



## CHAPTER 14\*

# The Failed Pedagogy of Punishment

## Moving Discussions of Plagiarism beyond Detection and Discipline

*Kevin P. Seeber*

PLAGIARISM IS THOUGHT TO be a pervasive problem in higher education, and despite hardline approaches to discipline and advanced detection techniques, it is often regarded as an ever-growing issue. The status quo could perhaps best be summarized by Richard Hardy, who notes that “in recent years...academic dishonesty among colleges and universities appears to have reached epidemic proportions.”<sup>1</sup> Hardy goes on to attribute this epidemic to the recent “information explosion,” which has made locating and copying information easier than ever.<sup>2</sup> The end result is that faculty can “no longer assume that traditional methods of testing and grading are valid. New methods of detecting and preventing academic dishonesty must be developed.”<sup>3</sup> The interesting part of this assessment from Hardy is that it was written in 1981 (the information explosion in question was the availability of photocopiers). And although three and a half decades have now passed, this account contains the same core elements of the narrative surrounding plagiarism today—first, that plagiarism is rampant and dangerous; second, that technology is to blame; and third, that improved detection is at least part of the solution.

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This chapter seeks to deconstruct this narrative that surrounds plagiarism in higher education, as well as provide academic librarians with alternatives to the pedagogy of punishment that often accompanies discussions of academic dishonesty on campus. I do not deny that plagiarism exists, nor do I seek to downplay the importance of academic citation. Rather, this chapter is an invitation for librarians to critically rethink our relationship to the broad concept of plagiarism on campus and ensure that our interactions with students, faculty, and staff are grounded in a pedagogy that values student learning, rather than administrative policy.

At the outset it is worth noting that, frankly, citation is weird. Not the act of citation itself, but rather the mechanics of how citation functions within higher education. There are dozens of styles in use, many with rules that even experienced practitioners cannot explain. Beyond that, this method of citation largely does not exist outside of academia and scholarly publishing—just think of how many stories in the popular media rely on “unnamed officials with close knowledge of the situation”—resulting in new students encountering a system to which they have had little or no prior exposure. Is it really so surprising that citation causes so much confusion among them? Yet the weirdness of citation is often accepted without criticism by librarians and instructors, who frequently choose to focus on explaining the rules and threatening punishment, rather than addressing the root of students’ confusion.

So what might be causing this confusion? At least part of it stems from the fact that what constitutes “plagiarism” or “appropriate citation” is culturally defined and varies by context. For those within the culture, these rules and practices might seem like second nature, while for those coming from outside, these same practices can be a cause of frustration or anxiety. An example of plagiarism’s constructed nature can be seen in multiple studies that address the topic in relation to international students, who often encounter obstacles within the American educational system when it comes to citation.<sup>4</sup> These are not cases where students set out to break the rules, but rather cases where students found that the rules they knew did not transfer to a new place. It is also worth noting that these cultural differences are not solely tied to country of origin. Even among scholars writing on the subject, there is not a shared definition of plagiarism, with studies frequently devoting a significant portion of their text to providing a taxonomy of academic dishonesty, parsing “plagiarism” from “fraud” or “cheating.”<sup>5</sup> The more one digs into this issue, the more it becomes apparent that something like “ethical behavior” is highly subjective—a fact that should give educators pause before we present plagiarism as an absolute.

There are consequences attached to this confusion. For their part, Patrick Drinan and Tricia Bertram Gallant do well to observe the role of culture as it relates to writing papers, pointing out that instances of insufficient citation “can often represent misunderstanding or lack of academic sophistication

rather than an intent to deceive.”<sup>6</sup> They go on to note that plagiarism rooted in this unfamiliarity is “distinct from the plagiarism that might be performed by faculty or other experienced writers,” and attribute the matter to “students’ lack of experience in writing research or scholarly pieces and their lack of expertise in the discipline.”<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, it then becomes clear that plagiarism often is not malicious in nature, especially when committed by new students, but is instead the product of misunderstanding. From there it seems necessary to recognize that emphasizing punishment, without explaining the reasoning behind the rules, systematically alienates those students who have not been privileged with past exposure to academic conventions. Put another way, the balance of power surrounding plagiarism ensures that the students who have had the least access to higher education now have the most to fear in the system.

Unfortunately, higher education has been slow to recognize this issue, and discipline still occupies a central position on college and university campuses. An example of this persistence comes from Tara Brabazon, who powerfully indicates how poorly schools have been handling the matter at new student orientations:

What do we do to them on their first day? Within one hour of their arrival—instead of speaking of hopes and dreams and congratulating them on their achievements and wishing them well—we push sanctions against plagiarism so aggressively they almost suffocate. As I sit in the auditorium, I see how we lose our students. I see the shining joy leave their faces. A culture of blame, shame, judgment and ridicule is created. We never think that we as teachers are creating the problem that we most fear, by replacing teaching and learning with blaming and shaming.<sup>8</sup>

This example is not unique. Rather, it is part of a larger shift that has taken place within education, embracing a pedagogy of punishment over meaningful instruction. As Henry Giroux notes, “How educators think about children through a discourse that has shifted from hope to punishment is evident in the effects of zero tolerance policies, which criminalize student behavior in ways that take an incalculable toll on their lives and their future.”<sup>9</sup> Giroux goes on to write that “as the culture of fear, crime, and repression dominate American public schools, the culture of schooling is reconfigured through the allocation of resources used primarily to acquire more police, security staff, and technologies of control and surveillance.”<sup>10</sup> Although Giroux is writing with regard to K–12 schooling, many of these same criticisms apply to how academic dishon-

esty is framed in higher education, where policies are dictated down to students and transgression brings with it failing grades or expulsion. Moreover, this quote invokes a vital component of the discussion surrounding plagiarism and how to “solve” it—the use of “technologies of control and surveillance.”

Going back to the example from 1981, Hardy notes that a proliferation of new academic journals meant that “no matter how well read a professor is in his or her field, it is becoming almost impossible to detect plagiarism.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the means of detection at that time required faculty essentially to read everything they could and hope they would recognize plagiarized passages in student work. Considering how much has changed in the ensuing years, this model of surveillance seems almost quaint, though it was replaced soon enough. Writing just seven years after Hardy, Shoshana Zuboff notes how new technologies allowed the development of “information panopticons,” stating that “information systems can automatically and continuously record almost anything their designers want to capture, regardless of the specific intentions brought to the design process or the motives that guide data interpretation and utilization.”<sup>12</sup> Zuboff continues by stating that these systems “can alter many of the classic contingencies of the superior-subordinate relationship, providing certain information about subordinates’ behavior while eliminating the necessity of face-to-face engagement.”<sup>13</sup>

This kind of automated detection and discipline is now commonplace in higher education, occurring in the form of online citation checkers like Turnitin, which Brabazon has deemed “the panopticon of plagiarism.”<sup>14</sup> Much as Zuboff had predicted, these automated tools have effectively supplanted face-to-face engagement between students and instructors and determine violations of academic policy algorithmically. In a sense, this online approach is nearly a perfection of the panopticism described by Michel Foucault, who invoked plagiarism in *Discipline and Punish* when describing how observation would maintain order in a variety of settings:

If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen there is no risk of their committing violence upon another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying....<sup>15</sup>

The flaw with automating something like plagiarism detection is that, as has already been shown, plagiarism is not absolute. What constitutes “sufficient citation” is a moving target, one that varies depending on cultural context. Instead of recognizing and discussing that context, however, these tools

reduce citation to a percentage score, which in turn informs students as to whether or not their work is “ethical.” From a pedagogical standpoint this is a disaster, as students who are unfamiliar with citation are not only alienated by their inexperience with academic conventions, but are now removed from contact with a person who could even do so much as explain the rules, let alone the reasoning behind them.

This leads to a question: why does higher education continue to devote resources to these online citation tools? The answer likely is linked with the persistent misconception that technology is the cause of plagiarism and therefore must be the best solution. Considering that educators have been blaming technology for at least a few decades, though, that line of reasoning seems less convincing. As for the solution side of the equation, online citation tools fit nicely into what Evgeny Morozov has deemed “technological solutionism.” Writing about the influence of new technologies in education, Morozov notes that “digital technologies might be a perfect solution to some problems, but those problems don’t include education—not if by education we mean the development of the skills to think critically about any given issue.”<sup>16</sup> Put another way, these automated tools are seen as the definitive means of putting a stop to the problem of plagiarism. What they do not do, however, is facilitate any critical discussion around citation itself.

Perhaps, then, it is worth investigating what kind of learning outcomes are associated with discussions of plagiarism in higher education. In an article that is typical of many in the field, Roselind Wan, Shahrina Md Nordin, Muhammed Halib, and Zulkipli Ghazali advocate for emphasizing discipline, ensuring that students receive “adequate exposure to the university’s policy on plagiarism as an academic misconduct” so they will have a “clear understanding of the consequence of plagiarism.”<sup>17</sup> This line of thinking can be verified by reviewing university catalogs and course syllabi, which often include harsh language with regard to plagiarism. Within this paradigm, the desired outcome for students is “do not break the rules.” The emphasis on punishment, however, means that the more likely learning outcome would be something like “avoid discipline.” Of course, it is also implied that discipline can occur only following detection, so the outcome becomes “avoid detection.” Then, once considerations of automation enter into all of this, the true and final learning outcome for students is “get past the algorithm.” Citation has been reduced to a cat-and-mouse game with a piece of software.

As is hopefully apparent, the problem with this scenario is that it involves no critical reasoning in relation to why citation exists. Including quotes and acknowledging sources is treated as a bizarre set of rules that must be completed successfully in order to avoid punishment, not a concept that is valuable in and of itself. Learning outcomes are centered not on citation, but on avoiding detection and discipline. To extend this mode of thinking into life outside of

higher education, then, students have effectively learned to behave ethically only when they risk getting caught. In the absence of a panoptic authority, there is no reason to credit the work of others.

Within all of this, academic librarians are uniquely positioned to change the discourse surrounding plagiarism and citation. To be sure, librarians have been involved in these issues, often assuming the role of campus citation experts who can teach students where and how to cite sources and otherwise avoid plagiarism.<sup>18</sup> Although this role is decidedly more proactive than administrative policies that wait for students to transgress, then discipline them, it leaves something to be desired. Namely, having librarians be the ones who merely explain the rules and how to follow them fails to acknowledge the underlying reasons for why citation exists and why it is taken so seriously in academia.

So what are we to do in the face of this situation? What does a critical approach to citation instruction look like? To begin with, librarians need to move away from saying “these are the rules in college, and you better not break them.” The pedagogy of punishment, which emphasizes discipline while ignoring any discussion of context or critical reasoning, disproportionately impacts students who have had limited exposure to higher education. To employ such a pedagogy stands to reinforce the status of these students as “outsiders” in the academy, rather than empower them to truly join the conversation and contribute their voices and ideas. And why is this the job of librarians? By the nature of our positions, we are situated outside of these campus disciplinary constructs. While administrators establish academic policies, and teaching faculty are largely bound to enforce them, librarians occupy a separate space. To be clear, it is not a neutral space, but is instead a space where we can focus on developing pedagogies that truly value student learning, rather than push a disciplinary agenda.

In practice, this means that the term *plagiarism* should be dropped from any library learning outcome or class overview. Meaningful instruction should not be centered on “avoiding plagiarism,” or even “citing correctly,” but rather “citing effectively.” Such an approach allows librarians and students to explore citation not as means of avoiding punishment, but rather the means to support their ideas and situate themselves among other scholars. As Emily Drabinski notes: “Citation matters. It means a lot to acknowledge the work of those working before or alongside you. This is also a political [and] feminist act.”<sup>19</sup> In the emphasis on rules and disciplinary measures, this kind of thinking has been lost. If we truly desire to embrace critical library instruction and develop a pedagogy that empowers students to effect positive change, we would do well to follow Drabinski’s lead. Librarians are in a position to speak with students in a way that goes beyond “following the rules.” We are able to discuss how knowledge comes not from individual acts, but rather communal effort

founded on mutual respect. That is the core of citation, and it should likewise form the core of library instruction on this topic.

## Notes

1. Richard J. Hardy, "Preventing Academic Dishonesty: Some Important Tips for Political Science Professors," *Teaching Political Science* 9, no. 2 (1981): 68.
2. *Ibid.*, 72.
3. *Ibid.*, 68.
4. Dawn Amsberry, "Deconstructing Plagiarism: International Students and Textual Borrowing Practices," *Reference Librarian* 51, no. 1 (2010): 31–44, doi:10.1080/02763870903362183; Martin Zimmerman, "Plagiarism and International Students in Academic Libraries," *New Library World* 113, no. 5/6 (2012): 290–99, doi:10.1108/03074801211226373.
5. Amsberry, "Deconstructing Plagiarism," 33; George P. Germek, "Imagine No Possessions: Librarians, the Net-Generation Student, and the Imminent Victory of Plagiarism," *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 16, no. 4 (2009): 344, doi:10.1080/10691310903356000; Roselind Wan, Shahrina Md Nordin, Muhammed B. Halib, and Zulkipli B. Ghazali, "Plagiarism among Undergraduate Students in an Engineering-Based University: An Exploratory Analysis," *European Journal of Social Sciences* 25, no. 4 (November 2011): 539–40, [http://www.europeanjournalofsocialsciences.com/issues/EJSS\\_25\\_4.html](http://www.europeanjournalofsocialsciences.com/issues/EJSS_25_4.html).
6. Patrick M. Drinan and Tricia Bertram Gallant, "Plagiarism and Academic Integrity Systems," *Journal of Library Administration* 47, no. 3–4 (2008): 134, doi:10.1080/01930820802186472.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Tara Brabazon, "Turnitin? Turnitoff: The Deskilling of Information Literacy," *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 16, no. 3 (2015): 14, doi:10.17718/tojde.55005.
9. Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 98.
10. *Ibid.*, 99.
11. Hardy, "Preventing Academic Dishonesty," 72.
12. Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 322.
13. *Ibid.*, 323.
14. Brabazon, "Turnitin? Turnitoff," 14.
15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200–201.
16. Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 8.
17. Wan et al., "Plagiarism among Undergraduate Students," 546.
18. Nicole J. Auer and Ellen M. Krupar, "Mouse Click Plagiarism: The Role of Technology in Plagiarism and the Librarian's Role in Combating It," *Library Trends* 49, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 415–32; Mary J. Snyder Broussard and Jessica Urick Oberlin, "Using Online Games to Fight Plagiarism: A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down," *Indiana Libraries* 30, no. 1 (2011): 28–39, <http://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/IndianaLibraries/article/view/1912>.



19. Emily Drabinski, Twitter post, June 2, 2015, 12:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/edrabinski/status/605825951478378497>.

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