Ethics and integrity in proofreading: Findings from an interview-based study

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Abstract

Drawing on an interview-based study of the beliefs, practices, and experiences of 16 proofreaders of student writing at undergraduate and/or graduate level in a university setting, this paper focuses on the ethical concerns informants associate with the proofreading act. ‘Proofreading’ is defined for the purposes of this research as ‘third-party interventions (that entail some level of written alteration) on assessed work in progress’. Informants’ ethical concerns related, broadly, to:
(i) the text itself and the nature of interventions; (ii) the roles and relationships of proofreaders, writers, and their lecturers/supervisors, and how these impact on each other; and (iii) the wider university context. Text types identified by some informants as ethically problematic to correct were those by low proficiency writers and those of poor quality in terms of subject knowledge. Both corrections and comments were used by informants to draw attention to problems in writers’ texts in an ethical manner. It was reported that some writers have inappropriate expectations of proofreaders, expecting help which informants regard as ethically indefensible. While some informants reported that they did not experience ethical dilemmas about appropriate levels of intervention, others reported much uncertainty, and called for more explicit guidance from university authorities. The implications of the study are discussed.
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1. Introduction

There are numerous accounts in the literature documenting both native and non-native students’ writing difficulties (e.g. Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Beaufort, 2004; Casanave, 2002; Krase, 2007; Leki, 2007; Lillis, 2001; Spack, 1997; Sternglass, 1997). It is also not uncommon to read laments about students’ writing skills in our UK context in publications like Times Higher Education (e.g. Newman, 2007). In order to try to minimize these problems, student writers may seek help from a ‘proofreader’. In common with most UK universities, however, our institution does not offer an ‘official’ proofreading service, writers being obliged to seek help from friends, peers, or proofreaders who place advertisements offering ‘help with your English’ around campus. As we argued in Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2009), in this unregulated context the...
proofreading issue raises a number of questions connected with ethics: for instance, which types of student texts, if any, should proofreaders agree to work on? For what reasons should proofreaders decline to work on writers’ texts? In which areas is it (in)appropriate for the proofreader to intervene? How should proofreaders make their corrections? What contact, if any, should the proofreader have with the writer’s academic supervisor? Unsurprisingly, when we conducted interview-based research with 16 proofreaders who have worked with student writers at our institution at undergraduate and/or graduate level1, the theme of ethics was pervasive, and we report and discuss the ethical issues our informants raised in this paper.

We begin, however, with an important note on terminology. We recognised during the early stages of planning the original study, as reported in Harwood et al. (2009), that the terms used to describe the acts we were concerned with (defined as third-party interventions entailing written alteration on assessed work in progress), were themselves problematic. ‘Proofreading’ may be used differently by individuals to describe a range of interventions, while a number of other terms are also used, at times for broadly equivalent practices. Indeed, as discussed below, some of the ethical issues that emerge in an examination of so-called ‘proofreading’ practices may be seen to originate in a lack of clarity over terminology and associated meaning. One of the aims of our study was therefore to explore what different groups and individuals understand by the terms they use, thereby arriving at a more accurate description of the types of activity that the proofreading term is used to denote, and, ultimately, to work towards greater consensus in its understanding and use in the university context. (See Harwood et al. (2009) for findings related to informants’ preferred terminology.)

With this proviso, we have however retained the terms ‘proofreader’ and ‘proofreading’ as terms of convenience here, as the most commonly used terms in the context described, but we do not, for the reasons given, confine our definition to interventions at the levels of grammar, syntax, and morphology (which is what many readers may understand by the term); we wished to ascertain how far informants will intervene in student writers’ texts, without ourselves limiting the scope of the discussion.

We now briefly review the literature relating to ethical issues connected with proofreading, before describing our methodology and turning to our findings.

2. Ethics and integrity in proofreading

In Harwood et al. (2009) we pointed out that many of the debates about proofreading which appear in educational press publications focus on ethical issues, citing pieces by Baty (2006b), McCulloch (2007), and Scurr (2006). Scurr’s (2006) piece complains that unscrupulous student writers can ‘buy’ proofreaders’ ‘basic literacy and presentation skills’ rather than spending time striving to acquire them. Scurr also points out that only writers who are financially better off will be able to pay for such help. And Baty’s (2006b) article highlights how some lecturers see proofreading as equivalent to ‘cheating’ and ‘spoon-feeding’, rather than a source of ‘legitimate support’ for struggling writers. However, speaking about PhD students getting their work proofread, McCulloch (2007) is more relaxed about the issue. He points out that academic writing is commonly collaborative, and argues that ethical concerns that the proofreader may have exercised an undue influence on the text can be assessed during the viva voce examination (i.e. the British equivalent of the dissertation defence). Like McCulloch (2007), other contributors to the debate defend proofreading. For instance, Budenz (2007), describing herself as a ‘freelance tutor’2, accuses Scurr of ‘confused and disingenuous’ thinking. Budenz asks why those writers who are not fortunate enough to have ‘a kind native-speaking friend’ willing to proofread for them should be prevented from paying a proofreader to perform the same function. And Seedhouse (2006) asks why student writers should not be permitted to benefit from a proofreader’s services in the same way that an academic author writing for publication in a book or a journal does. Newsome (2006), for his part, sometimes proofreads free of charge for friends, and says that he confines his interventions to ‘checking the accuracy and clarity of the grammar, not the content’. Rather than constituting ‘cheating’, he

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1 Some of our proofreader informants also work on articles for publication. While this type of text is not the focus of our investigation, we refer to informants’ proofreading practices on texts for publication where relevant, since some proofreaders contrast the ethics of intervening on texts for publication with proofreading student writing.

2 We presume that proofreading constitutes at least part of Budenz’s role as ‘freelance tutor’. Like the proofreader term itself, here is another label which may describe a range of roles.
sees his interventions as formative, since he also explains writers’ mistakes to them. However, there are also many other reports which link proofreading with ethically dubious practices. Baty (2006a, 2006c), for instance, reports the case of Sean McGeogh, a part-time lecturer who set up a business providing private tuition, essay tutoring, and proofreading which university authorities have condemned as ‘inappropriate’ and ‘exploitative’, since it reportedly promises to improve essay content and improve writers’ grades. In his defence, McGeogh argues that his venture ‘is a legitimate response to the poor-quality teaching offered by overcrowded and underfunded universities’, who leave students ‘to drift’ unsupported in their rush to recruit ever-larger numbers.

Opinions regarding the desirability of proofreading are also divided among members of BALEAP, the British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes (see http://www.baleap.org.uk), as evidenced by a recent lively email exchange. Again, ethical issues were to the fore. Of those voicing reservations about the ethics of proofreading, some members argued that graduates from UK universities should be able to communicate proficiently in English, and that proofreading serves to mask deficiencies rather than resolve them. Others felt that proofreading may lead to a dependency culture among writers, whereas it is writers themselves who need to take responsibility for identifying and correcting their errors. Proofreading may also give writers a false sense of security, since, with proofreaders’ help, they may produce satisfactory coursework, but will be incapable of producing similarly intelligible work under exam conditions. Some members who were unfavourably disposed to the idea of proofreading also claimed that there are proofreaders who are incompetent and who may intervene in an ethically inappropriate manner, whether wittingly or unwittingly, by altering content. Indeed, it was recognised that while drawing a theoretical line in the sand between acceptable and unacceptable interventions may be desirable, achieving this balance may be a great deal trickier in practice. Finally, (appropriate) proofreading, by focusing on surface-level problems (grammar and syntax), may give writers the impression that it is these problems they should be preoccupied with, when in fact there may be at least equally serious problems at the level of content or argumentation. However, other BALEAP members spoke out in favour of proofreaders, seeing proofreading as an ethical practice. It was argued that if universities require error-free texts to sit on their shelves (especially at doctoral level), it is perfectly understandable for non-native writers in particular to turn to proofreaders for help. The point was also made that supervisors vary markedly in the help they give writers. If such help is not forthcoming, who is the struggling writer to turn to for help, if not the proofreader? It was also argued that universities accepting such writers onto their programmes have a responsibility to address their linguistic shortcomings.

Also currently engaged in research on proofreading are Joan Turner and Mary Scott, who raised a number of issues related to the ethics of proofreading in a recent conference presentation (Turner & Scott, 2008; see also Scott & Turner, 2008a; Scott & Turner, 2008b; Turner, in press; Turner & Scott, 2007). Like us (Harwood et al., 2009), they argue that the proofreading issue is one which needs to be addressed by faculty because of the many concerns related to ethics and fairness which surround it. They observe that the proofreading term, as it is conventionally used in the publishing world, is dissociated from changing content or meaning, although such understandings may not prevail amongst all proofreaders of student texts or those writers who seek their help. They also argue that few non-native writers are ever likely to achieve the standards lecturers and language support staff may wish them to, which may suggest some form of collaborative or consultative role should be permitted and codified. However, they highlight that inappropriate interventions will lead to the loss of ownership of the text by the writer.

Also of relevance to this debate is another set of literature relating to the proofreading of non-native academics’ texts for publication, as opposed to student writing (e.g. Burrough-Boenisch, 2003a; Burrough-Boenisch, 2003b; Lillis & Curry, 2006a; Lillis & Curry, 2006b; Shashok, 2001). However, for reasons of relevance and space we do not engage with this literature now, but refer to it at appropriate points in our discussion section below.

3. Methodology and procedure

We recruited informants by asking proofreaders known to us, both on and off campus, to take part in our study. We also contacted those proofreaders unknown to us who advertised on university notice boards, and eventually secured the cooperation of 16 informants, who can be broadly categorized into three different
groups: (i) professionals, for whom proofreading is a business rather than a hobby, not something they do occasionally; (ii) part-time or temporary freelancers, for whom proofreading is sporadic or likely to be short-term; and (iii) volunteers, many of whom work in the third author’s volunteer-led student resource centre, situated in her department and with a long-standing and popular proofreading service for students seeking help with term papers. Proofreaders in this group do not charge for their work. All but two of our informants are native speakers. Some proofreaders work or have worked in academia as lecturers, language tutors, or in other academic-related positions, while other proofreaders are PhD students. Full details of the profiles of each informant can be found in Harwood et al. (2009).

The qualitative interview was selected as the vehicle for our research because it is ideal for exploring people’s ‘knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, [and] experiences’ (Mason, 2002: 63). We were aware, however, that informants’ views may be unpredictable and non-standardized; and thus, to allow informants the opportunity to voice their beliefs, practices, and experiences, our interview format was semi-structured (e.g. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hermanowicz, 2002). Interviews were divided into two parts in an effort to avoid interviewee fatigue and to encourage detailed responses, lasting between two and three h in total. Our interview schedule can be found in its entirety in Harwood et al. (2009), where we provide a fuller account of its construction, and how we coded and analyzed the results. For the purposes of the present paper, we note that we asked proofreaders a number of questions directly related to ethical issues. For instance, we asked informants where they would draw the line between appropriate and inappropriate areas of intervention; and whether and to what extent they ever experienced doubts about the type of help they should provide to writers. We also asked informants to relate particularly pleasant and unpleasant experiences with writers they had worked with, (correctly) anticipating that many of the latter type would be ethically problematic. In addition, however, ethical issues emerged indirectly throughout our interviews, in response to a much wider range of questions: the type and level of texts proofread, the nature and focus of proofreader interventions, approaches to calculating charges, and the perceived expectations of the student writers. The centrality of ethical issues to all areas of the proofreading question, as evidenced in our interviews, was reflected in the number of codes broadly linking to this theme which feature in our data analysis.

The interview schedule was piloted and analyzed jointly by all three researchers, modified as a result, and interviews were transcribed and coded, using procedures adopted from Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Grant-Davie (1992), and Miles and Huberman (1994), with our final coding scheme comprising 58 codes. Given this complicated coding scheme, inter-rater reliability was a key concern throughout, reflected in the prolonged trialling and refining of codes. We eventually achieved a reliability score of 74%, which we considered to be satisfactory, bearing in mind the complexity of the scheme. We acknowledge that there are arguments to be found in the literature for and against coding in qualitative research, and for and against the checking of codes using inter-rater reliability tests: contrast the differing stances, for instance, in Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, and Marteau (1997) and Smagorinsky (2008). However, we believe systematic coding and reliability checks improved and enhanced the process of analysis in this study.

4. Findings

Informants’ ethical concerns related broadly to: (i) the text itself; (ii) the roles and relationships of proofreaders, writers, and their lecturers or supervisors; and (iii) the wider university context. We discuss each in turn.

4.1. Ethical issues relating to the text

Informants discussed: (i) the types of text it is ethically (in)defensible to correct; and (ii) the nature of interventions on a text felt to be appropriate.

4.1.1. Types of text it is ethically (in)defensible to correct

4.1.1.1. Low proficiency texts. One of our interview questions relating to the types of texts proofreaders were (un)willing to work on centred on the level of the writers’ language proficiency. (Although in principle our proofreaders were willing to proofread texts by both native and non-native writers, they reported that all or
the vast majority of their work is with non-natives.) The prompt card used, which is reproduced in Harwood et al. (2009), employed a five-point scale to ask proofreaders which texts they take on, with ‘five’, the top of the scale, describing a text composed by a writer ‘As proficient as, or nearly as proficient as, a native speaker’. By comparison, at the lower end, ‘two’ described a writer with ‘limited ability in English. The writer makes frequent grammar and vocabulary mistakes, or uses a limited range of sentence structures and vocabulary’, while ‘one’, the bottom of the scale, described a writer with ‘Very limited ability in English. The text is error-laden, making the meaning often impenetrable to the reader’. A number of informants highlighted the ethical problems of proofreading texts by writers of low proficiency in English, associated with writers near the bottom of our scale.3 Problems arise because of the scope of the changes that would be necessary to make the text readable, meaning that experienced proofreaders in particular tended to decline the work immediately. As Tom put it:

‘...ethically...the work must remain the work of the person who has written it. I believe correcting ‘two cat was sitting on the mat’ is not a terrible thing to have to correct, but when you have to work out how many cats were there in the first place, were they sitting or were they in fact standing...If the English is so bad there have been a number of occasions where we’ve said, “Sorry, we can’t do this...”’.5

While Joanna takes a similar line, her reasoning is rather different. She talked about why correcting low proficiency texts written by undergraduates in particular is unethical: whereas these writers are free to have their term papers proofread, they will eventually have to take exams, which they will fail unless their writing is up to a certain standard.6 She argued that institutions are at fault for accepting these students in the first place, and the best advice she can give them is to invest in a language course instead of paying for proofreading:

‘I don’t think the university should be accepting students with that level of English. I think it’s very unfair because they have an expectation that they are at a level that they can cope with the work and then they suddenly find that they aren’t...If there are so many corrections that they can’t produce a piece of work on their own it’s a waste of time to them...’.

4.1.1.2. Poor quality texts. Although Anne, another experienced informant, has worked on two PhD texts by very low-level students, she was in agreement with other informants that this raises ethical issues, because she was aware (as a former lecturer herself) that despite her interventions in relation to language, the texts were not up to the standards required in terms of content and quality. She therefore stressed that the university needs to formulate guidelines to instruct what proofreaders are to do in these situations:

‘You can tidy up the English...but they were certainly not submittable pieces of work, in both cases the English has been a huge part of the problem but certainly by no means the only problem...Where are the dividing lines for the university between what I should and shouldn’t be tackling?’.

4.1.1.3. Work in progress: draft chapters. Anne also declined to read what she calls ‘work in progress’, that is, PhD draft chapters, as opposed to the final version of the work. This is because, she argued, the supervisor is likely to ask writers to make substantial alterations, meaning the work would therefore need to be proofread again and student writers would be obliged to pay twice.

4.1.1.4. Undergraduate- and graduate-level texts. Although she has never been asked to proofread at undergraduate level, Anne would decline to proofread undergraduate work as well as master’s-level assignments because she believes proofreading is not expected or required for these pieces of work, and taking money

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3 Native-speakers with low proficiency English are in principle included here, and were certainly identified as occasionally presenting writing proficiency problems. In practice, however, the majority of writers identified at the bottom two levels of the scale were non-natives.

4 All informants’ names are pseudonyms.

5 Dots (...) indicate part of the interview transcript has been omitted and square brackets [ ] indicate additional information has been added by the authors.

6 Unlike undergraduates, most postgraduates in the UK university system are not obliged to take examinations. Note that the examination marking criteria may include an evaluation of the writer’s quality or clarity of expression.
for doing unnecessary work is unethical (‘it’s taking money for no good reason’). In fact she suggested lecturers should be proofreading these shorter pieces of work. Karen and Eve distinguished between the appropriate level of intervention when proofreading undergraduate and doctoral-level texts, feeling that they could intervene more heavily in the latter. Eve felt it would be more ethically dubious to flag up a questionable fact in an undergraduate essay than in a PhD thesis, because her comment on the undergraduate work would be likely to have a greater impact on the student’s evaluation:

‘If... I read a factual error in a whole PhD thesis I might say “That doesn’t sound right to me”. And how would I be making that much difference in [their grade]? But if some dumb ideas appeared in an undergraduate essay... I would probably not comment because I would think that represents a greater proportion of their independent thought on that piece of work.’

4.1.1.5. Student writing versus texts for publication. Although nearly all informants reported limiting themselves to a relatively narrow range of concerns when proofreading student writers’ texts (Harwood et al., 2009), a number of proofreaders spoke of how their remit was wider when working on other text types. For instance, Chloe was happy to intervene much more in work for publication or conference proposals, suggesting references for the authors to consult. This is related to the issue of ethics and (non)-assessment:

‘...if it’s for... a [conference] abstract, it’s much easier... I don’t have a problem saying “this paragraph doesn’t make sense”, or “I know a reference you can add here”.
I: Why can you do that for a friend but not a student?
Chloe: Because it’s assessed work. ...we’ve got different hats on.’

(Indeed, Chloe is an interesting case, since she is willing to provide only the lightest-touch interventions on student writing, as opposed to writing for publication, for ethical reasons, saying ‘if it were an essay I would take a very quick look... and just say “Your style is good”, or “You need to be a bit more academic”’.)

Jerry was also prepared to critique the structure, suggest missing references, and comment on ideas on articles for publication and abstracts, while Eve, proofreading a friend’s text for publication, dealt with ‘the finest shades of meaning’. Anne agreed that proofreading work for publication is less complex ethically for similar reasons:

‘...it’s very difficult to know what your brief is when dealing with students as opposed to any other kind of text because it’s an examined piece of work and I’m very conscious of that... If it’s pre-publication, I don’t have any problem with it, it’s not an examined thing and I know where I am...’

4.1.2. The nature of (in)appropriate textual interventions
4.1.2.1. Comments versus corrections. A number of informants explained how they were able to ensure their proofreading interventions were ethically justifiable (in their own minds, at least) by commenting on rather than correcting problem areas of the text. For instance, Stella limits herself to correcting ‘grammar, syntax, spelling, stylistic errors’, but is prepared to comment on a wider range of problems, such as the writer’s over-reliance on quotes. She felt this is ethically unproblematic because responsibility is then on the writer to address the issue; Stella has not rewritten the text for them:

‘...the biggest mistake that you find is people’s essays are made up entirely of quotes without putting their own opinion in. I would never change them, but I have highlighted them to people... but I don’t think that’s wrong...If they are incapable of putting in their own argument then even when you advise them to [do it] they are still not going to be able to do it.’

Similarly, ethical considerations explain why some of Tom’s interventions are ‘queries’ rather than corrections: even if he knows what the missing information is, it’s up to the writer to find out:

7 Of course, manuscripts submitted for publication are ‘assessed’ by journal editors and reviewers. And it is interesting that it is apparently acceptable for published academic writing to benefit from the input of a network of collaborators in a way that would be unacceptable for student writing.
we don’t correct queries, all we do is point out that we don’t understand what this is, that we believe something is lacking, or perhaps they need to explain something... when it goes back to the student it’s up to them to put it right.’

And Chloe neatly differentiated between the actions of correction and commentary on an ethical level when she reported that she is justified in proofreading, but not ‘proofwriting’.

4.1.2.2. Dealing with plagiarised texts. We have discussed above the problems that low proficiency texts can cause proofreaders, and Eve talked about a very low proficiency PhD student who would not (or could not) stop plagiarizing. Despite Eve’s repeated highlighting of the plagiarised passages, accompanied by an explanation about plagiarism, when the student returned the revised text the passages in question remained unchanged. Eve therefore stopped proofreading or commenting on the parts she felt were plagiarised and told the writer to deal with them. However, the student then broke off contact.

‘...she was plagiarising rampantly... The bulk of her dissertation was uncredited excerpts from a document that she had translated... But it kept coming back to me that way... I just started not editing those passages... I said “I’m not going to edit this passage here... you need to do is go back, read the text, close the book, write your own summary” and she couldn’t do that.’

Worryingly, Eve speculated that the writer had secured the services of another proofreader who was prepared to edit the plagiarised text.

4.2. Roles and relationships of proofreaders, writers, and their lecturers or supervisors

4.2.1. Texts where a conflict of interest may arise

In addition to placing limits on the types of texts they would work on, our proofreaders also placed limits on who they felt they could work with. As a lecturer herself, Emma described two situations in which she declined to proofread for ethical reasons: (i) when the writers were students on a course she was teaching; and (ii) when the writers wanted her to proofread work for courses she has taught in the past:

‘I haven’t done it with any of my own students and I’d find it very difficult then to be clear about the boundaries. I’ve always avoided doing it on any course that I’ve taught even if they weren’t my students because I knew too much about the content and I had too strong an idea about what a good essay should look like’.

Eve related how ethical issues have arisen because her husband is an academic, and one of his colleagues felt it would be inappropriate for him to refer his students to Eve for proofreading. Subsequently she has only proofread for students in her husband’s field from other universities. And as a part-time student, Alice refused to proofread for someone on the same course as her, ‘Just in case there’s any hint of plagiarism, if for some reason one of us duplicates the other, even by accident’.

4.2.2. Inappropriate expectations: of proofreaders, of peer support

Most informants had much to say about resisting student writers’ inappropriate requests for help. We asked informants about good and bad experiences of proofreading, and many of the latter type involved ethical issues. All but two informants have experienced writers asking for help they consider to be unethical. Tom, for instance, has had ‘not an insignificant number’ of people ask him to ‘ghostwrite’ their text for them, while Anne has been asked ‘many times’ ‘to go beyond what I think the brief [of a proofreader] is’. Chloe described a writer who would not stop ‘pressurizing’ her to make what Chloe regarded as unethical interventions. She ended up telling a lecturer about this, and declined to help the writer further. For her part, Alice was asked to write an essay for a student based on notes, who only gave up asking when Alice was brusque to the point of rudeness. Chloe claimed that some of these writers who request unethical interventions genuinely fail to understand what the ‘proofreading’ term means, ‘so if you are also an expert in the subject [they are writing on] then they tend to think you can help them in a number of other ways which is not proofreading, basically.’
However, she said that other writers understand perfectly well, but want proofreaders to overstep the boundaries anyway.

Our university sees voluntary peer proofreading as ethically less contentious than proofreading for payment, advising students whose first language is not English to ‘get their English checked by a friend’. Several of our paid proofreaders indeed rationalised their role as stepping in where such support systems are lacking. This is one reason why Louise did not see her proofreading activities as problematic. At the same time, however, proofreaders’ relationships and friendships can sometimes lead to ethically problematic experiences. Stella recalled how a friend asked her to take on a role she felt uncomfortable with, and she reluctantly did so (‘it was hard to say no’):

‘...they had cut out some massive quotes and they said could I just paste these [into the writing] and I said “well that’s not the remit of a proofreader, that is what you should do. If you create them I will correct the mistakes in them...”’. I did that on one occasion because I knew the person but I would generally decline to do that...’

4.3. The wider university context

Proofreaders talked about their contact—or lack of it—with supervisors and university authorities, and how they felt the university judged their work. Informants also gave their judgements on university policies and practices, particularly with reference to student recruitment and student support.

4.3.1. Lecturers'/Universities' ethical concerns about proofreading

Many informants assumed university authorities feel proofreading is ethically acceptable, and even welcome it, appreciating that proofreaders can make life easier: as Stella puts it, a proofread text can be ‘marked’ rather than first needing to be ‘deciphered’ by the lecturer.8 However, a number of informants have experienced lecturers’ or university authorities’ misgivings (or straightforward disapproval) about aspects of proofreading, or about the act of proofreading in general. These feelings are sometimes triggered when lecturers see proofreaders’ adverts. Stella recalled how one of the lecturers in her former department took her proofreading adverts down from departmental notice boards. She believed this department are ‘a bit over-sensitive’ about the issue, linking proofreading with plagiarism:

‘they’re very worried about plagiarism in the department and I don’t think there is a high incidence of it but they certainly talk about it a lot’.

The university authorities also felt there were potential ethical problems with Eve’s proofreading when they saw her advert in the University’s in-house magazine referring to ‘improving writers’ English’, and contacted her as a result. However, they reportedly relaxed, having learned Eve was not working on undergraduate-level texts; their rationale being that a proofreader could more easily improve an undergraduate essay because his/her content knowledge would not need to be so specialized.

4.3.2. Recruitment practices

On the issue of student recruitment, several informants argued that it is the pursuit of income from international students that has created the problem of writers whose language proficiency is not fit for purpose, and who then unsurprisingly turn to proofreaders with inappropriate requests (UK universities being permitted to charge students outside the European Union (EU) about three times more than home/EU students). Here are two typical, forcefully expressed views of this type:

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8 As a reviewer pointed out, other parties in addition to the lecturer/supervisor, like doctoral students acting as graduate teaching assistants, or language support staff acting as ‘proofreaders’ in universities where official proofreading services are offered, may also be involved in shaping and assessing student writing. It may be, then, that these parties can also ‘make life easier’ for lecturers, as Stella puts it, and there are issues here for universities to consider concerning (un)ethical roles. In common with Anne, the reviewer also questioned why lecturers themselves may not be expected to proofread their own students’ work (see Section 4.1.1.4).
‘[I] wasn’t particularly aware of the university as an institution being concerned. If anything I’d have a slightly cynical story about that, about universities getting in international cash cows and people like us left to pick up the pieces.’ (Emma).

‘[If] you don’t want students who need that support, then don’t take students who need it. That’s the way I look at it. Let the university collapse financially, but if you’re going to take those students there’s a financial, moral and ethical duty of support and care.’ (Alice)

4.3.3. Creation of level playing fields

A few informants expressed the view that the university cynically relies on proofreaders to ‘paper over the cracks’ created by an intake of students without the necessary language skills to cope with their courses. A contrasting, but not necessarily conflicting, view was that proofreading should be seen in a positive light as ‘creating an equal playing field’ for non-natives and students from non-traditional backgrounds. As Steve put it:

‘...at [this] university... people come from all sorts of different backgrounds and...it’s so much down to schooling, and it seems very unfair that students arrive with a really poor level of grammar and understanding of how to write and shouldn’t perhaps be penalised for that.’

4.3.4. The financial burden of proofreading

Despite the potential levelling effect described above that proofreading may have, informants were also aware that the financial burden of proofreading can be considerable. The university’s lack of guidance on the proofreading issue, described by Anne as a ‘head in the sand’ mentality, leaves students in a completely unregulated market place and therefore vulnerable. Amongst our group of informants the rate for proofreading ranged from gratis, through the minimum wage (roughly £5 per hour at the time of the study), to £33 per hour (see Harwood et al., 2009). Indeed, as we shall see below, Anne argued that in effect a PhD is partly assessed on the student’s ability to pay to get their work proofread.

Anne also claimed that students are not warned when they are accepted onto a doctoral programme that they will need to pay for proofreading at all; they are given the impression ‘their English is fine’. Anne reported that she has been approached by an increasing number of writers requesting that work in progress is proofread, and attributed this to the increasingly important role of supervisory boards in our university. These take place twice a year, and often require the student to produce a substantial piece of writing which is then discussed by a panel which includes the supervisor. This may result in the expectation that the student will need to pay to get their work proofread at frequent intervals throughout their time as a PhD student:

‘...they’re not only having to pay to have [the PhD thesis] done as a final thing, which I don’t have a particular problem with—if I was going to publish my own work I’d pay a proofreader because I don’t proof my own work, I don’t think you really can—but if they’re having to have something checked every step of the way... that’s a whole other ball game. It’s going to be re-worked so they’re going to have to have it [proofread] again... and I don’t like getting involved in that.’

Anne concluded that this is an area which needs to be covered in university guidelines about proofreading.

4.3.5. The need for proofreading guidelines on ethical grey areas

Both in response to direct prompting and spontaneously, many informants expressed the need for universities to draw up official guidelines advising on ethically appropriate interventions. For instance, Gill talked about how difficult it was when deciding whether to intervene in ‘grey areas’, and that guidelines would be useful, as would the opportunity to approach the writer’s lecturer:

‘It would be very useful to have someone... to come back to and say, “...Is this my area, or should I just not address it?”... because you’re not always certain that you are staying within the boundaries of what’s expected of you. ...So... I would like to have a point of reference, or some written guidelines, about what’s expected of me as a proofreader... some kind of worked-out policy of what I should and shouldn’t consider to be my role.’
Anne also argued that there was a need for such guidelines relating to ethics, although she realized formulating these would be very tricky because ‘there are disagreements in the departments about what should and should not be done... about what is being examined, so I’m aware that it’s a hot potato area’. As we have seen, she added that guidelines need to tackle the difficult issues of whether proofreaders should take on work in progress and low proficiency texts; at the moment, with no official guidelines, proofreaders are in an unenviable position (‘All of us are working in the dark here’). This is why Anne reported constantly asking other proofreaders she knows what their advice is on ethical issues, and about whether she should intervene:

‘I think we all from time to time come up against something and think ‘how on earth should I deal with this?’ ...every job is different so with virtually everyone I come across I will at some point be on email [laughs], and my friends do the same thing [laughs], to say “what do you think?”’.

4.3.6. Differing attitudes towards proofreading and standards of proofreading

Anne talked about how some supervisors may be more insistent than others that students’ work is proofread, while different proofreaders will correct to different standards. Some students:

‘are being advised to have their work properly proofread while others may not receive the same advice and have to spend several months undergoing corrections to grammar and to spelling after the viva—and maybe have costs incurred there... And then you get into the realm of fairness. [The PhD] seems to be...based in part on who can afford to go to these proofreaders—and they’re not cheap! You get what you pay for to some extent. Some ask their friends to do the work, but this won’t have the same results as asking a professional to do it. And some supervisors don’t seem to care...That’s not a level playing field.’

Another relevant consideration is that some proofreaders were apparently perfectly happy to intervene knowingly in a clearly unethical manner: as a very experienced proofreader, Tom knew of one organization who will ‘ghostwrite’ texts for writers, and feels the Internet has led to the growth of unethical and unscrupulous ‘proofreading’ practices. Anne also knew of unscrupulous ‘proofreaders’ who collaborate with students, and write their essays for them.

5. Discussion

We now discuss the three groups of ethical concerns informants reported above.

5.1. Ethical issues relating to the text

5.1.1. Types of text it is ethically indefensible to correct

While Anne placed the strictest limits on her activities (confining her proofreading of student texts to final drafts of PhD work), most other informants also drew ethical lines in terms of the types of student texts they felt it legitimate to work upon, pointing out that proofreader interventions may have more impact on certain texts compared to others. These lines could be drawn both in terms of course level (e.g. postgraduate texts, but not undergraduate work) and in terms of genre (e.g. final dissertations but not course essays). At the heart of these concerns was the desire to ensure that proofreading ‘help’ should not lead to the reader’s/marker’s false impression of the writer’s academic achievement.

Another interesting contrast was drawn between student writing and texts for publication, with many informants feeling that there were fewer ethical difficulties associated with intervening in the latter type of texts. Indeed, informants spoke of a dynamic which was closer to collaboration. Behm (1989), Clark (1988), and others point out that academics writing texts for publication regularly collaborate, even when the subsequent product is (ostensibly) single-authored, with colleagues suggesting additional reading and ways of polishing or even rewriting parts of the manuscript, and that we rarely if ever question the ethics of such practices. And Curry & Lillis’s studies (Curry & Lillis, 2004; Lillis & Curry, 2006a, 2006b) investigating non-native scholars’ writing processes when publishing in English show how these processes are ‘networked,’ being collective rather than individual. In contrast, university writing is normally assessed as if a product produced in isolation,
although as Behm (1989) argues, given that writing is inherently social and collaborative, this approach to assessment is unnatural. Nevertheless, however much we may wish writers to improve their text with the help of others, we appreciate assessment and evaluation of writing is necessary. Moving to a portfolio system of assessment, featuring multiple drafts and teacher and peer review (see Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000) is an obvious way of encouraging a more interactive, collaborative writing process, while other researchers like Lillis (2001) have proposed possibilities for more formative interactions even around traditional writing tasks, where lecturers collaborate with students while writers are drafting their work. However, it is questionable to what extent universities would permit such exchanges to take place before the text has been marked because of concerns that collaborators may exert too much of an influence on writers’ texts.

5.1.2. The nature of (in)appropriate textual interventions
While informants reported limiting themselves to correcting problems in a few areas, they were happy to comment more widely, putting the responsibility and onus firmly on the writer (and their supervisor) to continue to revise the text. This stance brings to mind the literature on writing centres and writing tutors. For instance, Behm (1989) also talks about writers’ responsibilities in relation to the writing centre tutor: ‘Ultimately, the writer assumes the responsibility, making choices among a variety of recommendations, accepting or rejecting advice, determining exactly what the final product will be...’ (p.10).

Like writing centre tutors, then, our proofreaders avoid certain types of interventions, or intervene in a more indirect manner, for ethical reasons. Nonetheless, when it comes to lower-level concerns, and to problems with grammar and syntax, it is clear that our proofreaders are more directive than writing centre tutors (contrast the way our informants correct errors in these areas with North’s (1984) advice to writing centre tutors to avoid ‘fixing’ writing). So, while we can make connections between writing centre tutors and how our informants see their roles, there are also significant differences.

5.2. Roles and relationships of proofreaders, writers, and their lecturers or supervisors

Although informants reported that most student writers have an understanding of the appropriate role of the proofreader which matches their own, a significant number of students were felt to have different understandings, requesting more help than informants are willing to provide. Again, these experiences are similar to those reported in the writing centre literature. Blau, Hall, and Sparks (2002) and Myers (2003) speak of how student writers may expect writing centre tutors to go beyond what they believe their role to be. And North (1984, 1994) also speaks of how writing centres are misconceived by students as well as their lecturers, reporting that a misconception frequently voiced by faculty is that writing centre tutors write students’ texts for them. We argue that there is a need for universities to agree on what are acceptable roles for proofreaders and where they sit within the network of academic support, and to disseminate these agreed roles widely so as to lessen such misunderstandings. However, we are obliged to acknowledge, as Anne argues, that achieving such a consensus in individual departments, let alone across the university as a whole, is likely to be extremely difficult.

5.3. The wider university context

5.3.1. Lecturers’/Universities’ ethical concerns about proofreading

We saw how a number of informants felt that lecturers generally regarded proofreaders’ work favourably, since it allowed faculty to devote their time and energy to interacting with and evaluating the ideas in the text, rather than focusing on grammar and mechanics. This perceived role has something in common with Shashok’s (2001) claim that the aim of the proofreader working on texts for publication should be to ensure the text ‘is given a respectful reading’ by the appropriate gatekeepers at the level of content. However, it is clear that Shashok is advocating more substantial interventions than many of our informants would be comfortable with correcting (if not commenting on) when proofreading student writing (as opposed to writing for publication):
If the author’s message can be presented clearly, concisely, and with conviction, it should be relatively easy for the reviewers to judge the scientific content. Defects in the presentation, such as excess data, irrelevant citations, redundancy, unsupported claims, and confusing or contradictory reasoning, may distract the reviewer from what may otherwise be a sound scientific message, and may lead to a negative review that reflects the reader’s irritation, impatience, and frustration, rather than actual problems with the scientific content. (p.116).

But other informants reported being regarded with suspicion, or even alarm by faculty, leading Anne to conclude that “you always get the feeling that you are doing something slightly underhand!” We believe that in our university context, at least, proofreading sits somewhere undefined on a continuum between useful and acceptable support and collaboration at one end, and unacceptable intervention and surrender of text authorship on the other. In sum, the impression given by informants’ (albeit second-hand) accounts of faculty attitudes is that opinion is split. It is perhaps partly because of this lack of consensus that our university’s policy on proofreaders and proofreading remains undefined.

6. Conclusions

Although not all of our informants said they experienced ethical uncertainties while proofreading, ethical issues surfaced regularly in every informant interview by way of explanation or justification for responses given, and clearly all informants felt ethical concerns and choices have a profound impact on what they do. Such a shared understanding of ethical imperatives in principle, however, was not always mirrored by uniformity in proofreading practices. As described (see also Harwood et al., 2009), we uncovered evidence of proofreading practices varying quite significantly between informants in response to their deliberations over similar, shared ethical concerns.

‘Proofreading’ within the university setting, however the term is elsewhere defined or understood, has a very particular context, connected first and foremost with the issue of assessment. At this level, the kind of ethical questions that typically arise are focused primarily on the text itself and the nature of interventions to it. Add to this, however, evidence of increasing demand for and dependency on proofreading as a form of support for students from diverse backgrounds, and place this in an essentially unregulated context where in practice anything goes and anything may be charged for it, and the ethical complexities accumulate. Clearly a consideration of ethics and integrity in proofreading cannot be limited to the act itself but must also be concerned with the organisational and structural components of the setting. We therefore close by arguing that universities have a responsibility to agree on their own protocols and guidelines concerning proofreading practices, and the structures and relationships supporting them, aimed at securing a minimum level of consistent good practice, and providing clarity and support for all parties involved in/affected by the process—the proofreader, the student writer and his/her tutor. No doubt this will involve much debate. But the alternative, opting for a less complicated, laissez-faire approach to the status quo, risks the proliferation of confusion, uncertainty, and unequal treatment of writers.

We intend to devote a future article to what these guidelines might look like, but, in relation to the ethical issues surrounding proofreading generally, some brief remarks can be made. Broad areas where guidelines would be beneficial stand out. For the protection of students seeking proofreading, there is a strong argument for universities to provide some basic regulation over the routes and means by which proofreaders advertise their services. In so doing, universities would have an overview and up-to-date information on who is proofreading and on what basis, whilst making such services more comparable by requiring proofreaders to provide equivalent categories of information (on proofreader charges, for example, and background/experience). For proofreaders, guidance on what the university broadly understands as the types of interventions falling legitimately within the term ‘proofreading’ in the university context (of work going on to be formally assessed), would provide them with a shared conceptual starting point, whilst benefiting universities in creating an impetus for debate and a shared language. This is not to underestimate the potential complexity of the task of achieving consensus within faculty. However, since we would argue that guidance is clearly necessary, such a process might realistically aspire, in the short-term, to agreeing some upper and lower denominators; to supporting both students and proofreaders in negotiating the terms of their relationship; to sensitising proofreaders to areas of the work that are potentially problematic and to offering a framework for decision-making.
in such situations; and to better preparing writers as to the nature and degree of help they can (ethically) expect.

This level of guidance might usefully be generated for all parties without necessarily dictating finer detail. With regard however to specific areas of ethical concern that have been raised here, in cases where proofreaders are asked to work on low proficiency or plagiarised texts, they could be instructed to contact a university representative specifically designated to liaise between proofreaders, supervisors, and writers. In the case of plagiarism, although the proofreader could easily direct the student to the relevant section of the university website which explains what plagiarism is and how it can be avoided, the authorities will wish the writer’s supervisor, rather than the proofreader, to be aware of the problem, and to resolve it with the student. With regard to the type of texts which universities permit to be proofread, it will be recalled that Anne refuses to work on undergraduate and master’s-level term papers, or on drafts of PhD theses, although other informants displayed no misgivings about this. A consistent university line is evidently needed on this matter. Guidance is also needed on whether proofreaders should be permitted to work on texts in their subject specialisms: we argued in Harwood et al. (2009) that proofreaders working in or close to their own disciplines may be able to pass on helpful insights about rhetorical conventions, and are likely to be able to understand the writers’ texts in a way proofreaders working outside their area would be unable to do. However, universities may worry that this subject area knowledge could be used by the proofreader to unethically enhance the writer’s text. As for guidelines on areas of (in)appropriate interventions, and on what proofreaders should correct and what they should merely comment on, the challenge will be less about drawing up a workable heuristic, and more about achieving a consensus among lecturers that the heuristic is apt: it will be recalled that our informants reported varying attitudes towards proofreading by lecturers, with some lecturers liaising with/putting their writers in touch with proofreaders, and others tearing down proofreaders’ advertisements. Finally, all parties—writers, proofreaders, and lecturers—must benefit from the negotiation of enhanced lines of communication and mutual understanding.

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