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Plagiarism Pitfalls: Addressing Cultural Differences in the Misuse of Sources

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Abstract: As a branch campus of an American university operating in the Middle East, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar must take into account the cultural differences that pertain to plagiarism and the misuse of sources before the school can begin to develop methods to address and prevent the problem. Differences in educational philosophies, students' previous scholastic training and cultural differences in individual motivation are all factors that must be considered.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Misuse of Sources, Qatar, Virginia Commonwealth School of the Arts in Qatar, Education City

THE CONCEPT OF plagiarism poses a unique problem to Western universities operating in foreign countries. As a branch campus of an American university operating in the Middle East, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar (VCUQ) must take into account the cultural differences that pertain to plagiarism and the misuse of sources before the school can begin to develop methods to address and prevent the problem. Differences in educational philosophies, students' previous scholastic training and cultural differences in individual motivation are all factors that must be considered.

VCUQ and its mission

VCUQ was established ten years ago by VCU in Richmond, Virginia and the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development; the school became an accredited branch campus five years ago. The Qatar Foundation is chaired by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Misnad, wife of the Emir of Qatar. Her mission is to make Qatar a leader in education and innovation. Part of this mission is Education City, a 2500-acre campus on the outskirts of the capital, Doha, which hosts branch campuses of leading American universities. Many young women in Qatar cannot travel abroad without a male chaperone, which makes it difficult to get a Western university degree abroad. Young men can travel but there is always the chance they will not return home when their education is finished. Bringing the universities to Qatar gives more young men and women the opportunity to get a quality education at home. VCUQ has approximately 190 students, all female; the school became coeducational in fall 2007. Twenty-four nationalities are represented at the school. About 70% of the students are

Qatari; the rest are primarily from the surrounding Middle East countries. Instruction is in English and most of the students speak English as a second or third language. The school offers a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in communication arts and design, fashion design and merchandising and interior design.

Plagiarism Plague?

The Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) Assessment Project surveyed 50,000 undergraduates across the United States and, in its most recent report released in June 2005, stated that on most campuses 70 percent of the students interviewed admitted to some form of cheating. Faculty are blaming the Internet. A nationwide survey, conducted in 2004 through researchers at the University of Illinois and reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, found that 42 percent of professors surveyed stated student work had declined due to the Internet, as compared to 22 percent who said work had improved. When asked about plagiarism, 44 percent agreed that it had increased since the emergence of the Internet, while 33 percent were undecided. Twenty-three percent disagreed.

The Internet has made "cut and paste" plagiarism, copying information found on a website and pasting it into a document without properly citing the material, a common occurrence. The CAI reports that in 1999, 10 percent of students questioned admitted to practicing this type of plagiarism, while 40 percent admit to doing it now. Of those who admit to it, 70 percent do not believe it to be a serious offence.

In this paper I am using the terms plagiarizing and misuse of sources interchangeably, but in "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism," The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Statement on Best Practices differentiates between the two. Many uni-



versities are also following suit and incorporating these distinctions into their academic dishonesty policies. The WPA defines plagiarism in an instructional setting as outright cheating that occurs “when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas or other original (not common-knowledge) materials without acknowledging its source.” Intentionally submitting someone else’s words or paper as one’s own is plagiarism. Misuse of sources, on the other hand, is unintentional, a careless or inadequate use of citing due to an inability to take adequate notes and paraphrase and cite properly.

Cultural Differences to Consider

There are cultural differences that should be acknowledged when working with students from other cultures, but it must be understood that these are generalizations. They must be considered in a discussion of plagiarism but the intention is not to stereotype or point fingers. Generalizations also do not account for students’ individual differences such as their family upbringing, prior education and personality. The key is to be aware of these differences and not make value judgments.

Many students come to the university from schools where learning is by rote and memorization. A textbook may be the only book used and the school may not have a library. Memorizing the textbook and repeating it verbatim in an exam is encouraged and accepted. Critical thinking and problem-solving are not required or expected. In interviews with Hong Kong Chinese students, another region that historically teaches by rote, Alastair Pennycook reported they had few opportunities to write essays and were primarily required to take exams which tested the knowledge of the course book through memorization (223-224). But he also quotes Herbert Palmer, who in 1931 stated that “memorization or repetition is especially good, because, by aid of it, the form and flame of expression adhere to the mind, and little by little, Taste is acquired” (qtd. in Pennycook, 221). Ideally then memorization is a means to a better understanding of language and information; however, memorizing text in one’s native language does little to prepare him or her to think critically and write in one’s own words in a second language.

Western culture prizes original thought and many countries have copyright laws that protect a creator’s rights and give him the exclusive rights to reproduce, distribute, perform and display his work. Western academic conventions forbid students from copying word for word from a source. However, in many cultures memorizing the writing of ancient scholars, or the Quran in Muslim cultures for example, is a way of showing respect and is an important part of scholarly and religious training. Copying another

person’s work is also seen as a sign of respect and a way of honoring the creator. Good students do not challenge their teachers or authorities, but faithfully copy and reproduce them (Sowden). Furthermore, writing one’s own thoughts may seem “immodest and presumptuous” (Leki, 71). Arabs have a deep attachment to their language (Hamady, 19); students may copy simply because they like the way the words are written. And, changing them might imply that the student thinks he could do better.

Ideas of private property and ownership develop in countries with a tradition of writing (Leki, 71). Arab culture is traditionally an oral one; however, information comes from wisdom, poetry, songs and folk stories, not books; the information is essentially in the public domain. Repeating work is part of the oral tradition and is a way of passing information from one generation to the next.

The traditional Bedouin social unit is a group; the focus is on the family or tribe, not the individual. The Arab proverb, “one hand alone cannot applaud,” expresses this idea of mutual interdependence (Hamady, 28). Cohesion and conformity to the group’s codes were necessary for survival in the desert and goals were set based on the improvement of the fate and position of the family (Patai, 83). Personality traits, such as independent thinking, that did not strengthen the group were not encouraged and were punished; independent needs were subordinate as well. This conflicts with the individual, performance-related goals Western culture prizes. Sincerity, loyalty and devotion to the family are character traits that still exist today.

In group-oriented societies there is also pressure to help the weaker members succeed. In this instance, helping a friend or a relative is not considered cheating but a moral obligation (Leki, 72). Working together as a group, even when the assignment is to be done individually, is not considered cheating. Different cultures have different ideas as to what constitutes appropriate collaboration and this creates a conflict in a Western university setting where there are distinct rules as to what is considered acceptable in this situation.

Students reading and writing in English as a second language may not feel confident to use their own words. Communicating original thoughts involves the selection and organizing of words and phrases that are beyond their level of language development. They may plagiarize simply because they do not have the necessary vocabulary or language skills to complete the assignment.

Accusing a Student

Cultural differences must also be considered when accusing a student of academic dishonesty. Raphael

Patai, in the book *The Arab Mind*, states that shame plays a more important role in Arab culture than guilt. He defines guilt as occurring between a person and his conscience and shame as occurring between a person and his society. A hermit in the desert will only feel guilt, not shame (qtd. in Patai, 113).

The honour of the group is dependent on whether or not those outside of the group respect it. Any offence that causes shame is taken as a humiliation that needs to be retaliated against immediately to regain the group's honour (qtd. in Patai, 107). When a student is accused of plagiarism, there are not only accusations of guilt involved, but also the potential shame and dishonour it will bring, not only to the student, but the family and extended family as well. When this student is a member of one of the country's influential families, the situation becomes extremely delicate.

A recent news report in the region provides a contemporary example of retaliation to restore honour to a family. Katherine Phillips, an American woman employed as a deputy principal at an international school in Kuwait, was banned from leaving the country at the request of the influential family of a student who had been suspended for fighting. Phillips posted a letter on the International Schools Review's website entitled "Detained in Kuwait/In Fear for My Safety," that raised awareness to her plight and ultimately helped her to leave the country. According to Phillips, she received a threatening phone call from the boy's father who stated he considered the situation "personal" and he planned to "destroy" her. No one has been suspended for plagiarism in the three years I have been at the university; however, according to our associate dean of academic affairs, every semester he has to put at least one student on "honours probation" for failing to cite their sources. VCUQ has an honour system that states that students are responsible for refraining from any act of cheating, plagiarizing or academic dishonesty. Some faculty require students to sign a statement indicating their work was done independently without giving or receiving assistance. Violations of plagiarism include submitting material that has been fully or partially prepared by another individual or commercial service, directly quoting from a source without the proper citation and paraphrasing or summarizing another's work without acknowledging the source. Penalties for plagiarism include probation, assignment of a failing grade, suspension, expulsion and revocation of a thesis or degree.

Is Culture an Issue in Plagiarism?

In April 2007, I organized a two-day roundtable discussion to talk about plagiarism within our cultural context. We had a large turnout, which is indicative

of the importance the topic has. We had participants from ten institutions, including high schools and middle schools as well as all seven universities in Qatar. The discussion focused on the problems of plagiarism; everyone agreed it was a problem, although the conversation focused more on prevention rather than cultural differences. There was some hesitation among the Westerners in the group to bring up cultural issues. We did not want to come across as culturally insensitive or resorting to stereotypes. What we determined were that there are cultural differences and they need to be acknowledged but students ultimately plagiarize for the same reasons they do in other parts of the world: poor time management, a reluctance or inability to think critically and laziness.

In terms of the points I have discussed in this paper, a student's prior education and their command of the English language are the two factors that might also determine whether or not a student misuses sources. As part of the preparation for the roundtable discussion, I wrote a questionnaire that was distributed to students to answer anonymously. When asked when they had first learned about plagiarism, 58 percent answered that they had never heard about it until they came to the university or the Academic Bridge Program, the one-year program in Education City that prepares students to attend an English-language university. There is a big gap between the level of students the local public schools produce and the admission standards at the American universities in Education City. *The Peninsula*, a local English-language daily in Doha, reported that many young Qataris could not meet the English language requirements needed to get into the world-class universities in Education City. The first school in Qatar opened in 1951, a little more than 50 years ago (Zahlan, 126). Qatar is in the process of reforming the state's education system, and has made a lot of progress, but it could be some time before those changes are apparent at the university level.

Outcomes and Solutions

One of the outcomes from the roundtable discussion was an initiative to develop an official statement on plagiarism and have it accepted by the Qatar Foundation and, ideally, by the Supreme Education Council. A committee has been formed and will move forward with the task in the fall. Within the university, the writing center director and I will be giving four workshops this fall where we will define plagiarism and then focus on how the students can avoid it. We will cover paraphrasing, quoting and summarizing and will have in-class writing assignments in each session. It is difficult for many of our students to fully comprehend what they read in

English; paraphrasing and writing ideas in their own words is extremely difficult and a common cause for plagiarizing. Four, ninety-minute classes is a small start and the workshops will need to be ongoing for progress to be made. Ideally, the workshops would grow into a required, for-credit class.

VCUQ is tied to the curriculum and regulations of the main campus in Richmond, Virginia, but at the same time the university must respect the culture and traditions of the host country, Qatar. Acknowledging the cultural differences that may affect a student's academic performance is a part of that.

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