

Moving Beyond Transgression: Contextualizing Plagiarism and Patchwriting

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of *patchwriting*, a term which Howard (1992) coined to refer to the practice of “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes” (p. 233). Although patchwriting in universities is often labeled simply as poor paraphrasing, and, by extension, as plagiarism, Howard (1992) suggested that patchwriting constitutes a developmental stage in mastering academic discourse. This paper reviews the literature on patchwriting in the university context. The findings in the literature demonstrate that patchwriting generally results from attempts to engage with new academic discourses. Therefore, universities must develop developmental responses to patchwriting that allow students to grow as writers.

Introduction

In North American universities, students beginning their studies are often inundated with information about academic integrity. However, violations of academic integrity, particularly acts of plagiarism, are perceived to be common (Sterngold, 2004). Though definitions of plagiarism vary, one broadly representative definition is “the act of using another’s work without appropriate acknowledgement” (Devlin & Gray, 2007, p. 182). In a large-scale study including over 80,000 Canadian and American students, 16% of undergraduate students and 8% of graduate students admitted to having engaged in fairly serious forms of plagiarism (McCabe, 2005). Another study found that over a five-year period, approximately 25% of 1098 assignments submitted to an international business course at a New Zealand university contained plagiarism (Walker, 2010).

While plagiarism is often treated as a monolithic entity by academic honour codes (Sutherland-Smith, 2011), plagiarism may actually represent several phenomena, as opposed to one particular phenomenon. One particularly controversial phenomenon, *patchwriting*, points to the complexity involved in writing within academic discourse communities. While patchwriting can be considered as plagiarism by institutional policies, research has suggested that it is something entirely different.

Howard (1992) coined the term *patchwriting* to refer to the practice of “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes” (p. 233). Howard (1992) characterized patchwriting not as an intentional act of plagiarism, but as an attempt by a novice writer to participate within an academic discourse community. While she acknowledged that patchwriting is problematic in its close resemblance to expressions in secondary sources, she argued that patchwriting is merely a

developmental marker indicating an expected immaturity in reading comprehension and writing ability (Howard, 1992). Howard (1992) argued that patchwriting is rarely intended as deceptive and therefore does not meet the intent criteria for plagiarism. She supported this idea by explaining that most patchwriting is accompanied by citations (Howard, 1992). Many researchers have since taken similar views on patchwriting (Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004; Currie, 1998; Pecorari, 2003; Price, 2002; Li & Casanave, 2012). However, more than two decades after the term was coined, patchwriting still remains a controversial academic integrity issue.

Contextualizing the Controversy

The debate about responses to patchwriting revolves around a perceived tension between two opposing positions: (1) institutions must hold students accountable for their failure to meet a standard of academic integrity; or, (2) institutions must allow students the time and space to grow in skills related to comprehension and expression. According to Sutherland-Smith's (2011) discourse analysis of major universities' plagiarism policies, these policies largely employ the language of criminal law, resting on the assumption that students who plagiarize are knowingly committing ethical transgressions. In this type of environment, it becomes easy for the expectation of honest work to overshadow the dearth of pedagogically sound responses to patchwriting.

Researchers have taken notice of this problem. Qualitative research has demonstrated that students can find incorporating source materials to be a very difficult process and that, perhaps as a result, students do not recognize patchwriting as plagiarism (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Li & Casanave, 2012; Pecorari, 2003; Sun, 2009). While not a study of patchwriting in particular, Lea and Street (1998) found in interviews with university students that

they experience anxiety over trying to determine the boundaries between their own work and the works they consult. This anxiety appears to stem from the inability to discern where others' ideas end and their own ideas begin (Lea & Street, 1998).

Some students, particularly those taking courses in a new discipline or in a language other than their first, may not be competent enough in the content or the language of instruction to engage meaningfully with material in their own authorial voice, a construct of narrative theory (Humphrey, Walton, & Davidson, 2014). Humphrey et al. (2014) note that authorial voice is a vague notion but that it generally encompasses the idea that each author expresses themselves in unique and idiosyncratic ways. Without a strong authorial voice, a students' writing becomes more of a collage or a quilt of others' ideas than a unique expression of knowledge (Abasi & Akbari, 2008). At the sentence-level, students may also come to rely quite literally on the voices of others by utilizing their words rather than paraphrasing (Abasi & Akbari, 2008).

At present, research on patchwriting is almost entirely qualitative in nature. Pecorari (2003) notes that nearly all studies on patchwriting focus specifically on second language (L2) writers. This appears to still be the case. As a result, patchwriting has come to be seen as deriving from both linguistic and cultural barriers. It is recognized that L2 writers do not have a command of the language in which they are being asked to write, and therefore, they may come to rely on particular wording to a greater extent than their L1 counterparts (Sun, 2009). The cultural aspect is more controversial, but there is, nonetheless, evidence to suggest that cultural differences may influence whether or not students view patchwriting as acceptable (Gu & Brooks, 2008). Patchwriting is also seen to reflect the power differential between students and instructors, with instructors as the privileged holders of disciplinary knowledge and "linguistic legitimacy" in their disciplines (Abasi & Akbari, 2008, p. 271). In addition to the challenge of

dealing with new linguistic and cultural barriers, L2 writers are being asked to operate in academic discourses in which they are novices who occupy positions of inferior power.

Patchwriting and L2 Writing

Academic writing tasks in a second or an additional language present unique challenges to novice writers. They are strangers to both the language and the discourse. When students write in a language other than their first, they necessarily bump up against the challenges of acquiring grammatical and lexical structures, learning idiosyncratic features of a language, and learning to discern appropriate contextual registers. Contending with these language tasks is not easy. To complicate matters further, L2 writers are not always confident with writing tasks even in their first language (Pecorari, 2003). These language tasks may place considerable demands on working memory.

In one of the seminal cognitivist works in the study of written composition, Flower and Hayes (1981) theorize that writing is a hierarchical decision-making process, the processing of which demands significant memory resources. One's growth as a writer depends upon the increased automation of certain lower order processes and the redirection of working memory to higher order processes (McCutchen, 1996). L2 writers face a unique challenge when it comes to automatizing lower order processes such as grammar and mechanics because they are still in the process of acquiring the basic features of the language. When working memory resources are being devoted primarily to language concerns, it becomes difficult to focus on global concerns like structure and organization.

Currie (1998) argued that some students may use patchwriting (termed *apparent plagiarism* in the article) as a strategy for expressing their ideas in ways that instructors will best understand. While this may be a problematic strategy, it is reasonable for students to desire

engagement in higher-level conversations with their instructors while their language skills are still developing. It is also reasonable for students to pursue strategies to communicate more clearly with one's audience.

In a well-known case study, Currie (1998) observed that a Chinese international student's patchwriting indicated some conceptual understanding of the materials with which she was working. The student explained why she borrowed so much of the language from the textbook in her writing (Currie, 1998):

I like to stay with the terms that is written from the book [...] The point is if I keep on using the language that never be ours in the book then I will never be able to learn the more specific terms. (p. 11)

It appears that the student viewed patchwriting as a helpful strategy to make use of discursive markers. It is also evident that she viewed discursive markers as something that did not belong to her.

Additional research studies have confirmed Currie's (1998) speculation that L2 writers may use patchwriting as a way to overcome seemingly insurmountable language barriers (Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Pecorari, 2003; Sun, 2009). One particularly frustrated student in Abasi and Akbari's (2008) study on patchwriting explained that academic papers required linguistic proficiency "like...[that of a] a professor" (p. 272). She recognized her proficiency in English as unacceptable for university writing assignments. Abasi and Akbari (2008) reported that students who faced linguistic barriers clung to fragments of other authors' expressions. These kinds of reports appear to provide support for Howard's (1992) contention that patchwriting is a normal stage in writer's development. There is very little research on the use of patchwriting by L1 writers. However, the research that exists suggests that L1 writers use

patchwriting as they master a discourse (Hyland, 2009; Keck, 2006; Keck, 2014). More research is needed to confirm these findings.

Patchwriting and Culture

In addition to the linguistic barriers they face while engaging with academic texts, many L2 writers also face cultural barriers to engagement. According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), “culture is a set of shared, yet often unarticulated assumptions that permeate thought and action” (p. 241). It is the unarticulated nature of culture that makes cultural barriers difficult to recognize. While significant cultural barriers do not necessarily exist for every L2 writer, it is important to acknowledge that culture presents barriers for some writers.

Generally, as the modern notion of plagiarism is considered to be a *Western* concept (Pennycook, 1996; Flowerdew & Li, 2007), research on culture and patchwriting focuses on the challenge of reconciling the differences between the writing conventions of the two cultures. As Reagan (2005) points out, “there is no single ‘Western’ culture in any really meaningful sense,” but there are certain ideas that have come to be viewed as Western (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 223). Cultural differences may problematize the understanding of plagiarism in a Western way, mainly with respect to the conceptualization of ideas as property and, therefore, of misappropriation as theft (Pennycook, 1996). For example, there are important differences between Western education systems and Confucian education systems (in effect, those education systems influenced by or founded on Confucian thinking, including those in “Korea, Taiwan, and China”) (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 227).

In Western societies, education is considered to be an individualistic and often career-oriented endeavor. In the Confucian context, on the other hand, education is considered to be a path to “spiritual development” and “becom[ing] fully human” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 227).

The role of the teacher in Confucian societies is to serve as both a facilitator of education as well as a knowledgeable other. Therefore, the practices of the teacher are regarded as examples to be followed, which influences the ways in which students approach writing assignments (Merriam et al., 2007). The most commonly assigned writing assignment in the Western university is the argumentative essay, in which students are expected to assert an original argument and support it with relevant literature (Wingate, 2012). In Confucian societies, by contrast, learners operate under the belief that imitation of knowledgeable persons such as teachers is the best way to learn (Merriam et al., 2007). As a result of these differing orientations towards education, L2 writers who emerge from a Confucian learning context may find it difficult to adjust to the expectation of creating original works in disciplines in which they are novices. Merriam et al. (2007) suggested that a number of other cultures similarly clash with Western concepts of knowledge building with the result that students from these cultures can find the adjustment to Western ideals to be challenging.

Research on plagiarism has confirmed that culture impacts the ways in which students incorporate source texts into their own writing (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2006). In Shi's (2006) study of L2 undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism, many students reported that the norms regarding plagiarism in their home countries were different from those in Canada. One student compared plagiarism in Canada with a closely related, but different concept in Japan (Shi, 2006):

In Japan, the word has a different meaning. . . .*tooyoo* means to steal something or the way of how to do something. . . . I knew the word *tooyoo* in Japanese, but I did not know it means to steal others' opinions [like the word in English]. . . . It is not so strict in Japan.
(p. 271)

Students from China and Korea expressed similar differences in the cultural concept of plagiarism (Shi, 2006, p. 271). Many students in Shi's (2006) study did not view patchwriting as a questionable strategy. In fact, they were confused and often frustrated by the obligation to paraphrase a text that they considered to be the most effective articulation of the ideas with which they were working.

When adjusting to a culturally different educational context, students must change the ways in which they construct knowledge (Gu & Brooks, 2008; Shi, 2006). In Gu and Brooks' (2008) study of Chinese international graduate students' perceptions of plagiarism, a student described how his experience with writing in a Western context changed his perspective:

I think that I am more used to the Western approaches to teaching. I also feel that the way I think has also changed, or been changed by the system. This is because I must think in a very logical way, in other words, thinking very hard to find a kind of causal relations in my arguments. . . . I don't think that I wrote in such a strict manner when I was in China. (p. 349)

Evidently, this student perceived a significant difference in the goals for academic writing in China and the United Kingdom (UK) and felt that learning to write in the UK context had changed the way in which he thought about the construction of knowledge in academia. It takes a considerable amount of time and effort to effect this paradigm shift.

There are some researchers, however, who disagree with the emphasis on culture in discussions of patchwriting in particular as well as of plagiarism in general. For example, Liu (2005) and Pecorari (2003), have both argued against the primacy of cultural confusion in plagiarism by L2 learners. Liu (2005) argued that, in spite of the number of students who report that directly copying material is encouraged in China, these comments do not reflect her

experience in China as a student and a researcher (Liu, 2005). She regards the students who make such claims as “unreliable informants” (p. 234). Pecorari (2003), on the other hand, reports only that the L2 master’s and doctoral students in her study did not identify culture as a factor in patchwriting. She raised the concern that much conversation around cultural differences and patchwriting is anecdotal and suggested that perhaps culture does not play as large a role as previously supposed. She recognized, however, that students in other studies might have faced different challenges than her students (Pecorari, 2003).

Patchwriting and Commitment to Mastery

East (2010) argued that one variable among individual students is their degree of commitment to mastering disciplinary discourses. Graduate students are more likely to adopt discursive markers in order to demonstrate proficiency within their fields (East, 2010). Undergraduate students, on the other hand, will vary in their commitment to gaining proficiency (East, 2010). For many undergraduate students, obtaining a university degree is simply a path to another outcome, most often a particular career (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; East, 2010). For the students who are extrinsically motivated to obtain degrees, there may be little value in mastering a discourse that appears to operate only within the academic system. In particular, when students are taking courses only as electives, their commitment to mastering discourses may be even weaker. If a student will only participate in a particular discourse for a few months, it does not make sense for them to be fully invested in mastering a discourse.

Patchwriting and Shifting Demographics

Another factor that may influence engagement is the shift in the demographics of incoming students. Trow (1973; 2000) argues that universities around the world are facing various structural crises created by new entering populations and new technologies. He

characterizes this situation in the United States as arising from “strong pressures on higher education to expand further in order to provide universal access to some form of postsecondary education” (Trow, 2000, p. 3). This change in the demographic leads to varying levels of familiarity with the academic environment, and as such, university systems that were designed for the education of the social elite are no longer adequate to educate the populations that are now enrolling. Canadian postsecondary institutions are facing a similar situation (Albert, 2010; Kirby, 2009). While the commitment to accessibility is a laudable goal, it does create certain challenges. This new population may not be as well versed in the conventions of academic writing as previous generations of university students had been. It is not surprising, then, that this more diverse population of students may require a period of adjustment.

Even when a student is fully invested in familiarizing him or herself with an academic discipline, the challenge of mastering a discourse is significant. Many students are required to engage with disciplinary language in writing assignments early on, and, as Carroll (2002) argues, these assignments are “complex ‘literacy tasks’ calling for high-level reading, research, and critical analysis” (p. xiv). Given the complexity of these assignments, instructors may need to provide greater procedural direction to students. Lea and Street (1998; 2006) argued that students develop *academic literacies* by acclimatizing themselves to the epistemological assumptions of disciplines, instructors, and institutions. However, students do not reach this level of awareness on their own. They require guidance through the process (Lea & Street 1998; Lea & Street, 2006).

In her interviews with high school students aiming for university study, Soiferman (2012) found that they reported differing levels of experience with constructing research essays, notably with respect to the requirements surrounding incorporating secondary sources. Some students

reported that they were required to use formal documentation styles to cite their sources, and others did not (Soiferman, 2012). Once these students were in their first year of university, a second round of interviews revealed that students did not adjust equally to the demands of university. This was due, in part, to adjusting to the expectations surrounding research essays (Soiferman, 2012). Other studies of students' adjustments to university expectations have raised similar concerns (Krause, 2001). Universities in Canada and elsewhere are now admitting students who, at times, have limited prior experience with research and incorporating sources into their own work. Therefore, it is important for instructors and student services staff to support students through this transition.

Patchwriting and Reading Comprehension

Students may also find traditional learning tasks to burden them rather than enlighten them. For example, reading loads in university courses can be quite overwhelming for students. As a result, students can actually find reading, particularly when heavily assigned, to be a barrier to efficiently acquiring discursive understanding. In her analysis of interview data, Pecorari (2003) noted that L2 graduate students find that heavy reading loads prevent them from being able to engage in close reading. Graduate students in Abasi and Akbari's (2008) study also felt that heavy reading loads impacted their ability to acquire discursive knowledge. Furthermore, Hyland (2009) found that when working on a research essay, L2 undergraduate students were more strategic, though not necessarily more effective, in their management of readings than their L1 counterparts. However, they were just as likely to engage in strategies such as patchwriting. These findings suggest that some students may not be able to process the volume of readings to the extent that they are able to manage the ideas independently.

As Bereiter and Scardamalia noted in 1987, novice writers (i.e., those new to writing in a particular context) are prone to *knowledge telling*, that is, reporting information rather than putting forth a unique perspective and line of reasoning. Paradoxically, heavy reading loads may not encourage the mastery of discourse and may instead lead students to knowledge-tell through a new method: patching together verbatim expressions of key research sources.

Taking all of these factors into account, it is understandable, and perhaps even expected, that students will turn to patchwriting as a strategy for managing the sheer load of information with which they are asked to engage. For a variety of reasons, students may find themselves unable to construct unique lines of reasoning and they may instead depend on the structures of others' sentences or even the structures of others' arguments. These dependencies have been termed *localized* and *globalized* patchwriting respectively (Abasi & Akbari, 2008). Thus, it appears that patchwriting may be an imperfect strategy for coping with a complex set of demands.

Many researchers have pointed to the advent of the Internet, with its facilitation of copying and pasting, as a primary factor influencing the prevalence of plagiarism (Sterngold, 2004). Merriam and Bierema (2014), on the other hand, noted that the Internet has become a mixed blessing for students. On the one hand, students have access to an astounding volume of information on the Internet. On the other hand, the Internet creates new challenges for students as consumers of information. The problems identified above with heavy reading loads are exacerbated by access to the seemingly inexhaustible stores of information on the Internet. Merriam and Bierema (2014) stated that not "all learners [are] adequately web literate" (p. 201), a notion which has been supported by studies on university students' information literacy

(Mittermeyer, 2005). As such, students need to be guided through the development of web literacy.

Conclusion

Patchwriting is a phenomenon that appears to arise from students' attempts to engage with new linguistic, cultural, and academic discourse communities. Given these efforts, traditional punishments do not appear to be appropriate. Structural overhaul is needed with respect to the unforgiving strictness of academic integrity policies. Furthermore, students need to be guided through learning to write while avoiding "transgressive intertextuality" (Borg, 2009; Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Thompson, 2006). As many researchers suggest, one very important and viable option is for universities to no longer consider patchwriting to be plagiarism, and to instead consider the building evidence that is developmental phase and to ensure that responses to patchwriting are developmental rather than punitive (Howard, 1992; Pecorari, 2008). Since there are discipline-specific conventions with respect to patchwriting (Borg, 2009), responses at the departmental level are seemingly more appropriate than institutional responses. While patchwriting shares some features in common with other forms of plagiarism, the lack of the intention to deceive is a fairly significant divergence. With this in mind, developmental responses would allow students the opportunity to grow as writers.

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