Celebrating Citation: Flipping the Pedagogy of Plagiarism in Qatar
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Abstract:
Educators and administrators at American branch campuses in Qatar continually find themselves distraught by the number of academic integrity violations each semester. Despite dire warnings and life-changing sanctions, students continue to breach the honour codes at their respective institutions. This article offers one possible solution by transforming the pedagogy of plagiarism into a positive teaching opportunity in the classroom.

Keywords: plagiarism, academic integrity, international students, citation

Plagiarism, academic integrity violations, idea theft, stealing, punishable behaviour, expulsion...

These are all words and phrases that are repeated throughout first-year student orientations at all the universities in Education City, an area in Qatar that hosts six branch campuses of American universities. At the beginning of each semester, faculty members, Deans, and other top-level administrators stand in front of the new cohorts of freshmen and extol the virtues of conducting ethical research, avoiding plagiarism, and pursuing academic excellence with integrity. Students leave the sessions weary and wounded, feeling as though they have had the lectures pounded into them. Inevitably, these same institutions have seen a large percentage of honour code violations, with anecdotal reports ranging from two to over fifty violations at various institutions per semester. The problematic nature of this phenomenon has led to the development of a task force, comprised of deans from all the schools, who have gathered together to brainstorm more meaningful and successful measures to combating plagiarism.

I have worked at various institutions around Education City for over seven years, as a teaching faculty and writing centre instructor. Consequently, I have been well-positioned to see a wide variety of different students with a wide variety of different educational backgrounds. Based on my experience, I can report with...
confidence that it is almost always a case of lack of clear instruction and practice rather than malicious intent resulting in violations of academic integrity. Arguably, these branch campuses struggle more with these challenges than their U.S. counterparts due to the greater international diversity of the student population. This is not to say that international students are plagiarists, but rather that they have not been sufficiently exposed to and adequately prepared for the conventions of American academic writing.

What I offer here is a proposal for exactly what the title suggests – Celebrating Citation – rather than presenting it as an offensive, criminal act for prosecution. Each semester that I teach English courses, I dedicate particular class sessions to celebrating citation. I tell the students, in advance, that we will have a Celebrate Citation party, although they do not appreciate this until they walk in the classroom on the assigned day and see balloons, signs, cookies, and other treats. I begin by asking students what they think of when they hear ‘plagiarism.’ Without exception, the first response to this question is a collective classroom sigh and downtrodden faces. Next, students dutifully recite everything they have heard during orientation. Some even offer tales from their secondary schools about scary stories of students who ‘got caught’. Always, however, the tone is negative and couched in a framework of shame, lies, and deception. Students who plagiarize are bad. Period.

The next segment of the class transitions to positivity. I remind the students that while it is critical for them to always remember the dire consequences of violating the academic integrity code, there are many, many positive aspects of incorporating sources into their writing. As a class, we brainstorm these points – it strengthens their writing, it provides support, they are not experts and therefore it helps to have an authority substantiating their claims, etc. While students typically experience some ‘ah ha!’ moments during this brainstorming phase, many other students are perplexed at the nuanced conventions of American academic writing. In addition to source attribution, students are constantly under the demand of being original in their thinking. How can I be original if I am citing so many sources? Won’t the professor think I have nothing new to say? These questions create an opening for a rich and healthy discussion of the complexities of American academic writing.

Finally, I devote the remainder of class time to ‘how to.’ I show students a number of resources that they can refer to for self-access in the future (reference citation books, the Purdue OWL website, other institutional writing centre websites, etc.). The homework assignment due for that class would be for students to bring in sources they were using for a particular research or writing project; therefore, they would have their own sources to be cited. I begin by asking for a lucky volunteer (‘lucky’ because the class will do his/her work for her shortly). If the student has a book, the entire class works together to find a model of how to cite a book, and this is done together. We continue through a number of examples together, attempting to cite a wide variety of sources, such as journal articles, newspapers, blogs, etc. Inevitably, this portion of the class becomes the most dynamic and engaging portion of the class. ‘Where do I put the comma?’ ‘Is there a full stop here?’ ‘Does is matter if I use italics?’ ‘How do I know when it was published?’ While some of the questions surprise me – the students were expected to enter the university with basic information literacy – I am thrilled that they are asking these ‘silly’ questions. The greatest challenge for me is not answering their questions immediately, but pushing them to find the answers to their own questions. I use a scaffolding approach by first answering the question and showing them where the answer can be found in one of their resources. By the end of class, however, students are answering all of their own questions, helping each other, and only consulting with me for final verification.

‘Celebrate Citation’ parties are a true form of academic empowerment for students. Students are offered the opportunity to make mistakes in a low-stakes environment; they are also introduced to resources that will serve them throughout their undergraduate years and beyond. While I recognize the concerns of academic integrity violations that echo around campus, I encourage educators to adopt a more direct, instructive approach to preventing the pitfalls of plagiarism.