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Reconceptualizing Citation Practices as “Feminist Memory”

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Cover Page Footnote

My experiences in Lehman College's Writing Across the Curriculum Program, the Princeton Writing Program, Bard's Language and Thinking Program, and the West Point Writing Program have shaped this piece. I am thankful to colleagues, friends, and students who grow and learn with me.

Reconceptualizing Citation Practices as “Feminist Memory”

Introduction and Rationale:

I had been thinking and teaching about citation incorrectly. For years, I had thought of it as a means to provide cover for myself, as a defensive maneuver to protect against scholarly shame, punishment, and ostracism. In retrospect, it is no surprise that this was my approach. I completed my undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as started teaching during the heyday of electronic and commercialized surveillance systems like TurnItIn.com (Zwagerman, 2008). Such technology sent two clear messages: citing was critically important, enough for institutions to invest money in detecting errors, and, to avoid scholarly disgrace, I needed to get citation right.

For a long time, that belief informed how I taught students. Engaging with scholarly sources was scary because it introduced opportunities for errors. Intentional or not, these errors were egregious either way. Even as I tried to reassure students by outlining the mechanics of citations and encouraging them to cite whenever in doubt, fear of accidental plagiarism filled the room, creeping into every conversation we had about academic integrity.

Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed challenged my approach. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed (2017) explains her “strict citation policy,” only citing those “who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism” (p. 15). As Ahmed so frequently does, she brilliantly theorizes around what this means. “Citation is feminist memory,” the philosopher explains, “Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (p. 15-16). With her words, my perspective shifted. Citation was a celebration, then; there was solidarity in citation. There was feminist community. Citation was about belonging and gratitude.

Encouraging students to recognize this runs up against the punitive narrative of citation that they still frequently encounter in high school and early on in their undergraduate careers (Price, 2002; Zwagerman, 2008).¹ One scholar has even used statistical modeling to urge faculty to enact the most serious punishments possible for plagiarism, insisting that such severity necessarily recalibrates the risk/reward calculations that might otherwise incentivize plagiarism (Woessner, 2004). In all, the mechanics of *how* we cite and what happens if we fail to do so perfectly continues to eclipse the *why* we cite in classroom discussions.

This lesson reconfigures those discussions. It takes seriously Howard’s (2000) invitation to consider plagiarism as not only a question of students’ ethics, but also of teachers’ values. And, it finds motivation in the principles outlined by the Cite Black Women Collective, a group committed to making visible “citational politics” and ending Black women’s too frequent erasure from scholarship (Smith et al., 2021). What values are we foregrounding when we talk about plagiarism? How does shifting from talking about plagiarism to stressing citation throw those values into stark relief? What would a feminist pedagogy of citation look like and reveal? How can we teach citation as a form of “feminist memory”?

¹ Price (2002) reminds that copying others’ texts is expected in technology jobs, highlighting the ways in which citation rules in higher education are not universal or always exactly transferrable to expectations outside of the academy.

Learning Objectives:

- (1) To understand why scholars cite one another, shifting the discourse from one centering rules/punishment to one foregrounding celebration
- (2) To uncover the ways in which systems of power amplify voices and silence others, and to use citation as a tool to contest that
- (3) To invite students to rethink what counts as “scholarship” and build new, more equitable definitions
- (4) To introduce students to a key concept in feminist studies: “misogynoir”

Explanation:

To prepare for class, I invite students to read two short articles: “On Misogynoir” and “Who Owns a Recipe.”² “On Misogynoir” is an interview between the two Black women who coined the concept, a concept that names “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience” (Bailey & Trudy, 2018, p. 762). In the piece, they describe what it is like to have others use their ideas without attribution. As their experience makes abundantly clear, Black women’s ideas, words, and theories are too often cannibalized and used for others’ gain. And since citation and name association provide the most valuable scholarly currency, this has material consequences: limiting who has access to the seats of institutional power (Smith et al., 2021). Taking a different approach, Krishna’s (2021) “Who Owns a Recipe,” a *New York Times* article, addresses plagiarism in cookbooks, detailing different perspectives on who/what authors should credit in cookbooks when they reuse, modify, or adapt recipes. Both raise questions about power and citation, though the latter does so less directly and thereby provides an opportunity for students to leverage “On Misogynoir” for analytical gain.

The class starts with a focused free write, wherein students are encouraged to let their ideas fill the page without any self-editing (Wallack, 2009). I provide students with three minutes to respond to the prompt: “How have you been taught to understand citation? Why do we cite?” They are given the instruction to “just keep writing” and “if you get stuck, just write ‘the’ over and over until you’re unstuck.”³

I ask students to then bracket off a piece of what they have just written and share it with the class. This launches our conversation, which should be guided by a series of carefully staged questions:

- 1) What did you notice when you read these pieces? To what extent did your understanding of citation shift?
- 2) What is the relationship between sexism, racism, authority, power, and plagiarism? How can Trudy and Bailey’s article inform our approach to Krishna’s?
- 3) Why does citation matter?

I draw students’ attention to Bailey and Trudy’s commentary on citation and invite them to mull it over. “The term misogynoir was born out of conversation,” Bailey states, “I want to be in conversation with people who find [the term] useful” (p. 765). Not only does failing to cite Bailey and Trudy ignore the work that they did to develop the theory, students begin to recognize that it

² Cite Black Women first put “On Misogynoir” on my radar.

³ My time at Bard’s Language and Thinking Program sharpened my approach to focused free writes

also excludes them from the very conversation they had enlivened. Citations concatenate academic discourse; therefore, students can use citations to connect scholars and thereby build a more equitable, celebratory, and inclusive academic community.

The activity ideally concludes with a review and rethinking of the institution’s academic integrity policy. In my case, students served as consultants in a writing center; thus, they regularly spoke with peers about citation in their academic papers. This provides a concrete, real world opportunity for us to think about how plagiarism and citation might be discussed while they assist peers.

This lesson takes 40-60 minutes.

Debriefing:

The focused free write is purposefully backward looking, while the last activity is forward looking. The free write prompt invites students to reflect on their previous experiences and creates the space for honest commentary because they are not required to share the entire piece. It pushes them to think beyond rote responses and invites their reconsideration of prior assumptions. Since the emphasis is on how they have been taught about citation, students do not need to worry that their answers will reveal their own errors in understanding.

Students wrangle with concepts like power, academic integrity, and citation during the core of the class. In my experience, they tend to agree that an intellectual concept such as “misogynoir” should be cited. They express more hesitancy about the citational politics around cookbooks, with many believing that borrowing is appropriate in this genre. This raises larger questions about research, academic study, and gender: why is it that cookbooks, a genre associated with women, need not follow the same citation conventions as other forms of scholarship? And, more broadly, why are recipes not considered a form of scholarship? It is easy for students to get detoured with this question, as they begin to compare experimental methodologies to cookbook recipe instructions and realize their similarities for the first time. It is therefore critical to consistently invite them to view this realization through a feminist lens. Why is this the first time they are seeing this similarity? Thinking of Bailey and Trudy’s experience, who historically has had the power to define what counts as scholarship, authority, or citation-worthy?⁴ How has patriarchal gendered stereotypes of men as rational/objective and women as emotional/sentimental shaped perceptions of knowledge production? And, how does acknowledging citation as a form of “feminist memory” shift our approach to recipes (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15-16)? Including a focused free write question explicitly about citation and power further help to frame this connection.

At the skill level, this segment invites students to practice putting two ostensibly different readings in conversation, identifying unexpected connections. It then encourages them to apply the more theoretical reading and concept to the seemingly straightforward newspaper article, prompting them to use the theory as a lens to enrich their understanding of a phenomenon.⁵

⁴ For some useful graphics on citational practices see Kwon (2022).

⁵ My understanding of “lens” texts draws from my experience in the Princeton Writing Program.

The concluding pivot ideally provides an opportunity to return to their focused free write and leverage their experience plus new insights for others' benefit—how have they been taught becomes how might they teach. It signals that their experiences and ideas matter.

Assessment:

This lesson is transferrable to many classes and institutions. I have taught versions of it for a first-year writing seminar on gender and an upper-level writing studies course. It is most productively completed, however, in advance of a paper's due date and preceding an overview of different citation styles' mechanics, as it provides motivation to understand those mechanics. It prioritizes the *why* we cite in order to motivate the *how* we cite lesson.

Students have reflected that it challenges their understanding of citation, shifting the discourse from a punitive register to a celebratory one. In the process, it introduces them to a key concept in feminist studies—"misogynoir," a concept that some of them return to later in the semester during independent work. Students debate where citation should end; is a public figure responsible for citing a scholar if they use her language? Might this be a slippery slope wherein all social media posts require footnotes? How does the work of retweeting/sharing replicate an architecture of citation? And, perhaps most importantly, what would a feminist architecture of citation, one that combats systems of exclusion and that is buoyed by gratitude, look like?

As we shift our understanding to one of celebratory citation, rather than chore-based responsibility, students rethink what counts as "citation-worthy" and recognize the ways in which their previous notions reproduced hierarchies that many wish to combat. Citation becomes much more than an obligation or chore. Feminist citation becomes, as Ahmed (2017) suggests, a tool to preserve "feminist memory" (p. 15). That reconceptualization is a much more powerful lesson than where to place the publication year in a footnote or which words in a Works Cited demand capitalization.

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