

The Instruction Librarian's Role in Discussing Issues of Academic Integrity

Lynn D. Lampert

California State University Northridge

When trying to think of creative ways to inform students about the importance of ethically using information in their work, I have often thought of parodying the lyrics of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" during an instructional session. Just think about the possibilities for individuals you could insert from the past couple of years in a plagiarism awareness song. Jayson Blair of the New York Times, historian Doris Goodwin, Stephen Glass of The New Republic and now even the scandal ridden "Oprah Book Club" famed memoirist James Frey are just a few famous figures eligible for mention in an unethical use of information themed song. Unfortunately, most of these more notable cases catch public attention for a short period of time only to fade into distant memory and then be recalled in the next related article highlighting the latest ethical infraction whether it be plagiarism, misuse of information, fabrication, etc. In general, people rarely take the time to look at the educational ramifications of the scandal and the reverberations felt within the related discipline or profession. This is unfortunate as these cases are serious examples of how a lack of awareness about the ethical uses of information in the "information age" abounds both within and beyond the ivory tower. Opportunities for educational reform to thwart plagiarism and other acts of academic dishonesty are often overshadowed by attempts to fix the problem by using technology or policies to police and punish student offenders.

While parodied karaoke has luckily not made it into any of my instructional sessions yet, I have found great success in highlighting these breeches of disciplinary misconduct for my students in order to demonstrate to them the real life consequences of not ethically using information in research. As Ron Robin notes when discussing seven notable cases of academic misconduct in his thought provoking book *Scandals and Scoundrels: Seven Cases the Shook the Academy*, "Deviancy debates and scandal are in themselves necessary vital signs of a vibrant intellectual body, delineating its rules and regulations through the creation of borders and margins"¹. As I have discussed before in my article focusing on information literacy instruction for journalism students², high profile cases of plagiarism and other unethical misuses of information often

provide instructional librarians an entrée into creating discipline based discussions and exercises about plagiarism with both undergraduate and graduate students.

Within the realms of information literacy instructional literature and practice a great deal of attention is often paid to incorporating better ways to teach students to find, locate and retrieve information while less focus is placed on educating our students about ethical and legal usages of information. The fifth standard of the Association of College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Standards of Higher Education calls for students to be able to, "understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally"³ – yet it is common to find it difficult to critically incorporate these important issues into instructional sessions due to time limitations or seemingly restrictive faculty assignment guidelines.

At the midwinter meeting of the American Library Association in San Antonio, I lead a pre-conference entitled "Combating the Culture of Copy: Information Literacy Interventions for Plagiarism." In this workshop some of the most fruitful discussions among participants revolved around effective ways that librarians can and should assist students and faculty in recognizing their discipline's ethical codes and preferred formats of citation and the documentation of sources. When given the luxury of time to sit back and ponder ways to integrate exercises that promote the ethical usage and synthesis of information in student research, librarians present were quick to think of creative strategies that would work across academic disciplines. It seems that the more we investigate and practice discipline based approaches to conducting information literacy instruction we realize the unique role that we as librarians can play. As Michelle Holschuh-Simmons explains in her article which explores the role of the librarian as 'disciplinary discourse mediator', academic librarians often act as mediators working to define and explain the culture and discourse of a discipline to students alongside faculty. She notes that, "Instruction librarians, especially those with subject specializations are positioned as simultaneous insid-

ers and outsiders in a discipline; this in-between position places librarians well to facilitate students' awareness and understanding of disciplinary genres"⁴.

When we think about our unique positioning as 'disciplinary mediators' and research specialists in the university, we can begin to see how our knowledge of a discipline's methods of citation and its corollary professional codes of ethics when using and disseminating information, can be transferred to students through instructional settings. Issues of academic dishonesty, plagiarism, the unethical misuse of information and copyright violations are viewed and handled differently in many disciplines. When we move beyond the foundational level of decoding APA and MLA styles, to explaining why these documentation methods are valued and used in a discipline's literature, we introduce students to the issues that live and breathe both in and beyond the 5th ACRL Information Literacy Standard.

The key to creating exercises and materials in this area is to make sure that the issues presented are relevant, realistic and well placed in the context of a discipline's discourse or culture. This can be done by simply locating and reviewing a discipline's professional associations' code of ethics. Or as suggested in recent research, by creating problem based assignments that link course content and information literacy issues, we can begin to prevent plagiarism⁵. In the preconference participants worked to come up with several different disciplinary based instructional scenarios that simultaneously exposed students to key ethics of information issues while teaching them to navigate resources. Some of the key tactics that librarians were reminded to consider when integrating anti-plagiarism or ethical discussions into information literacy sessions include:

- Reinvestigating what plagiarism and the unethical use of information mean in the context of a particular discipline.
- Familiarizing oneself with the discipline's preferred style of formatting and code of ethics.
- Examining the curricular standards required for disciplinary accreditation.
- Identifying discipline/professional associations that have a focus on ethics.
- Demonstrating a willingness to make resources available to aid in the study of the ethics of information in every discipline where it is appropriate⁶.

An example of how a librarian might integrate these ideas into information literacy instruction for anthropology students might involve having students search for information on Derek Freeman's unethical research assault on Margaret Mead. Or if needed, the class could review selected articles and issues surrounding the recent ethical review of my former UCSB professor Napoleon Chagnon and the late James Neel. The class could then be exposed to the American Anthropological Association's review⁷ of Chagnon and Neel's work spurred on by the allegations of unethical research practices made in James Tierney's book *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*.

By asking students to look beyond the top five hits retrieved in their favorite full text database and consider the issues involved in the disciplinary debates they represent, librarians can encourage critical thinking and promote a better understanding of why information ethics are important within academic and society. This will help us move beyond merely presenting the skills level training involved in introducing students to the mechanics of citation and documentation styles. By discussing a discipline's documented stance on ethically using information we will foster interest and the development of the critical thinking skills students need to successfully navigate the issues and research requirements of their majors, coursework and perhaps even future careers.

¹Lynn Lampert. "Integrating Discipline based anti-plagiarism instruction into the information literacy curriculum," *Reference Services Review*, 32:4 (2004), 347-355.

²Ron Robin, *Scandals and Scoundrels: Seven Cases that Shook the Academy*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2004.

³Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," American Library Association (2000) <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm> (accessed February 10, 2006).

⁴Michelle Holschuh Simmons, "Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators: Using Genre Theory to Move Toward Critical Information Literacy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 5:3 (2005), 297-311.

⁵J.M. Hurlbert, C.R. Savidge and G.R. Laudenslager, "Process-based assignments: how promoting information literacy prevents plagiarism", *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 10:1 (2003), 39-51.

⁶Lynn Lampert. "Integrating Discipline based anti-plagiarism instruction into the information literacy curriculum," *Reference Services Review*, 32:4 (2004), 347-355.

⁷Thomas A. Gregor and Daniel R. Gross. "Guilt by Association: The Culture of Accusation and the American Anthropological Association's Investigation of Darkness in El Dorado," *American Anthropologist*, 106:4, 697-698.