

the last word

Originality or Authenticity? “Plagiarism” in Postmodern Times

By Christina Hwang

Plagiarism. Groan. It is a word, a topic, a connotation that brings to mind the banal, loaded with problems and heavy consequences. This topic sure makes for a fun and exciting instruction session, let alone writing this article. As we have been told many times before, plagiarism is “bad” and should be avoided at all costs. Ask any Grade 6 student and they can spew that back to you.

So this has me wondering then: how do we account for the dramatic increase in plagiarism cases today? And I’m not just referring to the education/academic world where students write research papers, but it has become a much broader issue, infiltrating other aspects of our lives such as entertainment, sports, and the arts. But are these all really true cases of plagiarism? What about pastiche, mash-ups, and parody, works that are “close imitations”? How do you dub what is “original” and what isn’t in postmodern times?

Blurring the Lines

Take, for example, best-selling French novelist Michel Houellebecq, who has been recently accused of plagiarizing. In his new novel there are passages that he admits were lifted verbatim from Wikipedia. And what was his retort? It’s not plagiarism (cue gasping librarians). The author’s whole style is based on weaving descriptions from everyday life into “something artistic.” The *New York Times* published an article on plagiarism this summer and they reported a case where a student at a university, again, copied and pasted directly from Wikipedia. When the student was reprimanded, the student reported that “he thought its entries – unsigned and collectively written – did not need to be credited since they counted, essentially, as common knowledge” (*New York Times*). These cases and many more make for interesting accounts since Wikipedia’s content is essentially mash-ups, contributions of millions, with no particular or traditional “owner” or “author.”

Authenticity versus Originality

In an era where pastiche, play, collaboration, mash-ups, open sharing, and various applications of our copy-and-paste func-

tions are being contested for their originality, we come to question at what point do we draw the line? For instance, Shrek, New Spice vs. Old Spice commercials, and Mona Lisa “L.H.O.O.Q” by Marcel Duchamp are spin-offs from original works, but are themselves also considered “original.” Helene Hegemann, a German teenager whose best-selling novel about Berlin club life turned out to include passages lifted from others, notes that “there’s no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity” (*New York Times*). But is authenticity just as valuable, as fair, as originality? We live in a time where we are pushing former boundaries, and blame-shifting the internet, technology, the “next” generation, and the media for rising cases of plagiarism isn’t the solution.

Perhaps we need a better grasp of how we can create new ideas. Perhaps students plagiarize because they don’t know how *not* to plagiarize – that is, how to paraphrase and write in-text citations effectively. Perhaps more time needs to be spent on understanding and practicing this, than simply being told not to plagiarize, use the internet, or use Wikipedia.

As we approach and embrace new variations and forms of authentic creativity during these postmodern times, I think we should also look into tools that empower creative originality. Because at the end of the day, wouldn’t we all like to see something new?

.....
Christina Hwang is an Instruction Librarian and Biological Sciences Liaison at the University of Alberta. She is interested in instructional initiatives, creative use of technology, and engaging design. christinahw@gmail.com

Reference

Gabriel, Trip. “Plagiarism Lines Blur for Students in Digital Age.” *The New York Times*. Aug. 1, 2010. nytimes.com/2010/08/02/education/02cheat.html