Abstract

Plagiarism is the intentional use of another’s work as one’s own. In the United States, plagiarism is a serious issue with serious consequences. Yet around the world, different cultures have different perspectives on how attribution for someone else’s work should be given. This means that what may appear to be plagiarism in one country may be an acceptable practice in another. In a globalized world where individuals and students regularly cross borders for study and business, understanding different perspectives on source use and common knowledge can reduce tensions, especially between professors and students. This article gives a brief overview on some of the different ways cultures perceive the construction of knowledge, the writing process and source referencing.

Overview

Plagiarism, intentionally claiming another’s work as one’s own, is a serious offense in the United States. In the professional world, careers have been ruined when instances of plagiarism have been discovered (Stolberg, 2008). In colleges and universities, the penalties for not doing one’s own work may range from failure on a paper or a course to suspension or expulsion.

On the surface, plagiarism might seem like a straightforward concept. A student who purchases a paper over the Internet to submit for a grade, for example, has obviously plagiarized. Such a case of blatant cheating of the system is easily punished (if not easily identified despite anti-cheating programs such as Turnitin.com). But plagiarism is actually a complex subject that involves many culturally constructed notions.

Plagiarism as a Cultural Construct

One of these notions is that individuals can be the source for original and creative ideas. A second is that original and creative ideas should be property, controlled by the individual that produces them for the benefit of the individual. These underlying assumptions, which make plagiarism an issue, are not universal. Rather, the ideas are tied closely to developments in European-American history, which through the Romantic and Enlightenment periods, advanced the concept that the human mind is the source of all knowledge and wisdom, not God. Following this line of reasoning, individualism, creativity, and autonomy became important cornerstones in the foundation of western intellectualism (Swearingen, 1999). Additionally, capitalist ideology, which emphasizes that the means of wealth should be privately controlled, leads to the concept of intellectual property. Ideas, like any form of capital, have the potential to make money, and thus, those who develop the ideas should have the right to benefit financially from them (Stearns, 1999; Swearingen, 1999). Together, these two strands of philosophy laid the foundation for
The traditional western approach to authorship and creative control. That is, sole authors are granted the right to produce work that can then benefit them economically. To protect their ability to obtain this benefit, an individual’s work must not be used by anyone else without attribution or permission. If work is used without permission, copyright and plagiarism violations occur.

One reason that plagiarism is a cultural construct is because not all cultures share the same history. Thus, different cultures perceive differing relationships between ideas and people. Confucian-influenced societies, for instance, which include countries such as China, Korea and Japan, are frequently noted for their more collective and communal approach to ideas. Instead of viewing ideas as property with economic benefits for the owner, these societies tend to view them as being part of a collective foundation of knowledge available to all who seek it through advanced study. While Confucian-influenced societies perceive those who have contributed original ideas to the body of knowledge as being masters in their disciplines and worthy of study, the ideas themselves do not belong solely to those who created them. Furthermore, modes of learning in these societies, which frequently emphasize memorization as a way to absorb the knowledge of the masters, reward those who can reproduce important teachings with accuracy (Lund, 2004; Maxwell, Curtis, & Vardanega, 2008). In these societies, knowing the information is an indication that one knows its source. Thus, citing the source is not always necessary. In fact, some have reported that citing the source could be considered an insult to the intelligence of the reader (Buranen, 1999).

**Plagiarism & International Students**

Given the fact that concepts of authorship, ownership, and source use are influenced by cultural understandings, it is tempting to desire a systematic classification of how various cultures perceive the issue of citing sources. Having such a classification might help professors in American universities understand why some of their international students appear to be frequent plagiarizers. As many ESL teachers would attest, the answer is usually not an attempt by the student to deceive the professor, but instead a misunderstanding by the student of what he or she is supposed to do. Students from cultural backgrounds where giving attribution for an idea is unfamiliar or perceived to be insulting cannot be expected to understand its importance in American academia. A classification of perspectives on writing and citation by culture could help professors understand their students better, alleviating some of the tension surrounding the issue of plagiarism in the university. Unfortunately, cultures are too diverse to reduce to one homogenous perspective.

As in the United States — which has always been a culture comprised of eclectic ideologies due to the diversity of its population — cultures around the world now reflect multiple influences. International students and scholars, for example, have transported western ideas to middle eastern and eastern cultures. It is not uncommon for Chinese scholars to have studied in American, British or Australian universities. Similarly, the diversification of western curricula has integrated many ideas into American institutions of higher education that were once considered foreign (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Today’s scholars of any one culture are likely to demonstrate the attitudes, behaviors and practices of not only their native culture but also of the culture in which they have studied and practiced their discipline. Thus, developing a taxonomy of cultural perspectives would be somewhat impossible and possibly could be a disservice that could lead to inappropriate stereotyping.

Nevertheless, while one’s native culture may not be the single determining factor in influencing one’s writing behaviors, culture does play a role in shaping how individuals approach the writing process and in how they assess the writing product. Because culturally diverse individuals can and do approach writing with different standards and expectations, and because some differences, when they occur in a western academic context, may be perceived as plagiarism, understanding the interplay between individual, cultural background, and context can be useful in helping writers adjust to various discourses. To this end, researchers have focused on the stages individuals go through as they learn to write in an unfamiliar academic discourse as well as on their understanding of western ideas about source citation and plagiarism.

**Further Insights**

**Patchwriting**

One study that examined the role culture plays in international student writing and source citation behaviors is Gu’s and Brooks’ (2008) investigation of how Chinese students changed as they learned to write for a British academic context. The researchers followed 10 Chinese postgraduate students as they learned the conventions of western academic writing. They found that for...
students to become successful writers in the community, they had to acquire a conceptual understanding of how knowledge is constructed in the community. In that process, culture played a role, but so did student identities, learner motivation, and the power relationships between teachers and students. Importantly, they found that students frequently used memorization and copying as a tool for learning the language. This makes sense, the authors note, because in China, students are often required to memorize text in order to learn English. The practice is designed to help the students pay attention to details of the language and to learn rhetorical writing styles. In the study, students noted they may copy a passage from a text because they like the style of the language, and they want to learn it. To make it original, they may change words or some of the sentence structure. The authors highlight “patchwriting,” as the practice is commonly called, as a transitional strategy that students use as they move towards becoming competent members of the academic community. Although a western professor might see patchwriting as a form of plagiarism, punishing a student at this stage could be detrimental to a student’s motivation.

Collaboration & Idea Sharing

While second language learners may use imitation and appropriation to gain language and discourse skills, Postmodern theorists say the same processes are used by all developing writers. They argue that writing is a social process that requires collaboration and revision. As part of this collaborative process, writers interact with texts and thus other writers by appropriating words and ideas and transforming them into their own through use. In fact, they say, it is through these processes that writers gain the specific skills needed to function within a specific discourse community (Ede, 1994; Roy, 1999; Shamoon & Burns, 1999). This line of thinking challenges the conventional assumptions that underlie the issue of plagiarism – namely that individual authors are solely responsible for their creative ideas. If writers naturally take the words, style, structures, and ideas of others in order to become creative, where should the line be drawn between collaboration and plagiarism? Is plagiarism if a writer in a writing workshop accepts a suggestion from a peer but does not give that peer credit? What about novelists who make allusions to literary texts or imitate a writer’s style when the source text goes unacknowledged? Even professors have a long tradition of sharing ideas, trading handouts and resources, usually without attribution. At what point does such sharing of ideas become plagiarism?

While some have greeted collaborative writing with apprehension, believing that any sort of assisted writing may be plagiarism, others say the difference between the two rests on the concept of intent. Wilson (1999) writes that plagiarism always has an element of deception. It involves taking an idea with the intent to exploit the author or gain something for oneself without effort. Collaboration, on the other hand, involves a “balanced, open and equitable relationship between authors” (p. 211). In a study of university students participating in a peer writing group, Spigelman (1999) noted this distinction in the perceptions students had of acceptable and unacceptable collaborative behaviors. In general, students in the writing group viewed the texts under discussion as communal property. They felt free to make suggestions about ideas, word use, and mechanics and to make changes in their own papers based on others’ suggestions. Interestingly, students did demonstrate some differences in which views they felt were acceptable for appropriation. Some felt that only those comments directed specifically to the writer could be incorporated into a text. Others felt that any ideas gleaned from the conversation or from reading other students’ papers were fair game for individual work. However, students tended to agree that in order for an individual student to use an idea generated in the group, he or she must modify the idea in some way to own it and make it original. This last point illustrates the influence that cultural ideas about individual authorship and plagiarism can assert even within a collaborative writing environment.

Cultural Approaches: Japan

In a cultural context where ideas are not considered to be intellectual property, collaboration may have a very different look. Perhaps an extreme example of this is what Dryden (1999) learned was a common collaborative practice in Japanese universities between professors and graduate students. In this practice, graduate students may work closely with a professor and produce work that the professor then puts his/her name on while the student receives no credit. Although in an American context, this would be a clear case of plagiarism, Dryden writes that this is not the case in Japan because the student chooses to be part of the professor’s work group and because the ideas that the learner gleaned from studying presumably come from the master. Thus, the master has the right to claim the work. In the same study which involved surveying 200 Japanese undergraduates and several dozen professors, Dryden did find that using a source without attribution is perceived as improper in Japanese society. However, he also found that the practice is both common and often overlooked. One reason for the lax attitude, he believes, is that beginning students are not expected to have the kind of expressive and critical skills that a master of the subject would have. Therefore, the students and professors overlook instances of plagiarism because they do not believe that learners are ready to be original.

What can be taken from these limited examples is that the concept of plagiarism is complex. Social, cultural, economic and political factors shape how individuals perceive their roles and responsibilities as writers. Attitudes and behaviors deemed appropriate in one context may not be so in another. For students who enter an American university from a vastly different cultural background, the expectations for source citation and the consequences for failure to conform to these expectations may come as a shock. But the surprise is not felt by the students alone. Many professors who have not been exposed to alternative perspectives on authorship and ownership of ideas feel frustrated when their students don’t perform according to expected standards. Without developing a cultural understanding of the issue, instructors may blame students for being lazy, morally weak, or intellectually inferior. Thus, the challenge for those who work in an intercul
tural space, where many cultures are present and overlapping, is to develop a protocol for discussing, transmitting, (and possibly creating) rules and standards for written behaviors. But what is the best way to do this?

**Viewpoints**

**Teaching about Plagiarism**

One way to begin is through direct instruction not only on the mechanics of source citation, but also on its underlying philosophy. Lund (2004) lays out a five-step process for teaching about plagiarism that begins with discussions between students and professors regarding their cultural backgrounds, individual writing processes, and perceptions of author-text relationships. Once the students are aware that there are different ways to approach the issue and that different contexts require different approaches, they may be more willing to adjust their behavior to meet the standards of the American academy. Having explored their philosophical foundations, students can then move to the next step of the process, which is to examine writing samples that include examples of plagiarized and non-plagiarized work. Following this step, Lund recommends providing exercises that allow students to practice putting ideas into their own words. Only after such hands-on experience does Lund recommend lecturing students on the principles of intellectual property, formal institutional policies, and community expectations. Finally, having gained a greater understanding of the reasons why plagiarism should be avoided, students can learn formal documentation standards.

The purpose of direct instruction is to acculturate students to culturally approved conventions. Studies show that such instruction is helpful. In a study by Russikoff, Fucalaro, & Salkaushiene (2003) that compared the definitions, attitudes, and practices of 645 university students in four countries, direct instruction had a significant influence on students’ understanding of western concepts of plagiarism. After just four weeks, students from Latvia who were exposed to direct instruction on the issue were more likely than students from China, Lithuania, and even the United States who had not had similar training to recognize examples of plagiarism. They were also more likely to agree with its underlying principles, such as the belief that ideas constitute private property.

However, although instruction produced positive results, it was not 100% effective. Twenty percent of the Latvian population still said copying verbatim without attribution was okay, and one-third said citations were not required when paraphrasing. These results suggest that when exposed to western notions, students might still not understand or might resist core concepts despite their training.

To reduce the likelihood of student plagiarism, White (1999) emphasizes that instructors must craft better assignments. These assignments should demand critical thinking skills. For example, instead of asking students to summarize one author, he suggests that students be required to compare and contrast the ideas of two authors using class criteria. Furthermore, he stresses that instructors should provide feedback throughout the writing process. “When a writing assignment attends to the writing process, instead of only the end product, plagiarism becomes almost impossible” (p. 208).

Another approach advocated by composition theorists, not because it provides for a way to reduce plagiarism but because it produces good writing, is to allow the writer to situate an argument within his or her own personal context. Ede writes that academic writers have traditionally been granted authority over a subject only when they link their arguments to the writings of their predecessors. However, she says that writers learn from their personal experiences. Thus, they should be allowed to use this experience to create arguments that contribute to the conversation.

**Conclusion**

Ideas about writing practices and source citation may be expected to change in intellectual environments where multicultural views are respected. However, at the present time, in an American academic context, students are still expected to conform to current conventions. Namely, students must cite work that they quote or paraphrase, and they must create original work. While all students in the university may find learning the intricacies of proper in-text and bibliographic citations confusing—every comma and period must be in its correct place—students who begin from a background that ascribes to different philosophical views than the university culture may have more difficulty understanding the seriousness of the issue. And failure to understand can have serious consequences. Thus, it is incumbent upon instructors and other members of the academy to make educating students about the nature of plagiarism a priority. This education must occur in a way that is sensitive to cultural background. However, it must also impart the importance of conformity within cultural context as a means to success. By engaging students in the conversation and allowing them to build upon the wisdom of those who have already explored the issue, these goals can be accomplished.

**Terms & Concepts**

**Collaborative Writing:** Collaborative writing involves two or more others who work together to produce a single text.

**Enlightenment Period:** The Enlightenment Period refers to the time in the 17th and 18th centuries when people began to base their understanding of humanity and the world on reason instead of on religion.

**Intellectual Property:** Intellectual property describes intangible products of the mind, such as music or words, that have commercial value.

**Patchwriting:** Patchwriting occurs when students copy from a source and then change some of the words in order to give it originality. The result is usually not different enough from the original to be considered creative.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is intentionally taking the work of another and using it as one’s own.

**Postmodern(ism):** Postmodernism is a term that is still being
defined. Roughly, the Postmodern Period is the period that is said to have begun in the mid-1980s and continues today. The period is marked by new ideas on how humans are related to and create their world reality and on how knowledge is constructed and organized. 

**Romantic Period:** The Romantic Period, which roughly incorporates the time between 1850 and 1920, was a time when artistic expression, creativity and originality became important in the arts.

**Bibliography**


**Suggested Reading**


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