

Plagiarism: a university faculty perspective

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Plagiarism: A University Faculty Perspective

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The issue of plagiarism is highly complex because of its discipline-specific, cultural, educational and personal dimensions, yet how often have we heard our colleagues accuse their students of "stealing" the words of others? Many of us in the teaching profession are very familiar with the feelings of anger and of failure on our part when a student turns in a course paper that has obviously been copied. We may even view plagiarism as a personal affront displaying a student's lack of respect for the authorship of a text, as well as disrespect for us as teachers. We try to teach our students to be original and creative, and the act of plagiarism makes us feel as if our efforts have been in vain.

It was with these concerns in mind that we undertook a study at Eastern Michigan University on the issue of plagiarism. This study was designed to provide a context for discussion of the complexities of plagiarism. In this pilot, we chose to focus on university faculty members' perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism. Our intention was to confirm that faculty members sharing basically the same educational and cultural backgrounds would agree in their judgments of what is and what is not plagiarism.

Background

The literature on plagiarism and on the creation and use of texts reflects a serious concern on the part of teachers about practices and policies regarding the issue of academic honesty. Kolich (1983) describes a colleague's reaction to plagiarism in the following:

A colleague, a gifted and popular teacher, once told me in a rage of indignation, "Nothing is so vile or obscene as the insult of plagiarism. It is the worm of reason." The obscenity of a student's actions, which she believed was directed against her work, had deeply offended her. She was angry but also hurt, because her student had violated a code of honor that she believed must exist between teacher and student in the best learning environments. It was more than cheating; the act of plagiarism had touched something prized and almost holy (p. 144).

Howard (1995) describes the complexities of authorship and the concept of text, and emphasizes the fact that when questions of plagiarism and academic honesty are confronted, the complexities disappear, and teachers revert to labeling the act as "immoral" and refer to the plagiarist as "less of a person" (p. 793).

In evaluating the act of plagiarism, it is important to consider the nature of what is being "stolen" in addition to the morality of the plagiarist. As Bowden (1996) says, "Language has to be owned before it can be stolen" (p. 13). She argues that although Western culture tells us that we can "own" discourse, no voice is truly our own since we learn language from others: voice is a shared phenomenon. Bowden goes on to say that we can make rules about how much language can be borrowed

without attribution and then make judgments about plagiarism based on those rules, but we cannot escape the fact that language, by its very nature, is not "stable, ownable and individual" (p. 15). Howard (1995) further supports this position by arguing that the categories of both authorship and plagiarism have become increasingly unstable due to the advent of computers and hypertext, text which is made available to others electronically in a wide range of forums including discussion groups, chat rooms and mailing lists. This electronically-shared text is in a constant state of revision without stable authorship because of the collaborative nature of the "discussion" process. "No longer do we have originators and plagiarists...but the collective, always unfinished text" (p. 791).

The worldwide acceptance of English as the international language has also added complexity to the issue of plagiarism. As the cultural values implicit in English are more carefully explored and as we examine the educational backgrounds and practices of many of the users of English as an international language, it is clear that a stable definition of what constitutes plagiarism is not possible. Matalene's (1985) experience as an English writing teacher in China is the basis for her strong position that what Westerners view as academic dishonesty, i.e., plagiarism, should not necessarily be regarded as dishonesty in differing cultural and educational contexts. She argues that as the world becomes increasingly smaller, Western rhetorical values, particularly those of originality and individuality, should be examined carefully from a non-Western perspective. The following excerpt from an essay written by a Chinese student clearly illustrates the dilemma:

After our teacher's explanation, we understand that in her country or some others plagiarism is forbidden. Whenever you want to quote a passage from an essay or article, you must be permitted by its author, or else you will be accused as a criminal. This is clearly made by their laws. However, in our country, things are a little different. We may perhaps call what our teacher calls "plagiarism" as "imitation," which is sometimes encouraged especially for a beginner. Imitation is usually considered to be one of the secrets for a greenhand in writing. So there are many printed books which consist of many kind of good models to follow for learners. I remember when I was in middle school, I wrote a Chinese composition by imitating several model writings which were suitable for my topic. I employed some of the same words and phrases in them. I was praised by the teacher for this writing. (p. 803)

The practice of imitation is valued in this student's culture; appropriating the language of others is not only acceptable, but expected and praised. It raises the question of why student writers should struggle to find their own words, their own voice, when others have said essentially the same thing much more eloquently.

Pennycook (1996) also discusses the issue of "borrowing" text in the Chinese context. He examines the role that memorization plays in relation to questions of authorship and ownership of text. In a cultural and educational environment where memorizing text is a widely practiced art, the boundaries of shared knowledge and ownership are certainly extended. Placing the current Western concept of academic honesty in a historical perspective, Pennycook asks whether our "moral outrage" toward the act of plagiarism isn't simply a defensive reaction against more global changes in the notions of textual authorship and ownership. Pennycook's message throughout his detailed analysis of textual practices across cultures is that the concept of borrowing is complex. He implores us to look "behind the surface phenomenon of apparent plagiarism" to attempt to understand the complexity of the cultural and educational values implicit in the act of borrowing (pp. 225-26).

The Study

In order to learn about university faculty perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism, we developed a questionnaire which asked faculty members to provide basic background information on themselves and their teaching situations at the university as well as to respond to a range of questions regarding the issue of plagiarism in their particular teaching contexts (see Appendix 1 for the original questionnaire). Faculty in all five colleges at Eastern Michigan University (Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Health and Human Services, and Technology) as well as the library were surveyed. We sent out 660 questionnaires, and 227 were returned. Of the 227, we were able to use 204. All respondents were U.S.-educated, and all held at least one master's degree. The majority of the faculty taught undergraduate or a combination of graduate and undergraduate classes.

The faculty responses to Questions 6, 7, and 10-16 are summarized below. Question 7 (see Table 1) asked the faculty members to select appropriate definitions of plagiarism from five choices. As the table shows, the greatest concern was the act of students appropriating others' ideas and words and presenting them as their own. Faculty seemed to be less concerned about the lack of quotation marks or borrowing without proper citation.

Table 1
Defining Plagiarism

<p>Which one or more of the following definitions would best describe your understanding of the term "plagiarism"?</p> <p>a. <u>79%</u> Plagiarism is copying without attribution.</p> <p>b. <u>62%</u> Plagiarism is paraphrasing without attribution.</p> <p>c. <u>84%</u> Plagiarism is taking someone else's ideas and presenting them as your own</p> <p>d. <u>81%</u> Plagiarism is taking someone else's words and presenting them as your own.</p> <p>e. <u>33%</u> Plagiarism is not using quotation marks when needed.</p>
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The results from the questionnaire indicated that approximately half of the assignments given at the university were written assignments (Question 6 in Appendix 1). In Question 10, the vast majority of the faculty were not familiar with the institution's policy on plagiarism (see Appendix 2 for the policy); they were, however, familiar with their individual departments' policies on plagiarism (Question 11). Considering the fact that nearly two-thirds of the faculty had *never* or *rarely* encountered plagiarized work (Question 12), there may not have been a need to look into the university's policy: the department policy may have been sufficient. Responses to Question 13 indicated that most faculty took it upon themselves to approach students directly with suspected cases of plagiarism. A few sent students to the department head without talking to them, and one-third failed the student on either the assignment or for the course. The faculty reported that traditional undergraduate students typically had more problems with plagiarism (70%) than either graduate students (18%) or non-traditional students (12%). They noted no

difference between U.S. students and international students in the responses (Question 15).

The teachers said they were aware of their students' abilities and used that knowledge to detect cases of plagiarism. They reported that they became aware of plagiarism in student writing when the voice or the quality of information changed (Question 14). On Question 16, the students who *usually plagiarize* were typically *below average* or *average* (48% and 37%, respectively). Other responses to this question indicated that the faculty saw three basic reasons for plagiarizing: lack of competence on the part of the student; intent to deceive; and lack of understanding of the culture of research writing and of the code of academic honesty.

Results: Faculty Judgments about Plagiarism

In this section, we present the results of the items in our questionnaire which involved making judgments about plagiarism. There were four short original texts followed by authentic student uses of the texts. The university faculty members were asked to first decide whether the student plagiarized the text and then, if they thought the student had plagiarized, give reasons to explain their judgment. The "reasons" were subsequently categorized into three groups: *taking someone else's words* (linguistic plagiarism); *taking someone else's ideas* (conceptual plagiarism), and *lacking proper attribution* (technical plagiarism). The third grouping of reasons is at a higher level of generality since giving a source or using quotation marks could eliminate the other two kinds of plagiarism, but our primary concern was to capture faculty perceptions of plagiarism rather than to establish fixed categories. (It should be noted that the percentages below each question may not equal 100% because some respondents gave more than one reason or none at all.)

In each of the tables below, the original text is followed by the student uses of the same text. The underlining in the student renderings indicates the exact appropriation of language from the original. In the first example, Table 2, we have two student uses of Text A. Student 1 takes only the key words *time* and *activity* from the original and uses synonyms for the concepts of *going up* and *going down*, yet 20% of the university teachers felt that the student had plagiarized. Nearly three-fourths of those who thought that there was plagiarism, saw *lack of proper attribution* as the problem. In contrast to the first student, Student 2 takes the exact words of the original and only 30% of the teachers regarded this rendering as plagiarism. The increase in the percentage of teachers who saw this student's work as "taking someone else's words" indicates an awareness of the act of appropriating exact words; however, 56% of the sample did not feel that the writing was plagiarized. This fact clearly raises the question of whether there is a shared, stable definition among university faculty of what constitutes plagiarism.

Table 2
Text A

The great property of time for studying social change is that, if time in one activity goes up, time in another activity has to go down.	
Student 1	At the beginning he said that there is no exact information about what people do with their time and the way of measuring that is that <u>if the <i>time</i> on the other <i>activity</i> increases, then the <i>time</i> on the other <i>activity</i> decreases.</u>
	Plagiarized? Yes <u>20%</u> No <u>65%</u> Undecided <u>15%</u>
	If Yes, why?
	Taking someone else's words 20%
	Taking someone else's ideas 1%
	Lacks proper attribution 73%
Student 2	The study shows <u>that if time in one activity goes up, time in another activity has to go down.</u>
	Plagiarized? Yes <u>30%</u> No <u>56%</u> Undecided <u>14%</u>
	If Yes, why?
	Taking someone else's words 28%
	Taking someone else's ideas 6%
	Lacks proper attribution 76%

Table 3
Text B

Much of that extra free time has gone into increased TV watching. Physical exercise and sports activities have also gone up.	
Student 3	The greatest increase is in the time spent <u>watching TV, sports activities and physical exercise.</u>
	Plagiarized? Yes <u>52%</u> No <u>40%</u> Undecided <u>8%</u>
	If Yes, why?
	Taking someone else's words 15%
	Taking someone else's ideas 16%
	Lacks proper attribution 77%

Table 3 shows that Student 3 took six of the key words from the original, and changed the order of the words. The word *increase* was changed from a verb to a noun. In spite of the student's efforts to change parts of speech and vary the order of the elements, over half of the teachers felt that the student had plagiarized. As in the examples above, those who thought it was plagiarized mentioned *lack of proper attribution* as the main reason.

In using Text C, shown below, Student 4 completely appropriates the final clause from the original, uses two key words, "organization" and "working," and also uses "to do" but not with the same meaning as "to do" in the original. The concept of "working women" is paraphrased as (women) "working outside the home." Over half of the teachers felt that the student had plagiarized. Although this student clearly modified the original text to a greater extent than Student 2 did with Text A above, over 20% more of the teachers judged this rendering as plagiarism.

Table 4
Text C

<p>It probably has to do with organization, like anything else related to time use. Working women appear to organize their housework more efficiently, getting an equivalent amount of work done in less time.</p>	
Student 4	They are trying <u>to do it with organization: working</u> outside the home and <u>getting an equivalent amount of work done in less time.</u>
<p>Plagiarized? Yes <u>52%</u> No <u>41%</u> Undecided <u>7%</u></p>	
<p>If Yes, why?</p>	
<p>Taking someone else's words 30%</p>	
<p>Taking someone else's ideas 12%</p>	
<p>Lacks proper attribution 65%</p>	

Approximately half of the sample of university teachers judged the renderings of both Text C and Text B as plagiarism. In both cases, there was some effort on the part of the student to paraphrase and to vary the order of the elements in the sentences, but it appears that this effort does not have a significant impact on the faculty reader.

Table 5
Text D

<p>John P. Robinson is a sociology professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, and director of the Americans' Use of Time Project.</p>	
Student 5	The author gives the reader a lot of information about how Americans spend time in a discussion with <u>John P. Robinson</u> who <u>is a sociology professor at the University of Maryland and director of the American Use of Time Project.</u>
<p>Plagiarized? Yes <u>6%</u> No <u>91%</u> Undecided <u>3%</u></p>	
<p>If Yes, why?</p>	
<p>Taking someone else's words 19%</p>	
<p>Taking someone else's ideas 29%</p>	
<p>Lacks proper attribution 44%</p>	

The results for the following original text, Text D, were particularly interesting in our effort to isolate the features that university teachers attend to in

judging student texts for plagiarism. The student rendering for Text D contains all of the words from the original except two ("College Park"), yet only 6% of the sample of university teachers judged the student text as plagiarism.

The only marked difference between this example and the ones above, Texts A, B and C, is that Student 5 makes a clear reference to the author of the original text. Perhaps this reference is sufficient evidence to the faculty reader that the student is aware of the authorship of the text. Of the 6% who thought that the text was plagiarized, fewer than half mentioned *lack of proper attribution* as the reason for the plagiarism. This example suggests that efforts to make a distinction between the writer's voice and the voices of others, regardless of the number of exact words and phrases that are used, may be sufficient to minimize suspicions of plagiarism.

Table 7
Do You Suspect Plagiarism?

<i>Do the following excerpts raise questions in your mind about the possibility of plagiarism?</i>	
1. When we look like we are the children who we want to understand and help, such statements seem almost a declaration of irrelevance.	
Plagiarized? Yes <u>51%</u> No <u>46%</u> Undecided <u>3%</u>	
If Yes, why?	
Taking someone else's words	80%
Taking someone else's ideas	23%
Lacks proper attribution	9%
2. There would be 10,000 to 25,000 cases of potential thyroid tumours from iodine absorbed from contaminated milk, so many of the scientists said there would be troubles.	
Plagiarized? Yes <u>58%</u> No <u>39%</u> Undecided <u>3%</u>	
If Yes, why?	
Taking someone else's words	21%
Taking someone else's ideas	26%
Lacks proper attribution	59%
3. A child who might produce any sentence whatever - such a child would likely to be institutionalized; even more so if not only sentences, but also speech or silence was random, unpredictable.	
Plagiarized? Yes <u>50%</u> No <u>47%</u> Undecided <u>3%</u>	
If Yes, why?	
Taking someone else's words	60%
Taking someone else's ideas	23%
Lacks proper attribution	21%

We included a second set of student texts in our questionnaire (Question 9 in Appendix 1) which were not accompanied by the original texts. We asked the faculty members to judge the writing for possible plagiarism. The choices were the

same as for the student texts above, and as in the previous examples, the teachers were asked to give reasons if they judged the writing to be plagiarized.

The responses to the three short texts in this part of the questionnaire suggested the lack of a shared definition or understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. The highest agreement (58% on Sentence 2) was most likely based on the reaction to citing a fact, "10,000 to 25,000 cases...", without giving a source. The agreement may also have been connected to the use of the British spelling *tumours* rather than *tumors* in a U.S. academic context.

Sentences 1 and 3 elicited similar responses from the faculty: approximately half of the sample felt that the sentences were plagiarized. In both cases, they cited *taking someone else's words* as the most important reason for their judgment. Although Sentence 1 may be difficult for many of us to process, particularly out of context, it is most likely that the phrase *almost a declaration of irrelevance* triggered the faculty response. For those who felt that Sentence 3 was plagiarized, *taking someone else's words* was also given as the main reason. Sentence 3 appears to be patched together, and like Sentence 1, may be difficult to process. The use of the phrase *random, unpredictable* at the end of the sentence may also have been a reason for the reaction from the teachers.

The faculty responses to the texts in this question combined with those to the previous texts indicated that although there may be some shared understanding about plagiarism, as was seen in Text D above, it is unlikely that there is a widely shared, stable definition of what constitutes plagiarism, even in a highly homogenous sample of U.S. academics. We hope that this finding, simple as it is, provokes us as teachers to examine our expectations and values in regard to plagiarism.

Implications of the Study

Although the findings of our study are far from definitive, we feel that the demonstrated lack of agreement on what constitutes plagiarism across the judgment items presented above should encourage us to rethink our individual beliefs about "academic honesty" and also about the nature of text. As English becomes firmly entrenched as the international language, it is important for us to become aware of the values we attach to the language. Second language learners and users from a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds are now obliged to use English for their international communication, but are they also obliged to share the values that have been historically attached to English and English-speaking cultures? Judgments about plagiarism are made on a regular basis in our own classrooms, within our disciplines, on an interdisciplinary level, and on an institutional level. Students' grades on papers and in courses as well as their status as "students in good standing" at an institution can be affected by the judgments we make about plagiarism.

This dilemma is acutely apparent in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings where native cultural values and expectations regarding plagiarism may be in conflict with the expectations and values of those teaching the language. Is it not incumbent on those teaching in EFL contexts to show respect for local educational and cultural traditions by accepting the existing practices regarding the creation and use of text? If the findings of the present study do indeed reflect wider realities

about the lack of a shared, stable understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, aren't we in fact imposing our values on the students as we judge their writing?

Although there are certainly no simple answers to the questions raised in this paper, there are ways that we can begin to gain a better understanding of the complexities of plagiarism. First, it is important that we view the values of "creativity," "originality" and "ownership" within a particular cultural, historical and educational context. Second, we need to be flexible in our conceptualization of plagiarism. We should strive to separate plagiarism committed with the intention to deceive from plagiarism that results from writing across cultures, from learning to write in a second language, or from sincere, but unsuccessful attempts to summarize and paraphrase the ideas of others. Finally, we need to begin to re-evaluate our formulations of the concept of text ownership as hypertext and the use of computers to access text become daily realities in our lives. Many feel that we are now in a paradigm shift which carries significant implications for the creation, use and ownership of text, perhaps of the magnitude of the changes brought by the invention of the printing press (Woodmansee, 1994).

As teachers, we might serve our students best by being flexible and responsive to the changes we are witnessing in textual practices. As the amount of collaborative writing increases in all spheres of our life (Lunsford and Ede, 1990), we need to find new ways to define the concepts of text authorship and ownership. The rapid expansion of English as the primary international language is demanding that we reconsider the ways in which our own value systems are implicit in our expectations of students. Perhaps it is more important for us, as teachers, to devote our energy to seeking strategies that will help students learn about the changing notion of text and to revise our expectations of how students should use text rather than to expend that energy on hunting down suspected plagiarists.

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Appendix 1

Faculty Questionnaire on Plagiarism

1. Highest degree _____ From where? _____
2. Years at EMU _____
3. Teaching hours/week _____ 4. Average class size _____
5. What level of classes do you teach?
 - a. ___ undergraduate
 - b. ___ mixed graduate and undergraduate
 - c. ___ graduate
6. What proportion of your assignments (essays, papers, reports, journals, etc.) are written?
 - a. ___ none
 - b. ___ some
 - c. ___ most
 - d. ___ all

Please describe:
7. Which one or more of the following definitions would best describe your understanding of the term "plagiarism"?
 - f. ___ Plagiarism is copying without attribution.
 - g. ___ Plagiarism is paraphrasing without attribution.
 - h. ___ Plagiarism is taking someone else's ideas and presenting them as your own.
 - i. ___ Plagiarism is taking someone else's words and presenting them as your own.
 - j. ___ Plagiarism is not using quotation marks when needed.

What would you add to the above responses?

8. Please examine the following writing samples along with accompanying source materials and evaluate for plagiarism.

Text A: **The great property of time for studying social change is that, if time in one activity goes up, time in another activity has to go down.**

Student: At the beginning he said that there is no exact information about what people do with their time and the way of measuring that is that if the time on the other activity increases, then the time on the other activity decreases.

Plagiarized? Yes ____ No ____ If yes, why?

Student: The study shows that if time in one activity goes up, time in another activity has to go down.

Plagiarized? Yes ____ No ____ If yes, why?

Text B: **Much of that extra free time has gone into increased TV watching. Physical exercise and sports activities have also gone up.**

Student: The greatest increase is in the time spent watching TV, sports activities and physical exercise.

Plagiarized? Yes ____ No ____ If yes, why?

Text C: **It probably has to do with organization, like anything else related to time use. Working women appear to organize their housework more efficiently, getting an equivalent amount of work done in less time.**

Student: They are trying to do it with organization: working outside the home and getting an equivalent amount of work done in less time.

Plagiarized? Yes ____ No ____ If yes, why?

Text D: John P. Robinson is a sociology professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, and director of the Americans' Use of Time Project.

Student: The author gives the reader a lot of information about how Americans spend time in a discussion with John P. Robinson who is a sociology professor at the University of Maryland and director of the American Use of Time Project.

Plagiarized? Yes ___ No ___ If yes, why?

9. Do the following excerpts raise questions in your mind about the possibility of plagiarism?

When we look like we are the children who we want to understand and help, such statements seem almost a declaration of irrelevance.

Yes ___ No ___ If yes, why?

There would be 10,000 to 25,000 cases of potential thyroid tumours from iodine absorbed from contaminated milk, so many of the scientists said there would be troubles.

Yes ___ No ___ If yes, why?

A child who might produce any sentence whatever – such a child would likely to be institutionalized; even more so if not only sentences, but also speech or silence was random, unpredictable.

Yes ___ No ___ If yes, why?

10. How familiar are you with EMU's policy on plagiarism?

- a. ___ very familiar
- b. ___ slightly familiar
- c. ___ not familiar
- d. ___ what policy?

11. What is your department's policy on plagiarism?

12. Specify how often you encounter plagiarized work.

(If your answer was "never" to item 12, there is no need for your to continue with the survey beyond this point. However, if you occasionally or frequently encounter episodes of plagiarism from your students, please continue with the questionnaire.)

-
13. How do you deal with your own students who plagiarize?

14. You generally identify plagiarized work by:

- a. ___ recognizing the original source.
- b. ___ recognizing a shift in the writer's voice.
- c. ___ other means (please elaborate)

15. Those students who give you trouble with plagiarism are generally (check one or more):

- a. ___ undergraduate students
- b. ___ graduate students
- c. ___ non-traditional students
- d. ___ U.S. students
- e. ___ international students

Please comment on your responses to this item.

16. Those students who plagiarize are usually:

- a. ___ above-average students
- b. ___ average students
- c. ___ below-average students
- d. ___ other (please specify)

17. What did we neglect to ask you that would contribute to our investigation of this subject?

Appendix 2

Plagiarism

Eastern Michigan University Conduct Code and Judicial Structure for Students and Student Organizations

I.A.11. Academic dishonesty

1. Students are not to engage in any form of academic dishonesty including, but not limited to, plagiarism, alteration of records, substitution of another's work representing it as the student's own, and knowingly assisting another student in engaging in any such activity.

For purposes of this section, plagiarism is defined as the knowing use, without appropriate approval, of published materials, expressions, or works of another with intent to represent the material(s) as one's own.

Eastern Michigan University