

Copycats of the Central Himalayas: Learning in the Age of Information

Abstract

This case study highlights practices of a rarely documented group of neo-users of the Internet or *newbies* from Central Himalayas, serving as a catalyst for delving deeply into the act of ‘plagiarism’ in online learning. By looking at such ‘learning’ practices *away* from schools, namely at cybercafés in Almora, a ‘*rur-town*’ in the Himalayas, much is revealed of its educational system and learning in the broadest sense. There is an urgent need in educational environments to move beyond the punitive approach to ‘plagiarism’ through computer usage and instead pay attention to the actual learning and teaching that goes on through these processes with online resources. In doing so, contemplation of the relationship between information, ownership and originality in online learning and its role in how we enact ‘schooling’ through online-offline spaces becomes central to this study. This case study aims to provoke innovative educational approaches where current practices with new tools can be capitalized strategically for genuine learning to transpire.

Keywords: plagiarism, learning, information, computers, India

CASE DESCRIPTION

Background

Uttarakhand (previously called Uttaranchal), Central Himalayas has become synonymous with spiritual exploration and learning, of *sadhus* and *swamis* for disciples here and abroad. While thousands of pilgrims flock yearly to this area in search of spiritual learning, another wave of ‘pilgrims’ have been coming here for its more institutionalized learning - that of its schools and universities. In recent years however, there has been a migration of youth for higher education to the neighboring cities such as Delhi (Sati and Sati, 2000). This has been primarily attributed to the dearth of high-end technologies within Uttarakhand’s higher institutions, seen as failing to meet the needs of the current generation for relevant IT skills. In the last three years, the new State of Uttarakhand has sought to reinvent itself through high-end technologies, putting itself on the fast track to ‘e-readiness’ (E-Gov). In particular, it has launched an ambitious project of disseminating computers to all inter-colleges in its State (11th and 12th standard) as a means to reclaim its reputation by leading India in e-learning. With 45% of its population below 25 years, a critical need is felt to re-shape its schooling to equip the students with skills appropriate for this new information and global age.

Some investigation has been done on problems arising from such digital initiatives including but not limited to issues of connectivity, teacher training, electricity, software and hardware access and design, maintenance and more (Arora, 2006a, Warschauer, 2003). Rather than follow the path of institutional and technical limitations on learning, this case study takes the approach of exploring how students *do* learn with computers and the Internet in its current capacity, in particular at cybercafés around these institutions. The rationale is that by looking at their interactivity with the Net *outside* school settings, much can be learnt about how youth actually engage with human and online resources to fulfill academic needs. Particularly, this case study highlights the socio-cultural scenario within which acts that are deemed as ‘plagiarism’

come about. This compels a re-situating of computers as an inherently positive intervention to it being another technical tool with which a range of learning takes place. In doing so, we take this opportunity to address how we can capitalize on such practices to bring about genuine learning. Further, the range and type of online content being utilized becomes explicit as well as ways in which students go about instructing each other and themselves of such resources for academic projects.

Through an ethnographic investigation of such practices, the researcher brings to light the ‘ingenuities’ of learning in the act of ‘plagiarism’ within such novel ‘after-school’ spaces, particularly in information access and usage for schooling endeavors. Through action-research, participant observations and interviews, the researcher has been able to unearth prime issues of ‘plagiarism’ beyond the morality aspect: gender usage of the Internet, social learning, and information seeking as students navigate, cut and paste online material and make it their own . Through interviews with teachers and students in their school settings, much is revealed in the juxtaposition of institutional expectations and perceptions of plagiarism and originality in academic endeavors.

Educational Institutions and ICT: Overarching Issues

Computers have arrived in all higher educational institutions in Almora. However, on average, the ratio is 2-3 students per computer with access to computers for 45 minutes per week on average in government schools while in private schools it is per day. In spite of that, both government and private institutions emphasize the gaining of computer skills, particularly the Microsoft package of Word, Excel and PowerPoint, as well as the usage of Encarta, an offline Encyclopedia CD for educational use given the offline status of most schools in the region. All computer classes are in English and instruction in higher education is typically in English even though the main languages of the region are Hindi and Pahadi. Further, while some homes in Almora town have computers, the absence of broadband facility coupled with lack of privacy drives students to cybercafés.

Having held focus groups with teachers in both government and private schools, it is clear that most teachers are aware of the ‘plagiarism’ that goes on with the Net with some perceiving it to be a problem while others not necessarily seeing it as an issue to contend with. Even amongst those who are concerned, this does not evoke urgency for change and may even be seen as a necessity to get through the educational system. This is attributed to a combination of factors, namely the following:

- 1) State exam syllabus requires rote memorization and reproduction of enormous amounts of material with a focus on multiple choice questions over essay format for standardization on evaluation.
- 2) The dearth of quality and updated library resources available for students, particularly in English compelling students to seek elsewhere for academic material.
- 3) Overburdened and often under-qualified faculty at the universities. With higher education instruction in English while the local and first language of students *and* teachers being either Pahadi or Hindi, desperation sets in to succeed in getting these projects ‘right’ for higher marks. This leads to the seeking of material and assistance to complete projects the ‘correct’ way,

(Forthcoming). Chapter in Book, *Cases'n'Places: Global Cases in Educational Technology*

grammatically, stylistically and the like while teachers either turn a blind eye or/and become accomplices in this process.

4) Students often collaborate on their individual assignments given the limited computer resources available. This results in the sharing of material and ideas for academic projects. (Satyanarayana and Babu, 2008, Tiffin and Rajasingham, 1995)

Hayes, Whitley and Introna (2006) sum up succinctly the prime issues regarding plagiarism within the Indian Higher Education System:

The standardized syllabus taught to large numbers of students over large numbers of years also means that it becomes worthwhile for entrepreneurial students and teachers to write and publish “guide books” which cover all the topics for a particular course. These books are frequently available from university copy shops or markets and are, essentially, the key ideas from the course and its texts, presented in a simplified format and frequently (though not always) without attribution of where the original concepts came from. In addition, as the intention is to provide students from any college with the knowledge that they require in order to be able to answer the examination, they often focus on a conservative, uncritical approach to the subject. (p. 1731)

A focused group interview conducted by the researcher (R) with the principle (P) and her staff of an Inter College in the Almora area reflects the general understanding of those concerned of the intervention of computers in education and ‘plagiarism’ in academia in particular.

P: The computer has invaded our life...What I am concerned about is the impact...how they waste away their time on the internet and do nothing useful educationally.

R: Do you monitor them?

T1: They are not doing it here [school]...its all happening in these cybercafés. They stay there for hours and god knows what they do

T2: Sincerely they use computers when they have to do projects

T2: As an information device they are using it very well but as far as integrating it into their studies I don't think they are using it well at all...what they are basically doing is getting the information, getting the printout, compiling it and of course sometimes they have to get some sampling.

R: Do you think they are creating any original work?

T1: No no no ...they are compiling it, they are editing it, they are doing some work of their own but that is very very rare. They are producing already the information that is already there.

T2: It is not possible the way they are working...they are not producing anything new

P: They have become very good copycats [emphasis added]... that they do very well but if you say do something on your own, they do not know what to do...original work is missing.

T2: Say if our assignment is the use of various plants in Kumaon and its medicinal uses...they will take something from here and something from there and then here and then they just print and attach it and give it to us

R: So how do you change this?

T1: If we chose something rare then they will give us something of their own because they can't get it from the Internet

T2: Use of computers is not there except for typing purposes- they just put some visuals and text and then give it to us.

P: One day they will be in the global place in the world and they will have to learn the hard way... we will not be there to tell them to get curious and be original it has to come from them...they need to be motivated to do something creative.

Cybercafés: The New After-School?

This case study takes place in Almora, a relatively recent developed area partly attributed to the strong infusion of local computer-based services and government initiatives to digitally 'connect' this district. In the last year alone, broadband entered this area, stimulating the growth of cybercafés from around 4 to 20 and growing, students being their prime clientele besides tourists. For less than a dollar per hour, students come here to work, ranging from accessing information/visuals for school projects, getting their thesis typed (in primarily English), discussing their projects to applying for further education online. In interviews with cybercafé owners and managers, it is apparent that students are one of their prime sources of income but come at a price. Students take over cybercafés, ask questions and demand constant and continued assistance, disrupting all other activity within these cafes that barely have standing room but for the space for two to three computers and a printing/fax machine.

Further, students come in pairs or groups but rarely alone. So at any given point in time, each computer is used by 2-3 students, often seen dictating their needs to one amongst them or a cybercafé staff sitting at the keyboard. The researcher herself volunteered to work as staff given the space constraints and for the opportunity to be *instructed* on the range of learning that takes place within such computer-mediated spaces. Interestingly, given that cybercafés are a relatively recent phenomenon, the owners themselves are facing a learning curve with the Internet, discovering its potential and usage from a range of actors including IT crash courses, foreign tourists, friends to the students themselves.

Discovering the Internet for Academia

Given the intense competition amongst the cybercafés, the owners become highly attuned to the needs of their clients, particularly students and share online sites with them that can enable their projects. They gain favor with students by providing a package of services including typing of their thesis and other academic assignments, searching for information for their projects, organizing disparate information to form a cohesive thesis, formulating cover pages, searching for appropriate visuals to go in tandem with the text to providing advice on the fonts, layouts to print quality of the assignments. This is at little extra cost to the students as the staff labor comes practically for free with Internet time.

Surveying past history of web links over a month alongside observations and informal interviews with students and cybercafé owners reveals *Google*, *Wikipedia* and *Orkut* (by far the most popular site amongst students) as the most frequented sites amongst students. Curiosity and entertainment are the chief reasons that draw students to these sites and over time such sites are used for academic purposes.

As one student puts it, "with broadband, it is fun to browse...we can see what a tiger looks like on the computer like say, you type tiger and then the photos of a tiger appear; then you

type Chicago and then photos of Chicago appears.” Even the reluctant users come there to do their assignments because “nowadays everything is on the net, there is no choice.”

The Instructed and the Instructing

The researcher by becoming a temporary staff for a period of a month was exposed to a range of projects ‘accomplished’ in this space that adhered to school requirements and the range of strategies employed to fulfill these tasks. Assignments started as simple as getting a cybercafé staff person to type a student’s thesis directly from a printed textbook with no paraphrasing but citations included in the bibliography to the more complex orchestration of multiple texts from multiple sources. Here, both print and online resources are used with entire paragraphs and pages highlighted, marked, with subheadings created to ease transitions from texts of one source to another with no acknowledgement of the authors.

There was never an instance during this period where a student chose to type directly the assignment given. Instead, they took on the role of ‘supervisor’ and ‘manager,’ overseeing the execution of the tasks by the cybercafé staff. Further, there was no discussion on whether these acts of ‘plagiarism’ was permissible for school projects as they went about eliminating traces of the authored sources deliberately and efficiently. In fact, some acts of ‘plagiarism’ was performed openly and collaboratively as a joint effort amongst the staff and students to successfully complete the assignment given.

Below are three distinct ‘plagiarism’ cases where students along with the cybercafé staff harness the resources at hand to create and complete their projects. Rather than preoccupy oneself with these cases through the lens of academic dishonesty, one should pay attention to the actual process of accomplishing such acts of copying, ‘patchwriting’ (Howard, 1993) and tailoring – the relationship between the actors involved in this process, the discourse that shapes such acts and the kinds of content and resources employed. In doing so, one should simultaneously center ones own perceptions of what constitutes as plagiarism to gain a deeper understanding of such practices across socio-cultural terrains.

Case 1

A girl (G) looms over a male staff (S) from the cybercafé as he gets instructed by her to copy the printed text highlighted from the *Great British Poets* onto Word for her assignment on ‘The Critique of Poetry.’ She stands while he sits and types at the keyboard. Her friend is talking on the cellphone by her side.

G: These words are not right, correct it...here, now separate this, these words are joint see [she remarks as he types onto Word]

S: Yes but I will do that later

G: No no do it now or you will forget...god why are you making this so big?...ooh why are you... nothing...okay continue [exasperated about the font]

S: I’ll go ahead then?

S: Ah okay fine...array, I’ll beat you...stop showing me the same photos for this...okay the one you showed me earlier will do. ..don’t waste time now. [she finalizes on an English countryside image from Google to compliment her text]

Case 2

Two girls (G1 & G2) are at the computer trying to figure out how to access some “good western artists” from the net for their mid-term art history project. At this point, their art history teacher (T) enters the cybercafé. The girls wave him over.

G1: I couldn't find good western artists sir.

T: What is Van Gogh do you know?

G2: He's a painter

T: of? oh I mean which village he is from?

G2: I don't know...from Europe?

T: So put both his name and his village in *Google* and search then you'll find something more.

Having stated this, the teacher heads to the printer to make copies for the next class assignment.

Case 3

Take the second year biology student with a project to document animals of the region, their behavior patterns and their habitats. He comes in and informs the owner of his assignment. The owner instructs his assistant to get to work. The student sits next to the staff member and quietly watches him as he opens the browser and gets onto the English version of the *Wikipedia* site. He enters ‘elephant’ in the search section. He highlights the results by selecting all the data, then copies and pastes it onto a Word document. He proceeds to another animal. The cybercafé owner comes by and asks the student if he has any restrictions on page printouts and the number of documented animals. The student shares more details of the assignment stipulating the limits as well as his budget on printing. Based on the given information, the owner (O) instructs the assistant (A) in front of the student (S):

O: Just copy the text, not the visuals and just the first paragraph of each section of these animals from Wikipedia...you should pay more attention when copying

O: Save some time by not copying all the text- just copy what he [S] asks for

A: but sir I was going to get rid of it anyway afterwards

O: what's the point...unnecessarily wasting time. Do Ctrl C...why are you going to ‘Edit?’

S: I want different...some new animals for my project... not the same one as the others

O (to A): er...and make sure that you erase all signs of *Wikipedia* from the document... understood?

The staff member asks the student what other animals he wants besides ‘elephant’ and ‘monkey’ in his project sheet but the biology student doesn't seem to come up with any names at the spur of the moment in English. Even the assistant appears to not know but is not fazed by the fact. He goes to *Google* and types ‘animals’ and from that scrolls all the way down to ‘animal list’ and clicks on that. The list however appears to be too ‘difficult’ and ‘exotic’ to understand as they both read through the list and struggle with ‘parma wallaby’ and ‘coyote’ as potential candidates. He goes back to the *Google* search and selects the next choice ironically from *Wikipedia* itself under ‘list of animal names.’ He clicks on that link. The student approves of the list and from that the assistant chooses ‘panda’ and ‘squirrel’ to enter into the *Wikipedia* search for further copying and pasting.

Moral Hazard or Strategies for the 21st century?

Plagiarism as an issue has been written and discussed about extensively, particularly in the West. The dominant lens through which this is looked upon is through that of morality: that of ‘academic dishonesty,’ the ‘moral hazard’ in education, an ‘epidemic’ of sweeping proportion that needs to be ‘combated’ (Miall, 2005, Gerhardt, 2006). Some go beyond condemnation to that of cultural understanding, often taking up the baton that diverse cultures, be it Indian or Chinese are seeped in their ancient schooling practices of reproduction and repetition that persists for the most part to this day, and in fact can be a strategic means to deepen knowledge. Further, Asian cultures are seen as often being unaware of their actions when it comes to what is seen as plagiaristic acts (Introna et al., 2003). There is also an economic angle given where the opportunity cost of attending higher education particularly in developing countries creates tremendous pressure for students to perform and excel, even at the cost of their academic integrity (Pennycook, 1996).

However, in this frenzy to situate, condemn and/or rationalize what constitutes as ‘plagiarism,’ the enormous accomplishment of computer and Internet usage by a relatively nascent group of IT users in a small town in a developing world gets overlooked. The sophistication and strategizing of such practices come to play as students learn to draw upon the multiple resources available to them- technical, human and socio-cultural and thereby exercise their authority over the authored. While this is not to romanticize such acts of copying, this case study provides a forum to unearth some key assumptions and common relationships of ideas moving beyond the act of plagiarism itself :

- a) Plagiarism as more than just an issue of academic integrity and morality
- b) Gender marginalization and computer usage
- c) Direct versus indirect usage of computers and online learning
- d) Information seeking and knowledge through new technologies
- e) Formal versus non-formal computer-mediated spaces and online learning

This case is designed to compel the reader to re-examine the kinds of learning that emerge in such settings as demonstrated in the 3 cases and how it figures into the kinds of skills seen as necessary to succeed in this information age. Therefore, key guiding questions for this case study center around one prime question:

What kinds of learning takes place through the act of ‘plagiarism’ and how can this be harnessed for academic purposes?

Word Count: 3572

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world now, a good part propelled by its IT related industries and the prevalence of the English language (Sassen, 2006). With tremendous government drive and investment into information technology (IT) across sectors, from education, health to industry, there is a recognized drive for the Internet and computerization to compete effectively in the global market place. However, there is concern for the kind of learning that is taking place with computers as with new tools comes the challenge for new regulations. After all, formal educational agencies are designed to channel such tools to develop productive citizens that can contribute effectively to the State.

(Forthcoming). Chapter in Book, *Cases'n'Places: Global Cases in Educational Technology*

That said, what is at issue here is not whether 'plagiarism' is right or wrong but *how* students go about becoming resource agents and mediators, producers and consumers of information within environments deeply constrained as expressed above.

So one should start with the following question: WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

In addressing this, we need to keep our definitions aside and revisit it at the tail end of the discussion. This is essential to bring to the fore our constructions of this process and how this definition holds up to practices expressed above.

This case should be used by academics, students and teachers to reflect deeply and discuss concepts that are key to our understanding of learning and teaching particularly with new tools such as the computer and the Net. While doing so, we should keep our discussions grounded to the core question of this case that being: *What kinds of learning takes place in the process of 'plagiarism' and how can this be harnessed for academic purposes?*

The key subject areas are as follows:

What constitutes as originality and creativity in academic work?

What kinds of skills are required to become 'proficient' in 'plagiarism' online and offline?

How are these skills comparable to that required to succeed in this day and age?

Can there be collective ownership of authored material? If so, ground your argument with examples.

Does online plagiarism pertain primarily to textual material?

Now situate your argument by grounding yourself in the three cases above. In particular, pay attention to the following domains below to deepen understanding of ones own perceptions and how these examples contradict, validate or/and offer alternative views of common acts of learning and teaching.

Case 1

Management skills

Gender usage of the computer and the Internet

Indirect interfacing with the computer

Case 2

Information processing

Team work

Categorization of information

Information as culturally defined

Presentation of information

Case 3

Collaborative awareness

Efficiency in 'plagiarism'

Language constraints

(Forthcoming). Chapter in Book, *Cases'n'Places: Global Cases in Educational Technology*

Last but not least, another set of over arching questions that need to be explored are the following:

What do we mean by 'user' when interacting with the Net?

Is usage dependant on direct keyboard interfacing? Is this a cultural issue or an issue born of technical and/or socio-economic constraints?

What is the relationship between collaborative learning and plagiarism?

What are the different types of learning that seems to have occurred in these three cases?

Is originality and creativity really the most important attributes and skills needed to succeed in this information age?

Word Count: 526

REFERENCES

ARORA, P. (2006a) The ICT laboratory: An analysis of computers in public high schools in rural India. *Association of Advancement in Computing in Education* 15, 57-72.

GERHARDT, D. R. (2006) Plagiarism in cyberspace: Learning the rules of recycling content with a view towards nurturing academic trust in an electronic world. *RICH. J.L. & TECH*, 12

HOWARD, R. M. (1993) A plagiarism pentimento. *Journal of Teaching Writing* 233-246.

INTRONA, L., HAYES, N., BLAIR, L. & WOOD, E. (2003) Cultural attitudes towards plagiarism: . *Churches Commission for International Students Annual Report 2000-2002*.

MIALL, C. (2005) Plagiarism and new media technologies: Combating 'cut' n 'paste' culture *OLT-2005 Conference Beyond Delivery*.

PENNYCOOK, A. (1996) *Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism*. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL).

SASSEN, S. (2006) *Cities in a world economy*, Thousand Oaks, Calif., Pine Forge Press.

SATI, M. C. & SATI, S. P. (2000) *Uttarakhand statehood: Dimensions of development*, New Delhi, Indus Publishing Company.

SATYANARAYANA, K. V. & BABU, R., B (2008) Trends in the development of E-Theses in India: Issues, constraints, and solutions. *Tata Research Development & Design Centre, Tata Consultancy Services Ltd*.

TIFFIN, J. & RAJASINGHAM, L. (1995) *In search of the virtual class: Education in an information society*. , Routledge.

UTTARAKHAND, E. I. I. eGovernment Initiatives in Uttarakhand.

WARSCHAUER, M. (2003) *Technology and social inclusion: Rethinking the digital divide*, MIT Press.