

“Scholarship is a Conversation”: Discourse, Attribution, and Twitter’s Role in Information Literacy Instruction

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Introduction: Information Literacy & Scholarly Communication Instruction

When addressing scholarly attribution, citation, and plagiarism in one-shot instruction sessions, librarians often fail to present these issues in a manner that has relevance for students. Librarians often focus on intellectual honesty and the potential ramifications of plagiarism, both individual pursuits, rather than explaining that by creating an academic work, students are participating in academic discourse. Within *Pluralizing Plagiarism*, Anson argues that scholarly attribution instruction that emphasizes “policy, detection, and punishment” is antithetical to the mission of institutions of higher learning – the education of students (Anson, 2008). One of the major deficiencies of this compliance-based instruction is that it presents students with a false dichotomy that does not align with their authentic life experiences; plagiarism is demonstrated as a black and white issue, rather than existing in shades of gray. Students who have come of

age within a twenty-first century information ecosystem rife with remix and parody culture will likely find teaching that presents the re-use of source material as a non-nuanced issue unconvincing. Because students respond positively to instruction that aligns with their authentic experiences, this suggests that librarians need to develop new methods for teaching attribution and scholarly discourse that not only recognize the nuance inherent to these topics, but also presents these concepts within a familiar framework (Klipfel, 2014). As a familiar platform for social interaction with multiple avenues for giving credit and a shorter timescale, Twitter presents an opportunity to place attribution, plagiarism, and integrity into a humanizing, real world context that models how discourse unfolds in an authentic manner for learners. By embedding attribution instruction into a meaningful context, librarians and other educators can make substantial and much needed improvements to traditional compliance-based instruction, which is often built upon the slow, rigid, and unfamiliar patterns of how to cite scholarly works.

The literature suggests that the compliance-based approach to this topic is not reaching the desired learning outcomes established in Standard 5 of the still active *ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2000). Nor are students approaching the “Scholarship is a Conversation” threshold concept of the forthcoming *ACRL Framework of Information Literacy for Higher Education*, which the literature very nearly points out verbatim (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2014). Lee (2013) contends that undergraduate students lack understanding in even the basic concepts of citation and plagiarism. One possible reason students need more basic instruction on citation and plagiarism is that students, particularly undergraduates, are unfamiliar with the conventions of academic writing (Thonney, 2011). This lack of familiarity renders students unprepared to produce academic writing for their coursework. One of the primary conventions of scholarly communication is that “academic writers respond to what others have written about their topic” (Thonney, 2011). Duckett and Warren (2013) argue that the idea of scholarship as discourse is a central tenet of information literacy, noting that the way in which scholars “create, share, vet, discover, process and access new knowledge...are the same processes that students are asked to participate in when they must find scholarly literature” for use in research assignments. However, because undergraduate students are uninitiated to the social dynamics and mechanisms through which scholarly information is created, they do not understand why instructors and librarians place such high emphasis on seemingly arbitrary practices, such as using

peer-reviewed sources or providing complete citation information (Duckett & Warren, 2013). Another major challenge within information literacy is convincing students to perceive themselves as knowledge creators, rather than just as knowledge consumers (Duckett & Warren, 2013). Students who do not view their academic writing as participation in discourse or themselves as information creators are unlikely to find traditional citation instruction relevant or meaningful.

To address these deficiencies, Texas A&M University introduced a credit bearing, semester long course titled *Theft of the Mind* that utilized case studies based in popular culture to demonstrate to students that “plagiarism and piracy...are but endpoints on a continuum between source use and misuse” (Clement & Brenenson, 2013, p. 56). Central to the ethos of this course is the idea that “theft of the mind” hurts a community of practice at large as much as it does the individual content creator, whether this community is scholars within the academy or creative performers in popular culture (Clement & Brenenson, 2013, p. 57). This is an important value to imprint upon students that can be obscured in a compliance oriented lesson. Explaining that scholars depend on citation of their work for their livelihood provides students with a more forthright and holistic explanation as to why plagiarism carries such dire consequences within the academy. The success of this course at Texas A&M suggests that students respond well to the topic of scholarly attribution and plagiarism when instruction is placed within a framework that resonates with familiar life experiences.

Teaching with Social Media: Twitter as Discourse

When first emerging in the mid-2000s, social media platforms were labeled as the distraction from learning du jour, the “comic book hidden in a boring text” for the information age (Bugeja, 2006). However, in recent years, social media platforms have increasingly taken on more prominent roles within higher education as faculty identify new ways that these potential distractions can be leveraged as tools. Dougherty (2014) suggests that social media platforms can be used within the classroom to increase student engagement. The popularity of social media sites among traditional-aged students has exploded in the last decade, with 89 percent of Internet users within the ages of 18-29 reporting use of social media (Pew Research Internet Project, 2014). As social media platforms have become ubiquitous, they have also become an integral part of student information seeking behavior. Kim, Sin, and Yoo-Lee (2014) found in their study that use of Wikipedia and social media sites in information seeking was pervasive,

with 98 percent and 95 percent of users reporting use of each, respectively. Because students are using social media as sources of information, librarians have responded by using these platforms as frameworks for teaching and learning. The library literature includes many examples of librarians using social media within information literacy instruction, finding these tools are useful metaphors for explaining otherwise confusing concepts such as controlled vocabulary and subject headings (Click & Petit, 2010).

While not as ubiquitous as Facebook, Twitter is one of the more popular social media platforms for traditionally aged college students, with 35 percent of Internet users within the ages of 18-29 reporting use (Pew Research Internet Project, 2014). Twitter's interface can be a useful tool for visually demonstrating how discourse unfolds and how individual content creators can participate within a discourse. Brook suggests that Twitter and other social media tools are "platform[s] for social discourse," facilitating the sharing of content and ideas, as well as interaction between users (Brook, 2012, p. 120). Brook suggests that framing social media as platforms for discourse enables libraries to leverage these tools in a variety of ways (Brook, 2012). Presenting Twitter as a medium for discourse opens up the possibility of using the platform as a pedagogical tool.

Traditional academic discourse and Twitter discourse share a number of analogous conventions. Academic discourse is traced backwards and forwards by consulting bibliographies and publication dates. Scholars "speak" to one another using citations, and reference the work of others using direct quotes and paraphrasing. Scholarly works give credit to other scholars through footnotes, endnotes, and parenthetical citations. Meanwhile, Twitter discourse is traced backwards and forwards through *timelines* and *timestamps*. Twitter users "speak" to one another using *@reply* and *mentions*, and also reference the work of others using direct quotes and paraphrasing. Much like a citation style guide, the Twitter community has developed conventions that allow users to properly credit the ideas and content of others by using *retweet* for direct quotes, and using *modified tweet*, *hat tip*, and *via* for paraphrasing content.

These commonalities extend to the metrics used for evaluating the impact and influence of individuals and the content they create. Within academic discourse, author-level metrics like the h-index demonstrate the influence of a scholar's work, while article-level metrics like Web of Knowledge's Times Cited measures the impact of a single work.

Similar metrics exist within Twitter discourse. The number of followers a Twitter user has indicates how many other users like that account's content, while the number of times a single Tweet is favorited or retweeted indicates how widely a Tweet has been shared. In both streams of discourse, authors use a consistent name or handle to create their "brand." These metrics measure the author's reach and influence, and are discussed increasingly as a potential metric for measuring the broader societal impact of research, as well as by executives for various commercial purposes (Bornmann, 2014). Twitter, therefore, is a suitable analog for discussing attribution and the scholarly machine, but its more familiar social conventions and real-time scale make it more accessible to students than traditional slow-moving examples of scholarly communication.

Plagiarism scandals within the academy draw heavy media attention, and are often followed by an apology that falls somewhere on a continuum from defiant to contrite (Thomason, 2014). Because Twitter has such established attribution norms, it also sees plagiarism and misattribution scandals of its own. In June 2013, a controversy erupted over the tweets of user @prodigalsam. Twitter is extremely popular within comedy circles, as it gives comedians the opportunity to "test out material and win over followers who might end up becoming fans" (D'Addario, 2013). A tumblr feed, "[Borrowing Sam](#)," exposed that @prodigalsam had amassed a huge number of followers by plagiarizing the tweets of popular Twitter accounts ("Borrowing Sam," 2013). @prodigalsam would routinely engage in paraphrase plagiarism of the content of other users by waiting several months after a tweet was published, then altering the wording of a tweet enough to avoid detection through a full text search on Google. "Borrowing Sam" laid this plagiarism bare by placing @prodigalsam's plagiarized content side by side with the original content. (Figure 1) The pop culture context makes this both an accessible example of plagiarism in action, as well as a more nuanced example that can engender discussion.

Using Borrowing Sam in the Classroom

Beginning in the Fall of 2013, Twitter as an analog for scholarly discourse was introduced into a selection of information literacy sessions at the University of Maryland, College Park in which the librarian had been asked to address avoiding plagiarism and proper citation of sources. The librarians teaching these sessions hoped that by using the Twitter metaphor, students would be able to (1) articulate how

academic writing is a form of participation within a larger discourse; and (2) describe why citations and attribution are important within scholarly communication. Student reception to using this metaphor and achievement of these outcomes was generally positive. In an open response post-test, 86 percent of students indicated that academic writing is a means of responding to previous researchers, and 85 percent stated that the importance of citations was to give credit to the original author and/or strengthen an argument's cogency, rather than focusing on personal consequences.

The @prodigalsam illustration is especially valuable for demonstrating the concepts of scholarly discourse and attribution, as it opens the discussion to more complex issues of attribution and plagiarism. Plagiarism is rarely a black and white issue, as evidenced by remixes, mash-ups, and the ever-nebulous Fair Use legal defense, and acceptable attribution behavior can vary depending on the medium used or the norms of a particular community of practice. Presenting this view of attribution without clearly defined boundaries encourages students to engage with the concept, prompting further class discussion. When this illustration was employed in class, students raised questions about self-plagiarism, including the re-use of a body of work across multiple media. (Figure 2) While purely anecdotal, this line of inquiry indicates a higher level of engagement than what is typically seen in an information literacy instruction session. Perhaps most importantly, by telling the story of @prodigalsam, the librarian can use a narrative structure to convey information, which educational research suggests is among the most effective ways to increase student retention of content (Willingham, 2009).

In addition to prompting useful in-class discussion, the Twitter-as-attribution concept easily translates into online learning modules and scales well for larger groups. This made it ideal for incorporation into a revisioning of the UMD Libraries' partnership with the campus Professional Writing Program (PWP), an upper-division required core writing component that serves students from all majors and disciplines. In response to undergraduate population growth, and in an effort to maximize the value of class face time, the UMD Libraries is transitioning the PWP information literacy instruction component into a flipped classroom model, the basis of which is instructional modules designed for Canvas, the campus' learning management system. Given that PWP students are typically upperclassmen, the process of how scholarly information is created, reviewed, disseminated, and consumed is heavily emphasized throughout these modules, and attribution is a key component of this process. But given that PWP

students also typically have varying levels of knowledge and experience when it comes to research, attribution must be presented in a way that is accessible and makes use of their previous experiences, particularly given that they will be initially interacting with the information in an unsupervised context. To convey the importance of proper attribution and the harm plagiarism can potentially cause original content creators, the Canvas modules include the Twitter illustration and the narrative of @prodigalsam.

Areas for Further Research

Copyright cases often catch the attention of the news media, such as the recent legal dispute over who owned the copyright of a selfie taken by a black macaque (Chapell, 2014). The public interest in these news stories suggests that this is an area of high interest where information professionals could share their expertise with their communities, and while there are numerous avenues that promote copyright and fair use awareness for information professionals in higher education, such as Duke University Libraries' scholarly communication blog, there are far fewer initiatives directed at making this content palatable and meaningful for non-library faculty, students, or the general public (Smith, 2015). While initiatives such as the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) are trying to increase awareness of these issues, perhaps there is an opportunity to use authentic contexts and popular culture to make these issues more comprehensible, as well. One recent example that seems to present such an opportunity was the photo sharing service Flickr's decision to sell photos that had been licensed under the Creative Commons license ("50 million Creative Commons and licensed images now in Flickr Wall Art," 2015). While Flickr ultimately elected to reverse this decision, Flickr was within its rights to sell these images based on the Creative Commons attribution licensing agreement users agreed to when uploading their photos ("An Update on Flickr Wall Art," 2014). While many Flickr users were outraged by this decision, what this revealed was a lack of understanding of the purpose of licensing materials under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license ("An Update on Flickr Wall Art," 2014). Materials licensed under the Creative Commons agreement are not universally blocked from commercial use; rather, materials licensed under the Attribution-ShareAlike license are truly open (Paley, 2010). The Attribution-ShareAlike license allows for the copying, redistribution, and adaptation of licensed materials for any purpose, including commercial purposes, so long as the original work is attributed to the original creator and that the new materials are licensed under the same terms (Creative Commons, 2015). Using this Flickr example

as a case study within the classroom could present these complex, highly abstract issues into a more concrete and relatable context, but additional research must be done to consider whether such examples will authentically capture the attention of audiences.

While the authors used Twitter to demonstrate the mechanics of scholarly communication and attribution within a higher education context, the success of this model within one context suggests that similar models could be used to present related concepts in other settings. School libraries often reuse the online instructional materials on plagiarism that are created by academic librarians; consequently, changes in how attribution, citation, and integrity are taught within a higher education context could impact the instruction presented within school libraries. Perhaps by challenging students to consider plagiarism and attribution in a more nuanced way within the secondary school curriculum, undergraduates would arrive on college campuses better prepared for the rigors of college level writing and research. Furthermore, as creating an online presence is becoming increasingly important for individuals and businesses, presenting controversies about Twitter plagiarism and copyright together could make for compelling programming within academic, school, and public libraries. Case studies such as @prodigalsam and Flickr Wall Art ground these abstract issues into reality, and can be used to instruct the public on the importance of recognizing the work of others, carefully considering license agreements, as well as the how to create a litigation-proof online presence. Rather than limiting attribution to the realm of in-text citation and bibliographies, librarians working within libraries of all types should consider connecting these issues to case studies, which can convey to the public and students of all ages that attribution and copyright have relevance beyond the confines of academic writing.

Conclusion

Twitter and other social media platforms are promising pedagogical tools for teaching some of the central concepts of information literacy, especially in light of the forthcoming *ACRL Framework of Information Literacy for Higher Education*. These platforms, which show discourse unfolding within real time in media environments that are familiar to undergraduate students, are great metaphors for introducing students to the threshold concept that “Scholarship is a Conversation.” Just as Twitter users or Facebook accounts can discuss content within a thread, so do scholars respond to one another within scholarly literature. Grounding these critical issues of scholarly

communication within familiar media also shows promise as a method for engaging students with the threshold concept that “Information has Value.” These platforms bring the human element of information creation to the foreground and allow educators to shift the focus of their teaching to how plagiarism affects others, conveying that whether in academia, the workplace, or on Twitter, the original producers of content gain significant value from their work being properly attributed to them. Instead of emphasizing the negative personal consequences of academic dishonesty, librarians can use these platforms to convey the positive associations with participating in discourse and crediting the work of others, focusing on benefits to the academy or community at large.



Figure 1: Example of paraphrase plagiarism. (Borrowing Sam, 2013)



Figure 2: Example of self-plagiarism. (Borrowing Sam, 2013)

Notes

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