Tackling Unintentional Plagiarism
by Gavin O'Neill

A range of citation and attribution missteps are often covered by the catchall term *plagiarism*. This term covers, among others, extreme cases of academic misconduct including premeditated attempts to deceive the reader/teacher into believing that the words and ideas presented are those of the author, when, in fact, they belong to another person entirely; however, the term also encompasses *honest* mistakes made by novice writers while trying to navigate unfamiliar citation practices in, what is to them, a new discourse community.

How a teacher might react to the extreme cases of misconduct mentioned above would be decided by the particular teacher's and the educational institution's policies on plagiarism. This paper will instead focus on a classroom activity designed to remedy missteps on the other end of the spectrum: the honest mistakes.

Citation Misconceptions Among Students

Students in tertiary education may struggle with citation and attribution practices that were either not required in their earlier writing projects or were not strictly enforced. This is especially true for students who are introduced to these practices in a foreign or second language. This difficulty may stem from the fact that the academic practice of citation is not as straightforward as many would believe. Apart from misunderstandings arising from the cultural dimension to citing and attributing practices (see Pennycook, 1996; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005), the motivations behind decisions to add a citation to a text are often poorly understood by novice writers.

Instruction and instructional materials designed to promote citation in student work do little to enlighten students as to the range of purposes that citations serve, preferring to focus on proscriptions regarding the ownership of ideas and word strings; however, research into the citation practices—and the motivations driving those practices—of experienced writers in various academic fields have brought to light numerous reasons an established writer may choose to add a citation to their text. Harwood (2009), for example, has identified 11 possible motivations for adding a citation (see Appendix) with some citations being added for a number of different reasons. It is important to note that giving credit to another author for an idea or a quotation is just one of these 11 reasons. However, many students believe that these are not only the sole reasons to cite, but also that these kinds of citations weaken the author's work by directing credit for the work away from the author and onto the cited author.[1]

A Classroom Activity: Citation Analysis and Emulation

The following activity is designed to help students understand that citation is not an unpleasant requirement of academic writing designed solely to allot ownership of ideas and words; the activity aims to help students understand that citation is a tool that academics use to strengthen their argument, to indicate their position in relation to other researchers, and to guide their

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[1] This observation is based on interviews by the author with graduate students from a number of countries and cultures.

readers to resources that can help them better understand the topic under discussion. The ultimate goal of this activity is to help students move past asking the question, "Do I have to add a citation here?" to asking, "Would a citation be good here?"

This activity is designed for students who are required to write from sources. Depending on the teaching context, this could be graduate students or advanced undergraduates. For this activity, I adapt Harwood's (2009) 11 motivations for citations, often simplifying and reducing the number of motivations to four or five; it should be noted that Harwood's categories work well when analysing citations in the social sciences (and computer sciences) but would need to be adapted for the hard sciences and arts.

Activity Preparation

In order to prepare for this activity, the teacher should find two research articles related to the students' field of study. The first article will act as a class example, and the second article will be used as a student performance activity. The entire articles are not required for this activity. Usually, the first page or two of a research article will contain sufficient examples of citations for the purposes of this activity (depending on the citation practices of the field in question; citation practices vary drastically). Convert the file into an editable format and remove all citations in the second half of the extracts you have chosen from the research articles.

In Class

Distribute copies of the first research article to students and form groups. Introduce the various motivations for citing and allow the groups to speculate on why the author has added citations at particular points. The teacher can circulate, offering suggestions and asking questions.

Once the students have finished speculating on the citations in the first half of the extract, elicit ideas and write them on the board. It is important to note that there really are no right or wrong answers in this activity. Without actually interviewing the author, it would be difficult to ascertain with any certainty the actual motivation for many of the citations. The purpose is simply to accustom the students to the idea that citations have many motivations.

Once the citations in the text have been speculated upon and discussed as a class, have the students look for opportunities to add citations to the second half of the article—the half in which you deleted the citations. Remember to focus on reasons other than ownership of ideas and quotation. Experience doing this activity has taught me that students are usually rather frugal with their citations during this part of the activity.

Once they have finished, go through the text with them and point out all the opportunities that they have to add citations. It may even be beneficial to overdo the number of citations to prove a point that more citations are often better than fewer.

To finish, compare their version with the original unedited version of the article. The students can then complete the same process for the second research article, either as an in-class group

activity or as a homework activity. Ultimately, the students should be given a chance to revisit a piece of their own writing and identify areas where a citation would be useful or appropriate.

Conclusion

This activity is designed to encourage a wider view of the use of citations in academic writing and to overcome the wrongheaded belief on the part of some students that citations weaken an author's contribution by giving credit to other people. The activity could be adapted to any number of teaching contexts; most reading materials for EFL/ESL students contain texts replete with claims on topics from global warming to descriptions of particular world cultures. Having students read through these articles and identify areas where a citation could be added to guide readers to further information, support claims made by the author, or indicate areas of disagreement may help students to develop a healthy attitude toward citation and erode some of the unwillingness displayed by some students to embrace this academic practice. If this activity does not work, let them know that teachers often grade student work higher if the student displays a variety of citation motivations (Petric, 2007).

References

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Appendix

Harwood's (2009) 11 motivations for Citation

1. Signposting: when the author wishes to guide readers to further relevant information;
2. supporting: when the author mentions research that supports the author's view;
3. credit: when the author gives credit for ideas and quotations to other authors;
4. position: when the author groups other authors according to viewpoints;
5. engaging: when the author cites in order to disagree with another author;
6. building: when the author creates a theoretical foundation on which the author will develop his or her own ideas;

7. tying: when the author aligns him- or herself with other groups of authors, methodologies, etc.;
8. advertising: when the author advertises his or her own or his or her colleagues' work;
9. future: when the author discusses his or her future research projects;
10. competence: when the author wishes to display his or her knowledge of the field;
11. and topical: when the author wishes to mention something which is being discussed recently in the field.

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