Writing Spaces

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Fuzzy Logic: How the Fuzzy Definition of Plagiarism is Getting Even Fuzzier

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Overview

Rachel Hall Buck and Silvia Vaccino-Salvadore's *Writing Spaces* essay, "'Doing Research Is Fun; Citing Sources Is Not': Understanding the Fuzzy Definition of Plagiarism," suggests ways to help students unpack the complexity of plagiarism. Our activity extends these essential conversations by examining several recent high-profile accusations of plagiarism.

Using a jigsaw activity approach, students will examine three case studies, focusing on issues of "originality, structure, meaning, genre, and language" (Buck and Vaccino-Salvadore) as well as context, norms, identity, and technology (see Randall; Eaton; Yarborough et al.). Students will consider standard definitions of plagiarism, including their own institution's statement, and then consider how three cases might disrupt or complicate those understandings. This activity aims to reveal the complicated boundaries of plagiarism and help students arrive at a shared understanding of both plagiarism and the writing process. In the final step, students will collaboratively draft a statement of academic integrity policy for the class that reflects their findings.

Time Commitment

2-3 class sessions

Materials

Materials include links to articles about the three cases (found in the "Works Cited" section) --either as QR codes or as printed copies; a space for collaborative writing (Google Docs, flip chart paper, etc.); and links or copies of the plagiarism policies from various colleges and/or universities, including the home institution.

Activity Process

- First, students will read Buck and Vaccino-Salvadore's "'Doing Research Is Fun; Citing Sources Is Not': Understanding the Fuzzy Definition of Plagiarism."

- Next, students (in groups, pairs, or individually) will consider standard definitions of plagiarism by examining a handful of policies from various universities and colleges, including their own institution's statement. We recommend looking at schools that are both similar to the students' home institution, as well as those that are geographically or demographically different. Some schools have already adapted their policies to address AI, while others have different policies for different colleges or disciplines.

    - It may be interesting to note when the policies are both suspiciously similar, as well as when they are substantially different. Students can make a list of what they notice as they go along.

- Once students are finished, the instructor can bring everyone together to share their findings.

- Then, as a class, they will discuss how concepts such as context, norms, identity, and technology can influence how we think about plagiarism.

    - For instance, do we have different expectations for people in the political sphere and their speeches than

students and their writing? (See the example of Melania Trump's speech as discussed in Buck and Vaccino-Salvadore or in Washington, Myrick, and Engel.)

- Does it matter if the text someone (mis)uses was created by artificial intelligence? (See Eaton.)
- What expectations or norms do we have for speeches, legal rulings, business boilerplate documents, or artists?
- What type of attribution or citation should a student give to class discussions or office hour meetings?
- Are there different cultural or historical understandings of textual ownership, and is it shifting now? (See Yarborough.)

By the end of the discussion, students will draft a list of possible "troubling" factors that might challenge a single definition of plagiarism.

- Then, using a jigsaw activity approach, students will examine three case studies and then consider how they might disrupt or complicate those understandings. (We have provided several online articles. Some of them are behind paywalls; some may no longer be active in the future. The particular articles are less important than the event they are reporting on.)
  - Claudine Gay: The former Harvard President was accused of inadequate citations in her scholarship. This case invites students to consider the larger context, including the identity of the accused and

the political climate from which such accusations emerged. (See Hartocollis, Kettles and Robinson, or Svrluga.)

- *The Holdovers*: Simon Stephenson, who had circulated a script written on spec several years earlier, accused the filmmakers of plagiarism. This case invites students to explore generic elements and industry practices. (See Siegel, Hauser, or Vaziri.)

- Peter LoDuca and Steven Schwartz: The attorneys' ChatGPT-generated brief included non-existent legal cases. This example invites students to consider the use of generative AI and how it has deepened the complexity of plagiarism both within and beyond the academy. (See Armstrong or Mangan.)

- Students will discuss the ethical elements of plagiarism building on the three cases.

- Finally, students will collaboratively draft a statement of academic integrity policy for the class that reflects their findings. (This can be either assigned as a homework assignment or as a group activity.)

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Explain elements of plagiarism (including those beyond textual similarity)

- Assess the ethical elements of plagiarism

- Articulate a class policy about plagiarism

Learning Accommodations

- Material should be presented in multiple formats, including visual document design for the assignment description along with oral instruction in the face-to-face classroom or through video for synchronous or asynchronous online activities.
- While we recommend taking two class periods, time to complete activity stages can be expanded or reduced as needed.
- For example, the article can be read during class or outside of class.
- Consider using audio apps like Kurzweil for readings.
- Students may choose to work individually or with classmates as they review the various academy integrity policies. Conversation and list-sharing is encouraged but not required during this step.
- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.

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