

Obligatory intertextuality and proscribed plagiarism: intersections and contradictions for research writing¹

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Abstract: The continuing difficulties at both individual and institutional levels in defining and consequently avoiding plagiarism indicate strongly that the issues are not as straightforward as they may sometimes appear. In this paper, I propose that a key factor underlying these difficulties is an overlap between the obligatory intertextual practices of academic communities and the proscription of plagiarism. The disjunction this produces must be accounted for in order to coherently integrate a more workable approach to plagiarism with the practice of membership in the academic community.

Keywords: intertextuality, plagiarism, community membership, discourse analysis

Introduction

If defining and avoiding plagiarism were simple matters, then well-informed students would not unintentionally plagiarise, higher penalties for both students and teaching staff who transgressed their responsibilities would be a sufficient motivating factor to eliminate plagiarism, and forums for academic debate such as the Educational Integrity Conference would have already passed beyond their life expectancy.

That none of these things is the case implies strongly that we are not dealing with simple matters. Instead, rigorously specified, practical definitions of plagiarism are quite elusive, which is one (though not the only) reason for the difficulties encountered at individual and institutional levels in avoiding it.

In this paper, I propose that one of the key factors underlying these difficulties is a significant overlap between what is explicitly proscribed in research writing and what is, often implicitly, required (see also Crocker and Shaw, 2002, for a survey-based study of a related idea). The idea that the elements I will be discussing are obligatory in various ways is by no means new. Rather, in the rapid increase of focus on the threat of plagiarism, it appears that the academic community has lost track of the implications of intertextuality, as a necessary aspect of the creation and communication of meaning. Reincorporating these established understandings of intertextuality, then, will offer a balancing function in our attempts to make sense of plagiarism issues.

I will first highlight some definitional questions evident in a sample policy statement on plagiarism, by way of an anchor to which to return. I will then set the ground for the focus of this paper by briefly revisiting some classical and practical definitions of intertextuality, and their relation to research degree candidature. The discussion section returns to the anchor point, making problematical any attempt to clarify the definitions previously highlighted in the light of the necessarily intertextual processes of research and research writing. Some aspects of frame analysis are seen to be useful at this point. The possibilities which emerge require the incorporation of actual practices of research and research writing in the various research sub-communities as a baseline for any workable definitions of and practices around plagiarism.

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Plagiarism

Definitions

The definitions of plagiarism in university regulations are functionally – and, I would argue, necessarily – vague. The extracts below are reproduced from the policy statements of the University of Adelaide, but they are representative of the general approach found elsewhere.

Among the stipulations in these policy statements can be found the following:

No student will submit for assessment any piece of work which is not entirely the student's own, except where either:

- (a) the use of the [work] of others is appropriate and duly acknowledged, or
- (b) the assessor has given prior permission for joint or collaborative work to be submitted.

No student will assist any candidate in any piece of assessed individual work, and no student shall accept assistance in such a piece of assessed individual work, except in accordance with approved study and assessment schemes (University of Adelaide, Division of Student & Staff Services, 2004).

The crucial definitional questions at issue here include what is considered to constitute (a) a researcher's "own" work, (b) "appropriate" acknowledgement, and (c) "assistance" in a piece of assessed individual work. It is my contention that each one of these is not only under-defined, but as they stand, undefinable, in the light of the intertextual conventions of research writing practice.

Intertextuality

Definitions

In using the term *intertextuality*, I am referring to the collaborative process of meaning production, as organised in and by the practices of a particular (sub)culture – in this case "the academic community", and its sub-communities in particular discipline areas. For the purposes of this paper, I will be assuming a characterisation of the academic community as it is broadly understood in the Australian context.

An important component of the earliest versions of intertextuality theory was the tripartite construction of meaning, by "writing subject, addressee and exterior texts" (Kristeva, 1969/1980, p. 66). For the present purposes, however, I will be minimising the role of the "addressee", as standard current academic practices have left this factor so far outside of considerations of text/meaning ownership that it would take up the whole of this brief article to justify its reincorporation. One aspect of this element which cannot be completely disregarded, however, is that the writer is necessarily also addressee, in the chain of research writing in which they actively play a part.

This caveat aside, what I will be focussing on is the relations between writer and exterior texts – in particular, on their status as obligatory relations, and the conflicting overlap between what is required, and what, from the perspective of plagiarism regulations, is proscribed.

Fairclough (1992) analyses intertextuality into two types: *manifest* (after Authier-Révux, 1982 and Maingueneau, 1987) and *constitutive*. The former can be defined briefly as the employment of *content* from existing texts in the creation of a new text, while the latter can be summarised as the use of *structures* from existing texts.

The point I wish to make about both types of intertextuality is that they are in several ways *obligatory* – at some levels formally, and at some levels discursively. By *formally obligatory*, I mean that universities overtly specify such intertextuality as an evaluation criterion for the student’s work. By *discursively obligatory*, I mean that the student is compelled to develop an intertextual basis for their writing as a condition for gaining membership in the target research community.

It should be noted that Fairclough’s definitions are functionally restricted to a narrow definition of text as stretch of language (whether written or spoken). For a full understanding of the extent of intertextuality in research practices, it will be necessary to broaden this definition to include communicative, social and semiotic conditions at various discursive levels within the scope of “exterior texts”.

Formally obligatory intertextuality

A research student is formally obliged to demonstrate the lineage of their research from existing literature: which traditions of thought their research is overtly connected with; what is the nature of its relation to other realisations of these traditions (*oppositional, supportive or adaptive* – Fairclough, 1992); what consequential threads of this discursive web are anticipated. This is manifest intertextuality. At the same time, s/he is obliged to produce an *original contribution* as evidence of their worth as a candidate. It appears, then, that there are degrees of originality, within which it is possible to be “too original”.

Secondly, the research student is formally obliged to follow the conventionally established formats for submission of their work: this marks it as an instance of the genre the student is targetting. Here, the requirement for constitutive intertextuality is so overt, that a meta-language for its realisation has become commonplace, and made readily available in style guides developed for the various convention sets.

These requirements are integrated sufficiently in the life of universities to be locatable in formal lists of staff responsibilities:

Responsibilities of staff...to assist students to practise and learn the academic language and conventions required for their assessment tasks (University of Adelaide, Division of Student & Staff Services, 2004).

In terms of both manifest and constitutive intertextuality, then, there are strong and explicit requirements for the research student to reproduce (and in so doing to further strengthen) the conventions already established.

Discursively obligatory intertextuality

The underlying goal of the graduate research degree is not to graduate *from* the degree, but to graduate *to* membership in the academic (sub)community. In order to succeed in this rite of passage, the student must acquire the discourses of their target subcommunity: its language, its criteria for determining what is and is not an appropriate line of research, its systems for linking certain types of questions and procedures and not others, and so on. Only by this means can the student gain the membership in the subcommunity to which their enrolment in a research degree is implicitly targetted. This level of intertextuality is the very fabric and framework for the continuation of research in a given discipline:

...how much we all “borrow from existing texts, how much we depend on membership in a community for our language, our voices, our very arguments.” (Hull and Rose, 1989, as cited in Currie, 1998, p. 1)

To undertake graduate research, then, is to take on a subject position that acquiesces to and works within the principles set out by the discourses of a particular academic subcommunity. The alternative is, quite simply, not to be doing scientific work. Lyotard, using Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1957/1968) to describe the workings of scientific discourse, explains this as follows:

"Who decides the conditions of truth?" It is recognized that the conditions of truth, in other words, the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game, that they can only be established within the bounds of a debate that is already scientific in nature. (Lyotard, 1979/1984, p. 29)

In the justification of a research project, this is realised in the form of quite specific conventions about *what* can be accepted as "existing literature":

Each community and every subcommunity within it has its own *system of intertextuality*: its own set of important or valued texts, its own preferred discourses, and particularly its own habits of deciding which texts should be read in the context of which others, and why, and how (Lemke, 1995, p. 10).

The requirements of manifest intertextuality in a given academic subculture significantly constrain the possible topics and directions of research, in that only those questions justifiable from within the same subculture can be validated. *Lineage*, then, is entirely the appropriate word for this requirement: the research must not only be framed within the discipline formed by the discourse; it must also be shown to follow a coherent line of development already pre-empted in the discipline.

Although, one might object, it is clear that many kinds of research not already legitimated within academia are possible, and indeed, carried out, it remains the case that these lines of research are not available to the graduate student. For her/him, it is axiomatic that only research which can be assessed as competent by the target subcommunity can be considered. The production of meaning in the graduate thesis is constrained, then, at two levels of obligatory intertextuality: a lineage of *content*, and a lineage of *community membership*. In other words, the discourse requires that (i) meaning production is coherent on the basis of a lineage already validated, and (ii) the validation criteria are those established by the persons, conventions and/or institutions of the target subcommunity.

A second caveat is necessary at this point, as it may seem that I am implying that new ideas are impossible within this framework, which is patently not the case. In fact, the theory of intertextuality entails that meaning is always new and creative, because texts are always recombined and hybridised, in an infinite set of connections of layers. Again, this is not an area of the theory which can be adequately discussed in the present context, as my present aims necessitate a focus on the *centripetal* forces (tendency to reproduce) rather than the *centrifugal* (tendency to change) (Fairclough, 1995 – see this work also for a useful explication of the balance of these forces towards creative productivity).

Disjunctions for research students

I will now return to the crucial definitional questions posed earlier: What is considered to constitute (a) a researcher's "own" work, (b) "appropriate" acknowledgement, and (c) "assistance" in a piece of assessed individual work?

“Assistance” and a researcher’s “own” work

In the light of the intertextual processes of research and research writing outlined above, it is not surprising that the identification of text “owner” is commonly a point of negotiation. For example, it is standard practice in laboratory work, when publishing findings, to negotiate who will be the authors, and in what order. The need for negotiation on this point itself indicates strongly that there is no clear-cut relation here between who physically writes up the findings, who has developed their content, and who holds responsibility for the ideas communicated. In the terminology of frame analysis, we can talk about these roles as *animator*, *author* and *principal* respectively (see Goffman, 1974, and elsewhere). The view of plagiarism as a violation of authorial text ownership assumes a clear-cut relation between these roles. As Scollon (1995) points out –

The concept of the unified animator/author/principal, presupposed in most discussions of plagiarism, is not an entity easily found in normal discourse (Scollon, 1995, p. 8).

A good example of disjunction on this point can be found on the University of Adelaide website:

It is perfectly legitimate to study together and discuss your assignment with others, but ensure the work you submit is your own (University of Adelaide, Division of Student & Staff Services, 2004).

Here, the role of Goffman’s *author* can be clearly seen to be shared among several people. What seems to be crucial in labelling the work of one person is the conflation of the roles of principal and animator. But this is not so in the above-mentioned case of laboratory-based publications, in which the most crucial function appears to be the designation of principals. The identification of authors (those who have developed the content) is not at all straightforward, given the shifting of roles among various projects at various times in the laboratory environment. The animator is sometimes a research assistant whose name may be, but is not necessarily, included in the authorial list – this, of course, is also the case in many other, less obviously collaborative, situations. Similar negotiation of authorship is practised in grant applications – for which the selection of a principal is even more crucial, given the research record that must be demonstrated to secure the grant. For reasons such as this, the designation of principal may not always be strongly identified with authorship of the work as such.

All of this simply exemplifies standard practices of collaborative research and negotiated authorship as accepted by the membership of the academic (sub)community. The question now becomes: in a culture in which collaborative research is the norm, how can the student’s “own” work be definable? In regard to a research thesis in particular, the assessor *never* gives “prior permission for joint or collaborative work to be submitted” – yet in many university subcommunities, this is *always* what in fact happens. Similarly, it is hard to know what “no student shall accept assistance in any piece of assessed individual work” could possibly mean in practice.

“Appropriate” acknowledgement

At institutional level, it often seems that the requirement to demonstrate the lineage of one’s research is clarified by the apparently matching requirement to acknowledge one’s sources. There are many reasons for the importance of careful acknowledgement practices, from contextualisation of the work within the various lines of thought in a given field through to respect for the contributions of various types of participants. Nonetheless, in

the context of standard intertextual practices of research communities and the conditions of membership within those communities, there are limits even to the appropriateness of source acknowledgment.

The first point of disjunction is that established knowledge is freely recycled within a discipline. This kind of intertextuality is frequently constitutive, in forms ranging from conventions for the representation of a given type of data (such as the periodic tables), to standard structures and phrases used for commonly described features of the object of study (such as participant inclusion and exclusion criteria, or the phonology of a language). However, the intertextuality is also manifest, in the form of facets of the field considered to be common knowledge within the subcommunity. The point here is that if a student *were* to cite a source for any of the above, this would immediately position them as a non-member of that target community. The seamless incorporation of these standard forms and content elements is the unmarked identifier of the full member. Citing sources to justify the “choice” of items covered in a participant inclusion and exclusion criteria list could only be an indicator of student status. In this light, then, it becomes quite difficult to interpret the concept of “appropriate” acknowledgement. If the ultimate goal is full membership of the academic community, then appropriateness will necessarily mean *not* citing sources for all information and ideas used – a recommendation rarely found on university websites.

Secondly, given the collaborative processes and, frequently, apprenticeship elements of research degree candidature, it can often be quite unclear as to when it is necessary to mark a given idea, organising criterion or terminological innovation as “the work of others” and when it is not. The lack of clear boundary-marking between the work of different people is not only evident in overtly collaborative research situations such as described above. It is evident also in contexts including discussions of varying degrees of formality in the student’s Department, at conferences, and with friends. Add to this the widely varying degrees of involvement in both the research and the writing process by supervisors of various persuasions, then contributions made by not only colleagues, but also research participants (such as patients, clients or interviewees) and editors – and the picture as a whole becomes one of a wide-ranging, productive, unbounded network of exterior texts (see Evans and Deller-Evans, 2002, for discussion of the potentially contentious role of editors). Although an acknowledgement section at the outset of the thesis is standard – and becoming more heavily standardised as the threat of plagiarism rises ever higher – this requirement does not begin to approach the detailed citation of sources stipulated at universities for more readily traceable sources of information and ideas. This under-citation of general “sources” is also merely standard practice, and is directly attributable to the accepted degree of collaboration in the production of meaning – but is entirely at odds with the broad mandates of plagiarism regulations. Moreover, in the process of their advancement to membership status in the academic community, it will not have escaped most students’ attention that designated authorship and the requirement or otherwise to acknowledge sources is as much a function of seniority and academic standing as anything else (see Martin, 1994, for further discussion of this point).

As my third and final caveat, many readers will have observed that I have avoided altogether the broader cultural issues surrounding intertextuality conventions – that is, conventions that vary between “cultures” defined on a larger scale, as discussed by Pennycook (1996), amongst others. My primary concern in this restricted space has been to point out what is problematical in what sometimes appears to be straightforward. If even considering the Australian university environment as if it were an idealised monocultural space still allows me to highlight points at which intertextuality and plagiarism issues are not at all straightforward, then how much less straightforward they must be in the “real world”.

A concluding example

By way of a closing illustration, I would like to briefly consider some of the ways in which the obligatoriness of intertextuality and the proscription of plagiarism have intersected in the writing of the present paper. I will focus here on manifest, rather than constitutive, intertextuality, as it is the overlap between plagiarism and manifest intertextuality that presents the most visible concern for most.

As stated above, it is a formal intertextual requirement for research writing that I demonstrate the lineage of my research from existing literature. From a plagiarism avoidance perspective, it is also required that I do so by clearly citing my sources. Have I done this? I have referenced quotes (although note that these quotes have been selected from a *range* of sources. Had I quoted repeatedly from only one, I would have fulfilled the requirements of correct citation – but it could have been questioned whether I was making “an original contribution”). I have referred to a selection of additional sources where a related issue is only briefly touched on, and acknowledged researchers working in complementary directions. If you are reading this paper at all, the review process assures us that I have fulfilled the requirements for academic integrity.

However, it is quite clear both from sections of text in this paper and from the knowledge that we as an academic community share about our own research practices, that the lineage of my research is more extensive than this. In the first place, readers are unlikely to assume that the very restricted reference list I have provided constitutes the sum of my reading on and around my topic. In addition, it is highly likely that, given my self-nominated affiliation with a research education unit, I have benefited from many fruitful discussions with my colleagues.

Looking at specific text sections, initiates will recognise that language of the type

its criteria for determining what is and is not an appropriate line of research, its systems for linking certain types of questions and procedures and not others

carries markers of a post-Foucauldian tradition – yet nowhere in this paper (until now) is Foucault mentioned. Early in the paper, I noted that the policy statements of the University of Adelaide “are representative of the general approach found elsewhere”. This suggests some unspecified knowledge sources. If you as reader have accepted the statement, then I have correctly categorised it as “common knowledge” for this particular subcommunity, thereby not requiring citation.

At a number of points during this article, I am clearly addressing an imaginary audience – signalled by terms such as “caveat”, or even “one might object”. It seems that at some level this paper is construed as a conversation, rather than as an address: I am answering a range of likely responses and positions held by my addressee(s). Here the tripartite construction of meaning comes into play retrospectively – my reading and conversations in the past have been projected into the present (or, strictly, future) so that exterior texts are re-analysed as addressee contributions.

Clearly I have not cited all sources of manifest intertextuality in rigorous detail. In fact, the list could continue almost indefinitely. What of discussions I might have had in my home life? How far back in my professional history can the lineage of this particular research interest be traced? How wide is the circle of sources which have informed my ideas and positions? Do they include the novels I read or the political discourses I take part in?

In short, the construction of meaning represented in this paper is collaborative, relying on many kinds of exterior texts, and traceable through my varying roles as writer/author. I have, it would appear, some reason to consider myself a member of the academic community. But my membership status is enacted and demonstrated at least in part by the degree to which I have made myself judge of what is and is not necessary to cite – that is, by counting myself among those who determine “the conditions of truth”. What, then, will we tell the students?

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