



Volume 49 | Issue 1

Article 4

2006

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Tami Echavarria Robinson
Whitworth University

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Recommended Citation

Echavarria Robinson, Tami (2006) "Cut-and-Paste Plagiarism: Teaching Student Researchers Boundaries," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 49: Iss. 1, Article 4.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/2572-7478.1696>

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Cut-and-Paste Plagiarism:

Teaching Student Researchers Boundaries

Legal, Moral or Ethical Issue

While there is general agreement that copyright infringement is a legal issue, there is disagreement that plagiarism is a legal issue. Some authors view it only as an academic issue or an ethical issue, failing to recognize its connection, particularly in case law, to copyright infringement. For instance, Laura McCarty points out that plagiarism is almost legally invisible in legal reference sources (McCarty, 2000, p.17). Ronald B. Standler notes that it is rarely discussed in legal texts and journals (Standler, 2000, p.1). But McCarty and Standler come to very different conclusions regarding whether plagiarism is a legal issue and their position on it.

In many societies, expression is regarded as the property of its author or artistic creator. Copyright is a legal concept and the infringement of it is governed by statutory law. For the many nations, including the United States, that ratified the 1886 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, “plagiarism – either by verbatim copying or paraphrasing – is infringement of a copyright, a kind of tort” (Standler, 2000, p.1). Even with original alterations copying can be copyright infringement when the idea or meaning is unaltered. United States case law specifically prohibits trivial changes in copied text in order to avoid copyright infringement. Standler believes that such copying is also plagiarism and that plagiarism is not only an ethical and academic issue but a legal issue too. The owner of a copyright could sue a plagiarist in federal court for violation of the copyright (Standler, 2000, pp.3-4). Ralph D. Mawdsley agrees that “although it could be possible to have a copyright violation without finding plagiarism, it would seem more probable in such situations that copyright and plagiarism violations would overlap” (Mawdsley, 1986, p.87). There is no consensus, with other writers, especially those outside the legal profession, who do not consider plagiarism to be a legal term but rather a matter of literary or academic ethics, and there is considerable disagreement and confusion over what actually constitutes plagiarism versus paraphrasing.

In Standler’s examination of why plagiarism is wrong, he considers both the student and the faculty. He offers the fundamental goal of education to produce students who can evaluate ideas, using both analysis and synthesis, to produce significant original thoughts, and counters that copying does not demonstrate the skill or level of understanding that an educated person is reasonably expected to have. He points out that professors and researchers are hired, promoted, and tenured on the reputation of their discoveries of new knowledge and original analysis of old ideas as evidenced in their publications. When one takes credit for what improperly was taken from someone else, the person commits fraud. “The essence of plagiarism is deceit” (Standler, 2000, p.8). Edward M. White puts it another way, “Plagiarism is outrageous because it reverses education itself: instead of becoming more of an independent thinker and hence developing increased integrity as an individual, the plagiarist denies such integrity and hence the possibility of learning” (White, 1999, p.210).

Over time, our country has gotten more religiously diverse and we are no longer a predominantly Christian nation. Our society has gotten away from the Biblical guidance of values, ethics and morals that previous generations in our country lived by. American standards of acceptability have changed. Our values have shifted and competitive ownership is more highly regarded than integrity or scholarship. The current trends in thinking such as situational ethics, deconstructionist thinking and the common acceptability of rationalizations to justify thinking and actions contribute to the confusion.

The Literature on Plagiarism

The literature in the fields of Library and Information Science, Education, and English contains many publications addressing the issues of plagiarism and copyright. The various authors differ in whether they think plagiarism is a legal issue, how to approach these issues, and how to handle their existence in the arena of academic dishonesty. Essentially, these writings

*Tami Echavarria Robinson
Coordinator of Instructional Services
Harriet Cheney Cowles Library
Whitworth University
Spokane, Washington*

ABSTRACT:

Librarians affiliated with educational institutions, as members of an academic community, participate in teaching students and future scholars how they share in the responsibility of upholding ethical standards of scholarship and values of academic honesty. Academic honesty, in its variant forms, was part of issues in education long before the introduction of computers. Two forms, plagiarism and copyright infringement, were chronic problems in the print realm and present additional dimensions in today’s electronic environment. The causes of copyright infringement and plagiarism are extensive and complex. Divergent positions are represented in the literature on how to deal with these issues. They are not only legal issues, but moral and ethical issues as well.

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fall into one of five positions represented in the literature on plagiarism: 1) de-stigmatize plagiarism, 2) punitive measures, 3) faculty vigilance, 4) “patchwriting” as process, and 5) teach plagiarism and copyright concepts.

One position found in the literature is the desire to de-stigmatize plagiarism. Its proponents essentially rationalize the convenience, expediency and social acceptance of cut-and-paste plagiarism and consider it a creative process. Laura McCarty gives an example of electronic opportunism backed by social acceptance and argues that ideas cannot be copyrighted, and although they can be plagiarized, using others’ ideas creatively is acceptable. She suggests the euphemisms “‘model,’ ‘borrow,’ ‘imitate,’ ‘copy,’ and ‘share’” instead of the term “plagiarize” and chooses “borrowing is beautiful” to express her position (McCarty, 2000, p.16). Laurie Stearns views plagiarism as “a failure of the creative process” and considers that creativity relies on the “interdependence of human creative efforts” on what was created before, a process that is socially desirable. She believes that “words are meant to be shared, not possessed.” (Stearns, 1999, pp. 9,13). There seems to be a thread of social acceptance of the practice that weaves through the writings of those who would like to de-stigmatize plagiarism. Tami Oliphant adds a perspective worth noting which is a cultural factor rather than a rationalization for plagiarizing. “Some students find the idea that an individual can ‘own’ language difficult to understand, they may believe that copying is a high form of flattery, or they may believe that group work has precedence over individual work” (Oliphant, 2002, p.79).

A second position is that of dealing with plagiarism in a punitive manner. William L. Scurrah asks the question, “How did we come to find ourselves using the rhetoric of crime and punishment on our students rather than a rhetoric more attuned to our actual mission?” (Scurrah 2001, p.3). While endorsing the teaching of academic honesty, students should be held accountable by faculty for using information inappropriately. “Strong negative consequences to students who plagiarize will educate those who do wrong and may help to change the student culture of ‘taking the easy approach’ to assignments” (Austin, 1999, p.24). Those students who flippantly think that plagiarism is not a big

deal may need an attitude adjustment to see plagiarism as theft. While Edward M. White proposes teaching students the meaning and importance of plagiarism, he takes a firm stand against tolerating it, “We need to confront an unethical and damaging dishonesty that requires both personal and institutional condemnation” (White, 1999, p.205).

Another position prevalent in the literature is the recommendation to increase faculty vigilance. This position is applicable to librarians as well as classroom faculty, especially in cooperation. Whether students are plagiarizing intentionally to beat the system or because they innocently and mistakenly assume everything on the Internet is in the public domain and thus available for copying, those who espouse this view encourage faculty to outwit the students. It has faculty taking on the role of being always a step ahead of the students as technology savvy plagiarism police. Scott Stebelman offers librarians new methods of detection, believing that academic integrity will be strengthened and, in the process, “students will also be the beneficiaries of increased faculty vigilance” (Stebelman, 1998, p.50). Kim McMurtry offers specific strategies including designing assignments that require higher order thinking skills and checking student papers against a plagiarism detection service to “encourage educators to do what they can to help students maintain academic integrity” (McMurtry, 2001, p.41). Other labor and time intensive strategies suggested in the literature include collecting drafts of papers, copies of the sources used, checking all bibliography entries, requiring oral presentations, using plagiarism detection services, and increasing student accountability. One such practice, that of routinely submitting student papers to plagiarism detection services to detect cut-and-paste plagiarism, raises the important concern of whether this violates students’ rights. Rebecca Moore Howard uses the term “patchwriting” to describe a process of learning that involves plagiarism for a time. “Patchwriting ... can be an effective means of helping the writer understand difficult material; blending the words and paraphrasing of the source with one’s own words and phrasing may have helped the student comprehend the source” (Howard, 1995, p.800). She makes the distinction between allowing for patchwriting as a learning process

and its unacceptability as a practice for public writing, which includes papers submitted for a grade. Her position is that patchwriting aids a student toward comprehension and demonstrates that the student does not yet understand the source. It is a transition phase in the process of learning to write well, “a student’s progress toward membership in a discourse community” and should be viewed as such. It is “a pedagogical opportunity, not a judicial problem” (Howard, 1995, p.788). Karla Saari Kitalong, in her examination of how new technological writing practices mesh and clash with traditional academic views on plagiarism, points out that because electronic contexts are not yet a seamless part of our everyday life, they “destabilize our definition of plagiarism and confuse what we think of as our repertoire of available responses” (Kitalong, 1998, p.255). She agrees with Howard, saying that “patchwriting occurs as a transitional thinking phase between research and the final stages of writing. It becomes problematic only when it is incorporated into the final form of the work, that is, when it moves from the private to the public realm” (Kitalong, 1998, p.260).

Teaching the concepts of plagiarism and copyright is another view taken by legal experts, teachers and librarians alike. Keith Gresham, who thinks plagiarism is only a moral and ethical concept, writes that librarians have an ethical obligation to take part in specifically teaching students their responsibility of upholding ethical standards of scholarship. He goes on to emphasize that “library users need to understand that information from the Internet is still a form of intellectual property, that ethical and legal conventions apply to electronic information, and that the creation of a bibliographic citation for attribution of such information is possible” (Gresham, 1996, p.48). For librarians, it is important to teach succinctly about plagiarism, copyright and citation in every bibliographic instruction session. As part of a team with teaching faculty, librarians and faculty each do their part. The thrust of this position is that “preventing plagiarism before it happens is better than detecting it after the event” (Auer, 2001, p.425).

Student Attitudes

The World Wide Web seamlessly makes ideas and information available and in so doing blurs

the distinction between the ideas and their sources. It “can make it easy to forget not only where one got one’s ideas, but that one ‘got’ them at all” (Scurrah, 2001, p.9). Students, who are not yet critical in their analysis of information retrieval, mistakenly see the Web as an information resource instead of a conduit for information. They often lack a deep understanding of what they are looking for, have difficulty in formulating research questions, and believe that search engines interpret their queries so as to produce relevant results. Students are web consumers who easily settle for whatever they find, according to D. Scott Brandt (Brandt, 2002, pp.1,3). Marylaine Block candidly describes student information seeking behavior, “Our students love the net, which is OK. The problem is, they also trust it, which is not” (Block, 2002, p.12).

College students are in a phase of life where they are still learning about themselves and the world they live in, determining their values, and finding out what actions and behaviors are appropriate in society (Austin, 1999, p.30). Study after study shows the highest percentage of cheating ever among both high school and college students today.

Students cavalierly believe it is “no big deal,” 80% admit to cheating in school, and 90% believe cheaters never pay for their academic fraud (Kleiner, 1999, p.56). The ends justify the means in a culture where grades are the ticket to scholarships and graduate schools. Rondi Adamson cites Shirley Katz, an associate to the office of the legal counsel of York University in Canada, “‘Students don’t think you can be successful and honest at the same time’ ... one thing all of these students have in common, she says, is that they can’t grasp what the purpose of education is. They think it means good marks

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Reasons Students Plagiarize

- Not understanding academic integrity and honesty, intellectual property, fair use, collaboration, plagiarism, copyright, and paraphrasing. Few teachers discuss these concepts thoroughly with students.
- Overworked and stressed students look for an easy way out.
- Intense competition for college admission and scholarships seem to justify whatever it takes to get the result.
- Indifference to cheating as seen in the social climate (e.g., among CEOs, politicians and other role models).
- Lack of understanding of oneself as taking a place in the community of learners and thinkers, and acknowledging the contributions of earlier thinkers.
- Lack of understanding of construction and application of citation conventions.
- Confusing Internet sources that lack readily identifiable citation characteristics.
- Misguided belief that everything on the Internet is in the public domain and can be taken and used without attribution.
- Misunderstanding that any information found in libraries is fair use and does not require proper attribution.
- Inability to see the value of being honest when it may mean getting a lower grade.
- Uncertainty or confusion about what behaviors constitute dishonesty.
- Situational ethics instead of Christian ethics.

and nothing more” (Adamson, 2000, p.F1). Applied to the task of writing papers, they are product oriented, intent on making their final product sound right or look good. They are inclined toward glib and simplistic understandings, not the process of gathering and synthesizing information, seeking meaning or learning (McGregor, 1998, p.8).

Barry M. Kroll suggests that we approach teaching plagiarism issues and concepts to students by meeting them where they are in their understanding. In his study, he found that the way students conceptualize “plagiarism involves three ethical issues: fairness, individual responsibility, and ownership” (Kroll, 1988, pp.219). Students view plagiarism as wrong because it is unfair to authors and students alike. The desire for a just and fair system of rewards is a fundamental issue to college students. They also perceive that it is wrong because it violates their individual responsibilities to make the most of their educational opportunities (Kroll, 1988, pp.219-220). And they understand that stealing is wrong in that it disrespects the ownership rights of others. Students have a sense of ownership when they creatively write and teaching concepts of plagiarism and copyright can begin with personalizing the lesson to that which they themselves have created.

A Challenge

If that sounds too bleak, all hope is not lost. Ethics and values are role modeled and taught. Christian parents, teachers, librarians and businessmen all serve as role models and instructors for college students. Students will always be overscheduled, stressed out, and willing to spend their parents' money so they can slack off. Business people of questionable ethics will always be around to market temptations and ready to take that money. But the real issue is the integrity of students. They must learn that plagiarism is wrong because they have a moral, ethical, and legal responsibility to abide by copyright law and participate in academic honesty. We must include them in the academic discourse in ways that engage them and help them understand their place in the discourse community and in scholarship. Instead of

lamenting the moral state of students or society, why shouldn't we make teaching them academic honesty a primary objective? As librarians we have a critical role in this endeavor and we can seize our opportunities to guide the students in our academic community. Realistically, we will not wipe out all plagiarism, but we can make a difference. †

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