



A Different Take on Plagiarism

By Patricia Roy

In a previous article on education trauma, in which I retell a personal struggle with anxiety and attention disturbance, I gave the example of taking shortcuts as a coping mechanism in neurodivergent students. Personally, I am still unlearning the message that taking shortcuts means I'm lazy. Maybe you are, too.

So, I thought it would be helpful to use this perspective as a starting point to talk about plagiarism. Most teachers speak about plagiarism as a high crime. As students, we have to learn how and why to document the sources of our words or ideas. It is not an easy process and involves trial and error. While professional writers should know better, students often make mistakes because they don't.

Maybe it's time to decriminalize plagiarism.

Defining "Plagiarism" Might be (Part) of the Problem

While an adjunct professor, I encountered a wide range of beliefs and abilities regarding research and writing. When I asked my students how to paraphrase, for example, I got answers like this: "Take the words of the original and just change them around a little to make them your own."

To which I'd say, "NO! That's plagiarism!" Students only know what we teach them on topics like these. While the definition of plagiarism hasn't changed, I've come to see the problem is more about how we teach writing and the emphasis we place on giving the "correct" answer to a question. Students would benefit greatly if teachers emphasized the validity of students' thoughts.

Simply put, plagiarism is largely a result of pedagogy, not of "academic dishonesty" in the student. Similarly, you aren't necessarily "lazy" if you try to shorten the amount of time you spend on a difficult or boring task, especially if you have ADHD. Your education might be training you to do so. Consider this evidence. According to one survey from Rutgers University, 36% of undergraduate and 26% of graduate students admit to "paraphrasing/copying [a] few sentences from [an] Internet source without footnoting it" (<https://www.plagiarism.org/article/plagiarism-facts-and-stats>).

But when I look at the phrasing of that survey, the words "paraphrasing/copying" stand out to me as potentially confusing. "Paraphrasing" is a legitimate writing skill, provided it's cited properly and is useful, especially in the sciences or when citing information like statistics. We don't often quote statistics, data, or results from tests or trials. Academics save quoting for instances where the word-for-word language is important for the reader's understanding of the material. Equating paraphrasing with "copying" seems like a glaring error to me. Paraphrasing changes the words of the original, and not just a few. To correctly paraphrase, a writer completely reshapes the language, changing the phrasing structure and the words except for names or terms that do not have substitutes. And then, a paraphrase still needs to be cited because the idea comes from the source, not the student. Copying is taking down the exact words used. Of course, copying is fine if it is appropriately cited as a quotation, but that is not the common understanding of copying. If the language in a Rutgers University survey is this bewildering, can we be certain we are not confusing our students? These results show more about the surveyors than the surveyed.

My admittedly anecdotal experience and casual Googling reveal still more statistics on plagiarism, spanning a wide range of numbers — so much so I'm not sure that quoting (or paraphrasing!) them serves any purpose. And the sources of these "facts"? Many of them are from legitimate studies, but I'm finding them cited on webpages for plagiarism checker services. Essentially, this data functions as advertising for a service. It's part of a rational and emotional appeal to students and educators that says, "See how bad plagiarism is? You need to buy our product!"

Yeah, that kind of thing makes me squint in suspicion.

No Shortcuts, But One Winning Solution

We should all know that plagiarism is using someone else's words in our text as if they are our own. That seems like an easy concept. However, which words are our own? We might have little prior knowledge when we are learning about a subject. In the beginning, all or most of the words we use to discuss the

topic may not be our own. Think about all the rote learning students have done over the years — learning their multiplication tables or learning definitions or theories. “Energy can neither be created nor destroyed” is a Newtonian principle so perfectly articulated that paraphrasing, if not impossible, tends to dilute its meaning.

This is not to say that plagiarism is not a problem. In fact, with the rise of AI writing — using artificial intelligence to produce texts, often for advertising or customer support — the distinctions between plagiarism and legitimate reproduction of texts are likely to become more difficult to determine. If nature abhors a vacuum, technology seems prepared to fill that space with more ways to sell back our fears.

But what does this mean for the student? Should you invest in a plagiarism tracker? Should you spend \$\$ for an editor to check your work?

Absolutely not.

No fancy equipment, no software is needed.

But be aware that there are no “quick tricks” either.

You’re an honest student. You’re not looking for a paper mill, a cheat code, or some other quick solution to a paper due in the morning. I assume that you are like many of my students over the years who, perhaps by no fault of their own, still fall victim to “accidental plagiarism” because they haven’t learned how to do research.

While I can’t teach you how to research in one article, I can impress upon you the significance of one of the most overlooked research tools: your notes.

If there is one shortcut you should never take, it is not to take notes. I am convinced that most “accidental plagiarism” is due to students skipping the notetaking stage or taking ineffective notes. When I have discussed this topic with older students, they express that they “don’t have time to take notes,” that they either highlight or copy and paste important parts from an article into a document and then write the paper from there.

However, older students are not immune to plagiarism even if they are more familiar with the material and the writing process. Without taking notes on the sources, a writer is likelier to make paraphrasing and citation mistakes. The most important benefit to notetaking for research is the time it gives you to think about your subject. If you go from reading to writing, you’re not giving yourself enough time to let the material germinate in your mind. You are less likely to have thoughts of your own on the subject, and this makes it far more likely that you will accidentally plagiarize.

In an earlier series, I wrote about notetaking issues, tips, and apps that will help you stay organized and engaged with the task of learning. Next, I will cover how to take notes for research to avoid plagiarism.