

LBAR Lesson XII: Ethics and Issues 2 (Intellectual Property – Plagiarism)

Keywords: Plagiarize

In the last lesson we opened up several issues related to the concept of intellectual property, but especially those involving piracy. Piracy, especially software piracy, is a great way to get kids to think about ethics in Cyberspace, as it involves a practice so many young people engage in, probably because they have not stopped to think about what they are doing. Yet piracy is not just an ethical question; it is also a legal one that involves penalties under the sanction of law. This makes it different from another commonly-associated issue in intellectual property: plagiarism.

The word plagiarize comes from the Latin word *plagiarius* (especially a child), which means to kidnap. One who plagiarizes is then one who kidnaps what is not theirs. Plagiarism is thus theft, but it is also lying. Indeed, it is not so much that you take what belongs to another, but that you lie about doing so; plagiarism is a failure to acknowledge the source of your thoughts and ideas. Probably for as long as you can remember teachers have told you to give credit where credit is due; in this case, it means providing a citation when you quote or paraphrase the words of another. You do so not only because you got those words from someone else, and hence do not want to steal them, but more importantly because you do not want to suggest that you came up with these words and ideas. To do so is to misrepresent yourself, or put another way, to lie about what you actually did. Plagiarism is not a crime punishable by law, but it is a serious breach of intellectual and academic etiquette; in some instances, it can result in a much lower grade as well as a stern warning from your teacher; in other instances, it can get you thrown out of school.

But all of this you know. What we want to think about is both why plagiarism occurs, and how Cyberspace promotes and inhibits it. If you can do this, you are more likely to be aware of the possibility of plagiarism, even when you do not intend to do it. In fact, plagiarism can happen intentionally or not, though the punishment will be the same. That is why you must take it seriously before it occurs, so as to prevent it from occurring.

First, let's remember again what Cyberspace does: it removes many of the restrictions on our communications. That means that we can communicate much more easily and freely than we ever could before. But to communicate does not simply mean to talk/type to another person directly; it can also mean to read/see/listen to things available in Cyberspace. When you read an article in the encyclopedia Britannica online, you are still communicating; in this instance, you are reading what the author of that article wrote. It is as if you are talking through text, which is exactly what reading is doing; you are having a dialogue through the written word. All of the information available to you online is simply transcribed speech; it is merely rendered digitally for your convenience. Yet that it is online means you can access it when, where and how you would like; you no longer have to go to a library to sit amongst books pouring over pages to find information. Thus, you can cover more information faster and more efficiently than you could by searching through books. That of course is Cyberspace's benefit. But what of its drawbacks?

Think of it this way: not that long ago, when your teacher gave you an assignment, say to write a paper on the American Revolution, you would have gone to the library to get your information. First, you had to decide what books to read (you cannot look through them all, as that involves finding them all, taking them all down, finding the relevant information, then re-shelving them), then you would have to find the book, read through it until you found what you were looking for, read through the relevant

sections, write down relevant facts and quotations, and then go home to write the paper using all that you found. Given how your information was acquired (physically), the likelihood that you would forget to acknowledge one of your sources through quotations and citations was diminished; if you did not take good notes, it meant a return trip to the library! Now, it does not take much to see how Cyberspace changes this. What is different now, and how do those differences make plagiarism more relevant?

(This is not only a simple failure to attribute, but an oversight caused by the glut of information itself, which, as it is being scanned and processed, can be used without attribution owing to ease of access. Ironically, Cyberspace can promote carelessness in this way).

So you see that in some ways Cyberspace has made plagiarism easy. I mean by that not only that it is more tempting because there is more information, but more importantly, that it is more likely owing to the breath of information available. In a way, the ease with which Cyberspace delivers to us limitless information brings with it the possibility of intellectual laziness, i.e., that we do not do our due diligence when it comes to attributing sources. But part of being a citizen means accepting responsibility; when one agrees to use the resources available online, one also agrees to use them well. Good cyber-citizens are those who are aware of problems such as piracy and plagiarism, and are diligent in making sure they do not engage in behavior that might get them in trouble. Indeed, citizenship, cyber or otherwise, means doing things correctly not because you fear punishment, but because you understand why it is correct to do those things. In the case of plagiarism, we do not take someone else's words and pass them off as our own because we fear getting a bad grade or being thrown out of school; rather, we do not do it because we want to be measured according to our own merits, which means doing our own work.