

A QUESTION OF DIALOGUES: AUTHORSHIP, AUTHORITY, PLAGIARISM

‘When does a mutated idea become one’s own?’

‘There’s been a lot of words that I’ve thought, ‘Are they really words? How can we appropriate these terms and demystify them and claim ownership over them?’

‘Everyone’s free to use language in a particular way... no one has the claim to say, ‘this belongs to me,’ because the words are there.’

‘After all, the knowledge is shared by people... if they want to use my [work] they have to reference it to me, maybe.’

‘You read the book. The idea becomes your idea but it’s still his [the author’s] idea.’

EN BREF Le terme « plagiat » peut être utile pour désigner certains actes répréhensibles consistant à présenter le travail de quelqu'un d'autre comme le sien, mais il tend à embrouiller plutôt qu'à clarifier, puisqu'il est chargé de connotations morales négatives. Nous devons comprendre que toute écriture est intertextuelle. Tous les auteurs – des professeurs d'université aux enfants en première année du primaire – empruntent et tissent des mots et des textes provenant d'ailleurs. La question, c'est de savoir quand ces emprunts dépassent ce qui est acceptable et quand ils font partie du développement et de l'apprentissage. Nous devons aussi considérer l'écriture comme un dialogue – celui des élèves avec d'autres textes et notre besoin de dialogue avec les élèves. Ce n'est que par le dialogue que nous pouvons comprendre leurs mondes textuels, où des outils d'écriture interactive comme le blogage, le marque-pages social et la rédaction de type « wiki » remettent en question les idées conventionnelles concernant l'autorité et l'identité des auteurs.

These comments are all from students in a variety of undergraduate courses. They make very clear the feelings of fear, alienation and confusion that our students often experience as they struggle to understand how to deal with the demand to become authors of authoritative, 'original', research-based texts for assessment. They also make very clear that students come to their assignments with a wide range of views on language, ownership, texts and writing, thus providing insights into how we as teachers can begin to better understand the ways in which students from very different educational and cultural traditions engage with issues concerning author identity, authority and textual ownership in their academic writing. This need for understanding is central to the case we want

to argue here: While the term plagiarism has long been used as an unhelpful and moralistic catch-all to describe a range of textual 'crimes', we are moving into an era in many contexts of both increased diversity of student populations and increased capacity to detect textual borrowings through new forms of software. To rely on the latter is to hand over responsibility for the educational understanding of writing, development and diversity to systems that are obviously inadequate to the task.

“WE’RE SO AFRAID TO COME UP WITH OUR OWN IDEAS”

Frieda, a second-year international undergraduate Arts student from Indonesia, explained that her first experience of referencing the work of others and using an electronic catalogue was in her first semester of university study in Australia. It was also at this time that she first encountered the term 'plagiarism'. Frieda recounts one of her lecturers telling her:

Don't think that you can write the way you read in books, because all of these books are good books and the writers are really professional. You can find some books that don't have many references because they're by professors, and until you are a professor in that field, you can't write without referencing.¹

As Frieda explains, “She doesn't mind that we reference every sentence because that's a process to write a really good essay.”

So here we have the seemingly paradoxical situation where, in order to produce acceptable texts, students are being encouraged to reproduce sentences that derive wholly from the writing of others, at least according to Frieda. Although she says that she is willing to comply with these demands for referencing, she experiences a crisis in confidence about the value and status of her 'own' thoughts. Frieda describes how she reached the point with one of her lecturers where she felt powerless to present her ideas as her own because the lecturer would not have believed that they were hers. Frieda was convinced that the lecturer would have thought that they belonged to an author whom she (Frieda) had failed to acknowledge, so she decided to attribute them to a particular author anyway, to avoid being challenged by the lecturer. This resulted in Frieda deferring all authorial authority to her source texts and feeling alienated from the writing she had produced:

The problem is that I end up with an essay full of references. There's rarely a sentence, which doesn't have any references. And I think that's awful... I feel this is not my type of essay.

Although Frieda is clearly dissatisfied with her own writing – exclaiming “I don't know what I write!” – she nevertheless felt obliged to produce texts that limited her to “say only the things that I can find in books” in order to comply with the demands of 'Western' academic cultural traditions as required by her lecturer. Frieda's diminished sense of authorship and textual ownership highlight a lack of authority and presence in her writing, which is compounded by a fear of thinking independently (“We're so afraid to come up with our own ideas”); this results in her feeling like little more than a conduit for the ideas of others.

Frieda's struggles here, of course, need to be seen in the context of the near-obsessive fear in the academy of plagiarism. We would argue, however, that the term 'plagiarism', while possibly useful as a means of identifying certain base acts of presenting the work of others as one's own, by and large obfuscates more than it clarifies, since it is too laden with negative and moral connotations.

While many educators would acknowledge the importance of starting where students are at, of building on student knowledge, experience and interests to develop their learning, we have been less ready to enter their textual worlds. Unless we are able to engage with the textual worlds of our students, however, we will forever sit in judgment on their writing only in terms of its conformity to our putative norms. While assimilation has come to have negative connotations within avowedly multicultural nations such as Canada, it still seems to be permissible within the context of academic writing. Our research into student textual worlds shows that they are always struggling not only with the details of writing well, but also with much more difficult questions about identity, authorial authority and meaning.

We need, therefore, to do two things. First we need to grasp the fact that all writing is intertextual. All authors, from university professors to first-year primary school aged children, always borrow and weave words and texts from elsewhere. The issue is to understand when such borrowing may have overstepped a line (what we have called transgressive intertextuality²) and when it is part of a student's development and learning. Patchwriting³ for example – when writers incorporate verbatim chunks of the texts of others in order to provide a scaffold or framework for the development of their own texts – may prove to be a useful strategy, particularly for writers who are at an early stage of development. The question of how much and what kind of scaffolding is acceptable can only be determined at a local level. This will depend on a number of specific contextual factors, including teacher expectation and degree of familiarity with their students, the pedagogical aims and nature of the task, students' levels and educational experiences, as well as their disciplinary and linguistic backgrounds.

Second, we need to see writing as dialogical – both in terms of students in dialogue with other texts and in terms of our need to dialogue with students. It is only through dialogue that we can understand their textual worlds. As Tony, a Law student of Turkish background, commented about his own writing efforts:

I really should have helped myself more. I didn't consult the lecturer at all. I did it on my own... Writing a paper, you've got to get some feedback and get some pointers and then you're on to a better track but... doing it on your own, not knowing really what the lecturer wants, is not a good way to go.

We do not mean to suggest, however, that the dialogues in which students and teachers may engage will be problem-free. For Tony, the production of legal writing and knowledge involved a political struggle between different authoritative authors: there was no space, he felt, for student writers to contribute their own arguments because “they're all said” and the knowledge is “all there”.

As we demonstrate below in the case of Natalie, a third-year undergraduate history student from Thailand, ethnically and racially marginalized students may be resistant and unwilling to adopt the kinds of academic conventions expected by their classroom teachers. As educators, we need, therefore, to be able to engage effectively with the different values our students may bring to the classroom in ways that create opportunities for constructive learning through differences in cultures and status.

ACADEMIC WRITING REQUIRES EVERY PRODUCER AND READER TO PARTICIPATE IN A MUCH BROADER STRUGGLE ABOUT AUTHORITY, THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE NATURE OF AUTHORSHIP, AND TO CONFRONT QUESTIONS ABOUT WHOSE LANGUAGE, IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE COUNT AND WHY.

“WHY AM I WASTING MY LIFE... JUST... SUMMARIZING OTHER PEOPLE IDEAS?”

On several occasions, Natalie emphasized the importance she placed on developing and using her own ideas for assignments. She admitted that, in her first year at the university, she tried to avoid subjects with a research orientation and favoured what she saw as practical or vocationally-oriented subjects such as languages. She explained:

I don't care whether the lecturer thinks I'm intelligent or not, I just want to get quite a good mark... I just want to pass this subject. Just go and look for a job.

Natalie certainly seemed to operate in a very different cultural space than her lecturers and successfully resisted deferring to, or reproducing, the ideas of others, at least in her first two years at university. Nevertheless, she hoped to obtain future employment benefits from the education system she eschewed, and in her third year of study she relied on patchwriting from authoritative source texts as a means of coping with the demands of academic text production.

One of Natalie's assignments was written for a course in Spanish history and focused on the political and economic history of Spain. It can be seen from this assignment (see next column) that she had certainly copied certain phrases verbatim from the source text with no clear attribution, although her writing cannot be judged as a deliberate attempt to claim unwarranted textual ownership because she provides the following in-text reference: “As Carr and Fusi argue ...”, albeit without year or page number. The *italicized* sections indicate a word-for-word correlation with Carr and Fusi:



Up to then [the late 1950s] the Spanish economy was predominantly Agricultural *with industrial appendages concentrated in the Basque provinces and Catalonia*. It was an autarchy, a self-sufficient, self-capitalising economy protected from outside competition by tariffs. Administrative controls were created and regulated by state intervention. The Institute of Industry (INI), a state holding company, was set up to direct the establishment of basic industries and supplement investment. Prices and wages were controlled; foreign trade and exchanged rates were closely regulated. As Carr and Fusi argue, ...

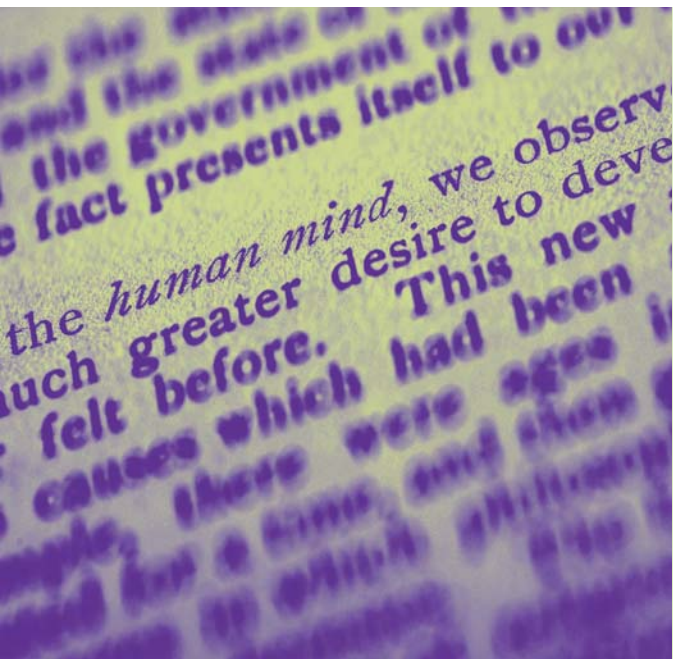
The Carr and Fusi⁴ version is as follows (the *italicized* sections are worded the same as in Natalie's text):

In 1939 Spain was different; it was an agricultural economy *with industrial Appendages concentrated in the Basque provinces and Catalonia*. (p. 49, paragraph 1)

The two key concepts were autarchy and interventionism. A *self-sufficient, self-capitalizing economy protected from outside competition by tariffs* and *administrative controls* would be *created and regulated by state intervention*. (p. 50, paragraph 2)

Prices and wages were controlled; foreign trade and exchange rates were closely regulated; the National Wheat Service fixed the production of wheat and marketed it; *the Institute of Industry (INI), a state holding company*, based on an Italian model and run by an admiral and intimate of the Caudillo, *was to direct the establishment of basic industries and supplement private investment*. (p. 50, final paragraph, through top p. 51, first paragraph)

When reading Natalie's essay and comparing it with Carr and Fusi, it is clear that she had not copied whole paragraphs or pages in a random or incoherent fashion. By rearranging the grammar, changing the order of certain propositions, and copying sentence fragments from across three pages of her source text, she had written a cohesive text that she had blended together to produce part of a paragraph of 'her own' writing.



There are a number of questions that arise with respect to Natalie's text. Is such patchwriting (an example of a 'hybrid' form of writing) acceptable academic writing practice for a novice student? On what basis should we make such a judgment? Considering the B grade allocated to the assignment, the original marker judged the essay to be acceptable. According to the staff member with whom Natalie's writing was discussed, the Carr and Fusi text is very well known and would likely have been familiar to the markers, suggesting that they would, therefore, have been aware of the textual similarities. The staff member also stated that he did not view Natalie's writing as highly problematic or indicative of deliberate deception; rather, he saw her incomplete attribution as highlighting her lack of experience as an academic writer. From Natalie's point of view, however, her textual production was also an aspect of her resistance to academic norms, as well as a way to meet her practical needs.

CHANGING CONTEXTS OF ACADEMIC AUTHORSHIP, AUTHORITY AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Academic writing requires every producer and reader to participate in a much broader struggle about authority, the politics of knowledge, and the nature of authorship, and to confront questions about whose language, ideas and knowledge count and why. The move to develop software that can detect plagiarism may serve some purposes (and can sometimes be used productively if handed over to students as a learning tool), but by and large it misses the point. Worse still, because of its judgemental connotations, it runs the risk of casting learners and teachers as battling adversaries in pursuit of very different pedagogical goals. Attributing acts of transgressive intertextuality solely to cultural differences between teachers and students also falls wide of the mark. Likewise the belief that problems of plagiarism can be fixed at a surface level by teaching referencing skills, paraphrasing and so on, fails to engage with the problem that there is far more going on here.

At the very least, we would suggest that the term plagiarism is largely unhelpful, and should be used with caution. Educators need to engage with the textual worlds of their students, to try to understand their struggles over language, culture and knowledge.⁵ If we can appreciate that all writing is intertextual, that we are always borrowing the words of others, we can develop a far better appreciation of when forms of intertextuality may be seen as transgressive. It is inappropriate and ineffective to cling to outmoded beliefs about individual textual production: We need to appreciate the changing environment of authorship and ownership, especially in an era of Web 2.0 contexts, where interactive authoring tools such as blogging, social bookmarking and wiki writing are challenging traditional ideas of textual relations in terms of authority and author identity.⁶ These new authoring tools, we suggest, offer the potential to be used not only to facilitate dialogue between students and their peers, their source texts, and their lecturers, but also to render transparent the complex ways in which textual authority and knowledge are co-constructed by multiple authors across time and space. |

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Notes

- 1 Where necessary, some students' comments have been reproduced with minor editorial revisions for the sake of clarity.
- 2 R. Chandrasoma, C. Thompson and A. Pennycook, "Beyond Plagiarism – Transgressive and Non-transgressive Intertextuality," *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 3, no. 3 (2004):171-193; C. Thompson and A. Pennycook, "Intertextuality in the Transcultural Contact Zone," in *Pluralizing Plagiarism: Identities, Contexts, Pedagogies*, eds., Rebecca Moore Howard and Amy E. Robillard (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2008), 124-139.
- 3 R.M. Howard, "A Plagiarism Pentimento," *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 11 (1992): 233-245.
- 4 R. Carr and J. Fusi, *Spain: Dictatorship to Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 49-78.
- 5 A. Pennycook, "Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory and Plagiarism," *TESOL Quarterly* 30 (1996): 201-230.
- 6 C. Thompson, "Dialogism and Social Computing: Academic Authorship in Cyberspace," in *Changing University Learning and Teaching: Engaging and Mobilising Leadership, Quality and Technology*, eds., Jeanne McConachie, Michael Singh, Patrick Alan Danaher, Fons Nouwens and Geoff Danaher (Queensland, Australia: Post Pressed, in press 2008).

