



Proper Acknowledgment?

Julianne East

La Trobe University

j.east@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract

The concern in Australian universities about the prevalence of plagiarism has led to the development of policies about academic integrity and in turn focused attention on the need to inform students about how to avoid plagiarism and how to properly acknowledge. Teaching students how to avoid plagiarism can appear to be straightforward if based on the notion that plagiarism is copying without proper acknowledgment. This paper reviews the term 'proper acknowledgment' in the academic context and argues that proper acknowledgement can be a matter of context and perception. In this paper forms of plagiarism are reviewed, reasons for student plagiarism are considered and different contexts for acknowledgement and how these fit in with concepts of attribution and originality are discussed. Comments from international students new to Australian academic culture provide insights and reveal that students in trying to master the rules of acknowledgment can be perplexed and concerned about when and why they should acknowledge.

Introduction

Currently, in Australian universities there is a major focus on plagiarism. And as plagiarism is claimed to be on the increase (Le Heron 2001, Park 2003, McCabe 2003, 2004), universities are keen to protect their reputations against negative publicity. As a result, policy statements have been produced and displayed, some of which, in an amusing aside, seem to be unacknowledged copies (Pecorari 2001, p. 242). University lecturers are expected to be more mindful of the presence of plagiarism in students' work, to teach students that they need to reference and to alert students that they should avoid plagiarism. This responsibility to teach students about avoiding plagiarism can appear to be straightforward if based on the notion that plagiarism is a form of cheating in which the copying of another's (or one's own) work is not acknowledged and the assumption that there are common understandings about what and how to reference. In fact, these issues of copying, acknowledgement and referencing are not simple, and teaching students how to avoid plagiarism is not always straightforward. Bloch (2001, p. 209) explains that:

The integration of previously published written texts into a new text is governed by a set of rules, the violation of which is called plagiarism. These rules concerning writing based on source texts have not always been as clear-cut as many teachers and students have assumed, particularly with regard to teaching about plagiarism.

The situation becomes more complicated when we factor in different perceptions about the appropriateness of copying. In the case of university students who use English as a second language and are new to Australian academic culture, concerns about what to copy, how to copy and how to have a voice in academic writing make the understandings and teaching of plagiarism even less clear cut. These concerns were revealed to me when I interviewed ten international students from both Scandinavian and Asian countries and collected online discussions from 52 students representing sixteen countries.¹ Some of these students have been quoted in this paper. For these students, the boundaries between emulation and plagiarism were not always sharply defined, and some were referencing simply to avoid accusations of plagiarism. Of course referencing is more than acknowledging a source for 'ethical' reasons. In this paper I contend that appropriate acknowledgement can be a matter of perception, context, and culture. I begin with an attempt to define plagiarism by discussing some examples and I review why students plagiarise. I then discuss contexts for acknowledgement, and how these fit in with concepts of attribution and originality. Finally, I conclude that those who are trying to master acknowledgement in academic texts are alert to the issues surrounding plagiarism.

Forms of Plagiarism

Plagiarism can take a number of forms. The most easily recognizable of these is copying someone else's work without any form of acknowledgement. Not surprisingly the originators of work can be aggrieved if someone else reaps undeserved benefits from their hard labour. Lecturers can also be aggrieved if a student has received or attempts to receive undeserved benefit by copying from another's work or presenting as original previously submitted work. Copying one's own work without acknowledgment and pretending it to be a first time production is a form of plagiarism.

¹ These data are part of a larger project, yet to be published, which analyses plagiarism and appropriation and the perceptions of international university students.

Sometimes students will copy chunks of another's work to their text, and even though there is acknowledgement it is not made clear that the words and ideas are not the students'. In another type of plagiarism, students will try and blend together another's words with their own (Wilson 1997). If this is just using the standard academic terms for a particular subject, then this is part of the process of mastering the language of a discipline, if it is taking an author's unique phrases it becomes plagiarising.

There are other forms of plagiarism which are more sophisticated and are harder to detect (Martin 1994). These include a practice, not unusual in undergraduate writing, of referring to sources which were cited in a secondary source without having accessed those sources. An example of this is when students copy quotations which have been cited in text books and then claim the original source rather than the text book as a reference. In so doing the writer can appear to be well read and seems to have researched beyond the prescribed text book. Another way writers plagiarise is to use the references from a text, then neglect to acknowledge the use of that text as the source. This lack of acknowledgement denies rightful recognition for the author who initially collected the references and reviewed the literature. In some cases this may be because the writer wants to be seen as having done the job of collecting the references; it can also be a case of ignoring the initial text because none of its ideas were used and the referencing system (particularly the author date system) does not allow for such a space.

Perhaps the most controversial for teachers who provide model essays, papers and examples of research design, is the practice of copying the organization and structure of another's arguments and research. Here we can see a blurring of the boundaries between learning how to do something and producing something which is not original. At the most basic level students are taught that an essay has an introduction, body and conclusion; beyond this, students can be given models demonstrating the parts within this structure, as well as models of argument and evidence and critical analysis. While following a model might be considered reasonable, not so the act of expedient reproduction in which a writer takes another's work and simply rewords the arguments and evidence from that work. This is a case of plagiarism because the collection of ideas, the organization of those ideas and the thinking about how those ideas fit together has been the work of another. While it could be argued that the act of rewriting re-creates something which can be understood with new meaning, it should not be claimed as something original. As Coleman (2004, p. 278) explains, 'even if we agree with the plagiarist that by putting something into a different context they have changed its meaning, it does not follow from this that they have produced an original perspective. Often, what they have done is relieve themselves of this task'. This is the sort of plagiarism which could be hard to detect and confirm, especially in the case of competent and calculating writers. Certainly, word matching detection tools such as Turnitin would be unlikely to lead to recognition of such plagiarism if it is the work of skilled paraphraser.

Some students will plagiarise knowingly; others will do it inadvertently (Chanock 2003, Dawson 2004). There are also circumstances conducive to plagiarism, and there are a number of possible explanations for why students plagiarise. In some cases students might plagiarise because they can and nobody stops them; students also can be driven by fear of failure or the pressure to succeed (Dawson 2004); they can be ignorant of how they are expected to construct knowledge and how to reference, and they can come from educational cultures where copying is an expected learning practice.

An example of a situation in which availability of opportunity allowed plagiarism was reported by a student who explained that because his lecturers had not objected to the copied sentences in his writing tasks he had seen no reason to change his practice. Such plagiarism would not be tolerated in all subjects, and unfortunately for this student, he is not learning academic citing conventions. It could be that this student's lecturers do not have enough time to teach skills; maybe they do not know how to teach these skills, or maybe they are unaware that they are receiving plagiarized work. Given increased class sizes and work pressure, such situations could be widespread in Australian universities (Parker 2003).

Students who cannot keep up with the demands of a course, for whatever reason, perhaps a weakness in academic skills or language skills, could resort to plagiarism out of desperation. A student, who before returning to study had seen herself as a competent professional with a lot of responsibility, explained why she had once plagiarized. 'My thoughts were I have to pass it or I will not be able to do other things...the difficulty of the subject was really overwhelming. The lecturer was not too approachable. I didn't really have that support.' The same student also reported that earlier her lecturers had given her a guide about avoiding plagiarism, but she had not understood why and how she should acknowledge sources. This student, while ashamed of her action, argued that with better teaching she would not have resorted to plagiarism.

Better teaching so that students understand the content and issues in a particular subject might reduce conscious plagiarism. Such teaching could also lead students to be more than sophisticated paraphrasers and do more than regurgitate information, so that they can reflect and comment on what they are learning and can construct and apply knowledge. Nevertheless, students might still not acknowledge according to the particular rules of Australian academic culture. They might be ignorant of what is expected or they may apply a different set of understandings. An undergraduate student reported that in China if you are a student it is 'ok to copy an expert's words into your writing [without a reference] because you are using respected support for your ideas, but this is not acceptable for publishing when you should be demonstrating own findings'. This example demonstrates that what may be considered legitimate appropriation in one context is plagiarism in another context because it lacks explicit acknowledgement.

Acknowledgment

Like many other universities, La Trobe University in Victoria, Australia has recently developed a policy which has driven various strategies to educate students about avoiding plagiarism and the need for acknowledgement. This policy defines plagiarism as 'the reproducing of someone else's words, ideas or findings and presenting them as one's own without proper acknowledgement' (La Trobe University, Academic Misconduct Policy). I do not have any argument with such a definition; it seems perfectly reasonable that one should properly acknowledge, accepting of course that what is proper in one context could be quite different in another.

Experienced writers can base the decision to acknowledge on the perception that some sources and some ideas have more value than others, rather than the imperative to be honest. Citing from a prestigious journal lets the reader know that the writer has read such a journal and is up to date with the latest thinking and findings on a topic. On the other hand, an idea or organization of ideas in an unrefereed text, no matter how interesting, is likely to be less authoritative and so carry less weight as evidence. For example, an email from a chat room is unlikely to carry as much weight as verifiable research (Bloch 2004, p. 221), so it is not surprising that such communications are not always acknowledged. Similarly, some writers and researchers bring more authority than others.

In fact, this is an issue I have been reflecting on in my own academic writing practice, and in particular in writing this paper as the following concern demonstrates. In preparing to write this paper I considered that there could be different cultural understandings of when, why and how to attribute, and accordingly I wanted to present appropriate selected support. An example of such support is in the work of Pennycook, a well-respected commentator on English language academic culture. He pointed out that the notion of plagiarism 'needs to be understood within the particular cultural and historical context of its development, it also needs to be understood relative to alternative cultural practices' (Pennycook 1996, p. 218). I could have also used other sources, for I have read such ideas elsewhere, but my preference is for the acclaimed and erudite Pennycook. In fact, I didn't get the notion that plagiarism has different cultural contexts from reading Pennycook; I don't know where the idea came from, but maybe, in fact, Pennycook might really be the original source of the idea. Maybe I picked up the idea from conversation or observation or something I read somewhere. Such sources would hardly be impressive, and after all what is the point of making a claim unless it is to be taken seriously. In another instance, I might choose not to acknowledge a source. I read the Lancaster University document 'Cultural Attitudes to Plagiarism: Developing a better understanding of the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds relating to issues of plagiarism' (Introna, Hayes, Blair & Woods 2003) but found no specific items that I wanted to use for my research; however, the bibliography gave me some good references. Should I give acknowledgement for a good collection of sources? (See Martin 1994, for a discussion of the various forms of plagiarism.) I certainly would if Pennycook wrote it. So, rather than acknowledge to avoid plagiarism, I choose to refer to sources so that my writing is placed within a particular discussion. Hunt in his article 'Four Reasons to be Happy about Internet Plagiarism' (2003, p. 4 of 5) gives a succinct explanation of why scholars acknowledge.

Scholars -- writers generally -- use citations for many things: they establish their own bona fides and currency, they advertise their alliances, they bring work to the attention of their reader, they assert ties of collegiality, they exemplify contending positions or define nuances of difference among competing theories or ideas. They do not use them to defend themselves against potential allegations of plagiarism.

An implication of this is that novice academic writers will need to learn how to use citations to their advantage. Their decisions about which texts to use as evidence and which to acknowledge might need to be based on understanding particular contexts. A student new to an existing body of knowledge in a subject will be discovering who and what evidence carries weight. This involves dealing with the huge amount of information now available and deciding which texts and which writers are seen to be valued.

Another concern for novice writers trying to sound appropriately academic is the acquisition and appropriation of new terminology. Sometimes students repeat phrases and terms because they do not have a ready repertoire of synonyms; sometimes they repeat because they do not yet have the understanding and knowledge to be confident about paraphrasing. One way that I build my terminology is by working through texts and appropriating terms to my own writing. Of course I know that when I meet a unique and newly created term or approach I need to acknowledge the source. The more familiar I am with a topic the more confident I am in doing this; on the other hand, when I meet new terms in a new subject I am tentative about mining vocabulary. It follows then that the greater my exposure to a particular subject the more aware I am of what is commonly used and needs no acknowledgement in contrast to that which can be attributed to an individual and so requires acknowledgement. Or I could say that the more familiar words and terms become, the less aware I have become of making out their meaning.

Gee (1996, p. 140) points out that when we have mastered something we have no consciousness of it, and eventually as Chanock explains: 'We learn to see things the way other people see them, by naming them in the ways that other people name them' (2002, p. 51). Until such time the novice writer could be disadvantaged, which indicates the asymmetry of power in language (Habermas 1987). Using new terminology is one way that novice writers build their vocabulary and attempt to sound academic; recognising unacknowledged unique phrases is one way that lecturers determine that acts of plagiarism have been committed.

There have been times when I have been inspired and checked by the ideas and words of others but have not necessarily acknowledged these. My colleagues and study group have been a great support in my research and as a matter of etiquette I can give due acknowledgement for this in a thesis, but I rarely acknowledge this input in other texts. This could be as much a shortcoming of the referencing system as much as anything else. I realized this when trying to find a place in this paper to acknowledge the particularly helpful comments made by a colleague, Elizabeth Burns Coleman. The difficulty is in relaying a clear picture of the degree of the input and its effect. Whether acknowledged or not, I consider the input of my colleagues and exposure to their ideas to be a collaboration vital to my learning process and professional development, and I know that this is not collusion, and further I am comfortable about placing myself as the author (cf. Myers 1998, p. 9).

Acknowledgement for authorship of and input into a text can vary. In some cases, language and academic skills advisers have been extensively involved in teaching students how to research and how to write and present research but have received no public acknowledgement, just as the role of editors is often ignored (Scollon 1995, p. 8). In contrast there are instances of an author being listed even though this person has had little or no involvement in the writing process. If this 'author' has a prestigious reputation lending a name to a publication is in the interests of the other listed authors, whose work might otherwise not be accepted for publication. Understandably such acknowledgement, albeit not a measure of effort yet understood by some as valuable, is controversial. La Trobe University has declared this practice of 'Honorary authorship' to be unacceptable (see La Trobe University Guidelines for the Conduct of Research 2003, p. 9).

In some circumstances and with some university texts it is accepted practice that the writer as wordsmith is not acknowledged. Administrative communications can be written by a person or persons other than the named official. I am not alarmed or concerned if the message to all staff from the vice-chancellor is not personally written by him (cf. Martin 1994). While I expect his direction of and responsibility for such a task, I do understand that the demands of such a senior role would mean task designation to others, and I do not expect those others to be acknowledged. My response to the message to all staff is that the vice-chancellor is being the author. Scollon (1995, p. 7) explains such a perception of authorship by using Goffman's communication categories: the vice-chancellor could be seen as having the role of standing behind and being responsible for a communication, while the person who prepares the communication text is understood to 'animate' the words of the vice-chancellor. Scollon also comments on this explanation and asks us, as does Martin (1994), to consider that because these roles are embedded in the institution those within the institution might be blind to the rights of those who actually write texts. While this might be so, vice-chancellors would be well-advised to ensure that any writer of their texts has referenced properly, because it should be the vice-chancellor who risks public disgrace from accusations of plagiarism.

Accusations of plagiarism are not limited to the university context. Just as senior university staff might not write their administrative communications, so politicians employ speech writers. Acknowledgement is rarely given to speech writers, but then they do not wear responsibility for the content and delivery of 'their' speeches. This can result in accusations of plagiarism not directed to the person who wrote and sourced the text, but rather to the politician who delivered the text. In April 2004, the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, accused the then Leader of the Opposition, Mark Latham, of stealing ideas and words from President Clinton's 1997 State of the Union address (ABC Online). Latham, not his speech writer, responded to the accusations of plagiarism of Clinton's speech, also no doubt worded by a speech writer.

It could be argued that a person might not discern that what is appropriate acknowledgement in one forum is not applicable in another. In the tradition of Black American oratory, using another's words, style and structure is legitimate. Tannen (1989) in her analysis of Jesse Jackson's speech in 1988 to the Democratic National Convention, showed that much of the power of this speech was in its heavy borrowing from Martin Luther King's famous acceptance speech "I Have a Dream" for the Nobel Peace Prize. This 'borrowing' could also be understood as appropriation of terms that Jackson and his audience had come to believe in. In contrast, while Jackson's appropriation is acceptable in its oratory genre, it is argued that the instances of copied text in King's doctoral thesis lacked appropriate acknowledgement. Responses to this have varied. Scollon (1995) and Martin (1994) have indicated that this could be evidence of different cultural traditions, and Moore Howard (1995, p. 793) points out that 'we carry the practices and conventions of one community into another'. Randall (2001, pp. 208 - 213) analyses this view from a number of perceptions, even considering that the lack of acknowledgement in King's work amounted to plagiarism which had been tolerated because his supervisors were racist and had not expected more of him.

There are other situations where what is considered plagiarism in one community because it lacks acknowledgement may be considered acceptable practice in another. A law student from Denmark who was confused about the referencing requirements in her studies in Australia explained:

Normally, back home it's the argument itself that's important and not the author. So I can use as many arguments from books as I want, without referencing anything. I don't have to use name or page – I just use the argument. For me that's normal. Sometimes, if there's a good sentence I can copy the words, I can write the whole sentence and I don't have to use references at all.

In some cultures there is an expectation that copying is a learning strategy.

In my first language, [you] don't have the concept of plagiarism, you can copy without acknowledgement. [We] think copy others' work is a good habit for learning, in this point, it is completely different to the concept of plagiarism... Based on the cultural differences [with] Australia, plagiarism makes me feel very confused, it is new for me.

An explanation from another student demonstrates why he perceives that acknowledgement is not always necessary:

... in some Asian countries or few western countries, only [when] the whole article is copied by students and used as their own can [it] be considered as plagiarism, and it is accepted to use some good sentences or phrases from other reading material directly because students need to show that they have read widely before writing their essays.

While these examples support the idea that copying and repetition can be a legitimate learning strategy (Biggs 1997), if students applied this strategy in an Australian university they could be accused of plagiarism.

Ideas, Originality and Attribution

One way of viewing text creation is with the notion of the author as a producer of private property whose efforts should be acknowledged. Such a perception has credibility when the accordance of reward is based on effort which has produced something original. And as Bloch (2001, p. 211) notes, students are disinclined to attribute authorship to that which they consider as 'common knowledge' and in the 'public domain', which parallels my earlier claim that 'commonly used' terms need no acknowledgement. The problem as a student explained is that, 'sometimes it is difficult to distinguish what may be considered as plagiarism, as there is no clear dividing line between general knowledge and a person's voice.' Another student was concerned about when an idea became common knowledge and when acknowledgement was necessary:

We rewrite what we have learned and often we use different words from the textbook. But the ideas we write about are still from the textbook...I think I need some more practice in when to use references, because too often I ask myself if I should have used one or not. The textbooks can often describe concepts thoroughly when they are used for the first time. Some of this might be common sense or knowledge or something you just know about. Then you do not feel you need to acknowledge the textbook. No, it is not easy!

From these students' dilemmas we can learn that acknowledging effort and attributing ideas can be problematic if the divide between what everybody knows and what an individual author has created is not clear.

Another limit to the concept that property rights rest with individual creation of text is the use of technology for text making and sharing. Technology has increased what is in the public domain and made it easier to access and plagiarise. I also suggest that this availability and the variety of texts have made it harder for the user to envisage the quoting of text as taking someone's property. Bloch citing Kolko (2001, p. 211) asks us to consider how students might perceive texts on the internet and whether or not all these should be cited in the same way. While it is clear that an online academic journal requires formal acknowledgment, would this also be so for information from a site where the author is not obvious, say a university page explaining plagiarism? Furthermore, online discussions demonstrate the collaborative and derivative development of ideas, and so challenge the notion of the individual author producing private property. This notion of proprietorship, however, remains the premise upon which university assessment is based. The conundrum for the student writer is in knowing how to appropriate what seems to be publicly available, so that they can produce texts which will be assessed as if they are individual creations.

Understandably, some students perceive ideas as being individually created with property rights. One of the interviewees explained that whenever she got an idea from others she would give some sort of recognition, but she considered it unfair when protocol prevented her from claiming sole authorship of an idea.

... sometimes I feel that what they said is actually my idea as well, it's what I feel, but sometimes there I have to do some sort of quotation but it's not fair to me as well. ...anyway I just want to follow the rule, not make a big fuss on it so I just give a citation there. That's why I feel it's unfair to me because it's my idea too.

This student, rather than seeing her contribution as an analysis of perceptions of knowledge, and that the value of her academic opinions could be enhanced by verification, seems to be imagining ideas as individual productions or discoveries. The student describes herself as just following rules, which implies a sense of frustration and also that the need to acknowledge seems 'unfair' to her, which puts her at odds with some of the reasons for citing sources. According to Bloch (2001, p. 221) 'There is also a rhetorical purpose for citing sources. Academic writing in particular relies on a kind of social cohesiveness, what Myers (1985) refers to as the need for writers to demonstrate how their ideas are connected with what has previously been claimed.' Without an appreciation of this connectedness, I can see that such a student might feel that her own voice cannot find a place in academic writing.

Some published writers also see the attribution of ideas as personally relevant and practise the curious act of self-citation. Obviously, such writers refer to their own previous works and ideas not to acknowledge another's 'property' or creation, nor do they always reference for the sake of transparency and honesty, rather they are likely to be alerting the reader to the writer's value and place in an existing body of knowledge. In fact, as Hyland (2003) argues, self-citation is usually self-promotion. Self-citation, however, does not work in quite the same way for the unpublished writer. As an academic skills adviser I have seen many examples of self-copying in students' essays. These include minor examples such as 'reusing' a few sentences and reusing empirical research as well as the more blatant examples of resubmitting entire essays. I am yet to see any example of self-attribution in a student's writing.

It is not hard to see why students might be confused by the concept that authorship of a text is the construction of original ideas. As one student protested: 'if one thing is told you by your mother, and your mother is told by your grandmother and how can I get the original? Where does an idea come from, it's generation to generation...' Barks and Watts (2001, p. 254) in their chapter advising on the teaching of referencing, claim that because the concept of 'originality' requires discussion they have been 'purposefully vague' in their use of the term, which does not leave the reader any the wiser.

In fact, originality in academic text creation does not mean that an author has created new ideas only from 'imagination'. Rather the writer works within an existing body of knowledge and makes decisions about which ideas and evidence to use from sources, what can be said about these ideas and so what other perspectives can be brought to this new discussion. Understanding originality in this way could make the purpose of acknowledgement clearer for those students who are concerned about attributing the 'original' source of an idea.

Contextualising the concept of originality in ideas and the need for attribution as cultural notions could be a way of understanding what new student writers confront. In his examination of the history of Western thought, Pennycook (1996, p. 205) points out that the author and originality are constructed notions, and by referring to Kearney he explains how imagination, once viewed as a reproduction of divine inspiration, in modern western thinking has become the subject of human production. He explains that by medieval times², truth was linked to authenticity which could be verified through the authority of an individual author. While scientific notions were to be seen as unauthored 'facts', in the area of literature, individual creativity was recognized and valued. Pennycook explains that this move to seeing works as individualized and therefore original is a Western cultural perception. Students new to Australian academic culture could be trying to sort out such cultural perceptions. They will be working out that they need to state, in a prescribed way, a source for certain ideas, and that there is a proprietorship of (some) ideas which is taken very seriously by their lecturers.

² Moore Howard (1995, p. 790) notes that the notion of the individual author can be traced to earlier times.

Conclusion

This paper has touched on a number of issues regarding plagiarism and 'proper' acknowledgement. It is clear that acknowledgment can have different purposes, including attributing to a particular source to prevent plagiarism. Furthermore the need to acknowledge can be context specific. In reflecting on my personal explanations of when I acknowledge and appropriate I can see that I write as someone who seems comfortable in describing the peculiarities of acknowledgment. By contrast, the comments from the international students sometimes reveal a perplexed concern about when and why they should acknowledge. These concerns indicate that for newcomers to Australian academic culture, notions of acknowledgement and attributing ideas are not familiar. It could also be that, in attempting to understand the rules of academic communication, these students are conscious of that which those who are culturally familiar are no longer conscious.

These conclusions invite speculation that when students, lecturers and the university communicate about plagiarism they can come to the conversation with different understandings, and they could also leave with differences. I have made few suggestions about how to improve these communications, but hopefully this provides opportunities for future research. I hope that the insights of the students and my discussion will contribute to greater understanding of the issues confronting students when they try to properly acknowledge.

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