

13. Citation Practices of Third Level Students

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This paper examines some of the guidelines given to third level students in relation to citing other authors and avoiding plagiarism in their written work. It compares what the guidelines say with what actually happens in the students' writings in a sample of essays submitted to the Philosophy degree programme. It concludes that the common guidelines given to students are misleading and do not prepare students for the writing tasks they have to perform in their college life. Instead, an alternative way of teaching citation is proposed.

Introduction

While considerable effort is devoted to helping young children learn to read, and also to developing writing skills in older children, the task of academic writing can present some third-level students with significant challenges for which they feel singularly unprepared. This paper will look at academic writing, a type of writing which demands particular skills, such as the ability to cite accurately and comment on the work of others. These skills will be examined using data drawn from undergraduate Philosophy students and these data are collected in a programme that offers third-level students learning support as they acquire those skills (see also Clancy, this volume).

Undergraduate students are expected by those correcting their written work to include citations in their essays. A citation is 'the attribution of propositional content to another source' (Hyland, 1999: 341). In other words, when undergraduate students write essays for assessment, they employ citations to indicate that the information or idea referred to by the citation has come from a source other than that of the student writer. For most students entering third level education this practice of citing other

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writers within written work is both new and confusing. Some third level institutions have tried to help students come to terms with this practice through a range of measures, including academic writing classes, learner training seminars, student guides, departmental regulations, handbooks and the provision of style books in the library.

Why do students reference?

According to the literature and a number of study and academic writing guides (for example, Hall and Birkerts, 1991; Turabian, 1996; Barrass, 1995; Haffner, 1996; Crème and Lea, 1997; Chambers and Northedge, 1997), there are a number of reasons why students should cite other authors in their essays. These include:

- Avoiding plagiarism
- Indicating where further information can be found
- Demonstrating awareness of the relevant sources
- Placing work in the context of previous research
- Providing justification for the arguments propounded
- Acknowledging a debt to another scholar
- Displaying an allegiance to one school of thought
- Creating a rhetorical gap for the current research

While these reasons for referencing may seem reasonable in the view of the academic institution and those correcting the essays, to the student beginning their academic course they can seem irrelevant and difficult to grasp. First-year students do not have knowledge of previous research unless it is given to them by the lecturer. All of the books on the subject available to the student have, in all likelihood, been ordered by the lecturer. It is also unrealistic to expect first-year undergraduates to be able to side with one school of thought over another, or to create a rhetorical gap which implies that they are providing new analysis to the discipline. Considering the short time they have studied the subject (roughly 8 weeks before the first essay assignment is due) and the fact that the topic and title of the essay has been set for them, it would appear unrealistic to expect students to offer original arguments in their discussion on a topic.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism, or the necessity of avoiding plagiarism, is very often the motivation for the teaching of referencing to third level students. Furthermore, plagiarism is presented to students in a very threatening way, with a tendency to cite the penalties for being ‘found out,’ using words such as ‘dishonest’, ‘breaking the rules’, and ‘stealing’. Students are described not as plagiarising, but instead as being ‘guilty of plagiarism’. In one case discussed by Hall and Birkerts (1991), students were made aware that the word ‘plagiarise’ comes from the Latin for ‘kidnap’ as a way of highlighting the gravity of the ‘crime’.

In a compulsory first-year academic writing programme in Mary Immaculate College, students are given advice such as the following in relation to plagiarism:

- If you read a relevant point in a book (or website), you may want to use it in your essay. This is normal practice. However, if you reproduce a point from a book without referencing it (i.e. saying where it came from), you are breaking rules. To use someone else’s ideas in this way is seen as intellectual theft, and it is more commonly referred to as plagiarism.
- Every time you use an idea from a book, website *etc.*, you have to reference it.
- You are encouraged to use sources when writing your essays but they must be referenced.

While plagiarism should, of course, be avoided by students, there is a danger that linking referencing and plagiarism sends a very negative message to students, effectively telling students that if they do not reference sources in their essays they are stealing and being dishonest. This may be unfair to students who are still learning the skills of academic writing. We should remember that students are attempting to find an acceptable way of representing their knowledge and thoughts on a given subject when they are writing an essay as part of the assessment procedure. It may be more effective to approach the teaching of referencing in more positive terms and show students what they can do in

their written work to develop and support their arguments through the use of citation and referencing instead of pointing out what they should not do. This paper will explore some of the referencing options given to students and examine some examples from the data collected in this study.

Data

The data discussed here are drawn from a corpus of 66 undergraduate student essays submitted to the Philosophy degree programme in Mary Immaculate College by 26 students from one cohort of students. The specific focus is an investigation of how students actually cite other sources in their academic writing. These citations can be linguistically realised in different ways and also integrated into the surrounding text in different ways. The types of citation used by the students are identified and examined in relation to the grade received by the students, and ways in which students can be helped when they have difficulties with citations are explored.

To date, the data consist of first year and second year essays from the same cohort of students. Students must choose four subjects to study in first year and then drop two of these for the remainder of their degree. Each academic year in Mary Immaculate College is divided into two semesters, so the first and second semesters are in first year while the third and fourth semesters are in second year. In the first semester there are 26 essays included in the data. In the second semester, there are also 26 essays in the data, drawn from the same 26 students as the first semester. In the third semester (i.e. in year 2 for these students) there are seven of the original 26 students represented in the data. These same seven students are also represented in the fourth semester.

Number of citations over the semesters

There are large numbers of citations over the four semesters with an average in first year of 24.8 citations per essay and this rises in second year to an average of 31.1 per essay. When students are using citations so frequently in their written work it is essential that they are equipped with the skill to use them in a way that helps them to receive a good grade. This can be done by integrating the citations into the overall framework of the

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essay and also by using citations sensibly and not for the sake of impressing the reader that a lot of reading has been done.

Table 1. Total citations, rate of citation per essay and range of citation types

Semester	Number of essays	Total citations	Average citations per essay	Number of ways of citing
1	26	677	26.0	116
2	26	616	23.7	114
3	7	216	30.8	73
4	7	220	31.4	74

Table 1 shows that in this small sample of essays there was an increase found in the frequency of citation in second year students' essays compared to first years'. The increase could be due to students becoming more familiar with this convention of academic writing. This increase is substantial, but it is also noteworthy that in the first and second year of a degree programme in Philosophy there is an average of between 23.7 and 31.4 citations per essay. This is a large number of citations and clearly students need to be able to cite in an appropriate manner in order to succeed in third level.

However, when we look at these citations, we see that students have many different ways of citing another author. There are 116 different ways of citing in the first semester and 114 different ways in the second semester. Furthermore, these do not overlap completely and there are over 180 different ways of citing represented in the first two semesters alone. Furthermore, these data are drawn from a small sample of essays and by no means represent a definitive list of ways of citing other authors. This suggests that when we are teaching students to cite, simply listing the ways it can be done is likely to be ineffective due to the sheer number of possibilities. The information that is typically given to students regarding the citation of other works is discussed below.

Referencing options often given to students

Students are usually offered only two types of information regarding the inclusion of ideas or arguments from another source in their written work.

The first type of information concerns the decision to quote the source material directly and word for word or paraphrase the source material into the student's own words. Generally, students are advised, both in the literature and in our classroom, that paraphrasing is better than direct quotation because putting something into their own words requires students to show an understanding of what is said in the original source. On the other hand, students are often advised to use direct quotation when the original quote cannot be improved upon. This is problematic in that most undergraduate students would not be able to improve on the words of professional academics and seminal works that generally form the core material of an undergraduate degree programme. The data below present some examples of both direct quotation and paraphrase.

Direct Quotation

As C.D.C. Reeve says of the Apology: "Socrates aims to persuade the jury of his innocence.....but he is not willing to do so at the expense of truth, justice or his own deepest convictions." [The student provides bibliographical details in a footnote]

Paraphrase

In his summing up in the Apology, Socrates suggests what he sees as being the two possibilities for what happens to people after death. Either they meet with the souls of the great and the glorious from times past, or they simply cease to be.

In the table below, we can see the percentages of direct quotation and paraphrase in each semester.

Table 2. Proportion of direct quotations and paraphrases

Semester	% Direct quotation	% Paraphrase
Semester 1	60.7	39.3
Semester 2	61.0	38.9
Semester 3	66.2	33.8
Semester 4	58.1	41.9

The data demonstrate that, despite advising students to use direct quotation sparingly, in each semester more citations use direct quotation than paraphrase. This could be due to the fact that students find it easier to use the words of others as they have not yet developed their own ways of writing for Philosophy. Furthermore, students may not feel confident about changing the words of experts in the discipline.

It would seem that the purpose of the citation within the essay is more important than the way the citation is presented. Yet it is information on how citations are presented in the written text that constitute the other main type of information given to students on this topic. There are two choices here, either to include the name of the original source in the main text or to place the name of the original source outside the main text. The former is referred to as author prominent, or integral, and the latter is referred to as information prominent or non-integral. Some examples of both types from the current data are given below:

Author prominent (integral)

Socrates himself points out that if he had used 'his wits to escape death' it would have been wrong.

Information prominent (non-integral)

A lot of his property was seized as he was in opposition against the thirty.³

[The superscript here refers to a footnote where the student provides bibliographical details]

Instead of solely teaching the mechanical ways of citing other authors and telling students they can use direct quotation or paraphrase, author prominent or information prominent styles, let us look at what is happening when students cite and use this as the basis for developing teaching materials.

Functions of different types of citation

There are a number of functions that students can perform when citing authors, as evidenced by the current data (but it should be emphasised that those appearing in the current data are not a definitive list).

Phrases that in some way evaluate or judge

Nietzsche claims that the energy in the universe is finite.

In this example the student is both reporting what Nietzsche wrote (that the energy in the universe is finite) and at the same time implicitly casting doubt on the veracity of the statement by using the word 'claims'.

Phrases that attribute an opinion to the author

Nietzsche believed that all human relationships are driven by the desire for power over others, even Christianity, which proclaims [sic] to be the religion of love.

In this example, the student is not reporting what Nietzsche wrote but is instead showing what they think is Nietzsche's opinion. The student chooses the word 'believed' to attribute an opinion to Nietzsche instead of attributing a fact to Nietzsche. This offers a different interpretation for the reader compared to putting in a direct quote.

Phrases that indicate the writer's inference regarding the text

Nietzsche is saying that there is a limited amount of energy in the universe, which also consists of a limited capacity of space but with an endless capacity of time.

In this example, the student is not reporting exactly what Nietzsche wrote but is instead giving their interpretation of what Nietzsche wrote.

Phrases that refer to the organisation of the original text

He continues, regarding philosophers such as Socrates, "His plebeian origins and his ugliness are highlighted as ominous symptoms of a decadent attitude. Socrates brought the cancer of dialectic, the ultimate expression of *ressentiment*, permitting endless self-defense

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against the opinions of others.”³³

[Superscript refers to student’s footnote providing bibliographical details]

Here, the student is giving a direct quotation and at the same time placing it within the organisational framework of the original writing.

Phrases that describe the research process of the original author

Like Plato, Freud classified the mind into three parts, namely the *id*, *ego* and *super-ego*.

Here the student describes the research process of the original author and at the same time reports what the author wrote. The student draws a comparison between the approaches of two authors.

Phrases that simply report

Trigg states [that] once it is accepted that beliefs and desires can be unconscious, a theory is required as to why this should be so.

It is debatable whether it is possible to simply report without showing any judgement, but verbs such as ‘state’ and ‘say’ are used by students to give the impression that they are reporting what was written without interpreting or questioning what was written. However, in the essays that receive a higher grade, it was noted that the student tends to expand on the citation in the sentences following and comment on the original work in that way, whereas in lower grade essays, the student tends to quote without commenting.

Guidelines concerning direct quotation

Arising from the difficulties with citation identified in this sample of students’ essays, and from the popularity of direct quotation over paraphrase noted in the texts, the following guidelines regarding direct quotation in the literature were developed:

- Use direct quotation sparingly. Placing large amounts of quoted material in your essay has a very negative effect on the reader. It gives

the impression that the writer has not really thought about what is being reported.

- Only use direct quotation if you need to quote from an authoritative text; for example, a government report, a respected author in the relevant area or an original source such as an historical document etc.
- Direct quotation can also be used to clarify any point that might appear confusing if paraphrased.
- You may also wish to use a quote because it has a punch line value and cannot be improved upon.

Students are advised to use direct quotation sparingly because it can have a negative impact on the reader. It is argued that if the student can put something into their own words, then it appears to be integrated better, and shows better understanding of the material. However, the guidelines continue to advise that, if using direct quotation, it should be from an authoritative text. The problem with this is that, when undergraduate students are writing their essays, they are not yet capable of distinguishing an authoritative text from a non-authoritative text. Furthermore, the students are working from reading lists and, as far as they are concerned, all secondary sources are equal. Finally, no students are going to paraphrase a point so that it appears confusing on purpose, and is unlikely that first and second year undergraduates will be able to improve upon the writing of professional academics. Therefore, if they were to heed the above advice, all citations would involve direct quotation.

Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that the guidelines presented to undergraduate students with regard to citing other authors are inadequate to prepare the students to use citation within their own written work. Instead of instructing students in the mechanics of citation, they should be presented with guidelines that help the student to integrate the work of others with what the student wants to say. This can be done by showing the students different ways of referring to authors and pointing out that there are many different ways of doing this (for, example, 116 in the first semester in the current data). The choice the student makes should be based

on how they wish to represent the original material and what comment they want to make concerning that material. Furthermore, it would be more helpful to show the students what they can do with their citations instead of instructing them to avoid plagiarism.

References

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