

Anecdotes of Plagiarism: Some Pedagogical Issues and Considerations

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Abstract

Plagiarism is a contentious issue at best. Despite the common association between teaching, learning and plagiarism, the issue is seldom seen as pedagogical in essence. For that reason, this paper presents some examples of plagiarism in the form of professional anecdotes as experienced by the three researchers. After each anecdote, a juxtaposition is made with the review of literature on issues and studies of plagiarism. The literature review will provide a larger background that makes this paper not only uniquely Malaysian but also globally relevant especially in the context of global students' mobility. In conclusion, the paper not only finds that the different and disparate perceptions of plagiarism among the lecturers and students contribute to the conflict in the process of teaching and learning, but it also evinces the idea that to communicate the ethical aspects of plagiarism is a tricky one especially when it involves students from different educational and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: plagiarism, anecdotes, pedagogical issues, students' mobility, Malaysian

1. Introduction

In early 2011 Fuzirah presented our paper entitled *Combating Plagiarism: Patterns of Plagiarism in Academic Writing* at a conference on English for Specific Purposes. In the paper, we equated plagiarism with cheating and stealing, which to our mind was quite a common observation and evaluation as we gathered the same sentiment throughout our initial readings on plagiarism. During the Q&A session, a Middle Eastern member of the audience, in a rather 'territorially animated' tone, disagreed with the equation and told us that our equating plagiarism with stealing was inaccurate or wrong. For him, stealing is a crime and plagiarism is not. Though we have read the same kind of claim in the literature, his tone gives an emotional weight to what has been staying on pages of journal articles. Plagiarism is now both personal and political. Suffice to say, his emotional response to that presentation has given birth to this paper. Needless to say, this paper is not build on emotion, but on professional considerations. As the act or even experience of plagiarism may vary from one institution, one culture, or one paradigm, from another, this paper situates plagiarism in the context of language learning.

In embryo, what the anecdote above illustrates is that the different perceptions and attitude people have towards plagiarism stem from the ontological uncertainties of the meaning of plagiarism itself. The resultant effect of this is that even though plagiarism is real, it seems rather amorphous. Nonetheless, it is important to establish that although the kind of comment given by the Middle Eastern member of the audience is not uncommon, for institutions of higher learning, admitting that their academic staff, especially those who have made their marks in academia, has plagiarized is like opening a Pandora's Box on steroid. Of course, in equating plagiarism with crime, especially in academia, we run the risk of exaggerating the degree of severity of the 'misconduct' as no one in academia, to our knowledge, has been persecuted for the "crime" or act of plagiarism. If the provost of an institution has duly taken a certain action on a plagiarist, the 'news' of the action is immediately shoved under the metaphorical carpet. Plagiarism creates a stigma that would affect the reputation of not only the plagiarist, but also more importantly to the institution. With this scenario in mind, the animated Middle Eastern guy was

right that, to a great extent, our evaluation was rather inaccurate, inchoate, and perhaps credulous. Having said that, the inaccuracy in our interpretation is the result of insufficient data available to us in the literature especially in Social Sciences and Humanities, and this paper tries to fill in that gap, albeit not completely, by providing a piece for the omnipresent puzzle.

In effect, this paper problematizes plagiarism as a pedagogical issue within the academia. By looking at some examples of plagiarism in the form of professional anecdotes as experienced by the three researchers, the framework is grounded on their professional experiences as academicians. To be able to do this, the paper is organized around the discussion on some common pedagogical (and perhaps ethical) issues deduced from these anecdotes vis-à-vis the review of literature on issues and studies of plagiarism. The literature review provides a larger context that makes this paper not only uniquely Malaysian but also globally relevant. We would argue that the different and disparate perceptions of plagiarism among the teachers and students not only contribute to the conflict in the process of teaching and learning, but it also evinces the idea that to communicate the ethical aspects of plagiarism is a tricky one especially when it involves students from different cultural and academic backgrounds.

2. Definition of Plagiarism

What is interesting about plagiarism is that despite its elusive definition in the Social Sciences and Humanities, there seems to be a unanimous “understanding” of what it is or should be. Even though different fields of study add their own nuances to what plagiarism should be in the areas, phrases like “taking the words of ideas of another person” and “using without proper acknowledgements” are ubiquitous (Culwin and Lancaster, 2009; Schiller M.R, 2005; Austin and Brown, 1999). Fintan Culwin and Thomas Lancaster (2009: 36) assert that “student plagiarism is further defined as plagiarism with the intent of gaining academics credit”. For the purpose of this paper, the amalgamation of the three elements will be used as the definition of plagiarism.

3. Anecdotes as Framework

Before we proceed with the analysis of the anecdotes, it is important for us to lay down the framework of our discussion. Crucially, the term anecdote has to be defined in order for us to argue that this is indeed a valid methodology, not alien in academic pursuit, especially in the Social Sciences and Humanities in which lived experiences are valid experimentation, and the world at large is our laboratory. For the purpose of this paper, we would like to borrow the term anecdote as employed by Meaghan Morris in her book *Identity Anecdotes*, which she defines as 'short narrative of a *particular* [original italic] incident' (2006: 1). Morris argues that "the point of an anecdote depends on its content as well as its telling and the contexts in which it is told and taken up; a pointless anecdote is one in which nothing works to give the incident itself a meaning or a resonance for us" (ibid.: 8). Morris further argues that "the impact of an anecdote is microscopic as well as context specific, this small quantity of force does not mean that it disrupts, subverts, transgresses or dramatically feminizes a 'grand' discursive other"(ibid.: 22). This description of anecdotes, therefore, allows us to frame our work within our research enquiry. The gist of Morris' descriptions of anecdote lies in the idea that the acceptance of narrative as a means of positioning an incident within a certain context appropriate for the event is valid. Using anecdote as a framework, this paper attempts to position professional experiences within the literature available in an effort to find a point of confluence that merges theory with practice and vice versa.

4. Discussion

4.1 Anecdote 1: Hostility of Colleagues

This happened at the very outset of my teaching career. One day I received an internal phone call from a colleague, she was full of apologies before breaking the news that she had discovered that my postgraduate supervisee had plagiarized her student's thesis. I thanked her for the tip off, requested a copy of her student's thesis so that I could check the degree of plagiarism that my student had committed, and finally called my supervisee for an immediate supervision. Through my inspection, I realized that my supervisee had plagiarized almost word by word. When I confronted her, she was embarrassed by what she had done, and her excuse was that she did not know that plagiarism could involve unpublished thesis. For her, people can only plagiarize from books or journal articles. I decided to accept her excuse and thought that it would be a great lesson for her that she got caught and that I would follow her progress more closely. I spoke to my colleague after that, and she expressed her surprise at the fact that I thanked her for reporting on my supervisee. According to her, if she had reported to other colleagues, she would have been scolded by them. She said she was brave enough to inform me as I was new in the institution. That came to me as a shock because I thought educators had to be open about cases like this.

Anecdote 1 exemplifies the problem of possible hostility (or even enmity) one would receive from one's own colleague for exposing his or her student's act of plagiarism. This begs two important questions: 1) Should one quietly report it to the authority so as to avoid hostility? ; 2) Should one approach the lecturer / supervisor personally so as to alarm him / her who is not aware of such act of plagiarism committed by the supervisee? We believe that the answer to the question depends on one's relationship with one colleague, i.e. whether or not he / she will feel insecure about your reporting.

Hostility or even sanctions in the case of a plagiarist are rarely polarized in plagiarism cases. Equally yet rarely discussed is the personal sanction imposed by your own colleague for exposing what they would consider their professional inefficiency or competency. As the first anecdote illustrates, and plus the fact that for some institutions competition for promotion is steep and the contemporary trend in Malaysian universities to encourage postgraduate students to publish along their supervisor, plagiarism has created a new conflict in Social Sciences and Humanities. The traditional paradigm of Humanities that safeguarded the originality or scholarship of work within the idea, argument and thought has been transgressed when supervisors are encouraged to write with their supervisees, blurring the traditional contention of the originality of the student's own thought. Lynne Pierce in her book *How to Examine a Thesis* argues that:

In the humanities and social sciences, however, formulating a sharp and coherent hypothesis is very much at the centre of the project's claim to originality, [...] and that a question such as "Can you tell us how your original idea for the thesis was transformed as the research progressed?" [Will] go to the very heart of a candidate's claim to 'original thought' and (in humanities and social science subjects especially) will test his or her capacity for hypothesizing (2005, 72).

The blurring of a student's *bona fide* original idea with that of a team work, i.e. with that of the supervisor's and the student's, is causing a lot of ethical slippage in Social Sciences and Humanities. But the point that we would like to bring home is that the slippage also causes unhealthy competition among lecturers, and reporting one's student of plagiarism is taken as a personal attack on the supervisor's reputation.

For this issue, we discover that it is hard to find literature review on the issue of possible hostility from one's colleague for reporting his / her student's act of plagiarism. This may be due to two interrelated reasons: 1) Hostility is usually felt at the inter-personal level and is never seen as a managerial problem; hence 2) not enough research has been carried out that focuses on this issue. Austin and Brown reported that in a research done by Center for Academics Integrity in 1992, which encompassed 16 college campuses, "less than half of the 800 faculty surveyed ever reported a student" (1999: 28). Besides Austin and Brown's report, the Editorial of *Research Policy* (2007: 910), brings up the idea of self-policing which means a certain level of awareness has to be implemented to ensure that plagiarism does not continue especially with regards to journal publication. However, Austin and Brown look at self-policing as an expectation and assumption made during peer evaluation process. Unlike the peer review process, reporting to your colleague directly is personal, which as said by my colleague, shall be perceived as a personal attack on the supervisor's ability to supervise.

4.2 Anecdote 2: Discrepancy in Academic Curriculum and Emphasis

The most recent conflict that I encountered is when marking the English language essay examination for an entry into the public service. In the pre-marking meeting consisting of lecturers from public universities and school teachers from public schools, an interesting issue was brought up by the head examiner, who is a school teacher. She explained that we would, albeit a rare case, find candidates who memorize certain paragraphs. One example was presented, and the examiners unanimously agreed that there was a dramatic change in terms of the candidate's language proficiency from the introductory paragraph to the body paragraphs. Indeed, the language collapsed after the first paragraph. In the discussion that ensues in terms of how to grade the paper, I suggested that the paper had to be a fail. I based my argument on the fact that I suspected that the paragraph was not the candidate's own and that the candidate had plagiarized from somewhere.

However, an examiner from the teacher group disagreed and suggested that the candidate had to be rewarded for his or her effort to memorize. She argued that there was no way of proving that the candidate had plagiarized. The general feeling then was that the teacher group accepted her reasoning, and the lecturer group was a little ambivalent. I concurred with the idea that there was no way to prove that the candidate had plagiarized since the examiners were not given sufficient time to check, or if they did, would not be bothered to do so on the basis that it was only an entry examination. I met the teacher during tea and asked her of how she would feel if that paragraph was hers. Would she have reacted the same way? However, her response, especially through facial

expression, makes it crystal clear that she has never thought about that at all. At the school's level, plagiarism has never been seen as crucially damaging.

Anecdote two epitomizes the lack of continuation in Malaysian education system, i.e. from secondary to university level, creating a different education culture. What this evinces is the fact that there is an apparent inconsistency in academic emphasis. The different perceptions of plagiarism that both groups, i.e. teachers and lecturers, have is a reflection of this.

A teacher plays a major role in making sure that students do not plagiarize. The failure of the teacher to do so will culminate in “unacceptable appropriate practices” (Abasi and Nahal, 2008: 268). Indeed, a case study done by Pat Currie (1998) reveals that the tutor’s inability to recognize plagiarism and articulate it as unacceptable has resulted in the student’s continuous copying. The flaw in pedagogy which Currie’s research incorrigibly reveals can ironically reward the student. The subject of Currie’s study, Linda, manages to obtain better grade that is beyond her own expectation after copying from the sources. Currie indeed suggests that copying has become a learning strategy especially for non-native English speaker with different educational background. What this suggests is that different cultures in the case of the anecdote, two different working and education cultures, produce a different standard and expectation. Seeing in this vein, the anecdote proves that the candidate’s memorization of the paragraph is justifiable, as it is rooted in his / her previous training, presumably, from school. Indeed, Abasi and Nahal see this as a: “response to certain demands of the pedagogical context in which they composed their text” (2008: 271).

4.3 Anecdote 3: Common Expressions

While marking my undergraduate dissertations, I realized that many of my students write the same phrases, clauses and even sentences. These sentences are identical, except for the title of their dissertations. For instance, the students wrote in the Research Objective section:

“Based on past research and the problem statement that focuses on this study aims at:”

Then when I checked previous years’ dissertations I realized that the same sentence, with slight modifications, appeared in all dissertations. I decided to accept this as a common practice, and think of it as a template in undergraduate thesis writing. However, I wonder what the anti-plagiarism software would do in this case? Would it detect this practice as plagiarism? How do I explain a commonly acceptable phrases, clauses or sentences within the context of plagiarism? If these phrases, clauses and sentences are common, is there any other possible expressions that can be used to replace these common expressions in their writings? Anecdote 3 indicates the practices of using similar phrases, clauses as well as sentences by students in their dissertations. The question here is whether the expressions used repeatedly in the different thesis are considered academic dishonesty or are they viewed as common practice by students at this level of developing their linguistic skills? Similar issues can also be seen in formal letter writing when a certain template is used.

According to Pennycook (1994: 282, quoted in Currie 1998), besides the anxiety of being charged with displaying the required mastery in their own words, students are also bogged down with the problem of differentiating between borrowing actual words and borrowing ideas. Another issue that emerges in relation to this is whether the conduct is intentional or unintentional. If it is the latter, then it is not considered as a punishable offense (Sutherland–Smith 2005). De Voss and Rosati (2002: 193, quoted in Sutherland–Smith 2005) contend that academic writing genre maybe unfamiliar to many EAP students, thus they consider that students are not necessarily evil in thinking, but instead they are learning to negotiate and do research in new spaces. Thus, is this practice considered an offense in the academia? As teachers, we must decide to solve this sensitive issue so as to discourage academic dishonesty in the academic world. What would the anti-plagiarism software make out of this?

4.4 Anecdote 4: Teacherly Instinct

I had a Middle Eastern student who submitted work that is of native speaker fluency quality. Knowing him throughout my supervision, my teacherly instinct could tell that it was not his language, neither was his level of proficiency. He admitted that it was not his language though it was his content. He claimed that he got help from an expert in the area but he did not cut and paste from the Internet. This leaves me in a quandary in terms of accepting or rejecting his work based on the fact that he was doing a Masters degree in the English language and not history or geography in which the content is of the utmost importance. In English Studies, the language used by the students has to be equally original. How do we draw a line between the students’ language capability and the expert’s correction, in the context of language studies?

Essentially, anecdote 4 demonstrates the problem among lower students with intermediate proficiency level producing a piece of writing that is of an advanced level standard. Even though he admitted that he did not plagiarize, his lack of language proficiency or more specifically, writing ability has revealed otherwise. The majority of the text that he produced did not look and feel original. As his teacher, I strongly believe that the words and phrases have not been composed alone as there are distinctly different language or writing styles. There was a limited amount of non-plagiarized writing as I could detect some common language problems often made by second language learners. In the literature, the notion of teacherly instinct is not alien. Pennycook in "Borrowing Other's Words: Text, Ownership, Memory and Plagiarism" also narrated that he first executes the student's of "plagiarism" while teaching in China by indicating how a student's composition "had a ring of text from elsewhere of language borrowed and repeated" (1999:202).

After being probed further, the student admitted that he had submitted a thesis which was partly "written" by someone else. In this situation, the student is considered "cheating" as the student concerned used words that were not his. Although he justified his actions by claiming that he did not 'cut-and-paste' from the Internet, he might have not realized that what he was doing is also a kind of plagiarism. In fact he was shocked when I told him that he could fail his thesis if his action is spotted as plagiarism. One explanation of this is perhaps this particular student was raised in a culture where plagiarism is not addressed as important and further that using someone else's help is not considered a theft. According to Biggs and Burville (quoted in Bista 2010: 5-6) the issue of cheating and plagiarism among international students is complicated because of language barriers and cultural differences. They may not be able to acquire a strong language competence in English; thus they resort to getting help from people who are more competent in the language. It is also believed that "cultural and social beliefs cloud the issues of improperly borrowed reference sources" (Bista 2010: 20).

4.5 Anecdote 5: Use of Synonyms

One day a student submitted an essay containing only three paragraphs to me. The work of this middle Eastern student sounded very familiar, and I made a Google search and found that there was a similar essay on the net. The essay that I found on the Internet bore a great similarity, or to a certain extent, identical in structure and content to the one produced by my student. However, the words used by the student were different. I noticed he had actually replaced words with synonyms to hoodwink me into thinking that it was actually his work. It is very difficult for me to evaluate the paper as I was not sure whether this would be considered a plagiarized work or not.

Anecdote 5 demonstrates how the use of synonym can cause dilemma to teachers / instructors. Two important questions pertaining to this issue are: one, would the use of synonyms still be considered plagiarism?; two, to what degree would it be acceptable or rejected?. These two questions reveal to us that the student's language ability is one of the major reasons for the students to use synonyms. To give students the benefits of the doubt, I believe that at least the student does make an effort of substituting the word with synonyms, rather than copying verbatimly or simply "cutting and pasting". As teachers, we need to be alert and the student's use of synonym should signal to us that the students do not know how to paraphrase accurately and hence a remedial course should be offered. In the same vein, a study done by Sutherland-Smith finds that the cultural background of the student is also a valid or possible cause. The literature on ESL on plagiarism for instance, reveals that the western notion of plagiarism may contribute to this confusion. The student's cultural as well as educational background may be different from that of the western notion of plagiarism. This idea of different cultural and educational background echoes the findings of research done by Alistair Pennycook (1999). Pennycook contends that western notion of plagiarism cannot (and even implied should not) be easily applied to the non-western culture (1999). Conterminous to this, the literature also states that the student may have used synonyms due to his feeling of lack of authority in the area of study.

5. Reflection and Conclusion

The focus on anecdote as a framework allows us to concatenate theory and practice. By juxtaposing real life anecdotes with the literature on plagiarism, we are able to show that there are aspects that we have overlooked (or even taken-for-granted) and that the issues of plagiarism are more complex and complicated than meet the eyes. Foregrounding this complexity as our finding, the correlation reflects the need to further scrutinize plagiarism especially in the context of students' mobility in the global educational scenario like today. To simply punish students for plagiarizing by using our own construct, which I should say is colored by Western idea and philosophy, is to hamstring the development of future scholars and leaders. Perhaps in Social Sciences

and Humanities, a new construct that is more fluid is needed to deal with the different cultural (work and societal) perceptions and attitudes towards plagiarism so that the hegemony of ideas can be etiolated and finally curbed.

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