

**Plagiarism or intertextuality? A study of the politics of
knowledge, identity and textual ownership
in undergraduate student writing**

Celia Helen Thompson

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree, except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Abstract

Interest in plagiarism continues to generate debate both in the media and in the context of the academy. Opinions continue to differ not only about how plagiarism can be defined, but also about the nature of its causes and its possible solutions. Most universities have now developed websites to address the difficulties experienced by both students and staff in ascertaining exactly what kind of writing practices might constitute plagiarism. However more often than not, such websites tend to give undue emphasis to the mechanics of referencing and universal notions of ‘academic honesty’ in order to make their point. Little or no attention is given to providing well-developed guidelines on what constitutes ‘common’ knowledge, which is especially relevant currently given the growing cultural diversity of contemporary university classrooms. In addition, discussions about writer identity and authorship seem to be totally absent. This silence on such matters needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency.

I have adopted a ‘critical ethnographic’ case study approach to this doctoral study in order to investigate how undergraduate university students from diverse language and disciplinary backgrounds have used the words and ideas of others in their written research-based assignments. The responses of academic staff to these students’ writing practices have also been explored. Three different sources of data from ten students and ten academic staff have been collected in order to allow for data analysis from multiple perspectives through a process of triangulation.

Bakhtin’s concept of *dialogism* (1981, 1984, 1986), Kristeva’s writings on intertextuality and the *subject-in-process-and-on-trial* (1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1996) and Howard’s work on *patchwriting*, textual ownership and writer development (1992, 1995, 1999) have been central to the construction of the analytical framework used in this study.

I argue that, the notion of ‘plagiarism’ should be re-conceptualised in terms of transgressive and non-transgressive forms of intertextuality (see also Chandrasoma et al., 2004). My study also reveals how students react differently to the *homogenising* forces of the academy (Holton, 2000). Some feel alienated and have challenged or resisted these forces, while others have adopted an accommodationist position. Furthermore, this research shows that students are confused by unified and autonomous notions of textual ownership and originality that fail to conceptualise subjectivity and authorship as sociohistorically constructed and multi-voiced.

I conclude that educators need to recognise the political nature of the processes involved in the construction of text/knowledge and writer identity and recommend a *dialogic* approach to pedagogy, which allows for textual ownership and authority to be circulated and negotiated between students and their lecturers.