



Sous la direction de
Nicole Saliba-Chalhoub

Le Plagiat fléau du XXI^e siècle

Actes du Symposium
5 et 6 décembre 2013

Collège Doctoral

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Addressing the Problem of Plagiarism

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This article discusses proposals for a project targeted towards art history and theory courses in the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts. I will examine what the faculty can do to proactively avoid detect and sanction plagiarism (Volkov, Volkov & Tedford, 2011), by attempting to address this problem through a series of interventions on class, faculty and university levels.

Contextual Description

Plagiarism is an issue of academic concern worldwide especially with the advent of the “new plagiarism” and the extreme ease of cutting and pasting as opposed to the far greater efforts that plagiarizing involved before the coming of the Internet (McKenzie as cited in Klein, 2001). Furthermore, this issue of plagiarism is often treated with complacency by teachers and has gained a kind of ethical acceptance among students (Chaw, Wilhelm & Neurether 2009; Tedford, 2003).

This is reflected in my own faculty where students seem to take the practice of plagiarizing from the Internet for granted, a crippling practice, subverting teachers’ capacity to facilitate active learning through research and to further students’ critical thinking.

Among other factors leading to high incidence of plagiarisms is a lack of mastery of the language of learning (Yu-Chih, 2012), an issue of special concern for Lebanese students whose learning activity is very largely in foreign languages.

Questionnaires

According to Trevino, part of the problem of in addressing plagiarism is a lack of faculty support for anti-plagiarism policies. (as cited in Klein, 2001). In USEK, this is compounded by uneven, disconnected and uncoordinated responses on the university and faculty level. So it was important to get the Dean's approval and support for my plan of action in order to be able to engage in coordinated action with my peers. After receiving said approval, I discussed the project with the heads of departments and the teachers and informed them of what I was doing. Then, and in order to analyze the problem, I emailed a questionnaire to the teachers. Following the lack of response, I personally interviewed five of them, asking them the same series of questions found in the questionnaire. I also distributed questionnaires to two classes of second year students in order to understand the problem from their point of view, of these I collected 35 responses.

Results of the Questionnaires and Analysis of the Problem

According to the teachers the problem of plagiarism is pervasive. Four out of the five teachers I interviewed said that they assigned research to their students. One stated that she did not because of the problem of plagiarism. All five thought that a majority of students were plagiarizing (a far higher percentage than the one third given by respondents in an American study (McCabe, 2005 as cited in Klein 2011 and in Chaw, et al. 2009). The teachers gave estimated that between 60 to 100 % of work in their classes is plagiarized. Furthermore, four out of the five teachers thought that students knew about plagiarism.

This picture of a very pervasive problem is confirmed by the Students' responses: Most indicated that they understood what plagiarism is, with only two of them showing a clear lack of understanding. Out of the 35

respondents, 25 confirmed that they have plagiarized while 9 responded that they had not (one student did not respond). So the rate of those admitting to plagiarism is 71.5% (again far higher than the one third who self-reported in McCabe's study). Furthermore, out of the 35 students, 29 responded that somebody did explain plagiarism to them, 5 responded that nobody did and one stated that he did not remember.

So the impressionistic image given by the interviewed teachers, of a very high rate of plagiarism by students who understand plagiarism, is essentially correct. The question is then, why are these students engaging in plagiarism at such high rates?

Out of the 26 students who responded as to why they were plagiarizing, 12 said that it was in order to save time. Of these, 4 specified that they had too many projects. The next most common response was plagiarizing in order to get better grades (4 students). Among all the other various answers, only one indicated that nobody had told him that it was wrong to plagiarize.

Four teachers stated that they clearly indicate penalties for plagiarism, either orally during class (three) or both on the syllabus and in class (one). On the other hand, out of the 35 students, 14 stated that nobody has given them any clear warnings on penalties resulting from plagiarism; 13 stated that they were told that they will fail the course if they plagiarized; four that the research will be annulled and four that there will be deductions. So, from the students' point of view we have sanctions differing from class to class with varied degrees of severity and lacking in coherence. I believe this to be a result of the absence of clear guidelines to teachers and the absence of a coherent faculty policy leading to a confusing situation for students that might be a contributing factor in these very high rates of plagiarism.

Another contributing factor is the response of teachers. Historically, the teaching and learning style in Lebanon was and continues to be largely memory-based. The Lebanese school system assesses students on how faithfully they memorize what is given to them. This memory-based approach is also applied in the assessment of research. Before the coming of the Internet, a pervasive strategy among a significant number of teachers

in Lebanon was to let students copy from books or encyclopaedias and allow them to present what they have copied as their own “research”. The assumption was that by copying, students would end up “remembering something”. Research was then a variation of and an aid to the memory-based teaching method. But now, and with the availability of information on the Internet, allowing the possibility of simply cutting and pasting entire pages, even the meagre benefits of copying have disappeared.

Some teachers faculty attempt to counter the problem of cut and paste by forcing students to submit handwritten “research” with the hope that hand copying the articles from the Internet will help them better remember what they have read. That this is considered to be a solution to the cut and paste problem shows a pervasive misunderstanding of methodology and of the most basic objectives of research. It also shows an underlying and unexamined theory of teaching and learning (Biggs, Tang, 2007): knowledge as memorisation of authoritative texts.

Faced with the tacit acceptance of copying-as-research, it becomes completely rational for students to assume that they have a right to take articles from the Internet and present them as their own. Furthermore, students with no understanding of methodology apply to Internet articles the same acceptance of authority that has been taught to them in school. They see Internet articles not as a source of possibly conflicting information and differing opinions, but simply as texts from which to gain truth, to be copied and memorized.

This tacit acceptance makes the problem of plagiarism very difficult to address. Trying to fight plagiarism individually, with no institutional support, is extremely difficult. Detecting takes time; it is very easy to know that an article is copied but hard to prove. Ethics demands that we do not penalize students without proof, especially since we as teachers might be mistaken. In our own faculty we are not subscribed to plagiarism detection software, nor are we given training in it, so to find proof means doing research on *Google* and requires four to five time the amount of work needed to correct a regular paper. Our course load, the number of papers we have to correct and the limited period we have to do it in means that this waste of time is simply unaffordable.

Given this situation some professors have simply stopped assigning research. In the next part of this work I will be explaining the steps I have taken in order to address this problem.

Fighting Plagiarism on a Class Level

The first step was to clearly inform my students during lectures and in the syllabi of my policy regarding plagiarism (see annex 5: Assignment in the course *History and Theory of Architecture* and its English translation).

Second I staggered their workload throughout the semester instead of bundling it one or two set periods. This has been shown to decrease the amount of plagiarism by removing one of its motivations, namely poor schedule management and lack of time (Chaw, et al. 2009). Furthermore, by progressively receiving the work, I am better able to monitor it, identify and give feed-back on any potential plagiarism problems. In this way I tried to proactively avoid the problem (Volkov, Volkov & Tedford, 2011).

The third action was in response to the poor research and methodological skills of my students: I transformed the assignment into a methodological exercise divided into five sections with successive deadlines thus spreading the work throughout the semester. These corresponded to the following research skills I wanted them to attain: 1- Choosing a subject, 2- reading and archiving, 3- defining a problematic, 4- organizing their thoughts into an outline, 5- writing, 6- giving an oral presentation and defending their ideas. The advantages of this is that it fosters a deep learning approach (Rust, 2002) since it has been shown that students taking a surface approach to learning are far more likely to justify plagiarism (Rust, 2002).

However, and despite having carefully designed the assignment, I saw a very high percentage of plagiarism among the work I corrected. I believe that the reason for this is the great difficulty of fighting plagiarism on an individual level without being given the tools to do so and without being supported by clear institutional policy on a Faculty and University levels. After discussing with 10 of my students as to why they committed plagiarism, I concluded impressionistically that the main reason is that they do not know how to write essays nor how to paraphrase, and are unaware

of the importance of referencing. Trying to teach them these complex skills while at the same giving a course on the History of Architecture is not realistic. I concluded that individual actions should be inscribed within a comprehensive strategy not only on the class level but also on the faculty and university levels, a conclusion supported by Klein (2011).

Fighting Plagiarism on a Faculty and University Levels

Given that fighting plagiarism must be part of a comprehensive strategy, I, and as part of my project, will be raising the following proposals to the administration:

The most obvious action to be taken is to give all teachers access to plagiarism detection software, train them to use it and make it a systematic requirement that all students submit their papers through it.

According to Braumoeller and Gaines (2001), using plagiarism detection software is efficient but some studies have shown that some cases of plagiarism may be unintentional (Chaw, et al. 2009; Tenpenny, Keriazakos, Lew & Phelan, 1998). In order to help students avoid plagiarism, they should be given the option of testing their own papers on the detection software. However, providing access to such software, while absolutely necessary is not sufficient since it leaves a number of issues unaddressed.

The first is the necessity of gaining the support of the teachers for the strategy; Plagiarism detection, even with the help of software, is still the result of teachers' effort (McKeever, 2006). Without their cooperation, fighting the phenomenon is extremely difficult. This makes it fundamental to create a culture of academic honesty. According to Chaw, et al. "A lack of consistent reinforcement of academic honesty policy by faculty members and university administration may have fostered a culture of cheating" (2009, p. 32).

The second is that clear institutional procedures should also be put in place and formally explained to teachers as their ignorance of such procedures has been cited as one reason for a lack of cooperation in fighting plagiarism (Chaw, et al. 2009). In order to be efficient there needs to be a unified policy applicable throughout the university. Teachers

should feel secure that they have the full backing of the administration and that they will not be penalized for the inevitable backlash that will occur, otherwise they will not actively engage in fighting plagiarism (Chaw, et al. 2009). Furthermore, to increase this feeling of security, the detection and punishment of plagiarism should be *depersonalized, automatic and the disciplinary actions taken out of the hands of the teacher*. This depersonalisation of plagiarism is essential as teachers tend to develop personal relationships with students and will hesitate to put their academic careers in danger (Chaw, et al. 2009). Furthermore the advantage of taking the disciplinary actions out of the hands of teachers is in the avoidance of outside pressures being exercised on them in a country where such pressures (called “wasta”) are rampant and routinely subvert all effort to fight corruption. Once plagiarism has been detected teachers should be required to immediately submit the evidence to an independent disciplinary committee.

The third issue is that of time. There should be guidelines and coordination between the teachers on the amount of time that we can reasonably expect learners to spend on the totality of their assignments. Right now, there is no coordination among teachers on the respective lengths of each assignment.

This management of students’ time should also take into consideration an avoidance of bundling; in my own faculty all the teachers tend to give students their deadlines more or less on the same set periods during which I see students not sleeping for three days in a row. We should seriously consider our responsibility for their safety -are they driving while sleep deprived?- and health as I am seeing more frequent use of dangerous energy drinks such as *Redbull*. This inefficient use of time leaves plenty of inactive periods and places unmanageable stress on set periods during the trimester. This pushes students to take shortcuts such as plagiarism. Thus, the workload we assign should be staggered throughout the trimester. Students should also be given lectures on time management.

The fourth issue is that of methodology: When they arrive from schools our students have very little understanding of research and yet, we expect them to start doing research on a university level right away. The result is predictably an abusive use of Internet resources such as *Wikipedia*.

Added to this lack research experience is the fact that in some of the schools they graduated from, there was an implicit acceptance of plagiarism. USEK does offer a course called *Techniques and Resources of Information*, where research techniques are learned. After discussing with some of the teachers and students I determined that issues of plagiarism are being discussed. This is very positive as the study by Chaw, et al. (2009), shows that students with clear instructions on how to avoid plagiarism are far less likely to cheat than those who had no such instruction.

In the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts however, it is not mandatory to take the *Techniques and Resources of Information* course during the first trimester, leaving some students with no systematic understanding of these issues, sometimes for up to three years into their studies. What I propose is that this course becomes mandatory for all first trimester students and that it be expended from two to three credits to cover not only the techniques of research and academic writing but also to touch on methodological issues such as, analysis, inference, problematic and hypothesis.

Finally, the university should publish a clear policy statement about plagiarism that the students would be required to read and sign. Brown and Howell (2001) found that such statements are efficient in reducing plagiarism.

Conclusion

The fight against plagiarism must be a priority for quality assurance as plagiarized works are a threat to the credibility of our university and are highly detrimental to the development of our students. Yet, this fight cannot be the work of single teachers but must be a coherent systematic policy on the levels of individual teachers, faculty and university. Its implementation must be objective, depersonalised and fair in order to protect teachers from external pressures. But more importantly than detection and punishment, our focus should be primarily on preventing plagiarism before it occurs (Scanlon, 2003) through both a rational use of the students' time, methodology and increased awareness.

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