Reflections on using the Foxfire Approach as a collaborative strategy in avoiding plagiarism in academic writing

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the use of the Foxfire Approach as a collaborative strategy in avoiding plagiarism in academic writing. Using insights from my own class in a tertiary institution in the Philippines, the paper proceeds with explaining the teaching strategies employed that realize the eleven core practices apparent in the Foxfire Approach which reveal a change in traditional roles in the classroom. This study reveals that student empowerment as espoused by the Foxfire Approach may result in student action, community involvement and challenge in assumptions made by texts and creative discovery—leading not only to an awareness of plagiarism but strategies in avoiding it. Moreover, the investigation also revealed that plagiarism may not always be explained through recourse to students' cultural assumptions about text borrowing.

Introduction

Despite many proposals and strategies to avoid plagiarism coming from a wide range of research in ELT and related fields, plagiarism remains to be a pressing concern among educators. With the emergence of advanced technologies in accessing information, students have become more susceptible to different forms of academic dishonesty (Park, 2003).

In order to address plagiarism in academic writing, the literature seems to attribute this problem to different causes. For instance, Fanning (1992) points out that non-native speakers resort to plagiarism due to their varying cultural perspectives on authorship, inability to use language for academic contexts and ignorance of expected conventions. Expounding on varying cultural beliefs on authorship, Yakovchuk (2008) has this to say:

> [The literature] seem[s] to agree that non-native speaker students in English-medium institutions might have different cultural perceptions of text, intellectual property, textual ownership and such cultural influence might be responsible for plagiarism on their part" (p. 40).

Hyland (2001) believes that ownership of texts and ideas can be traced to a Western tradition which may explain Western cultures' strong advocacy

against plagiarism. However, it is also the case that non-native speaker notions of ownership of ideas seem incongruent with that of teachers (Scollon, 1994) and may lead to students plagiarizing in an attempt to meet teacher expectations in academic writing (Sherman, 1992). Similarly, Sowden (2005) believes that one favorable characteristic of a diligent student is not to challenge authority in written work "but faithfully copy and reproduce" (p. 227) such authority, thus leading to the claim that plagiarism is a culturally conditioned practice. Sherman (1992) also believes that plagiarism may be a strategy for students to mark respect for authority thus deviating from the source (in terms of rearticulating it in their own terms) is not necessarily a desirable act:

> [Majority of requirements at school] are very text-based. Students are expected to know passages and set books almost by heart and answer detailed questions on the text verbatim, or at least without deviating from the content (p. 192).

Ironically though, while a wide range of 'cultural' explanations are given to make sense of the phenomenon of plagiarism around the world, Pennycook (1996) notes that an ideological double standard in the academe exists where some teachers use materials sourced from different authors without proper attribution while forcing their students to apply proper conventions in citing someone else's work.

Aside from cultural explanations, some studies also suggest that the inability to use academic language and deploy the rhetorical structures of communication in the academe is another reason why students plagiarize. Many students need to be familiar with linguistic and procedural demands in academic writing in order for them to meet the expectations in preparing an academic text (Fanning, 1992). Responding to the claim that plagiarism is culturally-conditioned, Liu (2005) points out that students plagiarize in two ways. First, students would write parts of their papers and copy the rest from other sources—leading to patchwriting (Moody, 2007)—revealing a marked improvement in their work. Second, students who have very limited language proficiency produce 'work' taken from that of expert writers. These actions suggest that students do not have the necessary linguistic resources to actualize the concepts imparted to them by texts. Plagiarism, in other words, is not simply a product of differing cultural assumptions of borrowing.

This paper deals with the problem of plagiarism among Filipino college students. More specifically, it reports on the use of the Foxfire Approach as a collaborative strategy in avoiding plagiarism.

Background

This investigation was conducted in selected ENGL 102 classes of De La Salle University–Dasmarinas. ENGL 102 (*Communication Arts and Skills 2*) is a general education course in academic writing whose objective is to help learners use different note-taking and documentation strategies to come up with a research paper using different modes of writing. In addition to a research paper, the students are also required to present their findings orally in class or a forum.

Since class size is a pressing issue in the institution (it usually ranges from 25–45 students), group work has been the norm in teaching this course. Likewise, the investigation was confined to one 1st year nursing class I taught during the 2nd semester of school year 2008–2009. The class had 45 students and had been grouped heterogeneously by the student admissions office and institutional testing office.

Discussion

In the 1960's Eliot Wigginton, an English teacher, introduced the Foxfire Approach in a high school in Georgia, USA. Deviating from traditional methods of teaching such as lectures and classroom based activities, Wigginton "decided to throw away the textbook and inspired the students to go out into the community" (Laubach, 1995, p. 52). Through immersion in the community, the students were able to come up with different projects that documented the different literacy and folk practices of the immediate community. Since the students were involved in interacting with community members, students were given the freedom to decide, execute and evaluate their projects resulting in the idea that the Foxfire Approach empowers students as members of the community taking responsibility for their own learning. Wigginton outlined eleven core practices that realize the Foxfire Approach as a means to empower students in the classroom.

Deay and Saab (1995), who have documented the uses of the Foxfire Approach among teachers, have pointed out that process-oriented and collaborative learning seems to be a clear strength of the said approach. Appropriating these strengths in English language teaching, they believe that the current thrust of student-centered learning can be realized through the use of non-traditional forms of assessment such as portfolios which document the progress of students at a given time.

Since writing research papers entails reflection and careful documentation for students, empowering them through the Foxfire Approach allows them to collaborate with members of the community and immerse themselves in authentic communicative situations. More so, addressing plagiarism in students' work should not be the teacher's burden; rather, the Foxfire Approach significantly changes teacher-student roles "in a way that allows the teachers, students, parents and community members to become partners in the learning process" (Deay & Saab, 1995, p. 114).

In order to address plagiarism in academic writing in the class, a three-hour session was devoted to discussing different aspects of plagiarism. During the session, the definition, manifestation and consequences of plagiarism were discussed with the students. Also, note-taking techniques were taught through sample texts and exercises from the textbook and reference materials used by the students for their research.

In addition, different strategies were employed to realize the eleven core practices of the Foxfire Approach espoused by Wigginton (1966) throughout the duration of the course.

1. *The output is a product of students' desire/s*

Prior to writing the paper, this core practice was realized in two ways. First, the students were allowed to choose their own group members and second, they were allowed to choose their own topic for research. Students were allowed to choose their own group members in order to bank on their own familiarity with their own peers which may not be established by the teacher. Although it is assumed that group work is also done in other subjects, the choice of members to work with gave the students a chance to be empowered early in the course of the subject. Also, empowering students to choose their members will have an impact on group relations as they face challenges when they develop their research.

Moreover, letting students choose their own topic of investigation provided motivation for the respective groups to explore areas which they find interesting. Moody (2007) asserts that the selection of topic is crucial and may reduce the chances of plagiarism since "this will determine how information is selected and organized" (p. 204). However, interest among students may not be sufficient in selecting topics. Hence, additional criteria (novelty, availability of materials and attainability) was set in order for students to explore possible options for their research.

2. *The teacher facilitates learning through collaboration and guidance*

In this core practice, I have assumed several roles in order to promote collaboration and guidance in addressing plagiarism in the course of dealing with texts. First, explicit teaching of appropriate note-taking strategies was done in order to impart "declarative knowledge on what constitutes plagiarism and strategies in avoiding it" (Lidell & Wong, 2008, p. 2). At this juncture, comparison of original and processed texts was presented in order to show the different forms of plagiarism and possible reasons why writers opt to plagiarize (Plata et al., 2007). Rather than delving into the pitfalls of plagiarism, I have also shifted my role as a "tour guide" to the students' initiation to the world of academic discourse. Since Lidell and Wong (2008) emphasize the need for students to make adjustments in terms of suitable practices suitable to an institution's standards, discussions on the role of students as writers were conducted. These focused on students' roles as experts in their chosen topics and the expectations of readers once the research is done.

In order to facilitate collaboration between students and teacher, conferencing has been the main tool not only to examine students' work but also articulate challenges faced in the processing of texts. Going beyond Ho's (2008) practice of collecting drafts and original material from students, collaboration with students was done by letting them make judgments on their work's place in the overall structure of the paper. For instance, selected paragraphs/texts from different sources were categorized as either in support of or in contradiction to the students' own findings.

3.   *Clarity in terms of the integrity of the academic work is emphasized*

One problematic scenario encountered in the class was the "inversion" of the research process. This is characterized by tendencies of students to examine the literature and then come up with questions that will fit the materials collected. This usually leads to recycling of information. This problem was addressed through consultation and introducing other means of collecting information such as surveys and interview. Also, students were guided in collaborating with other school personnel in order to obtain data for their research

Since one of the perennial problems for students is the lack of references, other methods were introduced, e.g. emailing experts, looking for materials in used book shops and coordinating with school librarians. Students were encouraged to email experts in specialized fields in order to help them with their investigation. Though some did not respond to student questions or inquiries, experts have either led the students to look for particular sources of data which may be helpful or answered particular questions posed. As regards collecting materials from used book shops which are popular in the Philippines due to lower priced books—some students reported that they had acquired some reference materials deemed helpful for their paper.

Another helpful strategy was coordination with university librarians. They helped the students by guiding them on the use of online catalogs and resources of the institution. Likewise, assistance was given by securing interlibrary loans from libraries from other institutions.

4.   *All work springs from student action*

Since the course spans a whole semester, the teaching of academic writing in the institution is grounded in the process approach where cyclical stages of writing are done. Hence, the students have been responsible in all of the stages of the work—selection of topic, collection of materials, preparation of working bibliography, formulation of research questions, application of note-taking techniques, preparation of manuscript and presentation of findings.

5.   *Teamwork and peer teaching are apparent*

One apparent 'weakness' in allowing students in selecting their group members is that value judgments on character and social relations tend to be prioritized over actual competencies needed to produce excellent research. However, this proved to be a minor hindrance only since groups made adjustments in order to help members struggling in processing texts. Similar to Lowry, Curtis and Lowry's (2004) assertion that groups work in a myriad of ways, the students played several roles in helping their co-members address problems with plagiarism. For instance, some students would act as a "head writer" that would outline the direction of the paper and distribute parts of the paper to his/her classmates. Some opted to work on the different parts of the paper making sure that content, organization, mechanics and proper note-taking techniques were considered. In cases where selected texts have manifestations of plagiarism, some students in the group

served as editors, checking the processed work of their peers against the original text and giving suggestions on how to improve them.

6. *Links between the community and school are evident in the project*

In this core practice, links between community and school are evident through the students' attempts to go beyond the confines of what the literature stipulates and draw conclusions from data available to the community. In this case, students conducted interviews with school employees (such as guidance counselors, other teachers and students), and community members (officials from other institutions or experts in different fields). Some opted to "quantify" their data through the use of surveys which were distributed across specific groups of respondents such as students and people in the community that are worthy of investigation. For instance, one group attempted to look into the spending habits of specific courses in the university through the use of surveys.

7. *There is an audience for the project*

The culminating activity for the course was an oral presentation which is a helpful strategy in reducing the probability of plagiarism since appropriate adjustments from written text to oral discourse are made (Sowden, 2005). In addition, this provides a venue where students get to share their ideas to fellow students, leading to a 'sense of audience' that 'consumes' their work. More so, other panelists (such as fellow faculty and students from other specializations) were invited to provide insights that might help improve the students' work.

8. *The project moves from what is known to the unknown*

In order to move beyond information sourced from texts, students were asked to accomplish a process sheet called "synthesis of sources" (see Appendix A) as a means for them draw concepts from materials gathered. This set the foundation for them to "survey" the existing literature related to their topic. In addition, students were tasked not only to outline the points highlighted in the texts but to challenge them by finding weaknesses or information gaps which they could then further explore and/or investigate. Although I allowed them to note verbatim the insights gained from source materials, letting them identify weaknesses and gaps in previous studies through strategies of inferencing helped them to be critically aware of what needs to be done to contribute to existing knowledge concerning a particular area of study.

Pointing out gaps in the literature related to their research topic has encouraged them to explore something unknown. In order to contextualize a particular problem in their own setting, surveys and interviews were conducted by the students to test their assumptions established by what is "known" in the previous studies. One example came from a group of students interested in phobias in medical procedures among patients. After reviewing the literature on the different fears associated with medical procedures, the students conducted a

survey and interviewed patients at the local hospital to identify which medical procedures they considered undesirable. Also, the students came up with their own nomenclature to categorize the reasons for patients' fear of selected medical procedures.

9. *There are aesthetic components considered for the work*

This core practice is realized through the students' efforts in making their oral presentations as lively and creative as possible. These were done by utilizing different types of oral presentation. Examples are role play, panel discussions, debates and talk shows, thus allowing the students to reconfigure information imparted to them by texts and integrating their own findings and inferences into one cohesive whole. In addition, the use of technology helped them present their research in a way that appealed to different kinds of audience.

10. *There is a time for reflection*

Through explicit teaching, assistance of peers and consultation, students were able to reflect on their text borrowing strategies and reconfigure them to avoid plagiarism. Similar to Sherman (1992) and Ho (2006), students had an awareness not to plagiarize by attempting to quote, summarize or paraphrase texts used for their paper. Another result of their awareness of plagiarism was the presence of errors in their work, e.g. problems with collocation, formality/ informality of tone, transitions between ideas. These could be evidence of the students' attempt to 'experiment' with their own Englishes. Subsequent drafts after lengthy consultations with the teacher and peers proved to be productive for these helped improve their academic writing in general aside from, of course, avoiding instances of plagiarism.

11. *Evaluation of the work, skills acquired and changes in attitude are documented*

Since assessment in the ownership of collaborative work is a controversial and problematic area in teaching writing, I have attempted to 'quantify' aspects of collaboration in relation to the different processes of preparing a research paper (see Appendix B). The assessment tool integrates self, peer and teacher's evaluation in order to identify contributions of members of the group to the research paper. In order to verify the ratings given, one-on-one consultation was done.

Conclusion

Based on this simple research work, the use of the Foxfire Approach as a collaborative strategy in addressing plagiarism in academic writing resulted in a few positive practices. First, empowering students through collaboration seems to be an essential component in promoting awareness of and developing strategies

in addressing plagiarism. Second, ties to the community can help students make sense of information imparted from texts through contextualization of experiences eventually leading them to draw inferences which may be considered theirs. Third, it appears that problems of plagiarism do not only spring from cultural conditioning but rather practical problems such as time constraints, lack of materials (Yakovchuk, 2008) and lack of awareness of expected norms of writing in the academe (Fanning, 1992).

Nevertheless, this paper has also generated questions that require further investigation. If the same students were tasked to write academic papers individually, would they be able to apply these skills as they progress in their course? More importantly, how can teachers assess work in a collaborative environment considering that the output is a result of varying viewpoints, assumptions and conclusions from authors and students? Perhaps educators should remain curious and 'critical' in order to keep the fox 'fire' burning as we search for answers together with our students who continuously discover the world through our classrooms.

CORRESPONDENCE

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Appendix A
Assessment Tool: Collaborative efforts in the research

Instructions: Check the appropriate response to the given statements. Compute the total points by adding the scores. Get the average of the self-evaluation and peer evaluation

	Self-Evaluation						Score/Average

Intellectual/Scholastic contributions to the paper

1. Contributes ideas/concepts for the development of the paper *(25 points)*

	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
a. Formulation of the research title *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
b. Development of Chapter 1 *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
c. Development of Chapter 2 *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
d. Development of Chapter 3 *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
e. Presentation *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____

2. Helps collect sources/data pertinent to the research *(15 points)*

	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
a. Collection of reference materials *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
b. Preparation of survey, questionnaires *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
c. Collection of data *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____

Other aspects of the research paper

	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
3. Helps in the preparation of the manuscript (typing, editing, printing etc) *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
4. Shares with the expenses incurred in the presentation of the papers *(5 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
5. Submits designated output/contribution on time *(10 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
6. Exhibits open-mindedness and enthusiasm when doing the research *(10 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____

For the faculty's assessment

	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
7. Researcher/s consults issues/concerns regarding the research paper *(10 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
8. Multiple drafts are presented *(10 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
9. The researcher/s manifests enthusiasm, open-mindedness and integrates and or defends suggestions made regarding the research *(10 points)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____

Total score _____

Appendix B
Synthesis of Sources

Title of Research_____

Table 1: Books

Title of book	Author/s	Year of Publication	Publisher	Concepts Imparted	Relevance to the research topic