

## Different understandings of plagiarism: Chinese students and Australian universities

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## Context

Students are confused, concerned – some are cynical, some scared.

'I'm worried about plagiarism all of the time...I'm really afraid that one day I may be sent back to China'

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## Theories

- Australian academic culture is 'high context' i.e. strange to outsiders and excluding (East 2006).
- The interests of those who work in an institution are different from those who pass through (Foucault 1991).

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## Perceptions of plagiarism

- Is plagiarism a matter of morality or convention (Turiel, 1983)?
- If it is a moral issue is it about justice (Kohlberg, 1981)? Or is it about compassion (Gilligan, 1982)?

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## Fears of plagiarism & a strange concept

'Plagiarism is a very serious dangerous issue. If you do it, it will be very dangerous. I am very careful about it, very very careful.'

'In my first language, [you] don't have the concept of plagiarism, you can copy without acknowledgement. [We] think copy others' work is a good habit for learning, in this point, it is completely different to the concept of plagiarism... Based on the cultural differences [with] Australia, Plagiarism makes me feel very confused, it is new for me.'

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## To whom does an idea belong?

'When you go to the first lecture, the teacher or the lecturer will tell what is the assignment in this semester, and every teacher will tell you be careful, don't copy from others, bla bla bla. In their mind it's very, very serious – it's wrong. Sometimes I think it is not necessary, because you know this, if one thing is told you by your mother, and your mother is told by your grandmother and er how can I get the original? Where does an idea come from, it's generation to generation.'

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## Making opinion can be confusing

'...this idea is mine but once I read the book I feel that actually the words that they put is much better than mine, but they both the same idea, so do I need to do the citation or no need to do the citation?'

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## Media student

'Because I feel that I got scared also I don't know how to write. This is more like probably a culture thing, it takes time to get used to it.'

For one task, she presented a well-constructed pastiche of copied texts. Correct language requirements meant copy or fail.

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## The student who cheated

'I think the lecturer could have been less cold and tell me if I need help to you know to go and see someone in the ESL teaching unit... It's like we're in different worlds, I cannot approach him.'

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## What would you do?

Justice / compassion?  
Washington's story

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In China, there is not a very clear definition about plagiarism and it is different from that in Australia. It will not be considered unethical if you directly use other's words or sentences without any references or resources. Quoting other's opinions in your essay is very common in Chinese schools when students are writing an essay. When I came to Australia, I learnt a lot about plagiarism in La Trobe's language centre. From that time, I knew directly quoting other's words in [*sic*] not allowed and references and resources should be added in the essay. I think plagiarism is unethical and this behaviour [*sic*] is just like stealing.

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## Cultural issues

- Chen (2001, p105): Too many citations 'diminishes one's role as a writer', it indicates that an author is not capable of presenting his/her own view.
- From students: At undergraduate level citations are not emphasized, cutting and pasting accepted.
- Liu (2005): Cultural stereotyping leads to false assumptions about plagiarism and Chinese students.

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## Reflections

- Australian academic culture is strange
- Acknowledgment standards need to be taught – what, how and why
- They take time to 'master'
- English language is an issue
- Justice and compassion
- Separate morals from conventions

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