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Moving from plagiarism police to integrity coaches: assisting novice students in understanding the relationship between research and ownership

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Abstract

Much of the discourse surrounding plagiarism is one of fear—a fear of being caught and punished, but many plagiarism examples happen unintentionally as students struggle with a new language, new ideas, and new communities in tertiary education. Specifically, many students are challenged with the task of writing a research paper, which involves finding academic sources, reading those sources to answer a research question, and integrating direct quotations and paraphrasing. Because novice writers often struggle with these skills, what is a developmental stage is instead interpreted as plagiarism. Much of the discussion of plagiarism involves implicit and explicit definitions of ownership, but there is little research about how students understand the concept of ownership in relation to ideas and language. In this qualitative study, we present data from 18 international students at an American-style university in the Middle East who write an introductory research paper as part of a composition course. Results show that perceptions of plagiarism changed in relation to owning ideas, owning language, and owning time spent on the research process and that distinguishing these boundaries is often difficult for students even within their own final research papers. We suggest teaching more robust note-taking strategies, discussing ownership in terms of a writer's choices in guiding readers through the paper, and creating an environment where students can understand the complexities of plagiarism rather than simply fearing being caught.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Undergraduate students, Ownership, Pedagogy, Composition, Research writing assignments

Introduction

Plagiarism is a global pedagogical problem affecting many aspects of writing at multiple levels but has been the “most common form of academic misconduct facing universities” (Birks et al. 2020:1). Although more and more institutions are moving away from asking instructors to be plagiarism police towards becoming integrity coaches,



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there is still a sense of fear surrounding conversations about plagiarism. For example, when discussing plagiarism, instructors often use words such as “steal,” “get caught,” “punished,” etc. While plagiarism is indeed a serious issue, we argue that creating a culture of informed discussion with students is one way to assist students as they enter academic communities and attempt to begin using language that is accepted by those specific communities.

While there are many definitions of plagiarism, most involve conceptions of ownership. Take for example the often-cited definition from Howard (1995:799 emphasis added) who defines it as a “representation of a source’s *words* or *ideas* as one’s own.” Yet, the boundary between ownership of *language* (or words) and ownership of *ideas* is blurry, especially for novice academic writers. Regardless of the definition, many academic institutions enforce harsh penalties for plagiarizing writing. By understanding plagiarism as a “transitional stage in writer development” (Hu and Lei 2012:819)—a developmental phase Howard (1995) refers to as patchwriting—instructors can assist student writers in developing key academic literacy skills which would allow English L1 (native language) and English as an additional language (L2) students to gain a deeper understanding of source integration in the hopes of avoiding being accused of plagiarizing.

In this article, we begin by reviewing literature on ownership of language and ownership of ideas and the relationship of each to plagiarism, discuss the results of the qualitative study, and end with pedagogical suggestions for composition classrooms that apply to both L1 and L2 students.

Ownership of language and ownership of ideas

Learning languages is a complex interaction between social and cognitive factors. One method is by imitating those around us (Lensmire and Beals 1994) and our individual experiences with languages are then shaped by further social experiences (Barthes 1977; Foucault 1977). Because of this, Bakhtin questions whether or not an individual can own a language because our experiences always build on previous linguistic experiences and “our utterances are filled with others’ words” (1986:89). So, too, are students’ writing experiences shaped by social and individual factors, which makes writing and citation complicated since, according to Howard (1999:91), “we all patchwrite, all the time.”

While language is social, there is also an individual aspect to its use especially in the writing classroom. Elbow (1998:7) tells students: “In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm, a voice which is the main source of power in your writing.” As a result, on the one hand, students’ language is socially constructed, but on the other, students are striving for individualistic ownership. This tension is described by Bakhtin who also acknowledges the individual has a sense of agency and control over the “meanings produced and consequently the meanings the listener [or reader] can respond to” (1986:96). According to Price (2014:14), this creates two ideas of language use: that the speaker [writer] can become assimilated into a specific discourse, or may remain distant from a language, but use it to fulfil given purposes. This sense of distance in relation to linguistic ownership is especially complicated for L2 students who often feel removed from a second language but feel a sense of ownership with a first language. This can create “disharmony” between

language use and language ownership (Chiang and Schmida 2002) in which racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically marginalized students feel resistance in learning a new language (Canagarajah 1997). As a result, many L2 learners do not feel as if they own their second language in the same way that they own their first language.

The tension described above is not merely confined to learning an additional language. L1 students often experience tension and confusion when learning new disciplinary languages and registers in academic settings, and as they learn to write within these new settings, imitation of language is often a starting point. In addition to the creative and constructive processes of learning a new language, imitation is a pedagogical technique used in some countries including China (Bloch 2008; Pennycook 1996) and in France (Donahue 2008). Indeed, Pecorari and Shaw (2012:155) found that teachers agreed that students' use of specific linguistic phrases helps them "acquire the register of the discipline." For example, using specific linguistic "building blocks" (Hyland 2008) can assist students in developing disciplinary expertise. Instructor acceptance, however, often depends on the length of the particular phrase (Davis and Morley 2015:27). As students gain membership within disciplinary communities and have more opportunities to use these disciplinary terms and patterns, they may not feel the need to cite them.

Not being able to distinguish between ownership of words and ideas can lead to misunderstanding of how and why citations are used, which can then lead to accusations of plagiarism. Students are often asked to read a text and then to put the ideas "in your own words." In paraphrasing another's work, students are supposed to use their own words to capture the author's idea (Hirvela and Du 2013). If students agree with the idea after reading a text, they feel that they are now "owners" of the particular idea and don't need to cite it. As a result, instructors should move beyond telling students to paraphrase "in your own words" because this simplifies a complex task (Mori 2019).

As students develop academic literacy skills, they must grapple with the tension between learning new concepts while also learning a new academic language and struggling to accurately represent the language and ideas of a particular source (Wette 2018). This is a developmental spectrum, and students must determine when they feel "ownership" of ideas, but also of language. Looking at source integration as a process rather than simply the product can help students understand this spectrum.

In the next sections, we describe a qualitative study investigating international students' perceptions of ownership as they pertain to the broader discourse of source-use and how this affected students' notions of plagiarism during a semester-long composition course. This research answers the call that more research on plagiarism is necessary, especially in non-Anglophone L1 contexts (Hu 2015) and the call to align academic writing pedagogy more closely with research-informed practices (Bahrami et al. 2019; Blaj-Ward 2015; Hyland and Shaw 2016; Rose 2019). The second author was the instructor of the course situating this research in the classroom, and the first author collaborated on the research process. Both authors have experience teaching in Middle Eastern contexts; Author 1 is bilingual in English and Italian, and Author 2 considers English as their first language. Collaboratively, the authors completed the manuscript with each giving insights and validating data collected in the research context. Specifically, two research questions were posed:

1. How do international students understand ownership of language and ideas within their research paper?
2. What is the relationship between international students' perceptions of ownership and their source integration?

Methods

Research context

The study took place at a coeducational nonprofit institution located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with a linguistically and culturally diverse student population of approximately 4500 and is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The UAE is a unique sociolinguistic context in which the demands of global English are implemented alongside Arabic. The writing course was the second in a required four-course sequence at the university. According to the university course catalog, the course: "Introduces critical writing and information literacy skills. Focuses on analyzing and evaluating texts, constructing cogent arguments, and using sources effectively. Builds on analytic thinking, argument, critical reading skills and an academic style developed in WRI 101. Introduces the argument/persuasion essay, evaluation essay and short research essay."

Research participants

A total of 18 international composition students gave consent to participate in the study. Nationalities of the student participants mirrored the vast cultural diversity of the larger student population at the institution: seven Indian, two Egyptian, and one each from Palestine, Somalia, Comoros, Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Syria. All student participants but five considered English to be their second or third language, whereas the remainder considered English their first language. (See [Appendix](#) for demographic information of student participants). At the completion of the study, students selected their own pseudonyms as a way to involve them in the study so they would "know themselves in the works that their words have helped to produce" (Allen and Wiles 2016:162).

Data collection and analysis

To ensure data validity, we collected data from multiple sources, which were all written in English.

1. Initial Questionnaire (IQ). In order to gauge students' understanding at the beginning of the semester, they were asked to define plagiarism and to explain whether they "own" the ideas and language discussed in their academic papers generally.
2. Plagiarism and Ownership Discussion (POD). This in class activity was intended to help international students complicate the notion of plagiarism through a discourse on ownership. (See Additional file 1 for complete activity).
3. Short Research Paper (SRP). Because so many first-year students are unfamiliar with academic research methods, the majority of the semester is spent on the following course learning outcome: "Practice academic research and library skills, use

APA citation, and compose a research essay.” The framing of this research paper assignment is drawn from the “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education” (Association of College and Research Libraries 2006), specifically the concepts of “research as inquiry” and “scholarship as conversation.” In this assignment, students chose a topic of interest, developed a research question, learned to use the library’s academic databases to find sources, and integrated at least six academic sources into a six to eight-page research paper.

4. Short Research Paper Reflection (SRPR). Along with their final research paper, students wrote a final research paper reflection that shed light on their growing understanding of ownership, plagiarism, and the research writing process as a whole. The reflection allowed in depth responses as students could read through their papers and then respond without time constraints. Students were instructed to do the following: “highlight in yellow all the parts of the paper that are yours; highlight in blue all the areas where you used and incorporated your research sources.” The reasons behind the highlighting task were twofold: to help students identify whether they correctly acknowledged the sources used in their papers and to complicate the idea of ownership within the research writing process. In other words, this intentionally complex task was created so that students would further understand how their ideas are connected with the ideas and language that they gather through their research process.
5. Individual Interviews. In order to check for consistency of student responses, an interview was held with five participants the semester following the study. These interviews lasted between 15 and 20 min.

Of note, all data sources except for the interviews were an integral part of the research writing course and were collected from all student participants. However, only five out of the eighteen participants were available for interviews. As a result, the authors decided to present the findings of these five participants as case studies below. In light of the research questions, data analysis consisted of reading students’ texts to identify common and divergent understandings of plagiarism, to determine how students conceptualized ownership of ideas and language, and to assess how their understanding of the terms had shifted throughout the course of the semester. More specifically, the initial questionnaire and the short research paper reflection were examined to chart students’ developing understanding of plagiarism within the broader discourse of idea and linguistic ownership. Data sets from the short research paper, the short research paper reflection and the interviews were analyzed to determine how students problematized the concept of idea ownership from choosing, reading, synthesizing, and integrating sources relative to their chosen research question. The two authors jointly identified patterns, interpreted the data sets, and resolved any discrepancies that emerged.

Results

Students’ understanding of plagiarism after discussion

Prior to students beginning the research process, we wanted to demonstrate to students just how complicated plagiarism is as a concept by presenting them with multiple

scenarios. The first was an article about “contract cheating.” Contract cheating is a problem in many institutions (Alin 2020), and the UAE is not exempt (Farooqui 2020). Like many others, tertiary institutions in the UAE must deal with the problem of students buying entire essays written by someone else. In the class discussion, most of the students agreed that this was a clear violation of the academic integrity policy. But when we moved onto the next activities, this clear boundary seemed to become blurred.

In the next section of the activity, students discussed whether they thought Melania Trump, in a speech given in 2016, had plagiarized a speech delivered by Michelle Obama in 2008. Students highlighted commonalities in phrases. For example, students highlighted the phrase “you work hard for what you want in life.” This phrase was used by both Trump and Obama, but many students agreed that since this is such a common idea espoused in American politics, that it’s unclear who actually gets to own the idea. But the phrase “your word is your bond” was different because it’s a less often used phrase heard in American politics, and that particular use did count as plagiarism. As students highlighted commonalities between speeches, they began to see that plagiarism involves not just similar words, but ideas, the number of occurrences, as well as the speaker’s position. As Ruby noted in the discussion, “Melania should have taken full of advantage of her higher position, her power and resources, yet, she didn’t make use of what she had; it’s annoying [what Melania did]” (POD). Most students again agreed that Trump did plagiarize Obama.

By having these sorts of discussions in class, that is, in an environment where students are not afraid to disagree or question the nature of plagiarism, they can begin to see how the concept is not easy to define. As Maddi stated, “This recent activity helped me identify plagiarism in examples that I would have not noticed before.” And Agatha said,

“I also learned about how it can be tough to identify cases of plagiarism, especially when two authors are writing about similar topics and have shared similar experiences. I think this exercise has taught me how a citation can be the difference between a well researched paper and one that is simply plagiarized” (POD).

Being able to say that plagiarism is not as clear cut as students originally thought was a necessary step as they began writing their own research papers.

Students’ developing understanding of plagiarism and ownership through the research process

Apart from a few students who still were unsure or confused about owning ideas in their papers (Mueller, Sabiha, Abigail), in their SRPR most students felt ownership of their ideas, and their research papers, albeit for different reasons. For example, some students claimed that the way they organized their ideas, how they incorporated their sources, and the general flow and structure of their papers allowed them to claim ownership (Ruby, Elon, Zamir, Agatha, Talida, Jade, Maddi). Others believed that the language used and their choice of words made the ideas in the paper their own (Elon, Agatha, Mishoo, Imaamka). For other students, adding personal opinions and

anecdotes were the only true ideas they could claim ownership of (Tea, Malar, Jade, Rima); whereas others felt ownership because of their own interpretations and conclusions drawn from their research (Agatha, Tea, Abigail, Inspira, Maddi). Finally, a few students mentioned that the large amount of time and effort employed in the research writing process was a contributing factor to feeling ownership of the final paper (Talida, Jade, Rima). Below, we discuss in greater detail five students' written work as each demonstrates different factors influencing their perceptions of ownership and source use.

Individual case studies

Malar

Malar is a psychology major originally from India whose L1 is Malayalam. At the beginning of the semester, when prompted to reflect on ownership of ideas, Malar responded:

"I don't think I "own" the ideas that I discussed in papers because knowledge comes from learning and understanding the world around you. The ideas I use for my papers are knowledge I gained from people and the environment around me so I cannot take ownership" (IQ).

Malar gains knowledge from everyday social interactions; however, she does not feel that she owns that knowledge which seems to disconnect her from those same social interactions.

Malar's idea of the process of gaining knowledge and ownership was complicated in her research paper on heliocentric views in astronomy. In her SRPR, she stated, "I knew Galileo had constructed his own telescope because in my astronomy course my Professor had mentioned it, but I did not know the date, so I researched the date and how he did it." In the research paper itself, Malar highlighted in yellow signifying self-ownership: "He watched the skies day and night with a telescope that he constructed" and the remainder of that sentence highlighted in blue (signifying ideas or language from another source) with a citation: "in 1609 that magnified only up to 3 to 30 diameters." So even though she previously mentioned that ideas gained from other sources are not "owned," in the research paper itself, she does claim a sense of ownership of the idea.

Also, at the beginning of the semester, Malar focused on language ownership and "writing in your own words" saying this "means to write what you understood from the material you researched or studied" (IQ). In her SRPR, she stated, "This paper is mostly stating facts and explaining how these facts were retrieved. So to say what is my 'own' in this paper I have given my opinion on what was done and how things have changed overtime." She said she did not have a hard time distinguishing between what to highlight. Furthermore, Malar had a perception that when she put something in her own words, she did not need to cite it because it was "her" understanding of an idea. She was using the words of others only when looking up facts. This is further complicated, however, in her research paper. She highlighted in blue the sentence: "Eudoxus of Cnidus, the well famous Greek astronomer, was the first one to believe that everything orbits around the Earth," but she did not cite any source. Asked whether she could

explain not citing this information, in her interview she maintained: “I got the information from class, from a lecture taught by a professor who got this information from somewhere else. I don’t know the source he used, so I cannot cite it. Also, if you google it, there are so many places where you can get this same general information, it is common knowledge.” This example also brings up the issue of “common knowledge,” and whether and how “facts” that are owned by no one and everyone need to be cited.

Malar also demonstrates the idea of entering a discipline and gaining academic discourse. For example, Malar had taken an astronomy course. In her SRP, she wrote: “He also combined eccentricity with an epicyclic model to explain the motion of the planets.” The words “eccentricity” and “epicyclic” did not need to be cited as they had become words that she felt comfortable using, or at least understood from a disciplinary standpoint to draw distinction between common knowledge and disciplinary knowledge.

Mueller

Mueller is a computer engineering major originally from India whose L1 is Hindi. At the beginning of the semester, Mueller responded: “I do think that I own the ideas that I discuss in papers for classes. Even if it is influenced through other people’s thoughts, it is my own creativity that makes me express these ideas in my own language” (IQ).

This relationship between creativity of language and the ideas of others was complicated as Mueller began his research paper on the childhood trauma of serial killers. When prompted to discuss this relationship in his final paper, he stated,

“The ideas I highlighted in yellow, I can say, are somewhat owned by me. But, on the other hand, they aren’t really my work as these ideas were provided to me through knowledge about the subject which was given to me by someone else” (SRPR).

In a discussion of a draft of the paper, the instructor was curious about a section of the paper that had no citation, but very specific disciplinary language. For example, “delinquents are diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, or various personality or mood disorders.” He had interviewed a psychologist in order to find out more about the topic but didn’t realize he needed to cite that information. In his paper, Mueller summarized the conversation with the psychologist and highlighted the section in yellow (signifying that he owned the words), but he did add a citation with the name of the person and the date of communication. The ideas were provided from “someone else,” but Mueller put the ideas in his own words, and therefore felt a sense of ownership over the language, but still gave credit to the interviewee.

Mueller also commented on the amount of time that he spent working on the paper, which he got from using a research log to take notes: “Over 18 hours. 5 drafts were created in the process. Research took less time. Binding together all the sources took a lot of time” (SRPR). Unlike Malar, Mueller felt some confusion about the boundaries of ownership in the paper, but also a varying sense of

ownership of the language and ideas, and clear ownership of the time spent working on the research paper process. In the interview, Mueller discussed a paper with 19 sources he had written in another writing course. Because he had so many sources, he said that the majority of the paper was quotes and paraphrases; as a result he felt “less ownership” of that paper because of the amount of words and ideas he used from his scholarly sources. Mueller’s sense of ownership came from the way he collected and presented the content of his paper.

Elon

Elon is a computer engineering major originally from India whose L1 is English and L2 is Hindi. At the start of the course, Elon had a rather simplistic view of plagiarism and “was under the impression that plagiarism is pretty easy to find and is just the use of someone’s work without giving proper credit” (IQ). Throughout his research writing process, however, Elon’s understanding of plagiarism shifted. He wrote:

“[it] depends a lot on the pattern, flow of the text, the ideas and most importantly the context in which it was used. Moreover, the line between plagiarized and original work can be blurred, especially when there is an involvement of “general ideas” and “common knowledge” (SPRP).

Similarly to Malar, Elon started to question “when does an idea become common knowledge?” (interview), implying that once an idea enters the realm of universality, then citing the original source may no longer be necessary.

This newly gained perspective about plagiarism also informed Elon’s growing understanding of idea ownership. Initially, he considered “owned” only those ideas that are a “source of livelihood” for the originator “and thus being stolen would cause supposed damages to the person” (IQ). By the end of the course, and after spending approximately “50 h” (SPRP) between planning, researching and writing his research paper on how artificial intelligence will affect tech industry jobs, Elon concluded that:

“As there is no clear, universal definition of plagiarism and it’s just an idea that we all follow with some basic guidelines, other than the quotes and paraphrases, I believe I own the entirety of the paper” (SRPR).

From this reflection, it seems that Elon moved away from his original thinking that ownership entailed some sort of monetary compensation towards accepting that time and effort spent researching and writing a paper allows for ownership of ideas and specific linguistic terms. In addition, Elon believed that he owned “the way in which the citations are used i.e the way they are ordered and the way they are incorporated into the text” (SRPR); therefore, organization of the ideas also allowed Elon to claim ownership of his work.

What is interesting to note about Elon’s final paper is that the dual color approach (yellow and blue to distinguish perceptions of ownership) did not fully represent what was happening in his paper. As a result, he decided to add a third color. He explained:

“I used green to show that these are my ideas however they have been formulated by studying various other articles and forming an understanding about the subject. These would usually be yellow, however to make it easier to understand what I concluded from research, I highlighted it in green” (SRPR).

By adding a third color, Elon was able to distinguish which ideas he came up with on his own (yellow); which ideas belonged to other authors (blue); and which ideas were the result of his own understanding of the subject based on his research (green). During his interview, Elon clarified this color distinction in the following way:

“during the research process and reading all the research, I noticed that my ideas were actually created by going over all these other people’s ideas and bringing them together. So the third color fit into that category, a little bit of both, the ideas are not entirely mine, although I came up with them. So, their ideas gave birth to my ideas.”

Furthermore, ownership for Elon also meant that the conclusions he came up with were entirely his own and had this to say about the process:

“This was my favorite part about writing the research paper, it really made me feel like somebody could actually read this paper and learn a thing or two that they wouldn’t find elsewhere” (SRPR).

Traditional notions of originality imply being the only one or the first to have a specific idea. In contrast, Elon’s definition of originality implies that the content does not need to be wholly new but that the reader can learn something new from the text. Ultimately for Elon, the process of researching and writing a research paper enabled him to claim ownership of his work in its entirety.

Sabiha

Sabiha is an industrial engineering major originally from Palestine whose L1 is Arabic. In her final paper on racial microaggression, Sabiha followed the assignment instructions and used two colors (yellow and blue, as previously stated) to distinguish areas of ownership. This dual color distinction made it challenging for her to discern what ideas she should highlight in yellow, that is, her *own* ideas. For example, she stated that:

“mainly in [the] introduction and the topic sentence I always faced a problem as they were not really from one source, [but] it is my own understanding and paraphrasing of various sources, some that weren’t even used in my paper, but I stitched them together to understand better. So, although it is not my own ideas, I still contributed a big factor maybe?” (SRPR).

It is clear from this reflection that Sabiha struggled to distinguish her own ideas from the ideas that emerged as a result of her own understanding of different sources. In the interview, Sabiha expanded on this idea by saying that “some sources were not very

useful” to her research paper, but did add to her understanding of the topic. In particular, she felt that the way she organized the ideas taken from the different sources used—even though she did not see them as “her” ideas—nevertheless added to the paper. Moreover, Sabiha’s confusion spilled into her use of quotes and citations, and she claimed that:

“even when explaining a quote I have included, it is my own understanding of it and in my own words, but it is still the author’s ideas, so it was really confusing [...] It is frustrating having to highlight it in blue knowing it was in a way all me [...] and putting in so much effort just for the work to still be credited to someone else is really confusing” (SRPR).

Although Sabiha recognized that “plagiarism is not a white and black thing,” (SRPR) thus expecting some level of ambiguity, she found idea ownership quite baffling and felt annoyed that even with all the effort put into researching and writing her paper, she still needed to give credit. Adding to her confusion was realizing that research is not a standalone investigation, but a continuous exploration of a certain phenomenon, which led her to question the notion of idea ownership. In her words:

“Furthermore, I’ve learned how no one really uses their own thoughts, many times I would find an interesting paragraph that is sourced to another journal, when I open the new journal and find the part which would be beneficial, I find that it is again sourced. Really makes me wonder who had the “first” idea” (SRPR).

Put differently, it was difficult for Sabiha to determine who was the originator—and thus the author who needed to be rightfully credited—of the idea. As a result, she concluded that because all ideas are a result of authors’ own understanding of the same or similar idea, claiming ownership is problematic, a notion that many writers, both novice and expert, share.

Maddi

Maddi is a design management major originally from Lebanon whose L1 is Arabic. Maddi was one of the few students who, from the very beginning of the semester, connected plagiarism to ownership stating that: “Plagiarism is taking ownership of other people’s work, in other words, using people’s work or ideas without crediting them” (IQ). Nonetheless, she did not feel that she owned ideas written in a research paper but did own the paper as a whole. She explained that:

“if we were to own ideas that are written on paper then might as well own anything I orally discussed in class. I view the paper as a whole to be mine but not the idea behind it. Anyone is free to be inspired by other people’s ideas but what’s important is that they approach it differently and make it their own” (IQ).

For Maddi, claims to ownership are not associated with the idea per se but with the point of view one chooses to adopt when examining the idea in question. In her

interview, she explained further by stating: “in the introduction and conclusion, I can see my own voice, but in the body [of the research paper] it’s about how you choose to explain and connect the information you research in your own way even though the ideas you use are not yours, what is original to you is the way you connect the research puzzle together.”

Throughout her research writing process, Maddi’s understanding of idea ownership and its connection to plagiarism did not deviate from her original consideration, but she had this to add about the process itself:

“I learned that the process of writing a research paper is long and multifaceted. Moreover, in order to write a good research paper, you must find the correct evidence that adds to your information rather than just take up unnecessary writing space. As in other English assignments, research requires multiple drafts to assure that the evidence provided from different articles flows together” (SRPR).

Furthermore, Maddi understood “to write in your own words” as meaning “to write what you have read in your own understanding and analysis rather than using the given information as is” (IQ). Put differently, in order “to avoid plagiarizing any ideas for [her] research” Maddi was aware that she needed to provide source information when “using the text’s ideas” even if she didn’t “use the exact wording from the text” and that she needed to approach the “topic in a new light and at a different angle” (SRPR).

When asked to highlight her research paper on physicians’ ethical conflicts with lethal injections in yellow and blue, she claimed to have “had some doubtful moments” because she felt that her “word choice in summarizing or paraphrasing” the source and her way of incorporating it into the paper belonged to her. Yet, she realized that “if you do not cite the source in these situations, even though the word choice is no longer the same, it is still plagiarism because you are still taking the ideas of the author without giving credit where it’s due” (SRPR).

Reflecting on her research writing and on the notion of idea ownership, Maddi had the following final consideration to make:

“As I was writing this research, I realized that for a paper to be yours not every single word in the text must be original, but the way that you guide the reader throughout the text and the way that you portray the message is owned by you” (SRPR).

Maddi realized that using original language to express an idea is not necessarily the hallmark of idea ownership; rather how a writer organizes ideas and, ultimately, how she conveys her message to her readers are the characteristics that lead to one’s sense of ownership.

Discussion

Much of the discussion around student plagiarism is about ownership of language (i.e. words and their organization). For example, a student’s engagement with the language in a text is closely tied to that student’s self-identity (Price 2014). However, this view of ownership needs to be expanded to include the complex relationship between language

and ideas, as well as the time and effort given during the writing process. Many scholars have pointed out that students entering academic contexts are developing more nuanced academic language (see Hyland 2004). Students, however, are also developing and learning new academic concepts and these two areas of ownership are inter-related. Helping students see this intricate connection in their own writing can be a way to acknowledge that students develop from novice writers into more advanced academic writers and thinkers. Throughout this study, students felt varying levels of ownership within their final papers, but this awareness and discussion of ownership also helped them to avoid any issues of plagiarism.

Many of the students in the study demonstrate the tension between citation practices and ownership of language and ideas. According to Pecorari and Shaw (2012:150), “The need to cite sources stems from the writer’s responsibility to make the influence that sources have had on her text transparent to the reader.” This relationship becomes more complicated if the influence a source has had on the *author* is not transparent as we see in the case of Sabiha and Elon. Furthermore, the tension increases because, as White (1999:207) asserts, “We get to own others’ ideas by understanding and thinking about them, by *making* them our own through reflection and integration into our own thinking processes” (emphasis in original). Consequently, students completing research are unsure how to locate their own ideas within the paper. Undoubtedly, one of the purposes of assigning students to complete research assignments is so that they will gain additional knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that many students will feel that new knowledge has become, in part, one aspect of their author self and, in part, an aspect of a larger disciplinary self, which includes “common knowledge” and therefore doesn’t need to be cited (as Malar shows in her SRP).

Yet, deciding when common knowledge and facts should be cited is confusing for students since “what is considered common knowledge for one individual may not be the same for another” (Chandrasoma et al. 2004:181). Moreover, what is sometimes labeled as plagiarism is often the “result of students’ honest attempts to draw on the work of other authors in their own writing and enter the discourse of their discipline” (Adam 2016:521). This is clear with Mueller’s and Malar’s research: they used more discipline-specific terms and felt ownership over those terms; although Malar did not feel the need to cite them, Mueller did. Students also felt tension when they found an idea from a source and put it in their “own words.” The distinction between citing language and citing ideas can be confusing as Sabiha demonstrates in her paper. Sabiha, Mueller, and Elon all discussed the challenges of knowing when something is “common knowledge.” Shi (2011:309) mentions that common knowledge is not a “stable construct but rather one in continual dynamic movement” because of the heterogeneous nature of communities. It is important to note that even within heterogeneous communities, there may still be similarities. For example, assignment sheets may call on students to respond to a prompt, which could generate similar experiences, and therefore similar ideas, sentences, and words. Indeed, it is not plagiarism to have the same ideas as someone else especially if students have had similar experiences. The ownership, therefore, is personal experience, not just the idea itself.

Seeing a sense of ownership in their papers is important for students developing as advanced writers within their academic majors. For many students, even though the language and ideas are socially situated, the paper can be individual as well.

Recognizing this sense of ownership can create excitement about a topic as Elon shows. On the other hand, students like Sabiha, who are unable to distinguish where ownership is in the paper, are distanced from their work.

Furthermore, students need to acknowledge that they can own their time and papers, without necessarily coming up with an “original” idea. In general, students may not have “original” ideas in these introductory research papers, which are still “original” in the sense that each student has a unique way of guiding the reader through the paper. For example, Maddi and Elon both acknowledged that how this is accomplished is determined by the author of the paper. This seems to agree with Bakhtin’s (1986) suggestion that an author has agency in determining how the reader interprets the ideas. Maddi and Elon both felt a sense of ownership in how they integrated the ideas and language from the sources in order to create a new text also confirming the importance of locating “any understanding of textual ownership in the academy as part of a socio-historically constructed intertextual framework that is part of student identity negotiation” (Chandrasoma et al. 2004:177).

Bakhtin states that an author cannot own words and therefore, what “words mean does not depend on the authors but rather on the site of textual production” (Sutherland-Smith 2016: 582). This idea is echoed more recently by Rebecca Moore Howard who states that “it is the reader, not the writer or text, who instigates meaning” (Howard 2007: 9). Results from this study, however, demonstrate that there are multiple ways of interpreting ownership within a text. A student author’s words may not be original since the students have conducted research and developed their ideas from other texts and social situations; however, there is a sense of uniqueness in each of these students’ papers. The way that an author chooses to combine words and ideas into their papers is determined by that individual student. So, while the reader does interpret the text in a unique way, authors do have some control over guiding their readers to a certain conclusion. As Bakhtin (1986: 105) mentions, “... the text (as an utterance) is individual, unique, and unrepeatable, and herein lies its entire significance (its plan, the purpose for which it was created).” The dialogue itself is important, and we should help our students see how their writing is in fact part of a larger conversation. This dialogue with the reader, however, is not possible if students see their work only in terms of other people’s words and ideas. For this dialogue to happen, students also need to recognize the agency they have in organizing their words and ideas in their papers.

Conclusion and recommendations for the composition classroom

Ownership is a fundamental concept in learner-centered pedagogies. Ownership of literacy, for example, involves students who “willingly use literacy for their own purposes” (Au 2005:75). When students use their agency to make decisions about their learning, they are more engaged in that particular learning. Ownership, then, is a concept that is encouraged in many classrooms and subjects; however, the term is much more complicated especially when composition students attempt to determine the boundaries of ownership within the writing process and the final product while fearing accusations of plagiarism. To assist students in this task, we have the following pedagogical suggestions:

Have students keep a research log

Pecorari (2013:68) has suggested that writers need to “articulate more consciously what they have learned from which sources.” This requires students to develop note-taking skills and to have enough time to absorb the new content of the articles as Abasi and Akbari (2008) suggest. We recommend that robust note taking skills be taught alongside research skills. During the process of writing their research papers, students might complete a research log writing down everything they already know about their research topic before locating sources. In this way, students can recognize that they are developing as members of disciplinary discourse communities and the process of completing research is assisting them in developing new language skills, new concepts, and connecting those in the final written product. Asking students to keep track of their research in a log can be easily adapted to fit multiple research paper assignments.

Hold class discussions on plagiarism

The concept of plagiarism should be openly discussed in the classroom to show students that, while it is a serious topic, it is also one that is complex. Discussing plagiarism in this way can help create a safe environment where students can “practice academic writing and citation skills for knowledge construction” without the fear of accusations of plagiarism (Polio and Shi 2012:99).

Demote originality by promoting ownership

Writing instructors can also stress that novice writing students do not necessarily need to come up with “original” ideas in their papers. What they can take ownership of is the way they guide the reader through the ideas that they have researched. As Maddi points out, the author’s voice in the paper is important. This conception of voice “emphasize [s] ... the choices academic writers make” (Tardy 2012:66). Furthermore, reading scholarly articles is a fundamental task for college students, and by reading articles, students’ own opinions will be formed and revised. Thus, their ideas and language will be influenced by the various authors they read. Teachers can stress the notion that ownership involves not just language and ideas, but also the effort and time spent reading and writing the paper. Students also own the choices they make in guiding the reader through the written research. By discussing ownership in this way, students may feel more involved and engaged in the research process.

As writing instructors working to prepare students to be successful in their chosen academic paths, we want students to be engaged in their writing and to feel a sense of ownership and self-confidence in the work they produce. These suggestions can help move students and instructors from a fear of being caught plagiarizing to facilitating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable discussing the complicated ideas of plagiarism. In conclusion, we believe that with the right “coaching” or guidance from their instructors, students will start to understand the subtleties of plagiarism and the importance of ownership in their writing, ultimately leading them to become good academic writers.

Appendix

Table 1 Student Participant Demographic Information

Student Participants	Native Language	Additional Languages	Country of Origin	Major
Ruby	Urdu	English, Arabic	Pakistan	Psychology
Elon ^a	English	Hindi	India	Computer Engineering
Mueller ^a	English	Hindi	India	Computer Engineering
Zamir	Arabic	English	Iraq	Civil Engineering
Agatha	English	Hindi, Malayalam	India	International Studies
Tea	English	French, Malayalam	India	Chemical Engineering
Malar ^a	Malayalam	English	India	Psychology
Sabiha ^a	Arabic	English	Palestine	Industrial Engineering
Abigail	English	Hindi, Konkani	India	Physics
Bilbo	Bangla	English	Bangladesh	Chemical Engineering
Talida	Arabic	English	Egypt	Design Management
Inspira	Malayalam	English, Hindi	India	Biology
Imaamka	Somali	English, Arabic	Somalia	Civil Engineering
Cayde	Arabic	English, Japanese	Comoros	Computer Science
Jade	English	Arabic	Jordan	Design Management
Maddi ^a	Arabic	English, French	Lebanon	Design Management
Rima	Arabic	English	Syria	Civil Engineering
Mishoo	Arabic	English	Egypt	Civil Engineering

^aStudents who gave consent to be interviewed

Abbreviations

L1: Native language speaker; L2: Additional language speaker; IQ: Initial Questionnaire; POD: Plagiarism and Ownership Discussion; SRP: Short Research Paper; SRPR: Short Research Paper Reflection

Supplementary Information

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Additional file 1. Writing 102 Plagiarism In Class Activity.

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Authors' contributions

Author 1: Methods, Appendix. Author 2: Introduction, Additional file 1. Authors 1 and 2: Literature review, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, and revision of entire article. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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