INFORMATION SYSTEMS EDUCATION JOURNAL

Special Issue: Teaching Cases

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Editors

Teaching Case

Single Sourcing, Boilerplates, and Re-Purposing: Plagiarism and Technical Writing

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Abstract

In academia, plagiarism adheres to the traditional definition: utilizing another person's words or ideas without proper credit. Students are taught to cite everything, while instructors are given tools to detect plagiarism. This ultimately creates an atmosphere of paranoia, where students fear accusation and teachers are convinced that plagiarism will occur unless they remain ever vigilant. At the same time, technical writers create, reuse, remix, and remarket content on a regular basis in the form of instruction manuals, boilerplates, and other technical, factual, straightforward texts. In academia, the technical writer would be accused of (self-) plagiarism, which would not – given the context – be the case. In the professional world, where the majority of writing will be technical, students will find themselves creating content based on already-existing texts, a direct contradiction of their academic training. This teaching case asks students to consider not only plagiarism but also the concepts of copying and remixing, two ideas closely related to plagiarism, and develop their own conclusions, both personal and professional, about what is and is not ethical communication. It also seeks to demonstrate the importance of recognizing that difference and adjusting accordingly so that professional communications not only meet ethical standards but are also produced in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Keywords: Technical Writing, Plagiarism, Remixing, Re-purposing, Ethics

1. THE ASSIGNMENT

Matthew Rice was beginning to seriously question his decision to choose technical writing as a career path. A junior at the community college, he had signed up for Ms. Parks' Technical Communications in Practice course, thinking that her real-world career as a technical consultant would be a bonus.

While it really was a bonus, the reality of technical writing was starting to become apparent. "The creative writing majors get to do the cool stuff," he grumbled to Lydia Jones during lunch. "Meanwhile, I'm supposed to write about some tech company that won a bunch of awards and make it sound interesting."

Lydia, who was in the same class, shrugged. "It's not that hard. Just take what was written and reword it."

"Isn't that plagiarism?"

"Not if you're using it for the same company. Think about the way that websites and annual reports are designed. Companies just keep reusing the same information. They call them boilerplates, and they're basically templates that you either don't change at all or only change a little bit. For example, you can use the same closing paragraph – the one that tells you when the company was founded, the awards they won, and how to contact them – in an annual report, in a brochure, and on a website."

Matthew nodded. What Lydia was saying did sound vaguely familiar. "I remember Parks talking about boilerplates. So it's really okay to just reuse someone else's words?"

"If you work for the company and you're creating it for the company, generally, yes. Check out chapter five in out text. The whole chapter is devoted to boilerplates and avoiding plagiarism."

Later that night, as Matt was working on his assignment, he thought about what Lydia had told him. *It's okay if you work for the company.* The assignment required students to evaluate a company's website, looking at its strengths and weaknesses, and provide recommendations. The assignment also required a short description of the company itself.

He was supposed to write the paper as if he were a company employee. Therefore, he reasoned, there was no reason for him to not used what was already written. Shrugging, he pulled up the company's website and began to copy-and-paste the text.

2. THE GRADE

Technical consultant Edie Parks describes her career as "being paid to tell people what to do," and she's not far off. She works for Unlimited Technologies, a consulting and research firm offering expertise in online learning, program evaluation, artificial intelligence, and data mining.

Edie's particular expertise lies in online learning and evaluation. She enjoys both technology and training, which makes Unlimited a perfect fit for her. When the opportunity to teach CP356 Technical Communications in Practice at a local community college, she jumps at it.

She loves it. The students, all either juniors or seniors, are engaged, and their work shows creativity and understanding. Everything is, in Edie's estimation, perfect.

Then she started to grade the midterm project, the largest assignment to date, one that asks the students to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a company's website. The resulting document would provide a brief description of the company, an analysis of the site discussing what it did well, what could be improved upon, and offer sample solutions.
Their solutions were on track; however, several of the students used boilerplates, or standardized templates that can be reused with little to no changes, from their assigned company's website rather than create their own company descriptions. This gave Edie pause as it was something that she had done herself, but

this was an assignment and she needed to know if the students actually knew the company or were simply cutting and pasting. She checked the project's guidelines and realized that she had not specified whether or not using boilerplate descriptions was acceptable.

As she continued to read, she realized that several papers used phraseology similar to some of the boilerplate templates that she had used in the past and had provided as examples, so while the content itself was generally original, the organization and format were not. Only one or two of the papers acknowledged the creator(s) of the templates in the bibliography. Leafing through the rest of the projects, she also recognized instances of *patchwriting*, or rearranging words in an attempt at paraphrasing (Appendix A).

This was not good. How could she give these students grades when they were using other people's work? And, when it came to patchwriting, was it a case of the student not knowing what else to say or was it deliberate laziness?

She picked up Matthew Rice's paper. He was usually a good student, and he was definitely creative. With any luck his work would improve her mood. Within three pages, Edie wanted to slam her head onto the table. As part of his recommendations for a small computer company, Matthew designed a new About Us page based on the already-existing users' manual (Appendix B). He didn't create content for the assignment, she developed exiting content. No citations were provided.

From a professional viewpoint, however, Edie knew that there are grey areas in technical communication that don't always exist in other fields. What was plagiarism is academia was not always plagiarism in the technical world simply due to the nature of the work. How many times during her career did she repurpose work, single source, or use boilerplates? Everything she did for her clients was original in terms of presentation, but that didn't mean that every solution was original. She had a collection of solutions from which she could pick and choose – then customize – as needed.

Edie put her red pen and grading rubric aside and read the projects as if they were business documents and not graded assignments. She realized that she needed to rethink her definition of plagiarism, copyright, and – while she was at it – intellectual property. The assignments, of

varying quality, met the criteria and offered viable solutions to the problems. While, in the real world, some would be sent back to the drawing board, all of them demonstrated learning.

Edie also realized that she agreed with the argument *Copying isn't Theft*, something her students debated a few weeks ago, which argued that making more – as in the case of copying – does not fit the criteria of actual theft, which leaves one party without (Green, 2012a; Paley, 2009). The argument didn't advocate copying for profit, but it did argue that copying isn't *theft*, at least not in the traditional sense. The students argued that copying was similar to Lessig's statements on remixing, and that remixing was "a collage [created by] combining elements" and "leveraging the meaning created by the reference to build something new" (Lessig, 2008, p. 75).

Philosophically, Edie believed that a person's idea belong to that person. However, once that idea was spoken or written, and shared with the public, how could someone claim actual ownership? Additionally, given that ideas are not tangible, how could borrowing someone's ideas, particularly when they are good ones, be "wrong"? Using someone else's ideas does not result in that other person losing the ability to access the ideas. Just because the students used solutions she, or others, developed did not mean that anyone was harmed. Additionally, she believed that, in certain cases, Lessig's argument made complete sense. Her students took someone's work, remixed it, and applied it to a new situation.

2. CONVERSATION

Baffled, Edie met with Jim Bevans, her department head, and brought her concerns to his attention. An English Literature professor, he admitted that he didn't know the answer. Academically, he said, the students were guilty of plagiarism and subject to the school's sanctions, from a zero on the assignment up to expulsion. "It's up to you, Edie," Jim told her. "You can fail all of them for plagiarism, which will be a disaster, or you can offer them the chance to do it over. Again, it's a disaster."

"What if I don't make them do their work again and change my grading standards? After all, they met the criteria, and what they did is not, in technical writing, plagiarism," she told him.

"But it's unethical in life. These students did not create original content or give credit where it was due. Look at the music and movie industries. How many millions are lost to kids pirating – copying! – their stuff from the Internet?"

"True," she countered, "and I get the idea of pirating costing the artists money, but this isn't a top forty record or summer blockbuster..."

"Exactly, it costs someone money," he interrupted.

"Look, the students took boilerplates and templates and put them to good use. It's done all the time. Do you honestly think that I come up with totally original content every time I meet with a client? If they need the same information in three different places, I'm going to use the same content and just tweak it a little. I created the content for them, so it's not costing me money if I reuse it. Heck, it's putting money in my pocket." (Appendix C)

Jim leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Look, Edie, you're the expert. If you come up with a fair, solid, and ethical solution, I'll back you. Just run it by me first, okay?"

Edie smiled. "Absolutely. Thanks, Jim. I'm not going to fail them for doing what I taught them. I'll figure something out and let you know."

4. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Take a moment to differentiate between technical writing and non-technical writing, e.g. academic papers, news articles, novels, and editorials. How are the ramifications different when it comes to a technical writer single sourcing and, for example, one novelist copying material from another? Why do you think this is so?

2. While it seems that the most logical answer to the problem is that Edie revisit her grading rubric and work with her students to ensure that they understand when it is and is not acceptable to remix material, can you see room for issues to arise in the future? Is this a double standard, and should all writers be held to the same expectations regarding plagiarism? Why or why not?

3. Anyone with a computer can publish anything on the internet. As a result, there are countless websites that not

only plagiarize from traditional media but also plagiarize from each other. Since there is no tangible theft taking place, since no one is depriving another of material property, and when no one profits financially, should we view copying material from one website to another the same as copying a tangible object, such as a DVD or book?

4. Is there a difference between copying with intent to profit and copying for the sake of sharing information? Why or why not?

5. Claiming another's work as your own constitutes plagiarism. In academia, the solution is to create assignments where plagiarism is difficult or impossible. Do you believe that this is an appropriate response? Why or why not?

6. Building on your response for question 5, what do you believe businesses can do to prevent unethical use of another's material, which would damage their credibility with the public and affect their profits?

7. How will you manage issues of copying and plagiarism in your professional career? Think about the field that you are entering and consider the opportunities to copy and/or plagiarize that are available.

8. Consider ethical theory, specifically the two most common: consequence-based and duty-based. How would a Utilitarian ethicist, one who focuses on the consequences, handle the discussion of copying? What about an ethicist who subscribed to a duty-based philosophy such as Kant's?

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Appendix A

Original text, taken from the company's website:

Founded in 2011 in Pittsburgh, PA, by sisters Olivia and Jayme Catalano, Livvie's Coffee (LC) is the largest mid-Atlantic provider of fair trade coffees and ethically-sourced teas for coffee shops, restaurants, and cafes. The winner of the 2013 Green Sourcing Award, LC offers clients "fresh and fair" products. For more information, visit: http://www.lcbeans.biz.

"Patchworked" text used to describe the company:

Pittsburgher Jayme and Olivia Catalano started Livvie's Coffee (LC) in 2011 in Pittsburgh, PA. It is now the largest coffee and tea beverage provider in the mid-Atlantic. LC provides clients with fair trade coffee and ethically-sourced teas. In 2013, LC won the 2013 Green Sourcing Award. On the company's website, http://www.lcbeans.biz, you can see…

Appendix B – Matthew's FAQ

Original text, taken from the company's website:

Founded in 1995, Branson's Communication Solutions (BCS) is the nation's largest provider of technical support for small- and mid-sized privately-owned businesses. Winner of the Organization of Technical Writing's 2013 Award of Excellence and named a Distinguished Provider by the Brotherhood of Technical Communications in 2014, BCS continues to offer innovative award-winning solutions to its clients. For more information, visit http://www.bcs_solutions.biz.

Founded in 2010, Caron Communications Solutions (CCS) is Pittsburgh's largest provider of tech support for small businesses.

APPENDIX C:

Example of a boilerplate found on a company website:

Founded in 2011 in Pittsburgh, PA, by sisters Olivia and Jayme Catalano, Livvie's Coffee (LC) is the largest mid-Atlantic provider of fair trade coffees and ethically-sourced teas for coffee shops, restaurants, and cafes. The winner of the 2013 Green Sourcing Award, LC offers clients "fresh and fair" products. For more information, visit: http://www.lcbeans.biz

Content repurposed for a charity event:

Olivia and Jayme Catalano started Livvie's Coffee in Jayme's kitchen in 2011. Today, Livvie's Coffee is the largest mid-Atlantic provider of fair trade coffees and ethically-sourced teas for coffee shops, restaurants, and cafes. The winner of the 2013 Green Sourcing Award, Livvie's offers clients "fresh and fair" products. For more information, visit: http://www.lcbeans.biz

Content repurposed for the new package:

It all started with a bitter cup of coffee in the kitchen of Pittsburgh native Jayme Catalano. With the help of her sister Olivia, Livvie's Coffee was launched in 2011. Their mission is simple: to provide products that are both "fresh and fair." Their mission paid off, and in 2013 they won the Green Sourcing Award. Today, Livvie's Coffee is the largest mid-Atlantic provider of fair trade coffees and ethically-sourced teas for coffee shops, restaurants, and cafes. For more information, visit: http://www.lcbeans.biz

In all cases, there were only minor changes to the wording. The information itself stays the same. This is not plagiarism because it was created by the company, for the company, and is used exclusively by the company.