

## **“Intertextuality” and Intellectual Property: Changing Views on Plagiarism**

Helene Hegemann was seventeen when she wrote her first novel, *Axolotl Roadkill*. It was hailed worldwide as a brilliant debut, nominated for the Leipzig Book Prize in Germany, and seemed to herald beginning of a bright writing career for its young author. That is, until she became embroiled in a plagiarism controversy that threatened to engulf her. Hegemann was accused of copying large passages of her book from another, less well-known novel called *Strobo*, written under the pen name “Airen”. While the literary world was in uproar, she was unapologetically arguing that, “There’s no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity” (qtd. in Kulish). Opinion in the publishing world was split. Some believe Hegemann is an example of a “new” culture that sees intellectual property as outmoded and “is here to mix everything with everything” (qtd. in Kulish). Others argue that ignoring intellectual property rights undermines the very idea of authorship.

This is an extreme example, and one that is not associated with the academic world. However, it is not difficult to imagine that Hegemann speaks for a “cut and paste generation” of students who find research materials ever more widely available and cheating (especially plagiarism) ever easier. What is to blame for the dismissal of intellectual property rights? Is it a misunderstanding of what plagiarism

is? Or a generational gap aided by technology and “wiki” sites? Whatever the reasons for an increase in plagiarism, they do not excuse the act, and universities must continue to educate their students about intellectual property and the reasons that plagiarism is such a serious offense.

Most students are taught the importance of citing their research and understand, perhaps in a vague way, what plagiarism means. Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary defines plagiarism as “to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of others) as one’s own: use (another’s production) without crediting the source.” The Eckerd College Handbook lists examples of plagiarism:

1. Using an article from a magazine or journal and presenting it as your own.
2. Intentionally attempting to make the thoughts of another appear as your own by altering the word arrangement or paraphrasing or omitting some words and not citing the source.
3. Using data not generated by your own research without properly citing the source of the data.
4. Handing in a paper or any part of a paper purchased from a term paper service.
5. Reprinting someone else’s paper, or any part of a paper, and handing it in as your own. (22)

This list covers a wide range of incidents (and is only one part of a substantial section on academic dishonesty in the student handbook). It is similar to the list that is included on many syllabi from college professors, and yet there continues to be an amplified focus on plagiarism, both intentional and unintentional. In fact, according to a survey conducted at Kansas State University, 44% of college students have copied written material (such as a book or article) without citing it. 41% have copied material from an online source without citing it. In addition, only 16% and 20% of students (respectively) thought that these offenses constituted

“serious cheating”. Even more disturbing, in both categories only 37% of professors considered these offenses to be “serious cheating” (McCabe)

These statistics point to a major problem in higher education. Plagiarism, literally the theft of someone else’s words or ideas, is not considered “serious cheating” even by some professors charged with identifying and addressing instances of plagiarism. While most universities still enforce honor codes and serious consequences for cheating and plagiarism, in order for these deterrents to work, universities must look at the causes of plagiarism.

One oft-suggested cause of plagiarism is the hyper-competitive and hyper-stressed culture of American universities today. It is true that college students are entering university with record levels of stress: only 52% of students reported that they had “above-average” mental health (Lewin). Counselors on college campuses attribute this to stress, especially economic stress:

‘Students know their generation is less likely to be successful than their parents’, so they feel more pressure to succeed than in the past,’ said Jason Ebbeling, director of residential education at Southern Oregon University. ‘These days, students worry that even with a college degree they won’t find a job that pays more than minimum wage, so even at 15 or 16 they’re thinking they’ll need to get into an M.B.A. program or PhD program’ (Lewin).

The economic downturn has contributed in a major way to students’ stress. Today, students cannot just do well, they have to overachieve to even have a chance at top graduate schools or top jobs. This need for overachievement can translate into extra pressure in classes; pressure that results in academic dishonesty and plagiarism, especially when students run out of time to complete an assignment.

When you add this internal stress to external stress (like parental unemployment, rising student loan debt, etc.) it is easy to see why college freshmen are reporting ever-higher levels of stress (Lewin) and colleges are seeing ever-higher levels of academic dishonesty.

Some studies also argue that the rise in plagiarism is due to a misunderstanding of how to cite sources appropriately, or a lack of writing skills generally, that is to blame for the rise in plagiarism. Ed Dante is the pen name of a man who works as a ghost writer, being paid to write papers for students at all levels of education, from high school to PhD programs. He says in the article “The Shadow Scholar”:

You would be amazed by the incompetence of your students' writing....They couldn't write a convincing grocery list, yet they are in graduate school. They really need help. They need help learning and, separately, they need help passing their courses. But they aren't getting it.

Dante argues that, while there is definitely a large base of “lazy rich kids” who make up his business, the majority of his clients are either ELS students or “hopelessly deficient students.” While he admits that he is not above moral scrutiny, Dante places much of the blame on colleges and professors who fail to address deficient writing skills, who are willing to believe that a student who can’t construct a basic sentence can write a senior thesis, PhD dissertation, major research paper, etc.

Placing the entire (or even the bulk of) blame for academic dishonesty on professors is unfair. But there is certainly a culture in higher education that rewards

high enrollment, even if it means admitting students who may not be ready for the academic rigors of college: “It’s a problem when higher education is driven by a student client model and institutions are chasing after bodies” (qtd. in Jaschik). Universities and colleges are setting students up for failure when they admit students lacking academic skills. They are also creating a group of students who will be forced to cheat in order to pass their classes.

A lack of writing in college courses could also contribute to a lack of writing skills and resultant high levels of plagiarism. According to the authors of *Academically Adrift*, half of students “don’t take a single course in which they must write more than 20 pages over the course of a semester” (Jaschik). This lack of rigor in writing is contributing, in the authors’ opinions, to a lack of learning in college. It is also keeping students from learning to write, a major part of which is learning to research and cite sources, leading to a serious misunderstanding of what plagiarism is and why it constitutes cheating.

Another culprit in the rising rates of plagiarism is the internet. While there are no definitive studies, anecdotal evidence suggests that students currently in college have been highly influenced by a culture that recycles and freely shares everything from music to television shows. An article in *The New York Times*, “Plagiarism Lines Blur for Students in Digital Age,” addresses this question directly. Teresa Fishman, the director of Clemson University’s Center for Academic Integrity, is quoted in the article: “Now we have a whole generation of students who’ve grown up with information that just seems to be hanging out there in cyberspace and doesn’t seem to have an author... It’s possible to believe this information is just out

there for anyone to take” (Gabriel “Plagiarism Lines”). Many students believe that wikis, unsigned online articles, are the equivalent of common knowledge because they are created by various contributors. Because of this belief, students fail to cite sources such as Wikipedia in their papers, passing off the information as their own.

In addition to the ease of cutting and pasting information, the Internet has also created a market for companies who sell essays to students on any number of topics. Sites like Essaytown.com and Schoolsucks.com give students the option of downloading pre-written essays or ordering essays based on their specifications (This is the type of company that Ed Dante works for). Essaytown.com is particularly interesting. According to their website, they have over 50,000 essays that any student can browse and purchase. They also offer:

...ONE-OF-A-KIND, BRAND NEW research paper, essay, term paper, **book report**, thesis, or **dissertation**... Our experts can research and write a new, original, unique document—JUST FOR YOU—on the particular topic of your choice. Through our "**Custom Research Service**," one of our 150+, experienced professionals...will write **300+ words per page**, following your exact instructions—**guaranteed**. Whether you are a high school senior looking for a 1-page admission **essay**, or a Ph.D. candidate in need of a 400-page **dissertation**, we have the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to complete your order. (Essaytown.com)

The upbeat nature of the site makes it clear that this is a for-profit company providing what it, and its customers, must see as a normal service. Essaytown.com is an unscrupulous website assisting students in cheating in their classes (or on college applications). They are propagating the idea that it is perfectly acceptable not to submit your own work, and that it makes sense to “outsource” your academic

work. One website, Rapidessays.com tells students “So why are you waiting? You want to earn an A+ don’t you? Order today... make that grade tomorrow!” Not only are students facing pressure within their school environment, these companies are perpetuating the idea that it is necessary to order a paper in order to get a good grade, an idea that is convincing to the “hopelessly deficient” students Dante mentions in his article.

Interestingly, Essaytown.com distinguishes itself from other sites by stating that those sites

... steal information and **plagiarize** from online sources. EssayTown is different.... We also scan every *custom research* paper order with our plagiarism-detection software to further ensure that all text is original and all sources are properly cited throughout the paper and on a bibliography, works cited, and/or references page” (Essaytown.com)

They conveniently forget to address the fact that turning in one of these papers to a professor *is* plagiarism. And here we return to a basic issue with plagiarism, the fact that many students don’t understand what plagiarism is or why it is a big deal. Helene Hegemann, when exposed for lifting passages from other writers said that it wasn’t plagiarism, simply “intertextuality” (Kirchner). Other commentators have compared this borrowing to sampling music that is common in hip-hop, or file-sharing on the internet (Kirchner). The problem with this is that it excuses plagiarism by dismissing it as a cultural movement, rather than addressing the issue. This casual stance has resulted in many students failing to grasp the seriousness of plagiarism, a misunderstanding that could cost them their academic careers.

Many colleges, however, are taking action against academic dishonesty generally and plagiarism specifically. The most widespread plagiarism preventer is the use of Turnitin.com, a website that checks student papers for plagiarism. Students submit their papers to Turnitin.com, which then gives the professor a copy of the paper with highlighting on any borrowed, uncredited passages (Gabriel, "Stop Cheats"). Some colleges are also requiring incoming freshmen to complete online seminars about plagiarism. One study showed that this tutorial resulted in students plagiarizing two-thirds less than students who had not completed a tutorial (Gabriel, "Stop Cheats"). These proactive measures are effective deterrents of plagiarism, addressing both prevention (the seminars) and catching students in the act (Turnitin.com).

Other schools reject this adversarial viewpoint, opting instead for enforcement of an honor code, a system that is based on trusting one's students, not assuming that they will cheat (Gabriel, "Stop Cheats"). Washington and Lee University, for example, declined to use Turnitin.com because it "gives the implication that we are anticipating our students will cheat" (Gabriel, "Stop Cheats"). This, along with the implementation of an Academic Honor Council, is the road that Eckerd has taken. While this stance, that we should expect students to always be honest, is noble, it is short-sighted. Between the stress of getting good grades, the ease of plagiarizing, and the social acceptability of "intertextuality", honor codes are simply not addressing the root issues of rising levels of plagiarism in college students.

Each of the causes mentioned in this paper, the pressure to succeed, a lack of skill sets in writing, and the ease of plagiarizing are all contributing factors to rising levels of academic dishonesty. It seems to be impossible to separate any of these causes from the other, and colleges that wish to effectively address academic dishonesty must address all of these causes. If universities wish to carry the idea of authorship and intellectual property into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is absolutely necessary that they create effective policies to address plagiarism and educate their students about the importance of intellectual property.

And, in case you were wondering, Helene Hegemann didn't win the Leipzig Book Prize.

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