Strategies for authenticating student work for learning and assessment

This paper is a revised summary of the original paper "Validating authorship of student work for assessment" by Pam Brennan (at that time Curriculum Officer, Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies). The original paper was presented as part of the 1998 annual conference for state review panels and district review panel chairs. This revised paper is intended to provide stimulus for further discussion concerning authentication of student work for learning and assessment across P to 12.

Introduction

In a system of criteria and standards referenced, school-based assessment, teacher judgments are used to determine achievements of students. It is therefore essential that these judgments are based on accurate and authentic assessment information. The challenge for teachers is to find ways of making judgments about student texts where there is access to electronic resources and collaborative text production. Key factors that combine in the making of judgments about student learning are the contexts, conditions, access to resources, types of resources, human and physical, and task demands. These features provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know and can do in particular contexts with particular knowledge and capacities. One challenge to the authentication of student work for learning and assessment is the availability of electronic resources and technologies. At issue is not that students use these resources but how they use them and acknowledge them in the construction of new knowledge.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism involves students submitting the work of others as their own, without appropriate acknowledgment or referencing of the original work. Examples of plagiarism cited in the Griffith University Research Higher Degree Handbook available from their website (http://www.griffith.edu.au/) include:

- word-for-word copying of sentences or paragraphs from one or more sources which are the work or data of other persons (including books, articles, working papers, conference papers, websites or other students' assignments) without clearly identifying their origin by appropriate referencing

- closely paraphrasing sentences or paragraphs from one or more sources without appropriate acknowledgment in the form of a reference to the original work or works

- using another person's ideas, work or research data without appropriate acknowledgment

- copying computer files in whole or in part without indicating their origin

- submitting work which has been produced by someone else on the student's behalf as if it were the work of the student

- producing work in conjunction with other people (other students, a tutor, parents) when it is purported to be work from the student's own independent research.

Whilst there are commercially available applications for identifying plagiarism once it has occurred, there are strategies associated with monitoring and documenting student text production. These strategies include ensuring that the body of evidence about which judgments are made includes tasks that are completed under varying conditions, ranging from most controlled to open access to human and physical resources. Where there is open access to physical and human resources, processes need to be in place for teacher monitoring of the development of tasks. These could include:

- teachers seeing plans and drafts of student work

- student production of and maintenance of documentation of the development of the responses

- student acknowledgment of resources used.

What should guide teachers?

The following principles (adapted from the Australasian Curriculum Assessment and Certification Authority *Guidelines for Assessment Quality and Equity*) may be used in developing an assessment program.

- Assessment judgments should be based on information gathered about student achievement in a variety of activities that reflect and sample the major dimensions of the subject.
- Assessment tasks should present situations that are in keeping with the kinds of activities that students have experienced in the learning experiences of the course.
- A range of assessment conditions is necessary to make a valid judgment about whether a student can attain a particular standard with an acceptable level of consistency in a variety of contexts.
- The level of complexity of assessment tasks must be such that they present a suitable challenge for all students and can be used to discriminate across the whole range of achievements.

Syllabuses require that there should be some variety in the nature of assessment tasks and that these should be completed under varying conditions. The conditions under which a task is completed should also be appropriate to the nature of the activity and should help to establish student authorship. A well-balanced assessment program provides opportunities for assessment information to be gathered across a range of conditions. To cater for the range of individual differences found in any student group, the factors influencing the range of conditions of tasks will be more complex than merely deciding whether they should be tests or assignments. It is not advisable to have an exclusive dependence on a particular set of conditions. Also, while some of the summative tasks might result from collaborative work, this aspect of the conditions would need to be taken into account in the teacher's judgment of the individual's contribution to the completed task. This judgment should be carefully and clearly recorded with sufficient detail to allow interested third parties to understand the decisions reached and the grades awarded.

In determining the conditions for a task, it is important to consider task demands (i.e. the complexity of the processes, skills and knowledge involved, firstly in using resources and gathering information, and then in shaping the response).

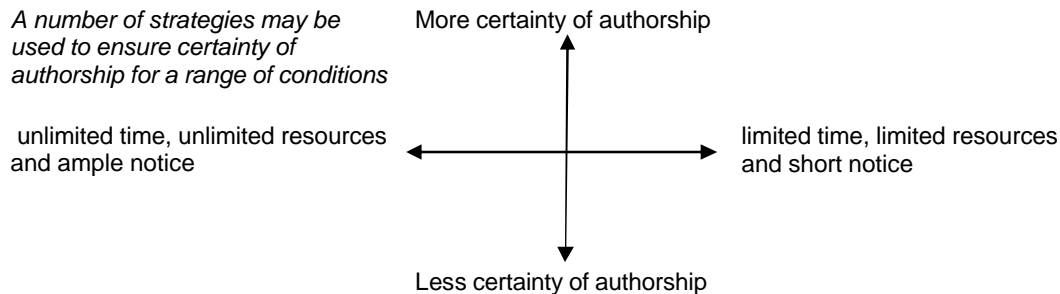The two most influential factors in ensuring a range of conditions for assessment tasks are:

- time allowed to prepare for and to complete the task, and
- access to resources, both material and human, before and during execution of the task.

Time available for a task and access to resources can be restricted by placing limits on:

- the prior notice of the specific nature of subject matter and/or genre of the response required
- the time allowed for preparation and execution of the task.

A field of possible conditions is shown in figure 1, focusing on these two factors — time allowed and access to resources. It should be possible to plan a range of tasks which fall at different points around this field, enough of them to demonstrate how well the student can use the skills, and understand and process the subject matter independently. The assessment program needs to contain tasks for which strategies have been developed to enable teachers to confirm the authorship of all tasks across a range of conditions. The conditions themselves should not restrict the level of certainty about student authorship.

Figure 1   Certainty of authorship

A number of strategies may be used to ensure certainty of authorship for a range of conditions

More certainty of authorship

unlimited time, unlimited resources and ample notice

limited time, limited resources and short notice

Less certainty of authorship

It may be argued that certain sets of conditions need greater priority in certain subjects and even perhaps at different stages of development during the course. Decisions on these matters will determine the frequency with which different kinds of conditions occur, which will, in turn, influence the teaching of these kinds of tasks and the degree of practice students are given as preparation. Differences are to be expected. What is desirable is appropriate range and balance in the conditions under which tasks are completed.

What are some strategies for authenticating student work?

The following strategies are suggested for teachers to better authenticate student work when time and resources for students are unlimited:

- Ensure that a significant amount of classroom time is spent on the task so that the teacher is familiar with each student's work in progress and can regularly monitor and discuss aspects of the work with students.
- Ensure that students document specific stages of the development of work, such as topic choice, listing resources and conducting preliminary research.
- File copies of each student's written work at given stages in its development.
- Regularly rotate topics from year to year to ensure that students are unable to use other student work from previous years.
- Where there is more than one class of a particular subject cohort, apply internal moderation processes and cross-marking.

How should teachers monitor student text production?

Teachers may:
- require formal acknowledgment and some declaration of information about all resources used and all assistance provided; this clarifies and legitimises such support and teaches the principle of academic honesty
- require a brief annotation, summary or discussion, written in class, exploring further some aspect of the subject matter or of the process of text production; this should help to indicate the extent of the student's understanding and involvement in the task
- require an interview with the student or have some other spoken discussion or presentation following the submission of the task to explore further or clarify some aspects
- require submission with the task of the original planning and all drafts of the work, monitored progressively by the teacher.

What about support from outside the classroom?

Tasks with open access to human and physical resources require processes to authenticate the contribution of the student. It may be helpful to plan for many of the tasks undertaken at home and in class to be used for guiding or enhancing activities during the course. These activities become the basis and source for culminating or synthesising activities that can be undertaken with some level of teacher supervision in the classroom. To ensure student authorship of each culminating task, teachers may change one or more of the contextual factors so that, in the culminating task, the student is required to independently process concepts worked on previously in collaboration with others. This effectively requires students to produce a completely new response but allows them to capitalise on the earlier learning. This could be done by changing one or more of the following:

- the *purpose* of the new task
- the *subject matter* of the new task
- the *roles and responsibilities* of people involved in the task
- the *mode* of the new task (for example, changing from writing to speaking)
- the *medium* of the new task (for example, transforming material for audio or visual presentations).

If teachers are to be able to confirm the authorship of student work for assessment, it is important that whatever conditions apply, teachers must:

- be fully aware of all factors operating in the execution of the assessment task
- clearly state the conditions for the information of students, and
- take the assessment conditions into account in the judgments they make.

If the authorship of an assessment task is questionable, teachers should go back to the guiding principles outlined earlier in this paper and act accordingly. In instances of suspected plagiarism, a teacher could request further evidence of that achievement through the submission of additional work. The student could be required to provide extra responses to tasks set by the teacher, under whatever conditions were considered necessary. If a school is able to determine that a student has knowingly used work that is not their own and neglected to reference that work, a teacher could notionally delete the plagiarised work from the piece of assessment and grade the task on the basis of student-authored work only. This should help to ensure that the grade awarded is fair and equitable, not only for the student in question, but for all students.

Finally, it is important that teachers bear in mind that students need help to become independent learners. In catering for the needs of individual students, teachers help them to assume responsibility for their own development as learners.

References

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