

Reducing Plagiarism and Improving Writing: A Lesson from Chinese Painting

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Abstract

Both research and experience has established that plagiarism is a relatively common feature in L2 writing. This is the result of several factors, including lack of understanding of the original material, limitations in academic vocabulary, time constraints, and so on. Although there are specific sanctioned instances where copying and presenting works as your own in cultures such as Chinese, plagiarism is never allowed. How then can a university level writing instructor overcome the confusion this creates among groups such as Chinese L2 students? In response to this question, the author proposes a theoretical model, based upon a traditional analytical framework for Chinese painting – where copying is a requirement. This model mimics the Six Principles proposed by Hsieh He's [or Xiè Hè's – 謝赫] in 520 AD. By modifying, translating, and directly applying these Six Principles to writing, students can better learn how to avoid plagiarism, gain a greater understanding of the material they are reading, and develop ways to better express themselves.

Keywords: L2 writing, plagiarism, reducing plagiarism, theoretical writing model, analytical tools, writing instruction, Chinese painting principles, ESL, Canada, Canadian university, practitioner, patchwriting

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“Plagiarism (noun): the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own.”

Oxford Dictionary

As a writer, editor, and an experienced academic writing tutor at a major Canadian research university I have, over the years, seen numerous examples of plagiarized material in essays, group reports, research papers, and even theses. This is often a situation among ESL students especially from China. My observations are not unique. As Pecorari (2015) noted, “It is now well established that plagiarism is a relatively common feature in much L2 writing” (p. 94). There is often a misconception in the West regarding the Chinese cultural attitude towards copying as an accepted practice. While there are legitimate reasons for this thinking, plagiarism is never allowed in academic settings.

In my experience, most plagiarism is unintentional. It typically takes the form of ‘patch- writing’. Here, a common problem is the inability to express an understanding of the reference material in the student’s own words. This can either stem from a lack of understanding, lack of an adequate vocabulary, or a lack of organization necessary to expand the ideas.

However, some of the plagiarism is deliberate. This typically consists of copying other’s work (verbatim) and presenting it as their own. Alternately, students mix unattributed work with their own writing to pretend the work is original. The former is often easily recognized because of a change in writing style or vocabulary. In the latter, it is often identified via awkward sentence construction as the student attempts to meld the different material. When confronted with possible plagiarism, some students simply lie and say it is their own work. If this occurs, I remind them to ensure it is truly their writing and that I am required, by department and university regulations to submit the suspect piece to the department librarian for analysis. Others, when asked, ‘confess’ and give reasons such as:

- The need to meet a tight deadline (faster to copy).
- Not understanding the material. Here, the student presents another’s work to create a perceived level of understanding.
- The need to easily fill gaps in their own writing.

Another example of plagiarism, I have seen with groups struggling with writing, is the “sharing” of work; that is, copying and resubmitting assignments to help each other out. “Group” work in this instance is plagiarism as the material is seldom changed and always unattributed.

Of course, all writing is group work in the sense that the student is building upon the works of others. One strategy I employ, to help students acknowledge source material, is to have them consider all papers as group work. In group projects, all student names are included in the final paper. As part of the group, the authors of the reference sources also become group members (i.e., they contribute to the overall success of the assignment). As a result, the authors should be included, through citations and references, for their contribution.

In past discussions regarding instances of plagiarism among ESL students, several professors responded with statements alluding to copying as being part of that student’s culture. This is typically a more prevalent response, at least in my experience, if the student is Chinese or South Asian. Such responses, and they are becoming rarer, do two things. First, it creates a stereotype of how students from a certain region act. Second, it somehow trivializes plagiarism by making it something to be expected.

Sowdon (2005) discusses the notion of plagiarism as a virtue. Simply stated, the teacher has the answer, and the student’s role is to reproduce this ‘correct’ answer when responding to the question. The virtue here arises from “producing what you know to be correct” (p. 227). Yes, there are different expectations for writing in different languages. However, having an in-depth familiarity with traditional Chinese culture, I find Sowdon’s interpretation to be misleading.

In China, there is a long historical precedent that clearly demonstrates plagiarism was not an

accepted practice. According to Liu (2005) and Wieger (1927), the two words for plagiarism [piāoqiè – 剽窃 and chāoxí – 抄袭] have existed in the Chinese language since at least the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). The former “means to rob or steal someone else’s writing”, whereas the latter means “to copy and steal” (Liu, 2005, p. 235).

My own recent conversation with Ms. Law Yuk Ching, a secondary school teacher and disciplinarian, with 35 years of experience within the Hong Kong school system also confirms that plagiarism is not tolerated. There, the offense is punishable by disciplinary action ranging from failing and having to retake an examination to suspension or expulsion from school (C. Law, personal communication, May 20, 2019). It becomes obvious that copying the writing of others and presenting it as your own is not allowed in Hong Kong, China, or Taiwan. Why then would some westerners be confused and think that plagiarism is somehow part of Chinese culture?

As it turns out there are two conditions in Chinese culture, specifically Chinese painting, where exact copying is allowed. The first was the result of a lack of mechanical reproduction technology, such as photography, to exactly copy works of art (Cahill, 1994). In order to share paintings, connoisseurs would have works from their collections accurately copied including, in many examples, signatures and dates as these often formed part of the composition. These copies could then be circulated for examination and comment. While there are a minor number of recorded instances of unscrupulous persons replacing originals with copies, the intent of reproduction was for scholarly discourse only.

There were, however, numerous examples of intentional plagiarism that more closely resembles the example of sharing work between students to meet assignment deadlines. According to Cahill (1994), several Chinese painters, including the famous Tang Yin (1470- 1524), sometimes resorted to “collaboration” to satisfy market demand. In Tang Yin’s case, he had his senior do the preliminary brush work – figures that were common and easiest to paint. Tang next took the work over, added his flourishes, dated, signed, and sealed the painting. Instead of presenting the finished product as works “from the studio of...” he sold them, at an inflated price, as his sole original work. This form of plagiarism is now plaguing art historians, auction houses, and collectors as more Chinese works of art come up for sale on the international market.

The second condition where copying and presenting the work as your own occurs when students are learning to paint (Sze, 1959). Here, the student copies the original, often via tracing, and presents it to the teacher as his or her own reproduction. This practice is done to deconstruct works by well-known painters and demonstrate variations in style and technique. Additionally, this process aids in understanding the artist’s underlying intent (i.e., the symbolism within the painting). Here, copying is not done to plagiarize. That is, there is no attempt to pretend that a student’s reproduction is an original. The intent is clear: plagiarism has a specific goal – to instruct, not to deceive.

Following along this discussion of Chinese painting, it occurred to me that we could look at the process of training painters as a means to train all students, not just ESL students, to become better academic writers. Of course, the following discussion is theoretical and has not been tested

in a classroom setting. This would be the obvious next step for evaluating both the practicality and applicability of my proposed ‘model’.

In order to develop this interdisciplinary approach, I first turned to the writings of one of the most famous Chinese painting critics – Hsieh He [or Xiè Hè – 謝赫]. In approximately 550 AD, he proposed Six Principles [繪 畫 六 法, Huìhuà Liùfǎ] or “Six Points when judging a painting” for both analyzing and creating works of art. In order, they are:

1. *Ch’i Yun* or vitality. This refers to the energy in the work that is conveyed from the painter to the viewer.
2. *Ku Fa* or bone method. This refers to creating structure within the work.
3. *Ying Wu*. This term refers to the depiction of form. Or, as the Chinese say, “according to the object, draw its form”.
4. *Sui Lei* refers to the application of color, layering, and the creation of values and tones.
5. *Ching Ying* or division and planning. This term relates directly to the organization and composition of the piece.
6. *Chuan mu*. The passing on of the master’s brush (i.e., technique). Simply stated, copy models to learn technique.

What I am proposing is a model of writing analysis that mimics Hsieh Ho’s analytical approach to painting to help students better understand and improve their own writing. Because these principles are quite abstract, even for Chinese speakers, the easiest way to begin the process would be to have students engage in a pre-activity that involves comparative analysis of series of similar subjects of one specific painter or artist. If we continue in the Chinese ‘vein’, we could utilize the paintings by Ni Tsan [Ni Zan – 倪瓚] (1301-1374). One of the most famous painters in Chinese history, during his career he painted only one subject everyday – trees and rocks in an otherwise barren landscape. His compositions were reflections on the state of the empire or on his own life and career. In Western painting, examples could include Claude Monet’s series *Les Meules à Giverny* (The [Hay]stacks at Giverny), David Hockney’s *Swimming Pools*, or Paul Cezanne’s *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*.

To begin, students would be presented with an example of the work for analysis and a list of the six principles. The teacher would explain each of the principles. To avoid stress, students could be randomly divided into small groups and given one principle to respond to. Each group would be asked to write as many short sentences they can to explain what the artist did to meet the requirements of the Principle. Since there are no precedents the students could refer to, they must rely on critical thinking skills to develop their answers. After sharing with the class, a second example is presented and student groups are required to demonstrate how the second art piece fits the criteria of the Principle and then how it compares to the first example.

Next, the instructor presents a modified version of the Six Principles, which I have transposed to

refer to writing.

1. Vitality would consider how the author creates interest and leads the reader through the writing.
2. Bone Method studies the structure of the writing. How does the author outline, order, or manage sources to create a piece that is cohesive and flows?
3. Correspondence to form asks the reader to describe how the reader follows and understands the writing. That is, what is the response to the piece from the point of view of the reader and not the writer.
4. Suitability looks at word choice (color), explores layering in writing (i.e., depth of meaning and understanding). How does the layering help to create more complex meaning? As well, how does it force the reader to seek alternate meaning and understanding?
5. Division and Planning. How is the writing organized? Is there a clearly observable flow and progression? Are there alternate ways of organizing the same elements to create new works or add clarity to the existing work?
6. Copy models. Here the purpose is to study many examples of good writing, especially in your chosen field, to effectively understand and express ideas in your own words.

Principle number 6 is especially valuable to students, as they are most often unaware of three basic precepts of writing.

- i. Writing is difficult and good writing is directly connected to good thinking.
- ii. Writing is a process. It is not just putting words on paper. Writing should also be viewed as a means to record and sort out your ideas on paper. Good writing is the result of these ideas being synthesized and presented in a way that makes sense to the reader.
- iii. Good writing requires the ability to effectively read the source.

Once the instructor has explained the principles, students are then given a piece of writing. Following the previous procedure for analyzing painting, they use the new principles to analyze the written document. The key here is not to write an emotional response to the work (e.g., "This makes me feel ..."). The point of the exercise is analytical. We are applying a set of principles, from a discipline that allows copying, to deconstruct written examples and create new works that are not plagiarized. The final phase of these exercises would include the students synthesizing the information from the original piece and expressing it in their own words.

When engaging in this exercise it might be of value to remember the words of another Chinese writer, Lu Chi (1987), who said, "*When studying the works of the Masters, I watch the working of their minds*".

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