Chapter 1

Why so many questions about plagiarism?

Philip Shaw and Diane Pecorari

This book speaks to university teachers who are concerned about plagiarism and want to address it constructively, but feel that they may not have all the tools or information they need to do so. It approaches the issue from a variety of theoretical angles in order to provide a framework for discussion and research. Those of us who have contributed to this book have a longstanding interest in plagiarism. Many of us conduct professional development courses and workshops, and the colleagues we meet there have a lot of questions about plagiarism. The colleagues we meet by the coffee pot at work also have questions, and so indeed do we ourselves. Probably as a result of the fact that there are so many questions about plagiarism, the past thirty years or so has seen an explosion of research interest in the topic. However, many of the questions which concern teachers still lack answers in that body of literature. In some cases that may be because the necessary research has not yet been done. However, in many cases, it is because the questions are not answerable empirically; they require informed, situated analysis. This volume is an opportunity to ventilate them and see what answers careful consideration, rather than further empirical observation, might give.

Answering such questions is the purpose of this book, and the analysis brought to bear on them reveals dimensions of plagiarism that are often less visible in a higher education landscape which treats plagiarism as a prime enemy in a battle for academic integrity, and has a regime of warning, detection and punishment as the primary weapons in its arsenal. Is plagiarism really so complex? We believe that the remainder of this book demonstrates that it is indeed complex, and this complexity requires a nuanced understanding and response.

Vignettes

Our contention about the complexity of plagiarism is based in part on the ways that it has arisen, in our experience, under various unusual and thought-provoking circumstances. The following vignettes are a preview. They are all stories which have been recounted to us as true, though naturally we cannot vouch for the accuracy (and indeed we have introduced some trivial inaccuracies to, as the saying goes, protect the innocent).
An unlucky start to a research career. Anton, a university teacher of English for Academic Purposes in continental Europe, had noticed that many of his students wrote incoherent essays in a way that he took to be typical of their group, but one had apparently learned what academic writing in English was supposed to be like and wrote coherently. Anton found the differences at the linguistic and structural levels very interesting and resolved to write the case up in his first attempt to publish an academic article. The article discussed the differences carefully and discussed how one could reach the stage represented by the good essay. This was before Turnitin was widely used, and in fact in the early days of plagiarism awareness in the country in question. When the article was sent for review, the reviewer luckily (in a way) put a paragraph from the good essay into Google and found that it was copied in entirety from an American university website, where it was given as an example of precisely a coherent essay. The review had to say that the article made lots of good points but couldn’t be published under the circumstances.

This vignette shows that some degree of concern with plagiarism is healthy, and Turnitin was invented for a reason. Recipients of texts need an awareness that producers can be trying to deceive them. Debora Weber-Wulff’s chapter in this volume discusses the constraints on detection mechanisms, constraints which are often missed by teachers who use them in the hope of identifying the sorts of problems they need to know about. Philip Shaw’s chapter argues that we have to worry about plagiarism because we insist on grading papers for credit and thus leading enterprising students like Anton’s into temptation.

A story from a colleague. This is a story told by Barbara, a student from the pre-internet, pre-Turnitin age. In the final year of her BA at a small, elite, liberal arts college, she had handed in a paper on which she had worked exceptionally hard. A knock came at her door: it announced the arrival of the dean, a security guard and a cardboard box with which to take away any notes or other materials she could produce related to the essay. Her teacher had suspected plagiarism because the essay was extremely well written; far too polished to have been produced by an undergraduate. The dean had concurred. Having sequestered the materials she provided, the subsequent inspection of the cardboard box revealed copious notes on extensive reading, multiple drafts, the early ones handwritten, the later ones typed with corrections in red ink. The trail showed the gradual development of understanding and expression, which was the intended outcome of the essay assignment. Her reward for having been a good writer and a hard worker was an accusation of plagiarism presented in as traumatic and dramatic circumstances as can be imagined.

A similar story was told to us by a colleague with a daughter in her first year of university who had a chance to read one of the daughter’s first essays, immediately after she had submitted it. Pride and concern competed for the parent’s attention, as it became clear what a high-quality production this was. Private knowledge of the development of the essay over several weeks, and familiarity with her academic writing during her school days meant that there was no
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question of plagiarism; it was easy to recognize the writer’s voice in the text. In a teacher role, however, the parent would have googled some of her more polished phrases; it was only this extra-textual knowledge that suppressed suspicion.

A healthy concern with plagiarism may be justified, but it can also poison the teachable moment. In these two examples the relationship between the recipient of a text and its producer was or could have been severely damaged by lack of trust. In her chapter in this volume, Jordan Canzonetta addresses the issue of trust between teachers and students, and the role which plagiarism, and tools for detecting plagiarism, play in that important relationship. In his chapter, Erik Borg describes the modern electronic environment in which perhaps it would be difficult to provide the paper evidence Barbara was able to show, and in which teachers have become even more suspicious of polished texts. Wendy Sutherland-Smith’s chapter describes steps towards a mature environment in which Anton’s student is dissuaded without people like Barbara being inhibited.

**Genre pedagogy?** Carl, a master’s student, had collected data for his dissertation but complained that he didn’t know how to write it up. Aware of the recommendations of genre pedagogy, his supervisor suggested he should read a few theses in his area with an eye on the structure and phraseology, and consciously model his work on these. After a while, the text really began to shape up and it seemed ready for a preliminary reader to comment on. (In the system in question there was funding for an external commentator to look at a semi-finished text.) Carl suggested the name of a lecturer in a neighbouring university who had written her thesis in the same area, and she agreed to read the draft. After some time, this reader said she would like to talk to Carl privately. It turned out that he had taken large stretches of text from the reader’s thesis, to the extent that the borrowing was illegitimate. (The concern extended only to text; there was no doubt that he had conducted research which addressed a research question of significance.) Carl said that he had asked for this particular reader because he was unsure whether he had borrowed too much from her work and wanted her advice, even though his supervisor had approved the draft. This seemed to be an extremely responsible procedure.

We need models when we come to a new genre, and we need to take a lot from them. It’s very easy not to know where the boundary is, and very responsible to try to find out, without too much fear of plagiarism to start with. As always, it’s not only the text that determines the nature of the intertextuality. Relatively set chunks of language are often the focus of students’ (and sometimes teachers’) questions about where the boundaries lie. In this volume, Mary Davis and John Morley investigate the question of boundaries between the register of the subject, which must be shared with other texts, and stretches of text which must not.

**A worry from a student.** In a section of freshman comp there were several students who had completed the International Baccalaureate (IB) with top marks. Students in the IB have to write a final-year project called an extended essay, which is essentially a first attempt at a research paper. The fact that they had top marks meant that they had mastered the genre. Forced to pick a topic,
any topic, on which to write an argumentative essay for freshman comp, they besieged the teacher with questions about whether they could use the same topic on which they had written their extended essay.

Their motivation to do so was that they were going to be assessed on the rhetorical and lexicogrammatical properties of their essay, not the content knowledge; but they knew that they could write a better work, rhetorically speaking, if they knew something about the topic. Further, they had chosen the topics in the first place because of a genuine interest; developing their knowledge and thinking about it would be productive. However, they were concerned on two fronts. One was that they might be violating a rule about not getting credit for the same work twice if they wrote on the same topic. The other was that, since their schools had submitted their essays to Turnitin, the similarity of content might cause the Turnitin report to reflect badly on them. Jumping to an entirely new topic would avoid this risk.

In the academic world—above the undergraduate level—we generally take our last work as our starting point. The fact that questions remained after our last study becomes the justification for the next. That’s how knowledge advances. Sometimes we shift research topics or even research areas, and the cost is that we have to read our way into a new literature. That’s no bad thing, but it’s the exception, rather than the rule.

A fear of plagiarism can cause our students to make choices which position them far from the scholarly ideal. In her chapter in this volume, Sandra Jamieson begins with Kenneth Burke’s metaphor of academic discourse as cocktail-party conversation. Each contribution must connect to what came before, and sets the framework for what comes after. It provides an excellent perspective from which we can interrogate the extent to which our writing assignments and expectations of plagiarism-free writing support the entry of our students into the ongoing conversation.

**Homer nods.** A colleague co-wrote a textbook. Because it was only a textbook it was very pleasing when someone took it seriously and cited it. One day, Google Scholar reported a new citation in an important review article by Ezra, a well respected scholar in a related field. It was very cheering to see that a whole paragraph was devoted to an idea from the textbook, with a citation to the appropriate page. This paragraph seemed to the textbook writer to be very well expressed but rather familiar. In fact, reference to the page cited showed that the paragraph in question was verbatim from the textbook, although it was not signalled as a quotation. Ezra had apparently plagiarized the textbook, but must have done so accidentally. He can hardly have done so intentionally because (a) there would be no possible benefit in doing so and (b) he would not have bothered to give a page reference if he wanted to avoid having people look it up.

Pecorari (2003) describes cases of postgraduate dissertations which seem to include unintentional illegitimate intertextuality, and the parallel with this case is quite striking. But Ezra was a well established applied linguist, not a novice. So completely unintentional illegitimate intertextuality really can happen to anyone.
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Can we even call this plagiarism? Isn’t it really just improper referencing, since there can hardly have been any deceptive intent? Erik Borg’s chapter in this volume discusses some of the complexities of intertextuality, and how common, acceptable intertextuality practices share a long common border with plagiarism. Diane Pecorari’s chapter deals with the question of intention and argues that since plagiarism is by definition a crime, the term plagiarism implies not only similarity of text, but also deceptive intent. But what would we have said to a student who copied a whole paragraph from a textbook?

An unusual request from a stranger. Francis, a student from China who had just completed a master’s degree at a large, respected university, contacted Fiona, a lecturer at another, less prominent, university, with a research interest in plagiarism, to ask for PhD supervision. They had a conversation about the student’s proposed project and what value Fiona could add to it, and it emerged that the topic of the MA dissertation and the prospective student’s research interests in general were relatively far from those of Fiona. Francis explained that he had contacted Fiona as an expert on plagiarism, but not because he wanted to move into that area of research. The point was that after the PhD, he wanted to return to China as an academic. He would then need to publish in international journals, but doing so was difficult. One challenge was the difficulty of writing in English. Some people had found a strategy for that and then been on the receiving end of accusations of plagiarism. Francis hoped that if he crossed the line into plagiarism, Fiona could set him straight, and eventually he would learn the difference between borrowing nice phrases in an appropriate way and plagiarism.

The discussion moved on to his practice of writing literature reviews by means of taking a sentence or two from the introduction of each article and stitching it together. Could that be plagiarism? It seemed certain that some people would think it was, though others may not.

It was clear to Francis that plagiarism was to be avoided, although many people have expressed the view that Confucian heritage societies look on it favourably. In their chapter in this volume, Yongyan Li and John Flowerdew give strong evidence that actually Chinese scholars have long condemned plagiarism, although like others they have not always managed to convey the full content of the category of plagiarism to students. This writer, though, was more interested in the question of where to draw the line between formulaic phrases such as “Table 3 indicates” and borrowing which encroaches on another writer’s territory. This is a particular problem for L2 users of English, particularly those whose L1 is typologically very different from English, and this is the context in which it is addressed by Davies and Morley in this volume.

Plagiarism and intertextuality

The above are vignettes of problems with what is called intertextuality, the way in which one text refers to or uses language and ideas from others. In particular, the vignettes show the contradictory and often counter-productive ways that
plagiarism and suspect intertextuality affect the learning process and the writing process. But of course all texts as stretches of language are always intertextual (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1980). Nevertheless, as the vignettes suggest, cases vary quite a bit and the differences are constituted by issues that recur in several of the chapters of this book: producer awareness, producer purpose, and intended recipient awareness. These are not visible in the text and therefore we cannot be certain that they are present in any given document, but they are crucial to decisions about the legitimacy of the intertextuality.

The unmarked case of intertextuality is what we have called indirect intertextuality (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012): the writer or speaker is not aware of a particular text being reused, but is just following internalized norms and patterns. A particular text may lie behind an idiom or phrase but it is not reused in awareness, and more usually the phrase has occurred in thousands of texts (Pecorari, 2008). It is just what is usually said in that context.

But there are cases where achieving this conventionality requires awareness of an intertextual relation. Novice writers in their first or second language often don’t know what one says in the given type of text and have to borrow the phraseology consciously (cf. Davis & Morley, this volume). Having not yet internalized the phraseology nor indeed the generic structure (Fairclough’s (1992) constitutive intertextuality) of the target register and genre, one must consciously borrow them. This is part of the problem in our vignettes of Carl and Frances described above. How far can one go in order to produce a text that is appropriate but will not lead to accusations of plagiarism?

In many cases there is awareness of a particular source text. This occurs across domains: in legal and business contexts, the functional use of a standardized ready-made text; in literary, but also conversational, contexts, deliberate allusion, for example to a song text or an entertainer’s catchphrase; in social media, for example retweeting, sharing, quoting the text responded to (cf Borg, this volume).

In academic contexts it is essential deliberately to make use of text or material composed by someone else. In 2012 we argued that this can be done in three ways in relation to the established expectations and conventions of the community, and these ways are distinguished by the form of the intertextuality and the intention of the writer. The first is conventional intertextuality, which follows the norms correctly. Text form, writer intention, and reader reception are aligned correctly. The second is unconventional, which arises from ignorance or accidental neglect (like Ezra) of the norms. The text form is inappropriate for the type of intertextuality in question, and though the writer’s purpose is appropriate, the reader may not receive it as intended, perhaps perceiving it as conventional (and ignoring the error) or deceptive (and accusing the writer of plagiarism). The third is deceptive, where the intention is to conceal the true nature of the intertextuality. The text form is again inappropriate for the type of intertextuality in question, but the writer’s intention is also inappropriate. Again, the reader may receive the
text as intended (and ignore the plagiarism) or perceive the deception (and make an accusation of plagiarism).

The biggest problems are those posed by the vignettes of Barbara, where teacher fear of the deceptive variety poisons relations and inhibits excellence, and of the freshman comp students, where student fear that the work will display unconventional intertextuality inhibits the development of the target type of discourse. Both fears are justified. Deceptive intertextuality exists, as Anton’s student exemplifies, but non-deceptive unconventional intertextuality can arise by accident even when one knows the conventions, as Ezra’s error shows. But the consequences work against the whole concept of writing to learn and the ideal of making use of the resources available to do so.

Questions arise here that are discussed in the chapters that follow. What are the boundaries of plagiarism in relation to other types of intertextuality (Pecorari)? Where might the boundaries of deliberate, self-aware indirect intertextuality lie (Davis & Morley)? With today’s omnipresent awareness of plagiarism and electronic resources, are intertextuality practices still problematic for university students (Sutherland-Smith)? What can so-called “plagiarism detection” software do and what can’t it do (Weber-Wulff)? How can the academy ensure that such software is used to support and not inhibit learning (Canzonetta)? How does the academy’s view of intertextuality fit into the digital native’s (Borg)? What intertextuality practices should the academy demand of undergraduates if the aim is education not just policing (Jamieson)? Can the academy’s practices be configured to make plagiarism a less attractive option (Shaw)? Is plagiarism just a local western issue (Li & Flowerdew)?

**Plagiarism and academic ethics**

Plagiarism is often identified as a breach of academic ethics. As Chapter 2 in this volume will discuss, there are two broad views of the relationship between plagiarism and academic misconduct. One is to regard them as two intersecting sets. In this view, some forms of plagiarism are deceptive acts of cheating, while others are better understood as mistakes of some sort and therefore do not overlap with academic misconduct. Another perspective is to regard plagiarism as a subset of academic misconduct. This view implies either that no unintentional forms of plagiarism exist, or, alternatively, that acts like omitting quotation marks or a citation through carelessness deserve to be called something other than plagiarism.

Regardless of the perspective adopted, some plagiarism at least needs to be situated in the context of other breaches of academic ethics, a broad category which includes acts perpetrated by both students and teachers. The range of behaviours coming under this heading can be illustrated by a perusal of the table of contents of recent volumes of the *Journal of Academic Ethics*. Questions which have been investigated include, on the part of academics, inappropriate behaviour outside of the classroom (Chory & Offstein, 2017); engaging in behaviours (such as
bringing cupcakes to class) designed to elicit more favourable student evaluations (Roberts, 2016); and peer review practices which are negligent (Overall, 2015) or delayed (Kumar, 2014). They also include accepting funding from morally questionable sources, such as tobacco companies (Jones, 2014) and a failure to cite previous research which may contradict one’s own findings (Cosentino, Marino & Maestroni, 2014). On the part of students, breaches of academic ethics include the falsification of university application materials (Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017); pirating software and music (Alleyne, Soleyn & Harris, 2015); and using an answer believed to have been accidentally disclosed by an instructor in completing a quiz (Woodbine & Amirthalingam, 2013).

Within the broad spectrum of academic ethics offences, plagiarism occupies a unique status in several ways. As a generalization, it can be said that most breaches of academic ethics are regarded as unethical because of one or more of three overlapping features: they give unfair advantage to the unethical person; they damage another person; and/or they introduce a degree of dishonesty into the academic food chain. The theft of research results exemplifies all three of these: the researcher whose data was stolen is deprived of the opportunity to publish; the researcher who committed the theft can gain a publication from it; and in the act of publication, the false view that the dishonest researcher was responsible for producing the data will be propagated.

Much plagiarism by researchers could touch on all three of these issues as well (the question of whether it usually does is not within the scope of this chapter). There is a requirement (at least a nominal one) that research is publishable only if it adds to the literature base in a meaningful way. Consequently, plagiarizing the original or creative parts of another scholar’s work would either deprive that person of the opportunity to publish (if the plagiarism happened pre-publication) or (if post-publication) would introduce a second, spurious work into the literature base, thus giving the misleading, and therefore dishonest, impression that the claims and conclusions had twice as much empirical support as would actually be the case. Because a publication track record is so important in decisions such as promotion, tenure and salary increase, an unfairly acquired publication amounts to substantial, unmerited personal gain.

All three of these elements are frequently invoked to explain why plagiarism is wrong, but in actual fact, they are not all always strongly present in student plagiarism. Certainly students who successfully plagiarize and thereby earn a higher grade than they would have done otherwise have had unearned personal gain. In the case of a student who pays a ghostwriter to write a piece of assessment writing, deception and dishonesty are clearly present, but most university teachers have experience of students who produce potentially plagiarized texts as a result of confusion, inattentiveness, or indeed laziness. While laziness is not a desirable trait nor one to condone in students, it is not the same as dishonesty.

Damage to others is a reason frequently invoked to explain to students why plagiarism is not acceptable, and this explanation relies on the idea that we cite sources to give credit where credit is due. Plagiarism obscures that attribution
and is therefore unfair to the original author. However, this idea is far from unassailable, particularly with regard to student plagiarism. A student who copies a sentence or a paragraph or indeed more from a textbook or a Wikipedia article has not infringed on the author’s right to assert ownership of the text in any meaningful way. Wikipedia exists for the sake of joint construction of knowledge and does not credit individual authors in any easily visible or ascertainable way. The sales figures of a textbook will not suffer because paragraphs or pages of its material are available, in reproduction, in an undergraduate assignment. Reputational issues do not arise either; anyone who notes the similarities will find it easy to conclude that the student copied from the textbook and not the other way around. A student who turns in a friend’s essay from a previous semester, with the friend’s permission, only endangers the friend in the unlikely event that the source of the essay can be traced and it can be proven that the friend was an accessory before the fact, rather than an unknowing victim. There are reported cases of students who have stolen a colleague’s typescript or Word file and turned it in (with a change of name), resulting in the wrong person getting the blame for plagiarism; however, such cases are almost certainly part of a vanishingly small minority of plagiarism cases. A more realistic sort of harm to others is an indirect one; anything which results in unearned academic credit contributes to grade inflation and indirectly damages all students. This is, however, a highly attenuated effect.

This is not to say that student plagiarism is harmless, but merely that it is not a major contributor to the forms of harm generally attributed to academic misconduct. If an argument were to be put forward for the harm done by student plagiarism, it would be the harm done to the student. Plagiarism circumvents or derails both the learning process and the assessment process. Students are supposed to learn by writing assignments, and they learn many things in many ways, depending on the task and discipline. For example, the existence of the assignment forces them to read and revise. The need to write a coherent text makes them think about their learning and construct a sensible argument (etc.) within the disciplinary constraints they have acquired. Writing forces them to think about the register of the discipline and the exact meaning of the terms. If students don’t do these things themselves they don’t learn as they should. If a writing task is used for assessment, then the examiner needs to be able to derive from the script information about the extent to which the student has attained the learning objectives. If the text is plagiarized, partially or wholly, then inadequate information is available. As a result, the feedback the student can receive will be partial and/or misleading. Within educational institutions all disciplinary actions are designed to maximize chances for learning, sometimes for the victims of the misconduct (as in cases of bullying or harassment), but usually for the perpetrator (as in cases of truancy, plagiarism, failure to do assignments, etc.)

Plagiarism, then, can certainly be regarded as a form of academic misconduct, and in its purest, most prototypical form it is a good fit for that category. As the other chapters in this volume will show, there are many non-prototypical
forms of plagiarism; and among all other subcategories, student plagiarism is the least typical of all.

The reason why

We can now see why there are so many questions about plagiarism in our universities. It is a form of intertextuality, one of the most common, if not salient, features of academic writing, yet it is an odd member of the category “intertextuality” by virtue of being so heavily stigmatized, and yet seeming to harm mainly the perpetrator (in the long run). It is a form of academic misconduct, yet not all kinds of plagiarism fit neatly into that category. Plagiarism, then, is an outlier, a misfit, a square peg in the landscape of good and bad writing behaviours. This vexes teachers who want to reward hard effort and disincentivize sloppiness or cheating, and who therefore need to understand the nature of the work in front of them.

This volume explores some of the more common vexations surrounding plagiarism. Each chapter begins by posing a question in its title. Given the discussion so far, it will come as little surprise that most end with a highly qualified and nuanced answer. There are no clear-cut, one-size-fits-all answers for understanding plagiarism. However, each chapter will leave you better informed about the nature of the issue. It may also cause you to feel that you need to read more, learn more, think more about plagiarism. If so, the final section of this book is a resource in which the authors present their top picks from the research literature on the topic. Some of the views adopted by the authors may run counter to your current understanding of plagiarism. If so, their analysis may persuade you to change your views—or not. All of this, we suggest, is in the spirit of the academic tradition. We encourage our students to inquire, to have open but critical minds; to learn from others but to think for themselves; to know that however great their learning, there is more. We hope you will approach the question of plagiarism in higher education in the same spirit.

References