DEFINING PLAGIARISM

On the surface, plagiarism may appear to be a straight-forward issue of copying the works of others. However, in reality, it is a far more complex concept. Part of the complexity lies in the fact that the term is not always defined in a consistent manner (Fishman, 2009; Weber-Wulff, 2014). Even among academics and practitioners, definitions may vary. It is not surprising then, that students are often confused about what constitutes plagiarism.

In fact, many students are as uncertain about what plagiarism means as they are in determining whether or not they have plagiarized. DeVoss & Rosati (2002) recount the story of a composition instructor who made a general announcement in class, telling her students that she had discovered three plagiarized papers in a recent assignment and that those three students needed to speak with her during office hours. The instructor did not single out the students by name, but later she was surprised when 14 students showed up at her office hours, with the 11 non-plagiarizing students all asking, “It wasn’t me, was it?” (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002, p. 192).

Fishman (2009) provides the following definition of plagiarism:

- Plagiarism occurs when someone
  1. Uses words, ideas, or work products
  2. Attributable to another identifiable person or source
  3. Without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained
  4. In a situation in which there is a legitimate expectation of original authorship
  5. In order to obtain some benefit, credit, or gain which need not be monetary (p. 5)

As Weber-Wulff (2014) observes, this definition of plagiarism is well-suited to academic environments in that it addresses many of the key characteristics of plagiarism, particularly the personal gain a student might hope to achieve by relying on the words or ideas of others and passing them off as his or her own original work.

TYPES OF PLAGIARISM

There are many forms of plagiarism. Plagiarism can be either accidental or intentional. It can be easily detected, or much more challenging to reveal. Weber-Wulff (2014) outlines several different types of plagiarism which represent an entire spectrum of plagiarism activities. Each of these types is briefly summarized below.

Copy and Paste
As the name implies, this type of plagiarism involves the whole-sale copying and pasting of text from a source into a student’s paper without attribution. Often the copied text comes from an online source, something which is all too common in today’s Internet-connected world. This type of plagiarism is typically the easiest to spot (Weber-Wulff, 2014). It is also the easiest form of plagiarism for plagiarism-detection software to identify (Ellis, 2012).

Translations
In the case of translation plagiarism, students take a source text written in another language and translate it (either manually or via an automated translation program) into the desired language for the assignment without acknowledging the source (Weber-Wulff, 2014). Depending on the quality of the translation, this form of plagiarism can be very difficult to detect.
Disguised Plagiarism
Another type of plagiarism that can be very difficult to detect is disguised plagiarism. In this form of plagiarism, students replace words or phrases and modify the order of sentences from the source text, but fail to properly cite the source (Weber-Wulff, 2014). This type of plagiarism is especially challenging since students often confuse it with paraphrasing, or writing about others’ ideas in their own words. Poor paraphrasing skills are as likely (if not more likely) to result in disguised plagiarism as intentional attempts to mask the original source.

Shake and Paste Collections
Shake and paste plagiarism is subset of the copy and paste variety. However, instead of copying and pasting large sections from a single source, the plagiarized material is copied piecemeal (sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph) from a number of different sources and then jumbled together into an often disorganized whole (Weber-Wulff, 2014).

Clause Quilts
Clause quilts, also known as patch-writing or mosaic plagiarism, are instances where students take phrases or incomplete sentences from one or more sources and then “quilt” them together with their own words or phrases (Weber-Wulff, 2014). Similar to disguised plagiarism, this type of plagiarism often happens inadvertently when students do not understand how to paraphrase correctly. Abrupt changes in style and diction, as well as incomplete or run-on sentences, are often indicators of this type of plagiarism.

Structural Plagiarism
Structural plagiarism involves paraphrasing another’s work as well as mimicking the original source’s organization, argument, or overall structure without appropriate citation (Weber-Wulff, 2014). This type of plagiarism can also be very difficult to detect, since it has more to do with the fundamental ideas being presented than the exact language used to convey them. This type of plagiarism is not uncommon in academic circles where writers or researchers may claim that others have “stolen their ideas” (Weber-Wulff, 2014, p. 10).

Pawn Sacrifice
Pawn sacrifice refers to cases where a plagiarized work is cited in some way, either in a footnote or a reference list, but it is unclear exactly how much of the original author’s work has been copied (Weber-Wulff, 2014). Often, much of the original source is taken verbatim but not quoted or attributed.

Cut and Slide
Cut and slide plagiarism is similar to pawn sacrifice in that the original source is cited in some manner. However, only a portion of the source is appropriately documented, and the rest of the source is downgraded in importance and split off or moved to a footnote or an appendix (Weber-Wulff, 2014).

Self-Plagiarism
Many students don’t realize that they can plagiarize themselves. However, submitting the same paper, or a remarkably similar paper, to more than one class or for more than one assignment is a form of plagiarism, even if the person submitting it is the original author. The primary issue here is that it violates the expectation of original work that Fishman (2009) notes in his definition of plagiarism. The author of the work is benefiting multiple times from a single work. Furthermore, in cases where a paper is submitted for publication to multiple places without a reprint notice, the author may be boosting the number of publications under his or her name in an manner unacceptable to standard academic practice (Weber-Wulff, 2014).
CONSEQUENCES OF PLAGIARISM

Some instances of plagiarism have very little impact, while others can change the course of careers. Plagiarizing on an academic paper could mean anything from failure on an individual assignment or class, to expulsion from a degree program or institution. In serious cases, plagiarism can lead to legal and financial repercussions, such as degree revocation, dismissal from a job, or even lawsuits for copyright infringement and fraud.

Educating students about the possible consequences of plagiarism is an important step toward creating a culture of academic integrity. Students need to gain a better understanding of not only what plagiarism is, but why it is a problem (Ellis, 2012; DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Weber-Wulff, 2014). According to Fishman (2009), the true harm in plagiarism “is that no benefit from doing the work has been gained, yet the student is asking for recognition of having received those benefits that have not, in fact, been earned” (p. 5).

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Identifying potential plagiarism creates an opportunity for dialogue, or a “teachable moment,” where students and faculty can explore issues of academic integrity (Warn, 2014). Students come to higher education to learn, and learning about plagiarism is often part of their development as writers. Warn (2014) recommends a “shift” in organizational response to plagiarism that focuses on “four key areas: finding the student voice, instructor as coach, a virtual environment for the academic community, and a process for consistent and appropriate intervention” (para. 6). While it is true that some students do plagiarize intentionally, it is also true that many students simply lack the knowledge and skills to cite source material correctly.

As Davis (2012) states, “your ability to use sources ethically and clearly is crucial to your success in every course, in any major you pursue, in whatever profession you choose” (p. 13). Given the impact of writing skills on nearly every aspect of a student’s academic and professional life, learning to avoid plagiarism is perhaps one of the most important life skills that a student can acquire.

Technology can be used as a way to flag the most common types of plagiarism and provide “targeted and adaptive interventions along with guided instruction” (Warn, 2014, para. 13). When used constructively, plagiarism detection software can become a powerful teaching and learning tool to help students grow as writers.
PRACTICAL RESOURCES

There are many useful guides available for helping students learn to paraphrase successfully and thereby avoid several types of plagiarism. The following online resources are just a few examples:

- Purdue Online Writing Lab – Paraphrase: Write It In Your Own Words
  https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/563/02/
- Harvard Guide to Using Sources – What Constitutes Plagiarism?
  http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70847&pageid=icb.page342054
- The Writing Center @ The University of Wisconsin-Madison – The Writer’s Handbook: Avoiding Plagiarism
  https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html

Debora Weber-Wulff is a thought leader on plagiarism, its impact and management. In Weber-Wulff’s (2014) book, “False Feathers – a Perspective on Academic Plagiarism,” she discusses the definition, typology and detection of plagiarism and reviews prominent case studies that brought to light the impact of plagiarism in the digital era of copy and paste.

James P. Davis’ (2012) “Guide to Writing with Sources” is a highly-recommended handbook to practices that counter the short cuts of plagiarism.

REFERENCES


