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 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 is 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. 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 CASE

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 CM-356 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 (Appendix A), 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 B).

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 the project of her star student, Lydia Jones. She hoped it would lift her spirits since Lydia's work was always stellar. Within three pages, Edie wanted to slam her head onto the table. As part of her recommendations for a small computer company, Lydia designed a new FAQ page based on the already-existing users' manual. She 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 a boilerplate? 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. With minor exceptions, 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, they did demonstrate 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. THE 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 I run into the same problem with two different clients, I'm going to use the same answer and just tweak it as needed. I created the content, so it's not costing me money if I reuse it. Heck, it's putting money in my pocket."

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."

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

4. 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?

5. Building on your response for question 4, 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?

6. 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.

7. 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

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.

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http://iscap.info

Appendix B

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.

Patchwriting example and explanation:

Pittsburghers 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. The company's website, http://www.lcbeans.biz, provides more information.

This is considered patchwriting because nothing new is added and it simply restates the content from the webpage.

To avoid accusations of patchwriting and, perhaps, plagiarism, the opening paragraph should contain more than what was on the website. For example:

Livvie's Coffee (LC) was founded in 2011 by Jayme an Olivia Catalano. The two sisters were tired of paying high prices for high quality and low prices for low quality. They were also concerned about sourcing, and did not like the idea of giving money to corporations that exploited both the environment and the workers…

While this intro still provides the basic information, it starts to branch out and expand on the information. Patchwriting typically lacks additional information and tends to be little more than a re-arranging of the original work.

 "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…