

Notes for a presentation
St. Thomas University
23 November 2012

The ecology of texts

Everyone knows there's a plagiarism plague (I think it's because Google makes it easy to find)

Hysteria makes all plagiarism seem to be cheating; it's not.

Some is, but that's a different story (see Corinne Hersey). But I wouldn't cheat on my carpentry class. (Would Lance Armstrong have cheated if he'd been trying to learn to ride better?)

We've made almost all writing about rewards and certification. People write to prove they know something or can write. I think that invites cheating – and also works powerfully against learning.

But leave cheating aside. Most of what is called plagiarism isn't cheating

Most has to do with the fact that students don't understand what peculiar academic concepts like “intellectual property” and “text ownership” mean (actually, I don't either). Nor do the lawyers.

Plagiarism documents don't help. Look at the UNB libraries' document. What's “common knowledge”, for instance? How long does a phrase have to be before it belongs to someone? (remember “Two Cheers for Plagiarism”)

Drawer Boy PG story

When you try to cover your butt you do this mechanical process, fending off a hostile reader, so you write with your fingers crossed. You might fall inadvertently into the plagiarism ditch.

But why do scholars cite and quote? NOT to fend off charges of plagiarism. We do it to present ourselves as members of an academic community, to establish an ethos as scholars, to compliment and acknowledge our colleagues, to engage in a professional conversation and thus get what all primates want: that sense of belonging to a group.

What do students do it for? None of the above.

They do it the way Ralph Klein did it.

How can we help them learn how it feels to do it professionally? Well, for some we can tell them. And we can show them models. Most of the people who wind up teaching are people who learned it that way. But for most people it's COIK, like English grammar. If you don't know already, you can't understand the explanation. You have to live in it. Some people have real social motives for wanting to join the academic community, and they'll profit from grammar explanations; most, however, just want to get a certificate.

How to confront this? I have a number of strategies

Unhook writing from evaluation

Give writing real social purposes, by putting it in situations where it will be read by readers who aren't exclusively (or even primarily) evaluating it, but are engaging with it: learning from it, being amused or persuaded or outraged by it, preparing to reply to it (that's what Bakhtin said understanding amounts to).

How do you find ways to have writing have real social purposes, at least potentially (students aren't always aware of the change; it takes a while)? Not, I think, by writing for the distant public (e.g., editing wikipedia, a la Anna Smol) or by a theoretical public (pretend you're writing for a general audience).

Wikipedia audiences are looking for bundles of information, without voice. If you do it well it's error-free, and rhetorical force free as well. And if you look at how wikipedia is documented, you'll find instance after instance of Ralph Klein, Chronicle reporter style plagiarism defense.

That "general reader" for scholarly work doesn't exist. There is always a specific disciplinary audience for every piece of documented scholarship of the kind we ask our students to emulate. General audience scholarly books almost always eschew documentation, because the general reader won't stand for it.

This is why our students have no models whatever for what we ask them to do when we assign a research paper and tell them not to plagiarize it). They've never read anything like that.

So, what can we do? I see two broad strategies, both of which I use.

1. Create situations in which student write to be read by other students, not to help or evaluate (“peer feedback”), but to learn. Collaborative investigation: you go find out about this, and you go find out about that, and tell us where you got it and why we should care about it. Learning reflections: students write to the instructor, but also to each other, explaining what they've learned and where and how they learned it, and eventually quote each other. Occasions. Inkshedding (in class or between). Forum discussions. What's important is that none of this writing should be read and evaluated by the instructor (think of the construction supervisor grading every carpentry joint as the building goes up, and paying the carpenters for good joints).

2. Create situations in which student writing actually is read outside the class (Playgoer's Companions, Inquiry Reports, other community-based writing exercises).

A paragraph from a Playgoer's Guide:

The "roots" of *The Drawer Boy* lie in an historic chapter of Canadian theatre history. In 1972, a group of young, Toronto based actors, working with Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille embarked on a project which involved the study of an Ontario farming community. Actors lived with farm families in the community of Clinton, Ontario, laboured on these farms and collected stories from the people they encountered. The stories were developed into a collective theatrical production called *The Farm Show*, which opened in Toronto and later toured parts of Canada. Both Miles Potter and David Fox, who were the director and an actor in the original multi-award winning production at Theatre Passe Muraille, helped create and appeared in the original production of *The Farm Show*.

The *Chronicle-Herald* reporter reproduced all but the first sentence, ending with an identification of its source by continuing with this phrase: "according to www.stthomasu.ca, a guide to the play produced by a group at St. Thomas University in Fredericton."

The reporter explained: "Because of all the recent plagiarism scandals in journalism, we are very conscious of proper attribution and have even had an in-house training session on the need for proper attribution, so I included the web address (I think I included the whole address but it appears to have got cut out of the final text) and the fact, the guide to the play was produced by a group at St. Thomas University in Fredericton (to put everyone's name in would have taken up too much room unfortunately)."

Today, you get 25 hits on the phrase "a group of young Toronto-based actors" – three are me, and a score are various plays where that paragraph has served as a source for a theatre company's program. At the time I first searched it, there were at least that many, some from well before our document went up on the Web. None ever had a footnote or a citation.

Ralph Klein's Reference page

End Notes

Gilbert, Jorge. Reading File (RF). Athabasca University, Athabasca, Ab, 2000

Young, Gordon; Mobley, George. Chila-Republic on a shoestring, National Geographic, National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C., 1973.

Internet Sources

AMARC.org

chile.com/

cia.gov/cia/publications/fackbook/geos/ci.html

geocities.com/educhile-1970s

moreorloss.au.com/killer/pinochet.htm

nervat.com.left/allende.htm

presidencla.cl/

atago@dfait-moeci.ga,ca

trumanedu/-marc/webpages/revfa1199/chile/

wikipedia.org/wiki/salvadorallende

Other sources

Felicia, personal interview (PI), 2004

Soto, Diego, personal interview (PI), 2004

Unnamed diplomat, personal interview, (PI), 2004

There are in fact no notes in the body of the paper. At the end of paragraph nine is the laconic notation "(Internet)." This occurs again after two other paragraphs, apparently at random; there are also two notations of "(PI)" and one of "(RF)." There is no way to identify exactly what came from any particular source. In the list, as is often the case, Web sites are listed as bare URLs, with no indication of what they actually are: the two print sources are useless as listed; and the three "other sources" are indications that he'd interviewed someone.

Under some pressure, the school initiated an inquiry. As it turned out, Klein was eventually exonerated of the charge of plagiarism -- and his instructor of the implication that he'd been soft on intellectual crime. You could, it appeared, actually make connections between Klein's words and the listed sources. There was, the inquiry concluded, no intent to deceive. What there *was*, of course, was a complete and profound ignorance of what citation and quotation are for (beyond fending off accusations of plagiarism).