

From Copy-and-Paste to Trace-and-Learn A Qualitative Survey of Student Perceptions of Plagiarism

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Abstract

This paper presents an investigation of both Danish and international second-semester BA-students' perceptions of the problem of plagiarism. Surprisingly, the investigation proves that the students unanimously perceive plagiarism as directly copying other people's texts or entire works. Some of them even use the term <copy-and-paste> to illustrate this, suggesting that their perception is closely linked to their use of the internet. This generally one-dimensional perception calls for immediate repair work in the teaching of English academic writing in International Study Programmes at Roskilde University.

I. Introduction and background

This article presents an investigation of both Danish and international second-semester BA-students' perceptions of plagiarism. The 35 students attend the International Basic Studies Programme in the Humanities at Roskilde University, Denmark. The study is based on a questionnaire, and the purpose is to suggest improved ways of teaching students at international programmes to become better academic writers in English as a foreign language and thus avoid plagiarism.

My motivation for undertaking this investigation is the contention that it is crucial to understand the students' perceptions before taking any action. You cannot teach good academic writing skills and reference practice,

including avoiding plagiarism, if the students do not see plagiarism as the teacher does. Moreover, having heard lots of rumours of an increase in plagiarism by especially international students, I wanted to take action in this particular regard before embarking on a course in academic writing.

My study takes place at Roskilde University which is a state university founded in 1972 with three bachelor programmes in the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences respectively. All BA-programmes consist of two years of basic studies, which are highly interdisciplinary and problem-oriented, and, lastly, one year of specialized studies. The programmes are taught in both Danish and English which means that there are six basic studies programmes in total.

II. Research question

Scholars, like me, usually think of plagiarism as a moral issue: an offence to or even theft of hard-working colleagues' production of knowledge, but do today's students think so too? Their world is embedded in information technology, i-phones and mobile phones with infinite possibilities of creating and exchanging networks of bits and pieces of information taken from all sources available. But how do they relate to such «intertextuality» in academic writing? After all, according to Otto Kruse, «intertextuality» is a defining feature of academic discourse:

Academic discourse, on the surface, is based on the fact that academic writers read others' works and respond to them. This exchange of ideas leads to the result that the texts are connected with each other. Each text depends on the existence of many other texts, which themselves were written on the basis of former texts. Academic texts are, therefore, highly redundant, in that they repeat to a large extent what has already been published. Only a small portion of them is innovative (Kruse 2003: 26).

Furthermore, academic intertextuality is more than just a web of texts. As Chandrasoma, Thompson and Pennycook propose, academic intertextuality consists of «multiple strands of knowledge within texts designed to produce desired meaning» (Chandrasoma, Thompson and Pennycook 2004: 175). In this way, intertextuality plays both a conceptual, complimentary and metalinguistic role in student assignments (ibid. 175).

Do the students know how to distinguish the interconnectedness of academic works and knowledge from plagiarism? And consequently, how do they define and perceive of plagiarism in general?

III. Definitions

Before trying to answer these questions, we need to discuss what we as teachers actually mean by plagiarism. The following famous and humorous quotes may illustrate the complexity of narrow definitions:

- Copy from one, it's plagiarism; copy from two, it's research (Wilson Mitzner)
- Originality is nothing but judicious plagiarism (Voltaire)
- Self-plagiarism is style (Alfred Hitchcock)

Surely, these tongue-in-cheek definitions are not to be found in university regulations on academic honesty. Nevertheless, the issue of «copying» seems to be a favourite defining term, both in dictionary definitions and in my student responses, which I return to later on:

Plagiarism:

- a piece of writing that has been copied from someone else and is presented as being your own work (www.dictionary.com)

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And in Webster's online dictionary copying is a synonym of plagiarising:

Borrowing	Borrowed plumes; plagiarism; (thieving).
Copy	Servile copy, servile imitation; plagiarism, counterfeit, fake; (deception); pasticcio.
Imitation	Plagiarism; forgery, counterfeit; (falsehood); celluloid.
Stealing	Noun: stealing; Verb: theft, thievery, latrocinium, direption; abstraction, appropriation; plagiary, plagiarism; autoplagiarism; latrocinium.

(<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/plagiarism>)

In Roskilde University's regulations, however, the word «plagiarism» is not mentioned at all. This is how plagiarism is rendered on the university website:

Examples of examination fraud and misconduct:
- To fail to provide proper citation and/or source reference – also when you submit work you have previously presented, e.g. in projects that form the basis of the examination (Roskilde University Regulations).

The University explains that they have not had the resources to design lengthy descriptions of plagiarism, and besides, their experience tells them that cases of plagiarism are more manageable if a certain degree of flexibility is allowed as it is difficult to categorise all cases of fraud as either plagiarism or not. Then it is up to each department and board of studies to make estimations from case to case before passing them on to the university vice chancellor. The problem remains that the students may not be quite aware of when to

cite and give references, and the question of fraud and misconduct (what is that, by the way?) is apparently only an issue in examinations. What about the submission of essays or drafts as part of the coursework? Is it alright to plagiarise in those?

In contrast, other international universities have elaborate descriptions and entire websites for defining and dealing with student plagiarism. At The University of Leeds, for instance, they define plagiarism as «presenting someone else's work as your own. Work means any intellectual output, and typically includes text, data, images, sound or performance» (Office of Academic Appeals & Regulation 2005). Besides this, students are guided to a wealth of links and resources on plagiarism, both in practice and in theory. But crucially, and in contrast with e.g. dictionary definitions, here «presenting» rather than «copying» others' work is stressed, and students also learn that such «intellectual output» may be more than just text and other printed material.

The question whether the open and flexible or the controlled and detailed definition is the most successful in deterring plagiarism remains uncertain and begs further research. But one thing is sure: if the teacher perceptions do not match the student perceptions, the problem stays a Gordian knot only to be solved by some drastic measures.

IV. Survey of literature

The recent surge in literature on plagiarism in academia over the last decade testifies to the difficulties of defining the concept of plagiarism (Buranen and Roy 1999; Angélie-Carter 2000; Decoo 2002; Briggs 2003; Price 2002; Whitley and Keith-Spiegel 2002). Some recent strands account for the cultural problems of international students not being familiar with the Western concept of intellectual property (Jin and Cortazzi 1993; Juwah, Lal and Beloucif 2006) and others discuss and testify to the linguistic problems speakers of English as a foreign language may face when trying to re-formulate the language of their sources in their own words – when their vocabulary is more or less insufficient for writing in English in Higher Education (Bloch and Chi 1995; Roig 2001; Pecorari 2003; Shi 2004; Keck 2006; Schmidt 2006; Abasi and Akbari 2008; Pecorari 2008a and b). Interestingly, none of these issues were raised in the student questionnaires. Instead there seems to be a simplistic and one-sided understanding of plagiarism as simply copying text.

V. The study

V.1 Method

The questionnaire is modelled on Philip King's questionnaire at the English for International Students Unit, The University of Birmingham, entitled «Plagiarism: an informal investigation into international students' perceptions of the problem» (2002). It contains choices of predefined yes/no answers as well as options of free text answers. The specific questionnaire of the present study was handed out to 35 students with the following nationalities:

Danish:	26
Polish:	3
Italian:	1
Australian:	1
Chinese:	1
Singaporean:	1
Unknown:	2

A word of caution: In the data to follow the figures sometimes unfortunately do not add up to the total amount of 35 respondents. Thus when you observe that the amount of responses is less than the total number, it is because some students have refrained from answering the particular question. Another important point to keep in mind is the fact that there are no really marked differences in responses between Danish and international students. And as the students mostly consist of Danes, my data does not give rise to any presumptions about international students knowing less about the matter than the Danes or vice versa.

V.2 Data

My data are the following questions:

1. Do you know what plagiarism is?
2. Describe your understanding of plagiarism
3. Why do you think universities say that it is important to avoid plagiarism?

V.3 Analysis

The responses are as follows:

1. Do you know what plagiarism is?
Yes: 32 – No: 3 – Not sure: 1

Here one student gives an answer including both a «yes» and a «not sure» which accounts for the total of 36 responses.

2. Describe your understanding of plagiarism

How:

Copying From Others Without Acknowledgement:	26
Taking From Others Without Acknowledgment:	1
Using Others' Texts / Words Without Acknowledgement:	5
Stealing From Others:	2

The categories here and elsewhere in my study are a condensation of the selected verbs chosen by the students to describe the action of plagiarising.

It is clear that the major cognitive perception of plagiarism is to *copy* from others without acknowledgement. Perhaps «copying» seems less severe to the students than actually «taking» or «stealing» as it denotes imitation or reproduction rather than seizing or capturing something by criminal action.

The preference for the idea of copying may also originate from the «copy-and-paste» manoeuvre we as writers so often make use of in our word processors. Some of the Danish students actually use this expression to explain their understanding of plagiarism.

Two student responses that strike me when asked to describe their understanding of plagiarism are the following:

- «When one person copies another persons work using more than six of their words in a row» (unspecified nationality)
- «It's a shameful thing to plagiarism» (Chinese)

The first response implies that the student may think it is alright to plagiarise if the wording consists of less than six words. The second response clearly expresses an unwillingness or hesitancy towards giving a personal understanding. What the student is only certain about is the fact that it is shameful to plagiarise.

What:

Texts:	17
Work(S):	5
Material:	1
Words:	0
Terms:	0
Concepts:	0
Ideas:	2
Information:	1
Sources:	1
Inventions:	0

Pictures:	0
Something / Stuff:	5

Where:

From The Internet:	3
From Published Texts / Works:	6

When describing *what* students may plagiarise, the responses point to entire texts and others' work as such, or works in plural, but few seem to understand that plagiarism also includes the appropriation of others' ideas, concepts, apt terms or phrases or entire inventions. This suggests, to me at least, that unintentional plagiarism of these features may be more extensive than we think.

As we can see, few students specify where the plagiarised material may come from, and among those who explain this, published works mostly come to their minds. Those who relate to the internet relate to this as the only suggested source of «inspiration».

3. Why do you think universities say that it is important to avoid plagiarism?

RELATING TO OTHERS: MORALITY

Stealing/cheating/crime/illegal	6
Not good/immoral	2
Laziness	1

RELATING TO OTHERS: RESPECT

(Lack of) respect for others' rights	0
(Lack of) respect for others' work/originality	3
(Lack of) respect for others' copyright	1

RELATING TO SELF: ACADEMIC SKILLS

Students do not learn anything	6
Students must develop their own understanding	8

RELATING TO SELF: PERFORMANCE

Students are to produce their own individual work	5
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Some students had more than one answer to this question, but the predominant concern for the students is their own situation as learners developing their own knowledge and understanding of things. The other major concern is the criminal issue as the students mostly reply that plagiarism is illegal and nothing but cheating.

Only one student is aware of the copyright issue, and

no students express any concern with the concept of general academic honesty and integrity.

V.4 Results

91,4 % know what plagiarism is

74,3 % define plagiarism as copying

48,6 % regard the objects of plagiarism to be entire texts

54,3 % think academic plagiarism is a problem related to the self (skills and performance)

37,1 % think academic plagiarism is a problem related to others (morality and respect)

These findings suggest that the students need help in realising that plagiarism is much more than just copying entire texts, and that the major problems only have to do with the individual student's skills and performance when writing. Students need to understand that plagiarism may happen accidentally through e.g. insufficiently mastered summaries, paraphrases or referencing systems, and that all cases of plagiarism have serious bearings on overall academic standards of honesty and integrity.

VI. Discussion and conclusions

The results suggest that the students do not know about the heritage of Western copyright ideas and the legacy of intellectual property. As we must not forget that the present students are second-semester BA-students, it is natural for them to be more or less ignorant of these matters. Thus I suggest that EAP teachers make a point out of not only explaining the conventions of academic writing, but also HOW these conventions came about, WHEN they appeared, and WHY we have them. Thus, the aim with this article is not to describe how teachers can be better equipped in detecting plagiarism, e.g. by using various fancy detection tools, or how students can improve the technicalities of giving references and including citations. The pertinent aim, to me at least, seems to be a plead for a re-introduction of the foundations of science in an electronic age where a few quick clicks with the mouse seem to be the ruling factor. In Walden and Peacock's contribution on teaching writing in the digital age, they point out, for example, how the shift from slow, old-fashioned handwriting to word processing has enabled a tremendous increase in the gathering of knowledge, thus making «copy-and-paste» a natural and resourceful move to any writer (138-39). I rather opt for a «trace-and-learn» version where

the old-fashioned rationale for undertaking scientific investigations in the first place are highlighted.

Here I want to refer to Colin Neville's handbook *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism* (2007) which gives an excellent overview of the Western historical development of the concepts of plagiarism and copyright from the Roman jurists, through the printing of the Christian Bible in Germany and the Copyright Act in Great Britain in 1710 to the further development of printing and universities in Europe and the USA in the nineteenth century which paved the way for a standardisation of references and a pervasive sense of acknowledgment to sources in academic scholarship: «There was a rigorous testing of knowledge and, as part of this, students were expected to cite the origins of ideas and offer detailed analysis and interpretations of sources. Citing and analysing the works of authors became a way for students to demonstrate their scholarly engagement with the text» (Neville 2007: 3).¹

Neville also provides a clear and pedagogical list of principles for referencing in academic writing:

1. The principle of intellectual property: «someone can claim ownership of an idea if it has been presented in a <fixed> way» (Neville 2007: 7).
2. The principle of access: Identification of sources spreads knowledge as readers may locate and use them themselves.
3. The principle of economy: This identification should be quick and easy.
4. The principle of standardisation: Everyone who has learned the practice may gain access to the knowledge.
5. The principle of transparency: There must be no doubt as to who says what when and where, and terms should be precise and unambiguous to enable understanding.

The last item is essential in comprehending the foundations of science. We need to be able to identify and trace the origin of ideas so that due credit may be given to the originator in accordance with the Western «capitalist' principle of intellectual property. This includes a sense of historical understanding of where and how ideas and words were formed, how they have been used throughout various periods and by various

¹ See also the historical chapter in Pecorari 2008 pp. 11-12.

«schools' of thought, and how they have changed their meaning and significance to people.

This aspect is also important for the testing of both the validity of the reference statements and the student's statements discussing or arguing for or against the particular statement of the secondary source. No teacher can get to the bottom of the validity of the student's results without being able to see through and back-track the web of voices, claims and points of view in the assignment. Data is not convincing if it appears «out of the blue». This is not a capitalist invention, however, but dates back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle's theories of rhetoric around 350 BC (Neville 2007: 10). Transparency, then, seems to be a key word to be taught in any class in EAP.

Eventually, giving references is also a sign of appreciation: «a modest genuflection to the work of others. It is about showing courtesy and respect, and about honouring the hard work of writers and commentators – by acknowledging them in your assignments» (Neville 2007: 10). This aspect is one of the crucial, missing links in the student questionnaire responses. Their main concern is themselves and their own learning situations, but they also need to grasp the web of knowledge and tradition they have engaged themselves in, including the real-life people involved. They need to understand that they have become part of a bigger international community than their everyday reading group, thus being able to see further than their own noses.

If students are presented with these ideas, and if they are allowed to reflect on them and discuss them, perhaps in comparison with the copy-and-paste trends in the popular culture they know so well, they may be brought to understand that the new findings that create and develop new knowledge do not originate in copying and pasting what has already been said and done, but by *seeing through* the academic intertextual network of using previous knowledge and giving transparent references to them. They may also be brought to understand the moral responsibility of creating and transforming knowledge, which will ultimately ensure their entrance in the international scientific discourse community.² They will go from «mimic» to «master», as Angéilil-Carter calls it (2000). This may eventually give them an idea of what constitutes academic integrity

2 Cf. Smeets and Solé's discussion of «knowledge-telling» vs. «knowledge-transforming» in overcoming plagiarism in synthesis assignments (2008).

versus academic «fraud» and «misconduct», which were the key words in Roskilde University's regulations. And this may not only be a case at this particular university, but a case for all international universities.

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