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Web Writing and Citation

The Authority of Communities

Elizabeth Switaj

The web is made of citations. Without citations, there would be a worldwide collection of unconnected digital spaces instead of a web. Hypertext markup language (HTML) would be text markup language. In the online world, citation is not an arbitrary requirement enforced by authority figures but, rather, a necessary, community-based value. The communities and cultures that come together online tend to value citation, even if they do not value copyright. Downloading a movie is fine; claiming to have made it is not.

Despite the importance of citation to its organization and architecture, the Internet has often been blamed for plagiarism.[1] Certainly students can copy and paste passages from websites and other digital documents more easily than from printed matter. Instead of looking at the influence of the web and digital cultures as a problem to be solved, however, instructors should take advantage of the importance of citation in online communities to help students understand the logic behind different ways of crediting sources and to help them see that, while academic citation formats may seem esoteric and arbitrary, they are akin to practices in which students who are active online engage on a daily basis. In other words, web writing presents an opportunity to teach citation as a community practice—and to make giving credit something students want to do, rather than something they have to do. In composition and writing-intensive courses, this goal can be reached by studying existing web writing, producing web writing embedded within existing communities, and by developing a unique set of citation standards based on the class's authority as a community.

Traditional ways of teaching citation are authoritarian and follow what Paulo Freire called the "banking model" of education.[2] Knowledge is treat-

ed as a set quantity; citation standards are depicted as unchanging ideals that must be deposited into students' minds. Teaching citation through observation of and participation in online communities, by contrast, acknowledges that expectations for giving credit depend upon culture and community. By allowing students to engage with the logic of citation in different communities instead of asking them to follow regulations, instructors prepare them to discuss and debate the role of citation. Students can contribute to our understanding of what citation should be if we give them the tools to understand current expectations and the reasons for them. This approach resembles the one taken by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say / I Say* in that it focuses on teaching students how to join conversations in their writing.[3] Where it differs is in locating these conversations specifically within communities and in viewing these communities as authorities on the rules of these discussions. Such a focus could be achieved without the online element, but using web writing for this task makes explicit the connections between students' activities outside the classroom and the practice of citation in academic writing. Also, on the Internet, conversations happen faster and more visibly, making the communities in which they take place easier to observe and participate in, especially given the time limitations imposed by semesters or quarters.

Communities develop citation standards, and authorities codify them. A number of examples of these two aspects of the development of expectations for giving others credit online can be given to students. Ryan Cordell has described using examples from social media to explain citation practices to students: "You wouldn't steal somebody's post on Twitter, he explains to them. Instead you mark it with 'RT,' for retweet. Same with Facebook: 'If you get something cool from someone, you tag them'." Academic citation, similarly, shows where ideas comes from.[4] Descriptions of the connections between the logic of academic and of social-media citation can be much more detailed, however.

The history of citation on Twitter provides examples of the importance of citation and of various kinds of citation practices. Users quote each other by retweeting. This feature only became automatic a few years ago. Originally, retweeting had to be done manually, by copying text and prefacing it with "RT @[username]"—a convention that became widespread on Twitter within a year of its launch. Some people on Twitter still use this

method, especially when they want to add a comment before the quotation. (Sometimes the comment is placed afterwards, with a character such as "|" dividing the quoted material from the original.) "RT" is changed to "MT" ("modified tweet") when the wording is altered. Less commonly used, and originating with blogs, are "via" and "h/t" ("hat tip") to denote intermediary sources. The early development of "RT" by Twitter users illustrates how much online communities value giving credit. The distinctions between "RT," "MT," and "via" or "h/t" show the value placed on accuracy in giving credit; they can be compared to academic citation practices for quotations, paraphrased passages, and intermediary sources. Including "@[username]" also creates a conversation, since the cited user receives a notification of the tweet from Twitter. Scholarly citation, too, is a kind of conversation, though a less efficient one. On Twitter, linking to external articles is also a citational practice, especially when those links are prefaced with a quotation from or summary of the piece. This particular practice, however, is about more than credit: the whole article provides an additional, fuller context as well. One of the purposes of citation in both online and academic communities is to allow one's readers to access one's sources. Finally, Twitter provides an example of how academic citation standards are formed by communities, as the Modern Language Association (MLA) released a standard style for citing tweets due to demands from the community that uses the MLA style. Discussing this particular example also provides an opportunity to illustrate that academic disciplines form communities.

At the same time, not every borrowing of material on Twitter needs to be cited. Memes in which specific phrases or pictures are played with to respond to different situations are rarely credited to their creators. No one ever provides a citation when they do something "for great justice." Memes are an example of the kind of intertextuality that Susan Blum refers to when she describes students quoting media to each other without the kind of boundaries between the speaker's and others' ideas that academic writing requires.[5] In fact, web communities regard memes as a kind of common knowledge. Some pieces of common knowledge are, as Amy England argues, used to proclaim membership in a discourse community.[6] Only someone who is new to a community, and thus not fully cognizant of the community's standards and assumptions, would think that I invented Serious Cat if I tweeted a picture of him with the caption "Serious Cat. He's seriously common knowledge."[7] Teaching how the discourse communi-

ty determines what is considered common knowledge presents a challenge for teaching, as students without direct experience within said community will struggle to judge precisely what knowledge is considered common. New members of online and academic communities should proceed cautiously, citing whenever in doubt and checking with more experienced community members along the way.

In addition to describing the history of citation within a particular digital community, instructors can also assign students to observe and describe the citation practices of specific communities. The description can take the form of an essay, a blog post, or an oral presentation and can be completed individually or in small groups. In any case, making this project public (through an unprotected blog post or a recorded presentation uploaded to YouTube, for example) will potentially allow members of the community discussed to comment on whether they believe the students have accurately described their expectations. Students might also contact community members directly and quote or paraphrase them in their reports. Having students explore and consider the role of citation on the web in this way allows them to understand more deeply the uses of citation (perhaps even discovering functions unknown to the instructor) and to develop their abilities to adapt to the expectations for citation of different communities.

Online communities also provide examples of what happens when expectations for giving credit are violated, and when members of a community hold different expectations. A widely debated case occurred when white feminist blogger Amanda Marcotte of Pandagon was accused of plagiarizing the work of a woman of color blogger who, at the time, went by the pseudonym Brownfemipower.[8] The ensuing discussions, which took place in posts and comments on numerous blogs, considered not only the precise definition of plagiarism but also how issues of power and privilege affect citation. For many in the communities drawn into this debate, citing commentators who represent less-heard perspectives is a matter of social justice. A blogger for major feminist blog *Feministe*, going under the name Holly (no surname), related the controversy to a broader context in which ideas espoused by people of color are not heard, let alone valued, until a white person restates them.[9]

During the Spring 2014 semester, I divided my ENG 102: Composition II

course at the College of the Marshall Islands into small groups to write rhetorical analyses of blog posts about this controversy, using a Google Drive document to collaborate. This assignment could also be used in various cultural studies courses. After students read each other's analyses, they discussed the issue and generally agreed that it mattered less whether something can be labeled plagiarism and mattered more that failure to pay attention to what someone else has said on a subject, and to demonstrate that attention through citation, is disrespectful. Asked how such actions differ from their collaborative writing, since Google Drive does not record who wrote which sentence, students pointed out that they had agreed to work together—if they had so wished, they could have each written a paragraph and signed it—while in the case discussed no such agreement had been made.

Failing to cite someone else's work on a subject, whether through intentional plagiarism or a failure to fully explore what had already been written, can be disenfranchising. Good citation requires good research first, and while the precise definition of plagiarism does matter, it is more important that students understand how to cite well. Instead of teaching the avoidance of plagiarism, we must teach the practice of good research and citation so that when students, through their writing, participate in conversations they do so as conscientious members of the communities in which they are writing.

Having explored community-based citation practices online, classes can consider the distinction between these expectations and the legal standard of copyright. Sometimes, copyright overlaps these expectations. For example, in the Cooks Source case, a small magazine copied content from food bloggers without permission or sufficient credit; the initial discovery of a theft of material led to a crowdsourced search for examples of plagiarized content. Traci Gardner has described a lesson-plan on plagiarism, the Internet, and the public domain based around this controversy. Gardner suggests a number of pages on the incident that students can read before answering such questions as, "Where are public domain materials on the Internet?" and "When do you need permission [to reproduce others' work]?"[10] In contrast to that situation, sometimes copyright stifles discussions within communities—perhaps the most famous academic case being that of the James Joyce Estate. While many of us would prefer to live in a

more ideal world where alternative sharing-based models such as Creative Commons or Copyleft reign, students should still be aware of the potential implications of copyright law for any public web-writing they might produce.

Once students have practiced observing and analyzing the citation practices of online communities, and understand the implications of copyright for citation practices, the next step is for them to produce work embedded in such communities. Doing so provides students with the experience of meeting standards and (potentially) being corrected by peers and authorities beyond the classroom. Moreover, as they become more involved in these communities, they also become more likely to continue participating and writing in them even after the course concludes. Online communities, even ones without specifically pedagogical aims, can support life-long learning.

Given that citation matters so much to Wikipedia that the community's designation for insufficiently sourced information ("[citation needed]") became the subject of a web comic that spurred a meme, Wikipedia may seem to be an ideal community for this kind of project. Indeed, plagiarism and insufficient citation are often caught quickly by Wikipedians. Recently, however, there has been some negativity among active, experienced Wikipedia editors towards such assignments. They believe student editors are more prone to making flawed edits that have to be reverted.[11] These stories can be used to frame assignments that involve editing Wikipedia pages in order to emphasize the need to understand and follow the community's standards. Siobhan Senier's "Indigenizing Wikipedia" essay (in this volume) describes one possible assignment that engages with community standards about what kinds of sources need to be cited to establish notability in particular. My own favorite Wikipedia assignment to give students is embedded in a longer research project. I require students to consult the site as part of their initial research. Then, after they complete the bulk of their secondary research, they must return to the articles they read and add any new information they have found. This process allows them to see not only that citation matters (as failure to cite sources will result in their edits being reverted) but also how to gauge the value of Wikipedia articles more accurately. Because the original articles vary in quality, I either use

this assignment as an ungraded in-class activity or grade students based on a reflection paper.

Another way to allow students to produce web-writing embedded in communities is for students to begin their own blogs, or contribute to a group blog, designed to be part of a specific blogosphere (feminist, fandom, etc.). The disadvantage of this assignment is that, at least at first, the writing will be less immersed in the community; fewer readers from the community means fewer chances for the community to react to violations of its expectations for giving credit. The advantage is that, in order to make their blogs part of a community, students must cite blogs already established in the community, especially through links within blogposts that send trackback comments; they must, in other words, conduct online research and participate in ongoing conversations.

At the same time that students writing publicly can participate in outside communities, a class creating web writing forms its own community. The classroom community is entitled to create its own standards for citation, though the development of these standards has to be constrained somewhat by membership in broader institutional and academic communities. It would be a disservice to allow students to decide, for instance, that they should be allowed to copy and paste whatever they want without any credit (and if students did suggest such a standard, it would likely indicate that they had not taken the assignment to develop standards seriously).

Demanding that students use an existing citation style can cause developing writers anxiety and, especially given the proliferation of formats in different disciplines, has questionable value in undergraduate education.[12] When students are responsible for their own citation rules, instead of running a white-knuckle Google search for "MLA citation animated GIF linked Facebook hosted Tumblr" (for example), they can ask their classmates to decide on a standard, if time permits. Otherwise, they are more likely to be able to make a logical decision about how to cite a resource for which there is no specific citation format because they will have a thorough understanding of the reasons why their footnotes, endnotes, or in-text citations look the way they do.

As part of the process of inventing their own standardized citation style,

students might also be asked to consider whether it would suit any of the purposes of citation to name things that have contributed to their papers that are not usually credited in academic work. How much of the research process should be documented? At the end of a brief article on the effects of Google, Chris DiBona suggests an alternative approach to citation in the age of Google by listing the searches he undertook while completing the piece.[13] A list of search terms might help readers discover the broader intellectual context of issues and ideas being discussed and to more thoroughly understand the writer's approach. That search results change over time and due to "personalized search" settings is an issue that might be raised during the discussion about whether to include search terms. Another example of work that could be credited, but usually is not, is software used by students. Do word processing programs, citation managers, and their developers not deserve credit?

Whatever students decide, their knowledge about the kinds of considerations that go into the development of citation styles will allow them to understand whatever systems they may be required to use in the future and to make similar judgments later in life. Because they will be required to think about the placement of commas, periods, and other punctuation marks, they will also have a greater awareness of the level of detail at which citation templates need to be read. Those students who go on to work in academia or in publishing may also be able to apply this experience to the revision of existing stylesheets and citation formats.

Citation is not condemned to cramped footnotes in arcane tomes and single-reader term papers. However, students will think that citation practices are simply rules to follow when citation guides are presented without any indication of where they came from or how they connect to practices many students already engage in on a daily basis. Perhaps even more troubling, many pedagogical approaches to citation do not focus on engaging in good practices but instead focus on avoiding bad ones. This negative focus creates distrust of the online world and a climate of fear in the classroom. Instead of wanting to give credit where it is due and to participate in community conversations, conscientious students panic over periods versus commas in bibliographic entries. Less well-intentioned students try to game the system—doing just enough work to avoid (provable) plagiarism. Teaching citation through web writing will not prevent all such cases, but

it can help students develop intrinsic motivation to practice good citation as defined by whatever communities they participate in. When students are provided an understanding of the reasons for existing citation practices, they can also contribute to discussions of when citation should happen and how it should look. They can shape the future expectations of communities both within and outside of academia. Preparing students to participate fully and rationally in their present and future communities is, after all, one of the most important goals of higher education.

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See an earlier version of this essay with open peer review comments.[14]

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