Review article on plagiarism in student writing

Shelley Angelil -Carter, *Stolen Language? Plagiarism In Writing*. Harlow: Pearson Education/Longman, 2000. Chapter 5: 'The development of the student writer: *from mimic to master*'

Plagiarism is a problem for a lot of International Foundation Programme students at London Metropolitan University, maybe because they are dealing with both a new concept and a new language. Much of what the modules I teach on are concerned with is developing student academic writing and one session per semester is dedicated to helping students understand how to cite sources, paraphrase and avoid plagiarism. Nevertheless, when it comes to assessing written work, plagiarism is often still there. The chapter I have chosen to review looks at what Angelil-Carter believes students may be doing when they produce work that appears to be plagiarised. This was particularly interesting to me for two reasons. Firstly, my colleagues and I believe that many of our students who plagiarise do so 'innocently'; therefore understanding the processes involved in their writing could help us to find more appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Secondly, part of this chapter focuses on student writing strategies specific to writers of English as an additional language, which is particularly pertinent to the students I teach.

In this chapter Angelil-Carter explores how student writers may be developing their academic writing, in particular the complex and difficult task of developing their own authorial voice. She demonstrates how the legitimate learning and developmental strategies students may be employing could mean that writing produced appears plagiarised. The chapter concludes with Angelil-Carter's belief that the authorial voice is important and, although it may be shaped by others' ideas, words or discourse, the authors' meaning and making of meaning is original. Student writing may sometimes appear to lack the student voice and use only the voices of others; hence it may look like plagiarism; but Angelil-Carter protests that this is due to the six developmental stages she discusses in the chapter. These stages are dealt with separately, but she understands that they need not occur one step at time, but rather may interact with each other.

The first stage is the student writer's alienation from academic discourse. Academic writing is likened to writing in a foreign language, where, although the transparent 'meaning' of the word may be known it still feels strange and foreign: 'it's not my voice saying this.' Until the student can make connections between the new word and their existing words and meanings, they do not own the word. Some students recognise the difficulty and decide to use their own words until the new words are owned, but many may find them so alien that they are unable to make any connections at all and therefore have no words of their own. So, they 'ventriloquise' – speak entirely through the voices of others.

The second stage is 'trying on' new words during the process of appropriation. Because they feel uncomfortable at first, the only way students can do this is to closely copy how others use the discourse, making only minor changes. This may look like plagiarism but is actually part of the student writers' journey of developing their writing and finding their voice.

The theory of hybridisation of discourses is introduced, where 'more than one social language is used in one utterance.' Different social discourses are in battle with the new discourse. Eventually the discourses are harmonised and the new discourse becomes natural. Angelil-Carter sees this as a positive and negative process. Prior discourses bring attributes that may facilitate easy transition to the new discourse, but inevitably some elements, which could enrich current academic discourse, are lost. What appears to be plagiarism may actually be a product of hybridisation; several clear examples are provided. One of these is the difficulty Chinese students writing in western institutions may have because their prior authoritative academic discourse is based on memorisation and imitation. In Chinese scholarship this is perceived as a mark of education and respect for texts; the need for referencing does not exist, as educated people will recognise the quoted texts. The writing they produce at this stage may then appear to be plagiarised but is actually the result of the hybrid of the old and new academic discourses.

Another stage is the 'masquerade'. Academic discourse demands that student writers pretend to be legitimate users of this language, but it is a language they are still learning. The characteristic of academic discourse which asks the author to subtly use their voice to construct their own argument whilst giving the appearance of impartial displayer of information, requires sophisticated writing, and the learner of academic discourse, whose prior experience may have been much more personal and expressive, could lose their own voice completely in this attempt to appear disinterested. In seeming contradiction, the writer should also display originality of thought; plagiarism could be perceived as a 'stress signal' of this tension.

Also, students may view the new academic discourse as authoritative, visibly attached to the figures of authority that use it legitimately. Authoritative discourse is seen to be at the top of the hierarchy, far from the student, and is perceived as 'given', unchanging. Therefore it is impossible to represent it, it can only be transmitted. In time the discourse will become theirs, they will make meaning with it and be able to represent it in their own way. Whilst this transition is in process however, they can only transmit it and this may be seen as plagiarism.

The penultimate stage is the use of memory in learning and formulaic language in second language acquisition. The focus is mainly on students who are writing in English as an additional language. The main ideas are based on the premise that the role of memory in learning is not fully understood and generally negatively perceived. Research is quoted that shows learning and recalling 'chunks' of (formulaic) language is part of second language acquisition, and is an important developmental stage. Despite being a useful learning and communication strategy, in terms of plagiarism it becomes problematic. For example, how far away from the original paraphrasing should be is rarely made explicit to student writers. Students learning new concepts through a new language 'see' these concepts in the new language and will struggle to find other ways of representing them. Writers of English as an additional language, learning using formulaic language, will find this even more complex and also have fewer linguistic alternatives to use.

Finally, Angelil-Carter discusses the difficult-to-attain ideal of the authorial voice – a recurring theme. In place of the common notion of 'author', she discusses the multipe roles of *author*, who thinks of the ideas, *principal*, who takes responsibility for them, and *animator*, who communicates them; rarely does one individual play all three roles. This framework presents difficulties for the developing student writer, as subtly

signalling authorship of views through referencing, and attitude to views through verbs such as 'maintains' or 'demonstrates'.

Angelil-Carter writes about academic discourse as part of academic discourse. Her ideas spring from recent sociolinguistic research and others' theories (Bakhtin's in particular) are clearly summarised and referenced and lend her argument weight, even when at times she chooses to disagree with some of their conclusions. The use of the dance metaphor that runs throughout the chapter (and the book), in section headings and within each section, was instrumental for me in clarifying some of the ideas and allowing me to take academic writing out of its box and examine it from a different perspective. Humour and the number of examples provided also made many of the ideas more accessible.

Shelley Angelil-Carter also shows empathy for students, which I share. Its relevance to the international foundation level students I teach was evident: whilst reading this chapter some of my students' comments often came to mind. Their surprise at the concept of writing peoples' names in the middle of a text, in the middle of a sentence even! Their surprise that it is not appropriate to memorise and transmit facts. Later on, in consternation, their questions about a low mark - 'but I referenced everything' (and included no original thought); the worried voices saying 'but I don't know how else to say it'; students who tell me they cannot *see* the difference between formal and informal words and those who feel frustrated at not being able to include information/ideas they have appropriated because 'I don't know where it came from, I just know it.'

What implications does this have for me (as a teacher) and the development of my students' academic writing? In the sessions where we look at academic writing and plagiarism, perhaps our attempts to clarify plagiarism to the students has meant that the centrality of the writer's argument in academic discourse has been underplayed; this needs to be readdressed. Also, finding out, in class, some of the characteristics of prior academic/school discourse that the students know or expect, and encouraging them to share these with the other students will raise an awareness of distinct discourses for both the students and myself, without placing value judgements on them. From this platform it will be easier to make explicit the differences between these and the academic discourse they are now being asked to write in, specifically with regard to citation systems and the author's argument, and the reasons behind these differences.

In recognition of the stages in development of student writing, more space could be given for development in the classroom. Academic reading texts could be exploited more than they are currently. We could encourage the students to use the vocabulary, or formulaic language, they find in the text, which may be new and unfamiliar to them, in class discussion or guided written exercises, giving them the opportunity to 'try it on'. We could help the students link the 'new' language to language they may already have which could express this idea. With new concepts learnt with the new language attached to them, activities could be devised to help them explain the concept in a different way or to show them how the same language might be used to express different ideas.

I would like to spend much more time on paraphrasing, not just in terms of becoming comfortable with and owning the language students can use to express ideas, but also showing students examples of paraphrasing with different levels of proximity to the original, making explicit what kind of paraphrasing is expected in this academic discourse.

I think the most important implications these ideas have for me, is to be constantly aware that the students are on a journey and that knowing the 'rules' does not always mean that they are able to use academic discourse to communicate in writing. Making explicit the differences between discourses and the requirements of the academic discourse they are being asked to use, showing recognition of and supporting the developmental stages in the safety of the unassessed classroom, and guiding their awareness of progression towards using the 'new language' successfully, need to be strategies that are employed and reinforced throughout the modules.

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