

The Plagiarism Debate & Epistemology

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Thomas Jefferson once said in a letter to Isaac McPherson on August 13, 1813:

“If nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of everyone, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.”

In my ongoing quest to assimilate and comment on the many thoughtful messages posted in the Plagiarism assignment each term, I keep seeking for the underlying assumptions that drive this debate. I keep coming back to how this doesn't seem to be so much about the mechanisms of transmitting and copying information but about the nature of knowledge itself and how we learn, and how we teach, and our motivation, and our valuation of wisdom and knowledge. Ends and means are confused. Cultures are different. Fiction and non-fiction are different.

The Plagiarism assignment and the Critical Thinking assignment are in the class for a reason. You can't combat plagiarism without cultivating critical thinking abilities that necessitate a theory of knowledge or philosophy of life. You want to be intrinsically motivated, and examine your reasons for learning, and understand the power of critical thinking and metacognition in the learning process and in developing your philosophy of life (often a lifelong endeavor!).

In the Middle Ages scholars felt that what was available to be known had been written by ancient experts, and that the true aim of scholarship was merely to know what others had said. What are the implications of a body of knowledge that now seems unlimited? Is this true or an illusion? How does this constant stimulation affect the human psyche and the functioning of society? Does this give us a separate peace, or just make us all hyper-competitive and focused on using information to “get ahead” materially in our world of massive consumption and materialism? Is it true that knowledge is unlimited or have the values of the School of Athens never been transcended? Is knowledge just for sale to the highest bidder? So “knowledge for its own sake” is also being questioned. Without a belief in this, students may be given to plagiarize. Eli in a prior class posited that if teachers don't explain the evolution of plagiarism, then the students won't see the value in proper research respecting the words of others. So a knowledge of history is foremost, in order to ideally generate an interest in wisdom for its own sake. Yet the study of history is seriously neglected, as noted in a recent survey in Newsweek.

With too much information, our eyes glaze over. In the medieval period and earlier the quantity of information was manageable, so that it was possible to create your own epistemology or “study or theory of the origins, nature, methods and limits of knowledge”

(Webster's Dictionary). Can we recreate a facsimile of this today? Today our databases presumably have much greater memories than we do as puny humans, so imprinted memorization is not taught effectively in the schools, and students do not develop their own theory of knowledge. Reference an article entitled "Wake Up and Smell the New Epistemology" (Jan. 23, 2009 Section: *The Chronicle Review*, Volume 55, Issue 20, Page B7 - <http://languages.oberlin.edu/ctie/blog/2009/01/20/wake-up-and-smell-the-new-epistemology/>).

According to Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows* now we mostly use our short-term memories. Viswanathan in Opal Mehta tried to claim that she uses her memory so effectively she can't remember her sources! (How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life-Visit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opal_Mehta)In IDS 101 you are considering where you find information, what kind of information you need and want, how you get it and what are the limits of your sources and your own understanding of those sources. Citing the sources is crucial as you build your epistemology to imprint your memory. Eventually, as you read more and more widely, and even repetitively, you will start to use your full memory. Then you tap into the power of your mind and assimilate and synthesize a multitude of ideas and begin to create your own ideas. That is the purpose of a liberal education. Plagiarism and cheating are driven by a lack of interest in creating one's own theory of knowledge. You need to use critical thinking to make informed decisions about your quest, about work and research goals, and find self-respect and happiness. Without a philosophy of life one becomes a dilettante and hedonistic consumer, flitting from one idea to the next looking for the truth, dilly-dallying here and there to wantonly drop the ideas of others into short-term memory and short papers (or novels like Viswanathan), and wallow in social networking ad infinitum.

Not that there is anything inherently wrong with social networking. In fact, it appears to be a wave of the future, if it can unite people together in unprecedented, productive ways—but that remains to be seen. Another aspect of the issue of limits to and access to a theory of knowledge then and now has to do with literacy itself. As Neil Postman notes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985) in the world of print **150 years ago every citizen in America was highly literate**; more literate than today's citizens. How could this be, you say, when we have such an embarrassment of "riches" in the age of information?

Just as too much freedom without limits isn't freedom at all, but enslavement, so too much information and technology apparently leads to ignorance and that nourishes plagiarism. Students are forced to build their ideas on the outmoded assembly lines of the compulsory factory schools; then we wonder why they use manufacturing "Just in Time" tactics to find information only when they need it, not to use long-term memory. There is no time to contemplate morality or anything else. What kind of epistemology and philosophy might we expect to create?

We can add to our excitement and glory as a species, if we treasure what we have and our place on this blue marble in the cosmos. It's not too late, though the clock is ticking. There are new studies of human cognition (see *Time* magazine Nov 2011) and the functioning of the brain's 100 billion neurons, of animal emotions, galactic events such as the immensely powerful gamma ray cloud surrounding our galaxy, or undersea life living on minerals,

with no sunlight and near volcanic vents at the bottom of the sea. As you search for the new in your research essays, ask yourself, “Can any of these new discoveries impact my research so that I can make a difference? How do they relate to my life and career in some way? How do these discoveries build on past discoveries and events?”

The challenge for you is to do enough research on a tight deadline so that you focus on something you think is new (until you continue your research again and realize it isn’t as new as you thought) so that you feel you are making a contribution to academic discourse. Rediscovery is the key to progress and innovation; building your own study of the nature of knowledge in your field of endeavor, and using your spirit of inquiry. Then who knows where you will go, as Dr. Seuss would say (I met him once). Use memorization and synthesis. Read widely so that you use your full memory and unconscious powers and think critically.

Seek out and read the difficult and challenging material in your field of endeavor and find that passion cited by Jen who is majoring in history and said in an IDS 101 class that “innovation is not some miracle which happens overnight but instead is a slow evolution of ideas which over time leads to a great transformation of thought and ideas which becomes progress. Highlights in this repeating may be standout performances to note, however even these insightful and ingenious ideas are built from a basis of accumulated knowledge. In this way it is an excellent thing that things become commonplace and even mundane to some because it increases the level of general knowledge and diversifies mental experience and understanding to create a higher plateau from which to build upon yet again.”

It isn’t that hard not to plagiarize. Just keep good notes, perhaps in a double entry (two-column) journal, and quote every significant phrase or word that you find anywhere! Don’t include too many block quotes (no more than 3-4), but don’t be afraid of direct quotes either. You will be able to look at the percentage of actual quotes in Turnitin and then cut back to a reasonable level with more paraphrasing and summarizing if needs be. Getting good at paraphrasing does take practice. For our purposes in this course, we want you to simplify, but only when you’ve done enough research. It is better to work from abundance than from scarcity and some ambiguity is good because a fruitful research topic will not have a definitive endpoint. However, too much ambiguity can signify that you didn’t do enough research or that your thesis is weak. Not only does considerable research lead to a better essay (if properly revised), it combats plagiarism. The more good sources you have, the less you rely so heavily on just a few, and the less likely you are to risk plagiarizing which can result from too heavy reliance on one or two sources. At the end of the day, IDS 101 is so important because it isn’t just about getting a grade. It is about working your worldview to be a good citizen and family member and not be sidetracked by every Johnny-come-lately opinion or half-baked idea or flash in the pan. Dig into some history. You won’t regret it.