Dr. Erin Zimmerman
Ms. Sarah Elcheikhali
American University of Beirut

Plagiarism across disciplines in an international context

Digest of Key Terms:

Plagiarism – Multilingualism/ESL/EFL – WAC/WID – Culture – Lebanon

Institutional Context:

The American University of Beirut is a liberal arts institution founded by American Protestant Missionaries in 1866. The language of instruction is English. The university serves over 9000 students, 78% of which are Lebanese and more than 20% are international students. 28% of faculty members are also non-Lebanese. Students arriving at AUB come to a university based on the American model from different types of educational systems, having learned not only different things during their schooling, but also in different ways and in different languages. Some students come into AUB having learned through memorization, while others learned through reading, writing or research. While some systems value student centered approaches to learning, others rely on teacher centeredness. In addition, some students might have had little experience with English during their school years, others might have studied English throughout their education and used it inside and outside school. Some students can be proficient in both French and English, while other French-educated student might be extremely comfortable speaking in English, but quite self-conscious about writing long pieces in English. Once students are admitted to AUB, they are required to take 2 English Writing courses, but may need to take up to 4, depending on their placement scores determined by the SAT Essay.

Key Theorists and Frames:

International plagiarism research: Moss, S. A., White, B., & Lee, J.; Wheeler, G.; Hayes, N., & Introna, L. D.; among many others examine faculty and/or student perceptions of plagiarism, the ways in which multilingual students learn to incorporate sources appropriately, and practices for teaching, detecting, and disciplining students for acts of plagiarism.

Instruction of plagiarism: Wilder, L. & Yagelski R.P., and Pecorari, D., among others present techniques for enhanced instruction to help students, often focusing on multilingual students, learn nuanced skills related to properly integrating sources into their writing.

WAC/WID influences of plagiarism: Hyland, K.; Swales, J.; Bazerman, C.; among others illustrate the discourse communities of academic disciplines, which impact the conventions and expectations of writing, including the types of and the ways in which sources are used in writing.

Introduction

Plagiarism is an often-discussed concern at most colleges and universities. Faculty listservs are rife with complaints about students' inappropriate use of sources, students seek help from writing center tutors on appropriate citation, and some individuals, inside and outside the university, make significant amounts of money writing papers for or sharing previously written papers with students who are occasionally too lazy or, more often, too overwhelmed to do the work themselves.

As much as plagiarism is recognized as a problem at U.S. colleges and universities with the majority of students matriculating from local, regional, or national high schools with standardized curricula, universities located outside of the U.S. hold similar and sometimes quite distinctive plagiarism-related concerns. In the past decade, student perceptions of plagiarism have been studied in a variety of international contexts, including China (Hu & Lei, 2015); Japan (Wheeler, 2014); Norway (Skaar & Hammer, 2013); Pakistan (Ghias, Lakho, Asim, Azam & Saeed, 2014); Vietnam (Tran, 2012); and Zimbabwe (Chireshe, 2014). Such research illustrates that while some causes attributed to student plagiarism are more universal, such as students' weak writing and researching skills or ignorance of academic or specific disciplines' writing conventions, some triggers of plagiarism are bound to cultural dimensions such as students' translation of ideas across languages or cultural or educational norms that deem copying appropriate. Of course every educational institution has its own unique contexts, successes, and challenges, but in the U.S., most American students matriculating into colleges and universities have similar awareness of the expectations of academic writing, including practices related to plagiarism, because of standardized language of instruction or curricular practices.

Such consistency is not necessarily the case at universities outside of the U.S. Specifically in Lebanon, historically there has been a wide range of diversity in educational systems, languages of instruction, and curricula. For instance, during Ottoman rule, French, English, Russian and Islamic schools, each with different languages of instruction and curricula, were created in Lebanon through government mandates as well as missionary involvements. Right before the eruption of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, the government ordered Arabic to be the medium of instruction throughout grade levels in the Lebanese school system in order to instill an Arab identity in citizens since the country had been forced to use both French and Arabic in all educational and public domains under the French mandate. However, after the war ended in 1989, constitutional laws mandated the bilingualism of Lebanese schools with the introduction of French or English as early as preschool and a third language in Grade Seven in order to prepare Lebanese students for communication and education on a more global scale (Shaaban, 1997).

These external factors greatly affect AUB because currently 78% of students are Lebanese who come from this wide range of secondary school systems, such as the Lebanese Baccalaureate, the French Baccalaureate, the German Baccalaureate, the International Baccalaureate, or the American

high school system (European Commission, 2017). The curricula differ widely across these systems; for example, the Lebanese secondary system favors "traditional methods of learning such as memorization and teacher autonomy" (Akar, 2007, p. 2), do not learn about academic writing or research. The curriculum as a whole also has and continues to differ from one system to another in terms of what is taught (subjects, use of text books, etc.) and how it is taught (learning through memorization, research, reading, group work/projects, writing, etc.). These distinctions become visible when students coming from the Lebanese system are used to studying and learning through memorization, while students from the American system find difficulty memorizing information but are more adept at project-based assignments. The language(s) of instruction in those educational systems and the extent in which those languages are employed also varies from one to another. For instance, in the Lebanese systems, sciences and mathematics are taught in French or English while history, civics, and geography are taught in Arabic. Meanwhile, French is the language of instruction of all subjects except foreign languages in the French Baccalaureate system, and the same is true of English in the American high school system.

To add to the diversity of Lebanese students' educational backgrounds, 22% of AUB's students come from over 90 countries, which adds even more variety of linguistic and curricular experiences that influence the preconceived notions and expectations about academic writing (American University of Beirut, 2018). And the melting pot of previous educational experiences is not only limited to students; 28% of AUB faculty are non-Lebanese, and many of the Lebanese faculty members received terminal degrees outside of Lebanon and the MENA region (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2017-2018). Thus, instructional methods and expectations of student writing also varies greatly. As such, these diverse educational, as well as historical and cultural, experiences influence the perspectives and knowledge that inform and direct the plagiarism-related struggles that AUB administrators, faculty, and students currently experience and witness.

This lack of homogeneity creates need for programmatic curricula and individual instructors to include significant amounts of instruction of writing skills and plagiarism in courses. In addition, AUB is accredited in the State of New York and upholds an American-style Liberal Arts curriculum model. Thus, AUB is importing a foreign educational system into this multilingual, multicultural local context. Significant consideration and modification must take place in order to ensure all the elements work. Specifically, the university must adapt U.S.-centric plagiarism policies and procedures to suit AUB's context. To meet these needs, however, examinations and discussions about what writing expectations are in academia and across disciplines, how prepared instructors are to teach writing in their courses, whether one-size-fits-all policies are useful, and so forth are necessary. Naturally, however, the sheer size of AUB, a university with 9132 students and 1196 faculty, complicates that initiative (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2017-2018).

Consequently, the variety of knowledge and perceptions of plagiarism that students and faculty have and the curriculum, policies, and procedures of the university makes AUB a noteworthy site to study the complexities of plagiarism issues in academic writing across disciplines.

Background

AUB addresses plagiarism in the Student Code of Conduct by stating, "Whenever students draw on another's work, they must specify what they borrowed, whether facts, opinions, or quotations, and where they borrowed it from. Using another person's documented ideas or expressions in one's writing without acknowledging the source constitutes plagiarism." This definition and the related disciplinary procedures of instructors giving the student a 0 on the assignment and reporting plagiarism cases, and conduct committees considering disciplinary actions such as reprimands, dean's warnings, or suspension are similar to those found at colleges and universities across the U.S.

Yet, scholars have noted that identifying plagiarism can be a complicated act because there is often a wide diversity in the ways in which plagiarism occurs, the course/discipline in which it occurs, the intentions of the individual student, and the student's skill level. Each of these, and other, factors often influence action taken by instructors or conduct committee members. Diane Pecorari (2003) observes, "University policies are in broad agreement about a general definition…but do not provide a yardstick to apply to specific texts to determine whether plagiarism is involved" (p. 322-4). Julianne East (2006) expands on this general observation by relating her experience in a faculty development workshop in which all participants arrived with a consensus on the definition of plagiarism; yet, by the end of the workshop it was clear that no agreement would be made deeming whether the example cases presented demonstrated plagiarism or not (p. 16). And if instructors have such difficulties identifying plagiarism, it should not be overly surprising that so often students struggle to avoid plagiarism.

While some tasks related to integrating and citing sources appropriately are relatively simple to learn and repetitive in nature, some are more nuanced and may thus require a higher level of thought. For instance, in history, writers are expected to evaluate and synthesize stories by "construct[ing] a narrative from existing narratives," which makes the understanding of plagiarism challenging because "the possibility of transgressing the boundary of the ownership of the ideas may be less clear" (Borg, pp. 419-20). Or in computer science, the issue of plagiarism is mostly concerned with a writer's reuse of codes: A coder is expected to translate a program from another programming language, but there is not a set limit at which using someone else's source code requires acknowledgement (Simon, p. 772). Therefore, some of AUB's students who are new to academic writing and simultaneously value memorization as a means of learning, have difficulty keeping track of the variety of regulations and when detection and enforcement practices are not always uniform, that adds to the confusion.

To complicate matters further, not all source integration and citation tasks are performed or valued in exactly the same ways in every disciplinary context. Writing studies research indicates that academic fields embody their own unique discourse communities (Bazerman, 1981; Hyland, 2003; Swales, 1990; Thaiss, & Zawacki, 2006). For instance, in engineering, the problem arises because

they mostly write collaboratively, crediting labs and teams of scientists while establishing a lead author (Borg, 2009, pp. 420-1). On the other hand, in the visual arts, writers might have difficulty grasping the concept of plagiarism because "learning through copying, appropriation, homage, visual referencing, expanding on a resource, parody, and pastiche" is fully expected (Simon, 2016, p. 775). So students must know general plagiarism rules while also being able to adapt the ways they use and cite sources and work with texts and other writers depending on the conventions of the discipline of the courses they take. And students at liberal arts universities like AUB who might only take one or two classes in certain departments might simply not get enough practice to fully understand and employ those skills.

To study and try to combat what many see as an increase in plagiarism in student writing, research on plagiarism is growing. Scholars have examined the actions students take when trying to learn how to incorporate sources in their writing (Pecorari, 2003; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018), discovered the perceptions faculty and students have of plagiarism (Hayes & Introna, 2005; Moss, 2018; Pecorari & Petric, 2014), suggested methods for improved instruction on plagiarism (East, 2006; Pecorari, 2003; Yamada, 2003), and critiqued methods of detecting plagiarism (Franco-Salvador, Gupta & Rosso, 2013; Simon, 2016; Sterngold, 2004) and the policies universities have in place to enforce punishments relating to plagiarism (McGowan, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Of particular interest to instructors and researchers in international settings, scholars also look at the impact of culture on students' understanding of plagiarism. The way students are expected to learn in the classroom environment is said to be directly influenced by cultural values and practices (Sowden, 2005). For example, Alastair Pennycook (1996) claims that plagiarism is a western construct, situated upon western histories of conquest and ideologies of learning, ownership and belonging, and Colin Sowden (2005) argues that a culture that "tolerates the idea of students sharing knowledge and responsibility…is less likely to discourage copying and the appropriation of ideas from other sources without acknowledgement" (p. 227-8). Other researchers, meanwhile, voice their discontent with such simplified explanations of how culture impacts the understanding of plagiarism (Liu, 2005; Yamada, 2003; Wheeler, 2009).

What this debate illustrates is that scholars recognize that "the concept of plagiarism is fully embedded within a social, political, and cultural matrix that cannot be meaningfully separated from its interpretation" (Scollon, 1995, p. 23). Thus, AUB is an ideal research space to examine such issues because of the ways in which multilingual students matriculating from various educational backgrounds come together in an Arab locale but at an American institution with imported academic policies, instructional practices, and educational expectations that at times are only found within this particular academic space in the whole of Lebanon. This notion of plagiarism is imposed on students that might have different definitions and understandings of what it means to learn, write, and conduct research according to their unique histories. For instance, Wolfhart Heinrichs (1987) relates how Arabic, the official language of Lebanon, has had a history of *Sariqat* (plagiarism or theft in Arabic) as a literary genre in poetry where entire stanzas were stolen/plagiarized by poets during the medieval period. The poet "would argue that being the better poet he had a right to claim

the stolen lines as his own as he was ahaqq 'more deserving' of them (Heinrichs, 1987, p: 359). This specific justification for committing plagiarism evolved to become a concept in itself in which a "poet who found a more attractive wording for a known *maa'na* [meaning] thereby deserved that this maa'na be ascribed to him" (Heinrichs, 1987, p. 359-360). This historical example challenges not only the definition of plagiarism but also the individuals upon which this concept applies.

By looking at the perceptions and reactions to issues of plagiarism at AUB, we can perhaps be able to give insight as to "why students from different cultures plagiarize" (Hayes and Introna, 2005, p. 215). The researchers' aim is to gain insight into students and faculty members' perceptions and reactions to issue of plagiarism at AUB in order to arrive at a refined understanding of the needed improvements in university and classroom practices, policies and/or procedures. Furthermore, with 4440 AUB alumni currently studying and/or working in North America and Europe, this internal concern at AUB becomes a western one as well (American University of Beirut, 2018). This research can model methods of adapting Western policies, procedures, and instructional methods to international settings while also highlighting specifically for educational institutions in the West with a large student body of international students, the challenges that Lebanese students have with the concept of plagiarism. The following questions guide the project:

1. What are AUB students' perceptions regarding plagiarism?
2. What are AUB faculty members' perceptions and actions regarding plagiarism (including discussion of, classroom instruction for, and/or reactions following plagiarism)?
3. How might similarities and differences of students' and faculty members' perceptions complicate instructors' teaching and students' learning of writing skills?
4. What actions might AUB take to improve student learning, faculty instruction, and faculty and university response to issues of plagiarism?

Methods

The researchers documented and analyzed AUB students' and faculty members' perceptions and reactions to issues of plagiarism through a mixed methods study. The researchers created two surveys comprised of both qualitative and quantitative questions, one for faculty and one for students. The IRB helped to create a random, anonymous sampling of 200 faculty members from all ranks and programs and of 1000 students from all academic years and majors. Surveys were emailed out in the middle of fall semester with three reminder emails following over the course of two months. The surveys garnered low returns in this first semester (12% faculty and 9.5% students surveyed responded). Therefore, the researchers requested and were granted that the IRB create two new email lists of # faculty members and # students. After the initial survey and 3 reminder emails were sent during the spring semester, a total of # faculty members and # student responses were collected.

The researchers completed an initial pass of data analysis in which we examined the results of the students and faculty members independently. We used grounded theory and open coding methods as well as statistical aggregates to locate patterns in perceptions and practices. Then, we read the results of these two groups in relation to one another as a means to discover relationships and find convergences and/or divergences.

In particular we looked at ...

used grounded theory, focusing on .... to identify and order reactions, suggestions, topics, issues, similarities, and differences. An open coding scheme helped us to then analyze and interpret the data and information that naturally occurred at the presentation through a systematic exploration of the meaning, patterns and frequency of both reactions and suggestions of possible directions of improvement. We then applied this categorizing, correlating, comparing, and interpreting of data to find patterns and identify themes among the surveys and presentation observations.

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