

Academic literacy and plagiarism: Conversations with international graduate students and disciplinary professors

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Abstract

In this study we examine how university plagiarism policies interact with international graduate students' academic writing in English as they develop identities as authors and students. The study is informed by the sociocultural theoretical perspective [Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.] that foregrounds the crucial role of appropriation in learning, and the Bakhtinian dialogism [Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press; Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.] that highlights intertextuality as a fundamental feature of language use. Relying on multiple data sources including text-based interviews, in-depth interviews with students and disciplinary professors, course syllabi, field notes, and institutional documents, we consider the social discourses that surround students as they interact with prior sources in order to understand how they construct their texts. We discuss how university plagiarism policies frame the professor-student relationship and influence student text production. We conclude by critiquing university plagiarism policies that serve to mystify academic writing, negatively affecting those students who are less familiar with the genre of academic writing.

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1. Introduction

In this study we are interested in understanding how university policies on textual plagiarism interact with international ESL graduate students' academic writing as they develop identities as authors and students. Across the English-speaking world, there is concern that plagiarism is on the rise, in large part the result of easy access to academic papers on the internet. In North America more than four hundred colleges and universities have subscribed to an online database called Turnitin.com[©] to assist professors in detecting plagiarism in their students' papers (The Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2003). The underlying assumption is that plagiarized source materials are evidence of an intention to defraud. Recently, an influential Canadian newspaper reported on a study by the

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Council of Ontario Universities urging academic institutions to combat student plagiarism by shaming “cheaters and plagiarists to the extent that privacy laws allow” (Ottawa Citizen, “Go public on cheaters,” 2007, D.1). Students, accused of plagiarizing, must prove their innocence in order to alleviate the presumption that they are guilty.

In Australia, a new research journal was launched in 2005, the *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, to specifically address issues of academic and educational integrity. Its first issue was devoted to examining “plagiarism in Australia, particularly in relation to the country’s historically high number of international students . . .” (Cohen, 2007, p. A51). While there are no research studies reporting a higher incidence of plagiarism among international students studying in English-language universities, there is concern that these students may be more vulnerable to accusations of fraud as their inappropriate textual borrowing is a more obvious departure from their own style of writing (McGowan, 2005; Pecorari, 2003; Valentine, 2006).

L1 and L2 writing researchers have been trying to understand the reasons that might account for unacceptable source appropriation. Some studies have explored student cognitive processes during summary or source-based writing under controlled task conditions, pointing to the effects of such intervening factors as language proficiency, task/text difficulty, and topical familiarity on student plagiarism (Campbell, 1990; Keck, 2006; Roig, 1999; Shi, 2004). Others have focused on students’ attitudes and perceptions through questionnaires, surveys, or interviews, uncovering differences in cross-cultural value systems and a lack of inter-subjectivity between students and instructors vis-à-vis the notion of plagiarism (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Deckert, 1993; Kroll, 1988; Li, 2007; Moon, 2002; Overbey & Guiling, 1999; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Increasingly, researchers who have studied student plagiarism *in situ* have begun to reveal the complexity of the phenomenon, locating it in a web of sociocultural relations. The results of these inquiries indicate that inappropriate source attributions might have to do with students’ culturally shaped life trajectories (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Cadman, 1997; Sherman, 1992), their outsider status relative to their prospective discourse communities (Angélil-Carter, 2000; Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004; Currie, 1993, 1998; Pecorari, 2003; Ritter, 2005; Thompson, 2005; Valentine, 2006), or their racial and social positioning excluding them from the rules and conventions of school literacy practices (Hull & Rose, 1989; Starfield, 2002).

Aiming to contribute to this growing literature, we are interested in understanding how university policies on “apparent plagiarism” (Pecorari, 2003) interact with ESL graduate students’ academic writing and their developing identities as authors and students. In order to understand how the university’s representation of matters of intertextuality intersects with students’ textual practices, we examine the social discourses that surround students as they enter into a dialogue with prior sources in order to understand how they construct their own meanings and understand their own text production. At the same time, we consider the perspectives of university professors on students’ writing and the ways in which the institutional policies interact with the professor-student relationships.

2. The study

2.1. Theoretical framework

This work is informed by theoretical perspectives located within a sociocultural-historical framework that focus on both the situated and distributed nature of learning mediated by the cultural artifacts and practices of a community (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1994). Based on this conception of learning, appropriation of language as the most pervasive semiotic means in human social activities plays a central role in learning. Accordingly, we view academic writing as a situated activity mediated by institutional discourses and practices (Foucault, 1981; Gee, 1996; Lemke, 1995). Of particular relevance to this paper is the Bakhtinian dialogic theory of language that brings to the fore the heavily borrowed character of language use as well as the intertextual nature of such use in the sense that all utterances respond to, and anticipate, other utterances (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Volosinov, 1973).

We further view academic writing as social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brodkey, 1987; Gee, 1996), which allows us to conceive of academic writing as a complex of literacy practices patterned by discipline-specific ways of reading and writing as well as the particular attitudes and beliefs that members of a given disciplinary community hold toward literate practice. This understanding of academic writing further reveals how writers simultaneously construct, and are constructed, by their texts (Fairclough, 1992; Kress, 1989). All writing is discursive, affording writers with particular ways of using the language as well as particular subject positions to take up. Therefore, as writers construct their texts, they simultaneously construct certain social identities through their texts (Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Ivanič,

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