that students may inadvertently plagiarise and an opportunity to detect and change it encourages good anti-plagiarism practice.

Whichever approach is used, the use of anti plagiarism software needs to be consistent and constant. Each new student cohort needs to be educated as thoroughly as theretofore or else students will learn that lecturers and administrators do not take the matter seriously.

The best, but the most time consuming, way for lecturers to detect personation is to be attentive to the abilities and writing styles of their students. An alert lecturer will be in a better position to detect that the work submitted is not the student's by comparing it with a previous assignment. However, the problems with this are many: the lecturer would have to possess previous assignments against which to compare the submitted work; the lecturer would have to have the time and the energy to work through a large amount of assignments to check for personation, and they may not wish to do either of these if they feel it will be difficult to prosecute or if they will not be provided with sufficient resources by college authorities should they make a finding of personation. This is the key problem with approaches which recommend getting to know your students and their writing styles, or even those approaches which suggest setting an assignment based on students' personal experiences of the module/course (Lancaster & Clarke, 2009) or ones which are highly focussed on very particular parts of the course/module so as to confound external writers who may not know this level of detail of the students' experience; they underestimate the amount of work required to do so by lecturers with large classes and who have pressing research and lecture preparation needs. Such approaches include greater emphasis on discussing submitted work with the students concerned, increased use of small group tutorials plus the authoring and discussion of texts in a class environment. With large class sizes and with less tutorial provision these are difficult. However, the argument for them is not simply in terms of detecting personation, plagiarism or other breaches of institutional regulations, it can also be that it assists students in constructing and composing well written material. Good writing then leads to good thinking and clearer evaluation of the issues in the student's academic discipline. Perhaps the emphasis should be on students learning the necessary evaluation skills for well developed thought rather than third level institutions seeking to increase class sizes to fund themselves.

In lieu of this happening there are other, more automated, detection methodologies may provide lecturers with an easier means of detecting personation. As described above, these may involve closely examining samples of the student's work to establish if the work submitted is by the same person as previously submitted the work. This can be done by keeping an electronic copy of the work and simply reading through it to see if the words, syntax and spelling are the same between the first work submitted under the student's name and this present work. This "foundational" work should perhaps be submitted at the beginning of the student's college career and at the start of each college year thereafter so as to correct for developmental effects and improvements in writing style. The essay could be on a general discipline related topic and would give the lecturer a benchmark in terms of style, syntactical structure and approach which could be compared to future work submitted by that student. This may be more useful for humanities modules and courses and it is predicated on the idea that we each have an idiosyncratic way of expressing ourselves in writing, whereby we prefer certain words and styles which tend to be repeated by us and from which we do not radically differ in short periods of time. There is potential for further research here on the extent to which we do differ across time in how students write, particularly through under and post graduate courses.

Not only do we have a particular way of writing but some research suggests that we have an idiosyncratic way of typing also (Flior & Kowalski, 2010; Kowalski, 2010; Vizer & Sears, 2009), in terms of typing patterns, and that these could be submitted to a lecturer for comparison along with the essay that they had submitted in a class setting. Both writing structure and key typing patterns when compared with any subsequent work submitted could provide a quick, highly useful, automated means of detecting personation.

Finally, colleges must also be committed to providing consistent punishments for those found guilty of plagiarism or personation. Many such punishments operate a mixture of the year in which the offence took place and the amount that was involved, with a sliding upwards scale towards those in later years for greater parts of their courses who have been detected or found guilty previously.

We believe consideration should be given to simplifying the disciplinary code, particularly where scant resources and management time may not be available to

punish continual offenders. In certain professional disciplines, such as law and medicine, the consequences of such duplicity and lack of truthfulness are particularly serious. However, we believe that it is a serious issue for all academic disciplines and failure to address the issue has the possibility of profound institutional reputational damage. We believe close pastoral and educational support should be provided for a student who is found to have committed plagiarism or personation for the first time, at whatever point in their academic career. They should be asked to repeat their assignment but it should be made clear to them that the college will not tolerate them cheating again and should they feel they need to do so in future they will be provided with counselling support but should they do so again that they will be suspended from the course, perhaps indefinitely. This approach may seem severe but, to draw an analogy, while the courts may be merciful towards a first time offender with mitigating personal circumstances they tend to be less tolerant thereafter.

This more simplified approach would mean lecturers having to spend less time wondering about the seriousness of different percentage plagiarism scores or about the seriousness of completely plagiarised sections of assignments which do not add up to a large percentage in the work overall or even if a bought essay for a minor part of the course should be overlooked.

In the following, penultimate, section we will look at how the sections thus far fit into some educational and relational theory, bearing in mind that the theme of the conference is the voice of the academic.

6. Possible theoretical approaches

One of the most famous educational theoretical concepts is that of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) whereby the person being educated is involved in a relationship of instruction with their teacher who helps them develop. They are scaffolded or supported in their learning and are initiated into the community of practice (Wenger, 1998) of which they may wish to become a member by achieving set standards. Such standards may involve not infringing rules of academic cheating and honesty regarding same.

Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1993), the Russian literary theorist, talked about what came to be known as dialogism, that is the mutual responsiveness between people which often occurs in talk, the opposite of which is the monologising tendencies of rigid

bureaucracies which allow no dissension from their diktats. Students who seek to cheat academically are monologising the academic space; they seek to allow a false voice to be heard, a falsely authored piece or one from someone who does not participate in the dialogue in their course and so seeks to negate the authentic participation of others in their course.

The key theoretical idea we wish to advance is that those who buy assignments, collude with others or plagiarise are closing off dialogue in the academic space, which should involve the exchange of original ideas or original readings of old ideas rather than the mere repetition of existing concepts.

7. Conclusions and Future Work

Many of our conclusions have been mentioned above so we will re-state them briefly. The true extent of plagiarism or personation in Irish third level institutions is not known (Ledwith et al.,2010; Ledwith & Risquez, 2008; Daly & Horan, 2005; Risquez, 2010), as very little international research on the latter has been produced. It may be acceptable to infer that those who plagiarise might also buy assignments from others but this isn't, as yet, supported by research findings. Thus a great deal more work needs to be conducted on the extent of this and the rationalisations provided by students for doing so.

Prevention may be improved through the use of different pedagogical techniques involving smaller classes and more class discussion on work produced. This would rely on college authorities providing more resources and reducing class sizes. What may be better would be a simplification of colleges' disciplinary code to support students not to commit academic fraud and then, if repeated, to punish them appropriately. Otherwise, academics will spend a great deal of time detecting offences which may not be treated with the severity they deserve by hard pressed academic managers afraid of litigation arising from unclear and contradictory regulations.

More useful might be automatic ways of detecting plagiarism and lack of originality. This area of research is promising and could provide busy lecturers with a simplified way to detect personation. If academics are supported in rooting out this problem then it will allow the authentic voice of students and academics to prevail and the quality of education and research will be better for all.

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