Karaokked: Plagiarism in the Classroom

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Contemporary culture is plagiaristic in many ways as culture itself is sustained through copying and imitation. Prevailing plagiaristic practices can be linked to other facets such as the world of work, increased use of technology, teaching-learning practices in the arts, and popular culture in which copying and imitation are integral parts. This article explores how some of these practices influence student “plagiarism” in academic institutions. It also argues that plagiarism cannot be embedded in a discourse of morality and suggests some simple, pragmatic ways in which these can be overcome in the Indian context.

Lively discussions with the students of two classes I taught directed me to the complexities of plagiarism for which I am grateful; my colleague, H S Shubha, and two students, Aditya and Supreet, drew my attention to practices in the digital domain. I also thank Sundar Sarukkai for closely reading earlier drafts of the paper and giving me critical feedback.

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The issue of plagiarism is a deceptively simple one which has pervaded several domains from academics and research to art and popular culture. Plagiarism has to be explored in different contexts: Firstly, among students who are in bachelor's and master's degrees but will not go any further into academics. Secondly, among students who are in MPhil and PhD programmes working towards a career in academics and research. Thirdly, among professional academics and researchers. In this article I will focus on the first group since this is the largest one and the practices learned here influence future action in the other groups. I will argue that for this group, consisting primarily of young people, plagiarism is not just an ethical issue but also a cultural one primarily because contemporary culture to which they belong is a “plagiaristic” one. Framed in this way, it has significant implications for pedagogy.

Some time ago, a young student who dreamed of becoming a filmmaker handed me an assignment. It was immediately obvious that he could not have written it since he had poor command over English and the writing in this assignment was excellent. When confronted, the student admitted readily that it was not his writing, that the assignment had been written by a friend who was a better writer than him but – and here is the catch – he claimed that it was “his” assignment since the ideas were all his own.

The student further defended himself by saying he was training himself for the world of film where he knows he will usually work with a scriptwriter. In a similar manner, he was getting the best person for the job of writing his assignment. For him, the act of thinking was separate from the act of writing, with the latter merely translating into printed words what he had “thought”. Many of the work situations that our students find themselves in require them to collaborate or do team-work based on division of roles and skills. How do we transpose the standards and values of a written, individualistic and largely logocentric domain of academics to the way we work in the so-called real world?

Another student handed in a research assignment which had hyperlinks (complete with “click here for a video or audio”). All the material was accurately but obviously selected from various websites and compiled. The outline and subheadings had been generated by the student but the content under each was not her own. She did not think she had plagiarised because, according to her, the act of writing an assignment was to put material together “originally” and to put it in a new context. Increasingly, students believe that copying and pasting material from the internet – the results of refined search engines – is more than sufficient to pass off as assignments. This appears to be a universal practice. As McCabe says, students now think that “lifting information from the internet, even verbatim, is good research practice rather than cheating. Are we raising a generation of students who view scholarship as ‘borrowing’ thoughts from a variety of different sources and simply assembling them into a final product?” (McCabe 2001: 42).

There are interesting pedagogical practices in courses which teach Photoshop or Illustrator, where students learn to create advertisements, posters and commercials by using “stock images” rather than conceptualising them from scratch. Should these be considered as plagiarised? Another way to generate images is to search the internet for them. The images are partially selected, joined together component by component and reworked for the final image. The justification for teaching this apparently plagiaristic act is that students are being taught the technology, not the visualisation. Indeed, the “new” image will be a composite and therefore will not resemble the “originals” from which they have been extricated. It has thus been “visually paraphrased” or “morphed” beyond recognition. So technically speaking they cannot be considered plagiarised. Yet, this practice seems to illustrate many of the fundamental questions confronting plagiarism. Alfrey (2000) puts it succinctly: “....the application of new technologies facilitates and encourages plagiarism, at a
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conscious and sub-conscious level, particularly in those instances where, due to the unfamiliarity of the process, technology leads rather than the imagination."

One might argue that today’s technology while making plagiarism easier also effectively disguises it. Lessons learned about picking and choosing (cutting, copying and pasting) to “create” a single entity are easily transferred from occlusocentric (image centred) to logocentric (word centred) domains. Unfortunately, putting together the eyes of one model with the legs of another model, the abdomen of a third one and the fingers of a fourth may give us the morphed image of a “perfect woman”, but cutting and pasting in this manner in a logocentric medium only shows the “joints” – the lack of continuity and coherence, the differences in styles of writing – not least because the way we read words is sequential rather than simultaneous. There seems to be an intrinsic relation between technology and plagiarism. Today’s composing, whether in writing, music or photography, has become far more technologised than ever before.

The larger culture and environments also exhibit various shades of plagiaristic behaviour. In the sections that follow, I will explore the influence of three domains which strongly influence young people: the world of work, art and popular culture.

The World of Work

A closer look at the world of work reveals some interesting features. Small ad agencies routinely use the “stock images” from agencies such as Getty, Corbis and Jupiter in poster-making, advertisements and commercials (Aditya 2010: 24). It is cheaper than organising a photo shoot and one can do so many things to images nowadays with technology that, depending on one’s skill, the original sources will have completely disappeared. These “visually paraphrased” images are more in the nature of a bricolage, tacked together from several sources. Such digitally manipulated images have become such an integral part of the daily functioning of advertising agencies that there is no sense of the ethical issues which may be underlying it (Supreet 2010: 36-38). Technology has democratised the ability to create because now everyone thinks they can put together a print advertisement with labour that was never trained for these jobs. Just as hiring contract teachers with no proper training in government schools diluted the value society places on good pedagogy, work places have devalued what it takes to create a good and original photographer and/or visualiser by allowing these “cut, copy and paste artists” a field day.

Along with technology, corporate work habits and values have also had an impact on plagiarism. Corporates routinely seek large amounts of material on a particular topic and junior staff compiles such dossiers without showing sources. It is apparently part of “corporate culture” to do this and even simpler in a technology-enabled world. Ironically, the same corporate culture becomes very proprietary when it comes to pirated software, branding and the like!

The other strategy used by corporates in the name of “training” is stylesheeting. The demand on corporates to use vast numbers of young people with differential capabilities to deliver material based on writing, has led to the use of standardised procedures such as stylesheets. These generate material easily usable by reducing them to standard formats, using cut and paste from the original documents. The influence of these corporate working styles should not be underestimated. Many students take up jobs in corporate organisations. They cannot understand why they should learn original writing when the end goal – the job – requires exactly the opposite. Students complain about educational requirements to read, write and think in coursework because they claim, with a large degree of truth, that these are never used in their jobs. So when the corporate world tells us that the graduates they hire have no skills, we should perhaps treat this as a compliment!

Since corporatisation is increasingly defining work culture in India such practices become endemic in a wide variety of organisations.

Culture as Plagiaristic and Plagiarism in Culture

When we turn to the larger culture we see that it is also “plagiaristic” in a qualified sense. “Culture” in its most comprehensive sense is an entire way of life for a group of people, one that emphasises the necessity to reproduce some shared meaning and ways of life over generations. These cannot be shared or sustained except through mimesis and “copying”. Thus it seems obvious that a kind of plagiarism is vital for reproducing culture itself on a day-to-day basis, a view that is accepted by some academicians. For example, pointing out that everyday life is perfused by plagiarism, Alfrey notes that plagiarism “is not only accepted, it is encouraged and integral to creative life. We depend on it, for we learn through copying others and we use it to reinforce social bonds” (Alfrey 2000).
Thus, not only do children learn language through imitation and repetition, they also quickly grasp through these very processes that it has a structure; they also learn the appropriate way and cadence to speak, eat, dress and behave in their culture by imitating other members of their community. Some researchers go so far as to suggest that replication is a human imperative. Congdon and Blandy (2001) refer to the work of Hillel Schwartz to argue that “replication is what makes us human. We see, hear, taste, or smell something, and we attempt to re-create it” (p 271).

It may be thus worthwhile to explore ways in which knowledge is imparted, learned and created across other cultural domains in order to understand how we learn and create in formal academic structures. This is particularly true in contemporary culture where “plagiarism” is manifest in various forms. How do different knowledge forms arise within our own lived experiences and learning contexts outside of educational institutions and what implications do they have within the strict discourse of education and academics?

The culture of plagiarism shows its tenuous links with plagiarism in culture. This latter is of two kinds. The first has to do with more formal approaches to plagiarism: copyright violations, remakes, adaptations, product and process patenting and the like which implicate ideas such as the original, copies, fakes and other forms of duplication and replication, authenticity, and the value placed on originality.

The second kind of plagiarism has to do with a more tacit “plagiarism” in culture which is concerned with drawing from culture as ‘shared knowledge systems’. As Price (2002) points out, “[T]he only material you can use without citing a source is anything that would pass as common knowledge or ‘fact’” (p 92). Here we are confronting ambiguity since what is “shared” or “common” changes according to the situation, historical time and context. However, while this is more obvious with the term “common knowledge”, even so-called “facts” are conditioned by contexts (Lunsford and Ede cited in Price 2002: 92). Price explicitly includes time as a factor which may also lead to differences in what is considered shared or common knowledge. But there is also the added problem of knowing who the “original” owners are. For instance, when a cultural form like a dance is associated with a community in popular imagination, it “belongs” to them. A paradigmatic example is the association made between Bharata Natyam and Tamil brahmins today. However, as is well known, Bharata Natyam is a renamed Sadir – a dance form performed by devadasis – which was appropriated as brahminical “tradition” in Tamil Nadu only a couple of decades before Indian’s independence (Palazhy 2009).

We can see from the above discussion that when we get away from logocentric domains, it is harder to ascribe sources and origins, and even harder to have a “logic of citations”. Given that these are the domains of everyday experience, our tacit understanding of the nature and place of “copying” is heavily implicated with plagiarism in and of culture. The complexity of plagiarism is further clearly illustrated when we examine the world young people inhabit, including the ways different communities learn and create in art and popular culture.

Learning in Art

Art has a special relation with “originality” as it does with “copying”. Being “original” in art may take one or several more of these forms: different, innovative, improvised, authentic, or new. Interestingly, however, apprentice artists, art students and aspiring artists whether they are musicians, painters, dancers, actors, learn their art from “copying” in one form or the other – repeating, duplicating, replicating, mimicking – either from nature itself (landscapes and nudes, for example) or from culture (singing/playing compositions of teachers and other musicians). The degree to which the student replicates or reproduces the “original” varies, each being a “new” rendition and this in fact may give rise to artistic styles, genres and indeed gharanas, depending on the artistic medium. Different techniques, improvisations and interpretations of the “same original” give rise to new works of art. Svara purity is also learned through imitation and repetition as much as careful listening, for all three are required to “tune the ear”.

Repeating, replicating, copying, imitating and reproducing are all important and integral ways of learning in the arts. More significantly, they are important indicators of the novice artist’s ability to “grasp” the medium. Frequently, it is through repetitive learning and listening that we are able to grasp the structural aspects of say, classical music (just like with language), so that one may move almost “intuitively” along the ascending and descending scales of particular ragas. Thus, in several domains there is a different value given to “copying”. Not only are imitation and repetition of techniques allowed, they are also encouraged in art in the learning stages. Once a technique or process is mastered, one is encouraged to create, interpret, improvise or visualise one’s own work. Thus it could be argued that what passes for plagiarism in academics may not necessarily be so in other domains. Taking an explicit stand, Lands (1999) says, “Plagiarism may be a taboo in academia, but in art some might say it is almost essential”.

Popular Culture

The last domain which influences students’ perception of plagiarism is popular culture. In popular fashion, for instance, teenagers replicate the style of their icons before they come up with their own style; they copy hairstyles and mannerisms, they appropriate cheap replicas of name brand clothing which everyone knows is a duplicate as much as the wearer themselves. Rarely does anybody mistakenly interpret any of these as “original”; rather there is a tacit understanding that imitation is an important aspect of learning and identity formation in the formative stages. Imitation here is used distinctly from copying and brings home the point that inasmuch as young people have a propensity to copy, over time, there is also in equal measure the ability to imitate. Yet, the danger is that with the amount of information available everywhere, copying and cloning, rather than imitation, may have become more appropriate metaphors to describe the behaviour of young people today.

Copying and imitation, however nuanced they may be, still require significant amounts of skill to execute. A popular example which requires little skill is using a stencil to draw. Karaoke “singing” is another powerful example where a singer sings the words of a song accompanied by a prerecorded soundtrack which makes it
sound like the “original”. Karaoke has become such a popular form of singing across the world that one can say that culture has been “karaokeed” and this process, I would argue, reflects changing norms of plagiarism. Another example is the GPS system which, in addition to many other functions, allows one to use the pad as a medium to create music. One can select a genre of music such as Hindustani classical without knowing what it is, and also choose any rags within it. Just running one’s fingers on the touch pad creates “compositions” in the selected genre and style. “Democratisation” of music has happened: anybody can be a musician without involving all those long hours of practice and years of learning an instrument and a style, or even cultivating their voice.

Thus, different domains of learning, culture and creativity are using these processes by emphasising, in one way or the other, form rather than content. Plagiarism in academics needs to take this into account.

Addressing Issues of Plagiarism in Pedagogy
As I have argued above, many of the techniques we associate with academic plagiarism are at the basis of learning and creating in the arts and popular culture. So what is special to plagiarism in academics? Is it something uniquely related to language? It might be the case that the problems of plagiarism in classroom and research writing reflect something specific to the very nature of language and language learning. Thus, for example, Scollon (1995: 20) reiterates the ideas of philosophers from Locke onwards who pointed to the fact that learning a language from others is indicative of the impossibility of original self-expression. However, this point is clearer for speech than writing. While we do learn to read and write through copying or following others’ written expressions, the relation between language and plagiarism can also be grounded in the fact that many of our youth do not, indeed cannot, express themselves cogently in writing partly because they have not read sufficiently in any language. Added to this is the fact that reading and writing requirements for coursework tend to be minimal in the Indian context. Thus, even though they are able to grasp conceptual thinking with some effort, they are unable to articulate their understanding through written words. A large part of this is due to the fact that we have moved from a logocentric world to an occulocentric one. Thus more young people are visually “literate” than previous generations but they have problems with basic reading and writing because of the fact that these are unfamiliar domains to them.

Despite these basic problems which are at the root of plagiarism, there is no doubt that part of the responsibility must be borne by teachers. Time and again I see that students are excellent at sifting through information, their searches are reasonably sophisticated, and they are able to come up with material that is relevant to their assignment, even though it is copied and pasted. Thus they show that they are capable of searching for and assessing material. They are masters in tracing information on the internet, trawling through various websites and going deeper into cyberspace.
in search of some obscure reading, much like previous generations would have scoured the print stacks in the library for an esoteric book or journal article related to their research topic. The intention is not always to avoid detection; many times it is also to find that bit of information which is not run-of-the-mill variety that everybody else will have. Despite all these proven capabilities, teachers either conveniently turn a blind eye to their achievements, or focus on it as “plagiarised” material.

These situations and responses, which are common among students, need to be utilised as the basis on which to build an understanding of what is at stake and how to work towards a final draft of an assignment. As Freedman (2004) points out, pedagogues need a new paradigm if they are not to be reduced to policing students. As a starting point we need to recognise that this kind of “plagiarism” is not going to go away. Some of the concerns about plagiarism could be addressed if teachers worked alongside students by allowing them to present their “copy and paste” endeavours as the first draft of a paper, with website and other links shown. In my experience, they are too happy to reveal their sources if they are taught this as an important part of the assignment. This information can be treated as a kind of “notes”, much like what we would have written/copied/summarised/xeroxed off books decades ago. This sourced and compiled “tertiary literature” is similar to the older handwritten notes from books and journal articles, but since new technologies have enabled their precise duplication, these must be treated as a bridge between conventional primary and secondary literature, and the final draft of a paper. These can be treated as a first draft of the assignment which students rework on along the lines suggested below. It must become part of the way we help students construct knowledge.

Given that this “tertiary literature” is usually appropriate and of good quality despite the lack of any formal training in search engines, students must next learn to organise it with their own outlines and subheadings.3 They may then be taken through the stages of paraphrasing it, formulating a summary and argument of each section and responding to it in simple ways with their own thoughts. Students must phrase and include their responses to these concepts and other questions in their written assignments. Students must be taught to use quotation marks and citations by including the comments of the teachers and their own classmates’ responses. Then the final draft of the paper may be submitted for evaluation.

This pedagogic method is based on the principle of “innocent until proved guilty”, and gives the benefit of doubt to youngsters when they need to feel trusted. Rather than dealing with plagiarism as a moral question, this approach deals with it as a matter of training and practice. In doing so, we also use their own approach to knowledge in order to build to where we require them to be in terms of norms. The onus of course is on the faculty to have the patience to take students through this task in the initial stages itself, by constantly focusing on processes of thinking through some topic. Precious class time may have to be allotted to it. Content work and syllabus will have to take a back seat. The reward is that by the end of the semester, innocent or unintentional plagiarists have been weeded out through a process-based, fairly rigorous approach, without naming them as such. Thus, we need to recognise that teachers have a central role to play not in curbing plagiarism but in working with students to make them understand it. Furthermore, while doing this, the idea of what is acceptable as “original” can be explored. For instance, Guetzkow et al (2010) in a comprehensive study exploring the notion of originality in research proposals summarised several ways in which researchers in the humanities and social sciences perceive a proposal to be original. Some of these ways were: using an original approach, method and perspective, researching an original topic or an understudied area, and using an original theory. Interestingly, the study revealed more complex ways in which proposal reviewers conceptualised originality. While teasing out the ways in which original approach, for instance, was understood, reviewers spoke of new approaches taken, new questions raised or studied, new connections and new arguments made (Guetzkow et al 2010: 197-98). Many of these can be used in teaching students to develop new ideas which could be considered to be genuinely original.

In conclusion, to deal with student plagiarism we need to recognise that plagiarism has much more to do with thinking rather than only writing. We need to acknowledge that we live in a plagiaristic culture but use that to counter naive plagiarism in papers and assignments, and to understand that originality is not just a matter of telling students to be original but to instil self-confidence in the student to be original. A self-conscious, aware pedagogy must succeed in doing this.

NOTES

1 This parallels Gombrich’s (1971) distinction between copying and imitation.

2 Karaoke is a form of entertainment where amateur singers sing a popular song along with recorded music of the same song minus the lead vocal, using a tape and a public address system. Lyrics are usually displayed on a video screen, along with a moving symbol or some other visual indicator to guide the singer.

3 There are other techniques such as “patchwriting” and “echoes” which are considered plagiarism in the American context. Such techniques, fine-tuned as they are to plagiaristic practices for advanced academic work, may in fact deter Indian students pursuing basic degrees from writing at all. They may thus be brought in for academic writing later on, at the stages of research and doctoral thesis work where training for future professions will require these more precise norms to be followed.

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