Plagiarism as an Expression of Agency

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The high incidence of plagiarism in South African universities has been attributed to increased opportunity in the digital age, peer group pressure, confusion about what constitutes plagiarism, and questions of language proficiency. Cultural differences regarding originality and authority have been cited as motives. It has also been argued that language proficiency implies more than an absence of technical ability, in that the issue is interwoven with the more complex one of membership in a discourse community. In this paper, I argue that plagiarism can reflect a quest for agency that is informed by strategic components, and that conscious choices are implicated in the performance of plagiarism. This discussion is based on a questionnaire given to students at a university of technology, which found that students choose to plagiarise in order to minimise time pressure and anxiety about language proficiency. The discussion is also informed by a case study of a teaching intervention in the same university, which focuses on the extreme persistence in plagiarising behaviour. This persistence is taken as further evidence for intentionality as a causative factor in plagiarism. In explaining these findings, the views of Ashworth *et al* (1997), Rudolph and Radcliff (2007), and Power (2009) are discussed, leading to the conclusion that agency is partly influenced by a ease of opportunity arising from contradictions within the university system, and by institutional incapacity to control plagiarism; and partly by alienation from the academic process, and from the value system that students associate with academic staff, but do not identify with at a personal level.

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Introduction

Students often commit plagiarism and demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to comply with referencing conventions; lecturers often feel that they are facing a rising tide of both. Research is inconclusive on whether it is rising or not, but there is consensus among various international studies that the tide is disturbingly high (see the literature reviews in Lin and Wen 2007, and Scanlon 2003). Among the causes cited are increased opportunity and ease in the digital age (Wilks 2004), peer group pressure (Rudolph & Radcliff (2007), confusion about what constitutes plagiarism (Bengesai & Saunders 2011), and questions of language proficiency (Ellery 2008; Gilmore *et al* 2010). Gilmore *et al* (2010) found a higher incidence of plagiarism in English Second Language (ESL) students, but cautioned that this "may reflect cultural differences in conceptions of plagiarism, inadequate English language skills, or a variety of other factors" (p. 24). Researchers also cite different cultural perspectives on the tensions between originality and authority (Valentine 2006; Lin and Wen 2007). Another (and perhaps more interesting) line of enquiry is the view that language proficiency does not merely imply an absence of technical ability, but that the issue is interwoven with the more complex one of acquisition of membership in a discourse community (Ellery 2008; Clegg and Flint 2006; Bengesai & Saunders 2011). One might add that the digital revolution has created a culture of cost-free replication. Many young people today routinely download movies, audiobooks, and music from bit streaming sources that require no payment, which suggests that by the time they enter university, they have come to regard the internet as a space in which intellectual property is a shared resource, and that no dues need to be paid. It makes intuitive sense, at least, that this ease of expropriation is then distributed into academic practice.

A position I explore in this paper, however, is that plagiarism can reflect a quest for agency that is informed by strategic components. Further, such agency is more readily exercised because there is an internal ease of opportunity within the university system (as opposed to the fact of

the internet), arising from inconsistent application of disciplinary sanctions, and lack of capacity to prevent or even control the sheer mass of infringement by legalistic means alone. A third factor is alienation from the academic system in general and the values of teaching staff in particular.

I use "agency" in accord with Lori Power's (2009) definition: "Student agency can be defined as a student taking control of the situation, feeling a sense of power, and making decisions for him/herself" – even where such decisions lead to negatively regarded actions such as plagiarism (p. 648).

This discussion is based on a questionnaire given to students in the Department of the Built Environment at Cape Peninsula University of Technology; a case study of a teaching intervention in the same department; and the views of Ashworth *et al* (1997), Rudolph and Radcliff (2007), and Lori Power (2009).

Motives for Plagiarism

For Kathryn Valentine (2006), plagiarism needs to be understood as a matter of identity rather than an ethical violation. In her view, "plagiarism involves social relationships, attitudes and values as much as it involves texts and rules of citation" (Valentine 2006: 90). The acquisition of a set of academic competencies is thus part of a journey in which identity is negotiated. She quotes Gee (2000, p. 127), who writes that learning a discourse involves acquiring "a sort of identity kit which comes complete with appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognise" (cited in Valentine 2006, p. 93). In her view, the ethical lens through which plagiarism is usually seen is not at all helpful. She therefore criticises a rule-based approach in the following terms:

> The problem with teaching citation and plagiarism as rule following is that it is not enough for students to know the textual practices of citation. Rather, students need to know citation and plagiarism as literacy practices – *as complicated ways of making meaning*.

(Valentine 2006, p. 105, my emphasis)

To make meaning in the first instance implies agency on the part of the maker. The trouble with agency is that, by definition, the agent is free to act in ways that disrupt the expectations and assumptions of the custodians of literacy practices.

In an unpublished study (Barris 2011), I found that there are elements of strategic intentionality at work, over and above the factors cited above. A questionnaire was distributed to 29 third year students in the Department of the Built Environment at Cape Peninsula University of Technology after they had participated in a research-based assignment. A precise demographic count was not taken, though most students came from township schools. About two-thirds were so-called Coloured students speaking a mixture of English and Afrikaans as first languages; apart from three white students, the rest had isiXhosa as their home language. The level of proficiency in academic English was generally low.

A majority indicated that they had read the preparatory material (69%), and tried to carry out the brief on referencing (67%). It must also be noted that all had signed plagiarism declarations, and all had been through a module on plagiarism, and on Harvard system referencing. Although reference to citation and bibliography was omitted from the questionnaire, verbal explanation preceding its administration defined the context, namely illegitimate use of other people's ideas.

As Table 1 below indicates, not many students admitted to direct forms of plagiarism such as copy and paste strategies, while approximately 75% indicated that they had copied neither internet nor print sources directly.

Table 1

Copy and Paste Strategy	True	Partly True	False
I copied some internet material and pasted it into my report	10%	14%	76%
I copied material from print sources directly	14%	14%	72%
I used material taken from a previous student's work	7%	3%	90%
I copied material from one of my peer students	0%	3%	97%

Approximately two-thirds admitted to close paraphrasing of both print and internet sources, to some extent (Table 2).

Table 2

Close Paraphrasing Strategy	True	Partly True	False
I copied some internet material and changed the words to some extent	17%	48%	34%
I copied material from print sources and changed the words to some extent	14%	48%	38%

A certain slippage appeared between the reported response towards plagiarism as a broad inclusive category, compared with the response concerning specific acts of plagiarism. For example, as Table 3 below indicates, 93% regarded plagiarism as unacceptable. However, only 48% reported that they had never plagiarised in any subject or assignment. Further, the respondents admitted to committing specific plagiarising actions to some degree when coupled with reasons for doing so. If one aggregates the True and Partly True figures, the motives given for plagiarism (in the context of verbatim copying) were confusion about the assignments (29%), time pressure (38%), and anxiety about proficiency in English (25%). The latter two, time pressure and avoidance of language production, suggest the presence of strategic motives.

Table 3

Motives for Plagiarism	True	Partly True	False
Plagiarism is acceptable if you can get away with it	3%	3%	93%
I sometimes copy/paste material because I don't understand what I am supposed to do	11%	18%	71%
I sometimes copy and paste material because I don't have enough time	7%	31%	62%
I sometimes copy and paste material because I am worried about my use of English	11%	14%	75%
I never plagiarise in any subject or assignment	48%	28%	24%

In her study of motives for plagiarism, Ellery (2008) found that inadvertent plagiarism was the most prominent factor amongst the plagiarising students she interviewed. However, she concedes that "deliberate dishonesty" (p. 511) was probably why almost half of her sample avoided such discussion:

> The overwhelming impression with the 21 interviewees was that plagiarism was inadvertent. Instead, most seemed perplexed about why they were considered to have plagiarised, and all were seeking better guidance than had been provided in this regard. However, it is recognised that deliberate dishonesty, driven by a desire for better grades, is an oft-cited cause of plagiarism (Davis et al. 1992; Whiteman and Gordon 2001; Straw 2002), and that some or all of the 18 students who avoided discussion of their plagiarised essay in this study may have done so because of fraudulent intentions.
>
> (Ellery 2008, p. 511)

Many teachers would agree on the basis of experience and anecdote that confusion and dishonesty are both relevant motives. However, the reasons for what appears, at least on face value, to be dishonesty need to be explored further. The contradictions I have noted in the responses to my own questionnaire suggest that strategic motivations must also be considered. The questionnaire shows firstly, that there was calculation of the perceived value of the project against the available time – students can complete an assignment far more quickly if they can copy and paste. A second and related motivation is efficiency – it is far easier to complete an assignment by this means. Thirdly, there is evidence of a conscious interlanguage strategy, intended to protect students from being marked down for language use. In my view, these motivations are constituents of the drive for agency, reflecting a need to bring this fraught zone of literacy practice under control, on the students' own terms.

Persistent plagiarism and selective improvement

The questionnaire discussed above shows that a degree of intentionality is present as a motive for plagiarism. In this section I discuss a case study that presents stronger evidence for this view. The gist of the matter is that plagiarism can persist despite an intensive approach to information literacy, and despite a combination of negative and positive incentives. I emphasise the extreme persistence of plagiarising behaviour encountered as material evidence of my argument, because this alone suggests one of two broad explanations. The first is that many students are unable to acquire appropriate literacy practices. The second is that many may choose not to.

Kathryn Valentine, having argued that teaching plagiarism should be about the acquisition of identity rather than about following rules, states that

> [a]voiding plagiarism is done not through rule following but through repeatedly carrying out what counts as citation in a context similar to the context in which citation will be required. In the same way that dancers repeat dance steps in preparation for a performance until they can perform without consciously thinking about those steps, writers need to cite repeatedly and correctly (figuring out the how, when, and why for each situation) before they can perform that citation without thinking about it.
>
> (Valentine 2006, p. 93)

The following case study will show that students were led through many such dance steps, but without the expected result. It took place in the context of a year long communication course for first year Built Environment students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, in which the curriculum placed strong emphasis on information literacy. There was a similar demographic pattern to the class discussed above, and a similar profile of under-preparedness. By the end of the first semester, the following activities had been completed:

A section on plagiarism, research skills, and Harvard System referencing.

Exposure to the Library's online Information Literacy training guide, followed by a Blackboard e-assessment on some of the topics.

A collaboration with the Library involving a training session by two librarians, coupled with direct communication links in the Blackboard subject page to one of the librarians, and to the library catalogues.

A formative assessment in which students were required to write a brief technical report and reference it using the Harvard system. This was supported by a session afterwards in which the required citations and references were explained, with digression into common errors.

A summative assessment in which the same skills were tested in a slightly longer technical report. Drafts were assessed in individual meetings where each student was given feedback, and an opportunity to correct the shortcomings before handing in the final draft. During these marking interviews, a smartphone was used to look up internet sources where plagiarism was suspected, and it was re-explained that plagiarism is problematic, unacceptable, and easy to detect.

Two more substantial research assignments, one of which was marked in the same way. All research assignments were accompanied by a signed plagiarism declaration. Students who still plagiarised at this stage were given an opportunity to rewrite, though marked to a maximum of 50%.

A summative test, under controlled conditions, in which students were required to demonstrate that they could combine source information in their own text, and insert accurate in-text and bibliographic entries. This was an open-book test to the extent that the students were given Harvard system guides as part of the reading material.

One might predict that this sustained developmental work would result in a reduced incidence of plagiarism in its various forms by the end of the semester. The texts continued, however, to demonstrate copied and pasted material, weak bibliographies, and sometimes incoherent patchwork.

In reaction to this, I devoted the entire third quarter to a single outcomes-based project, in which progression depended on successful completion of the preceding task. It resulted in an improvement within the immediate context of the project; however, outside this particular context, students reverted to inappropriate forms of writing and citing which the intervention was intended to overcome.

The first stage was to complete a formative e-test of ability to use and interpret the Harvard system. The test could be repeated indefinitely, with no time limit. Students had free access to various online and print guides of the Harvard system. The only catch was that they had to get 80% before proceeding. The value for the whole assignment was 14 marks, which coincided with 14% of the full year mark. The reward for successful completion of the test was a 2% bonus. About three-quarters of the class eventually achieved this, some taking the test almost twenty times, and up to 12 class hours before they achieved it. Eventually (after three weeks) I allowed the remaining quarter to proceed to stage two, though they did not get the 2% bonus.

The second step was to write four paragraphs in which each paragraph coherently merged information from two sources. Each student then had to show me the successful product on their computer screens before they could proceed. The results were instructive. A small minority managed to merge information coherently from both sources in each of the four paragraphs on the first attempt. Most were surprised when I pointed out that certain paragraphs, or all of them, contained references to only one source. These were often in order of reading: in other words, the first two paragraphs would contain material from the first source, and the last two paragraphs would contain material from the second source. The accident of reading order thus dictated the content of the students' texts, which is typical of inexperienced writers. There were many errors of citation, which I could then point out, as well as other misunderstandings of academic construction. For example, about one quarter of the students combined material –

particularly on their second attempt when they were obliged to use both sources in each paragraph – incoherently. When this task was completed, the students earned another 2% bonus. By then most of the third quarter had passed.

The third stage was to rework the same four paragraphs, and the same two sources, into a short technical report. This was to be uploaded into Safeassign on Blackboard. If Safeassign reported a match of 20% or less, the student could then print it and hand it in to me, together with a printout of the Safeassign report. If a higher match was reported (evidence of a greater degree of close paraphrasing or direct copying), the student had to go back to the drawing board. The final report was then marked conventionally, contributing 10% to the year mark.

The Safeassign process worked so badly that no firm conclusions can be drawn from this aspect of the intervention. However, the product of this final stage did show a marked improvement in the integration of material, in-text referencing, and bibliography. These gains were demonstrated again in the final assessment of the year, by when the scaffolding explained above had been withdrawn.

However, between the scaffolded intervention I have described, and this final assessment, there was a written group project. In this case, the drafts were submitted and checked for basic problems. Many were returned for rewriting because students had lapsed into copying and pasting, no citation, and minimal, inaccurate, or incomplete bibliographies. This must be related to the fact that most assignments over the full year were subject to the same scrutiny, and to the fact that my response to these shortcomings was consistent. In other words, the students persisted in behaviours that consistently attracted negative feedback, and over the year were consistently followed by a demand to correct and resubmit. The question is why they would perseverate in this fashion, given its proven dysfunctionality. The contrast between this final group project and the final assessment suggests that students knew exactly what to do by then; they just chose not to do it once they felt that the pressure of closely scrutinised performance was reduced.

Discussion

There is suggestive evidence in the questionnaire described above that students choose to plagiarise (amongst other motives) in order to reduce time pressure, and to avoid anxiety related to language proficiency, by resorting to plagiarism. Further, the teaching intervention discussed above suggests two further intentional elements. As the intensive first semester coursework demonstrates, the first element is marked resistance to acquiring the requisite literacy practices. One might argue that this points to a lack of ability, but the improvement noted in the third quarter suggests otherwise. The second intentional element is shown in the selective nature of this improvement, which also implies that improvement was modulated by a factor other than ability, namely agency: the students, to a significant degree, chose the time and context in which to perform at an appropriate academic level. In a different context (the group project), the choice of the majority was not to invest the effort required to avoid plagiarism, clearly a strategic decision.

This finding requires explanation. One possible reason is that the quest for agency is driven by alienation from the value system teachers take for granted. It is also facilitated by the depth of opportunity actually embedded in the university system, despite the dense layers of nominal and legalistic disapprobation. In a study of student attitudes, Rudolph and Radcliffe (2007) observed several motivations that are relevant to this discussion:

> Getting caught is unlikely and even then there will be so many other people caught that the punishments can't be too severe. The prevalence of the practice provides protection.

> The material or instructor is of no interest, of little value, or not relevant to my future.

> While the payoff for plagiarism is in the short term, the costs are diffuse in the distant future (unless one is caught).

> Most anti-plagiarism system [*sic*] are sporadically or unevenly applied which is unfair so the entire anti-plagiarism [*sic*] is invalid and should be ignored where possible.

(Rudolph & Radcliffe 2007, p.3)

The theme of alienation is evident in this list ("The material or instructor is of no interest, of little value, or not relevant to my future"; "the entire anti-plagiarism is invalid and should be ignored:). A second important theme of opportunity is also reflected ("Getting caught is unlikely and even than there will be so many other people caught that the punishments can't be too severe.")

With regard to the theme of alienation, Ashworth *et al* (1997) found that "cheating is taken to be excusable where units are seen to be of marginal importance, or badly taught, or assessed in a manner that almost invites cheating" (n.p.). Power (2009), moreover, identified what she called "externalizing" (p. 649) as a strong motivator. Students tend to experience the discourse of plagiarism as an imposition from outside, something that belongs to the world of professors. However, they do not regard it as a value set that has anything to do with themselves. She records that "[e]very student in this study knew that the plagiarism policy could be found in the student handbook. However, not 1 of the 31 students had read it. In fact, only two had read any part of the handbook at all" (p. 655).

With regard to the theme of opportunity, Rudolph & Radcliffe (2007) cite the disparity of dire warnings on the part of the institution, on the one hand, and the relatively low probability of being severely disciplined on the other, given the unwieldy nature of disciplinary processes (p. 3 – 4). It leads to the perception that consequences are limited. There is also an unexpected form of cultural relativity within universities, in that teachers and programmes are widely inconsistent in their attempts to control plagiarism.

The facilitative influence of opportunity on such negative acts of agency is self-evident. However, Power (2009) cogently encapsulates the dialectic between alienation – or "externalization" as she calls it – and agency:

> The students interviewed for this study indicated that their motivations for plagiarizing or not plagiarizing are embedded within [a] power structure. Their misunderstandings are a part of it too, because if they don't understand it (or if their professors seem to be always changing the rules), then they have less agency. They fear being accused of plagiarism. When they make a deliberate choice not to plagiarize, they generally do so out of fear, not a personal sense of morality or personal agency.

(Power 2009, p. 652)

I conclude that students become agents in making meaning not only about the content of their discipline, but about the processes whereby knowledge is acquired and communicated. Strategic factors such as available time, efficiency, and protection against being marked down for language use play into choices made by students in this context.

I conclude, further, that alienation from the teacher, programme or academic system is likely to direct the drive for agency into potentially negative channels such as plagiarism. This lends cogency to the views of proponents of discourse membership cited above, while highlighting the difficulty and complexity of acquiring such membership.

It is also clear that internal opportunity is an important predictor. In other words, inconsistent responses by academic staff to the regulation of plagiarism contribute to a permissive atmosphere. This is further influenced by a lack of capacity to prevent, control or sanction its overwhelmingly numerous manifestations, which leads in turn to the perception that it is relatively safe to continue to plagiarise.

Finally, an additional possibility arises for further study: it is possible that my own students resisted acquiring ownership of this literacy – except when they were pressurised into doing so, and then only selectively – because they regarded it as part of a transient academic experience. I speculate that many students (perhaps more so in universities of technology) regard the acquisition of information literacy values as an obstacle to be bypassed on their way to a vocational qualification, rather than as an integral means of acquiring the qualification, and even less as a core ethical code that is integral to the vocation concerned.

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