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## Reframing Anti-Plagiarism Efforts in the Academic Library

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## Reframing Anti-Plagiarism Efforts in the Academic Library

By Amy Burger

### Introduction

Plagiarism has long been the target of educational efforts by institutions, faculty, and librarians. This work may be improved by examining the beliefs in which it is rooted. According to anthropologist Susan Blum, two concepts are typically used to explain the “wrongness” of plagiarism: morality and legality—plagiarism is treated either “as a sin” or “as a crime” (2009, p. 149). These approaches contrast the academic conception of intellectual property with its legal understanding (Haviland & Mullin, 2009, p. 131). The central concept of plagiarism is honesty, whereas the central concepts of copyright are property rights and revenue (Cvetkovic & Anderson, 2010, p. 40). Both interpretations are invoked frequently in discussion of plagiarism, but I suspect that this indicates attention to the wrong target, “not plagiarizing” instead of “citing correctly.” Understanding the purposes and methods of citing sources would likely do much to bridge the gap between students’ documented conceptual understanding of plagiarism and their continued struggles to apply this knowledge to their work (Mendes, 2017; Breen & Maassen, 2005).

As many scholars have noted, plagiarism refers to a variety of phenomena, which vary widely (Buranen, 2009, p. 25; Haviland & Mullin, 2009, p. 130; Blum, 2009, p. 6; DeSena, 2007, p. 47). Rebecca Moore Howard, director of the Writing Center at Syracuse University, has argued that some forms of plagiarism, in particular one known as patchwriting, or “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another” is a necessary and productive step in students’ development of proper citation skills, and suggests its

“decriminalization” (Buranen, 2009, p. 26). Now, “many in composition studies have now been persuaded of the rightness of [Howard’s] position” (Blum, 2009, p. 27). Writing Center Director Lise Buranen extends Howard’s call, saying “much of what is labeled as plagiarism indicates a need for consciousness-raising and instruction (of both faculty and students), rather than censure or punishment” (2009, p. 25). Further evidence that learning about citation contributes to the reduction of plagiarism comes from researchers Lauren Breen and Margaret Maassen, who found that “many incidents of plagiarism are likely to result from ignorance and poor skill development,” instead of the common perception that they are due to intentional cheating (2005).

Distinguishing between intentional and unintentional plagiarism is especially important when the students are early in their academic careers (Cvetkovic & Anderson, 2010, p. 80). Two valuable partners in the attempt to combat student plagiarism are writing centers and libraries, places that exist expressly for helping students, free of the power dynamic of grading; Buranen has labeled these “safe places” (2009, p. 30).

### The Role of the Library

Libraries are, for students, uniquely situated to help, not solely because librarians are not in a position to assign grades to student work, but also because librarians “are neither ethically nor legally bound to report students to the Judicial Affairs Office, academic dean, or principal, if they see instances of possible plagiarism, [librarians] can focus their efforts on helping students negotiate the seeming contradictions and very gray areas built into citation practices, making it clear to students that librarians are

not there to turn them in, but to help them make sense of it all” (Buranen 2009, pp. 30-31).

It is not, however, only students who would benefit from working with librarians. Faculty “need to become educated about the complexities of using and citing information and in turn...educate students about them” (Buranen, 2009, p. 32). This is an opportunity that librarians can take advantage of, and, since librarians work closely with students as they work toward understanding, librarians can likewise bring this appreciation of student mastery and areas of confusion to faculty in their meetings together.

Another way libraries can contribute to the efforts to educate students on issues of citation is to develop their own instructional materials. Many libraries have created tutorials to address the need for widespread educational resources on the topics of citation and plagiarism. Rutgers University employees Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic and John B. Gibson provided a detailed explanation of the process they used to create the “Cite is Right” game-show themed online plagiarism tutorial (2010, pp. 61-72). Such tutorials show promise; a study conducted on the University of Texas-Austin library’s tutorial found it “at least as effective as in-person instruction” (Cvetkovic & Anderson, 2010, p. 87).

Dalton State College’s Roberts Library, in addition to its role as supporter of citation education and antiplagiarism efforts throughout the institution, is also part of the disciplinary process for accused students. While I have met with several students for a consultation, which is a required step, many of these consultations have been held by my colleague Betsy Whitley, who reports that she meets with two to five students per semester, and that summer is the busiest time, with students who have just finished the spring semester (personal communication, April 18, 2017).

When consultations are held, the librarian begins by asking the student to describe the situation. Whitley reports that there are two predominant reasons students report for finding themselves in this position. The first is that the student was out of time, and knowingly plagiarized to meet a deadline (personal communication, April 18, 2017), a common reason given for plagiarism (see also Twomey, White, & Sagendorf, 19-25). The second is that the student had lost track of the citation information, but used the source anyway, citing it incorrectly, or not at all (personal communication, April 18, 2017).

Both reasons for plagiarism accusations arise not from a lack of understanding the concept of plagiarism, but rather difficulty in employing this understanding. For the student who has run out of time, there is little that can be done after the fact, although Whitley says that she counsels them on time management. This can be a frustrating conversation for both parties to have, when librarians are aware that many students work in addition to their roles as students, and many have other obligations; Whitley remembers that “my first case was a guy who was a full-time employee and full-time student with a family” (personal communication, April 18, 2017). If the offender is one who has plagiarized by not documenting his or her work carefully enough to keep information and its sources together, she says, “I can give them advice about e-mailing sources to themselves, and put them in a mail folder as backups if they lose printed pages or websites” (personal communication, April 18, 2017).

During library class sessions at Dalton State College, students are asked to practice citing both in text and to construct complete citations. These are valuable and practical exercises. However, more explicit instruction focused on citation would likely benefit students. The findings of Breen and Maassen (2005) indicated that students, especially those early in their academic careers, struggle to understand paraphrasing:

For example, first and second year students often defined paraphrasing as making small changes to the order of words in the original text, and spoke of deciding on the number of words from the original text that can be copied before the need to reference. One first year student stated, "Yes that's right, you remove some words and use others". In addition, some students, especially first year and international students, did not understand that paraphrasing meant that the original idea was not their work and consequently they had difficulty understanding the need to reference paraphrasing at all. (para. 13)

These students may feel that they have not been provided enough information or had enough opportunity to develop their skills. Understanding paraphrasing, in addition to quoting, is one of the basic skills involved with properly citing sources. My colleague Amy Mendes, whose forthcoming dissertation examines plagiarism, found that complicated citation situations were causes for confusion; examples of these include combining findings from multiple sources and incorporating others' findings with students' own statements.

One way to address students' gaps in understanding citation while paraphrasing or in new situations is to explicitly address plagiarism through offering hands-on plagiarism detection activities when citation is being discussed (Gilmore, 2009). Additionally, the library can improve its presence and quality as an ally in the effort to address plagiarism by offering "symposia and conferences for faculty and students" (Blum, 2009, p. 177).

### **Suggestions for classroom instructors**

For classroom instructors, research suggests some changes can contribute toward students' understanding of citation. This includes the careful revision of syllabi, handouts, and

assignment descriptions to integrate positive reasons for citation (such as adding credibility to students' claims or allowing the reader to locate the original source), and practical advice, including extending to information about resources and partners who can help, such as the writing lab and the library. Another recommended change is the replacement of emphasis from "academic dishonesty" to "academic integrity." In fact, professor David Horacek argues that academic integrity be given more attention and treated as an indispensable part of academic work (Twomey et al., 2009).

One common practice that may benefit from some reconsideration is the use of plagiarism detection software. Turnitin, while valuable for its ability to detect plagiarism in student papers, is problematic for a number of reasons: its use implies a presupposition of wrongdoing on the part of students, its facility means teachers do not have as much reason to develop pedagogical practices aimed at preventing plagiarism, its retention of student work "constitutes a violation of students' educational privacy or intellectual property rights," and it "simply [doesn't] work" (Twomey et al., 2009, pp. 150-152). Ways to improve students' experience with plagiarism-detection software are to notify students that it will be used, to make its use optional, and to allow students to submit drafts to check their work prior to submitting their final drafts (Twomey et al., 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, many forms of plagiarism appear to be the result of a disconnect between students' conceptual understandings of citation and their ability to apply this understanding to their work. Institutions, through documentation and availability of resources, and instructors, through their courses, can work together with librarians to productively address plagiarism by taking a constructive, education-oriented approach and moving away from stern, punishment-focused language and practices.

Librarians can channel their recognition of student struggles with source attribution into proactive practices to address plagiarism at their campuses. This starts with an awareness of what plagiarism is, and why it happens. Some concrete suggestions for things librarians can do include:

- sharing expertise with classroom teachers by
  - encouraging them to revisit their syllabi and course documentation with a fresh mindset focused on promoting proper citation and connecting students with resources, including librarians,
  - encouraging them to reconsider both the use of TurnItIn, and the ways in which it is used,

- explicitly addressing citation in library instruction and during reference interviews, with a focus on giving students hands-on practice, and
- creating instructional materials for students.

Above all, it is crucial that anti-plagiarism efforts proceed from a place of empathy. When discussing citation with students, “don’t plagiarize” is a less effective approach than one that incorporates other reasons for citation, and communicates the value of academic integrity.

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