Editor as Educator

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Like that of many *Science Editor* readers, my profession requires that I take on multiple roles. Sometimes I imagine that I am Gandalf at the pass, holding back the Balrogs of improper grammar and usage—"Thou shalt not pass"—banishing dangling modifiers. Other times my role focuses on diplomacy as I mediate between honoring the author's voice and meeting the readers' needs. More often, I find that to be an effective editor, I need to be an effective educator.

I recently edited an article for a non-native English speaker that was targeted for publication in an English-language journal. With some dismay, I realized the author had plagiarized entire paragraphs from published sources. Knowing the author may have been unfamiliar with publication standards, I highlighted the offending sections and requested the author reword the text in his own words. The author responded, "Thank you for your kind assistance. May I ask, how many of my own words do I need?"

I find that authors most often plagiarize when they do not fully comprehend the text they're citing or when they lack the vocabulary to express their ideas. These limitations can be particularly problematic when authors write about science, which requires its own particular language. Authors frequently say they lack the vocabulary to paraphrase a scientific text in their own words because they're still building their scientific lexicon. They may insert portions of copyrighted text into their writing (but without proper attribution), a practice called *patchwriting*.

After much discussion via email, I realized that my author had read the target journal's instructions for authors, which contained guidelines regarding plagiarism. Unfortunately, the instructions on proper citation and attribution that seemed explicit to me were not explicit to my author. To be an effective editor and educator, I needed to become fluent in the author's cultural context.

When reading about plagiarism and international scholars, one often encounters phrasing that implies a long-standing dichotomy between Western and non-Western perceptions of authorship. However, this view is somewhat simplistic. Western definitions of copyright are relatively recent, evolving within the last 200 or 300 years alongside the commercial needs of print publishers.[1] Even within Western culture, expectations of copyright and authorship may differ from academic norms. For example, government institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention publish materials that are in the public domain and without copyright; these materials can be reproduced and distributed freely (however, as with many things in life, certain limitations apply). In this case and others, the published materials are intended to serve a greater good by disseminating vital medical information, and the identity of the individual author is not paramount.

Another example of differing expectations of authorship occur in cento poetry (*cento* means *patchwork* in Latin), a genre in which poems are composed entirely of lines from other poems. Cento poetry is often used by students learning how to write poetry; lifting lines from famous poets can help students gain a feel for the rhythm, form, and structure of poetry, without the onus of creating an original piece.

Patchwork writing isn't limited to the cento genre, as it can be a highly effective strategy to learn the nuances of writing in English for students from cultures with different ideas of effective writing. For example, students in China are often encouraged to learn through rote memorization, and scholars are judged by the quantity of their reading and writing—not necessarily by the originality of their ideas.[2]

I Chia Chou, a researcher at the Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, noted that patchwriting was a valuable educational strategy when learning to write in academic English. "Imitating good models allowed me to understand writing conventions in American culture [and] learn the elements of good text structure, how to use transition words, how to condense sentences and how to make paragraphs coherent," she wrote. "I learned not only to use more sophisticated vocabulary but also to more formally and coherently construct academic papers."[2]

Patchwriting served as an educational scaffold for Chou, enabling her to develop a contextual framework for communicating in English—much as cento poetry allows writing students to learn the rhythm and flow of poetry. In both examples, authors unfamiliar with the contextual terrain use patchwriting to navigate and communicate in a new language or form.

Although patchwriting may have merit in a draft, it certainly has no place in a manuscript's final version. How then to explain a fairly complex topic such as plagiarism to authors from different fields and cultural backgrounds? One strategy is to emphasize that patchwriting is an educational tool that is acceptable for a novice—one that may be acceptable in a draft but never in a final version. Another strategy is to emphasize *note-taking hygiene*. Sometimes authors plagiarize because they did not practice note-taking hygiene when reading source material, such as failing to insert quotation marks around text copied verbatim.

Perhaps the best strategy is to emphasize that patchwriting implies the author does not understand the

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paper being cited; after all, accurate, concise paraphrasing requires deep understanding of the text. It is a cultural universal that no one wishes to look stupid or ignorant.

When confronted with plagiarism, it can be easy to imagine authors are either duplicitous or willfully negligent. However, many authors wish to conform to ethical standards but lack knowledge regarding patchwriting and attribution norms for an English-language publication. Understanding that attribution norms differ among cultures, fields, and even within subsets of fields can help editors and educators communicate more effectively with authors.

References

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