Credit: Giving It, Getting It, and Giving It Away

Riding along a small country road in Wyoming, I was only half listening to a radio program as I sketched ideas for this “credit” article. My ear was “caught” when I heard the announcer’s voice say, “If every woman in the United States woke up tomorrow morning, looked in the mirror, and liked what she saw, the economy of Western civilization as we know it would collapse.” My husband Harley and I burst into laughter and talked about how true that was! I hurried to write this quote down, so that I could give someone else the pleasure of hearing it.

Since I do not remember what speaker was being quoted, what radio station or program we were listening to, or even the context of this comment, should I not pass on this gem of wit? And, if I pass it on, do I risk someone giving me credit for it?

At the 2005 Colloquium in Mt. Lake, Virginia, “Navigating the Universe of Possibilities” was a theme that permeated presentations and discussions. As part of this metaphoric pursuit, Janet Barrett and Liz Wing gathered a wealth of historic evidence that helped us connect to voices and ideas, constellations from our past. For several participants, pondering the photographic and printed roots of our work brought the realization that many “new” publications are full of “not so new” ideas. Not a startling discovery, no, but the decades-old quotes and artifacts surrounding our meeting room served up an important reminder: properly giving credit “ain’t as simple as it seems.”

My mulling over the many angles of giving and getting credit results from a range of experiences and conversations: simple, practical concerns with students’ work and standards of scholarship; critical talk of colleagues’ mistaken perceptions of ownership; troublesome stories of questionable ethics in uncredited and unapproved use of others’ works; and my work as a mediator. As a certified and practicing mediator, my orientation is to assist in resolving conflict by considering solutions, addressing issues, and facilitating communication. My habit of mind is to ask questions — many rhetorical — that convey conversational rather than definitive tones, that pose possibilities rather than prescribe solutions. That is my intent here.

For this piece, I purposely did not consult verbal or written sources, because I wanted to plumb my own thinking without measuring it against “expert opinion.” Reflections on “credit,” especially in this era of intellectual grabbing, may be timely, and perhaps even welcomed.

Giving Credit to Others

Are We Copying?

“Copying” commonly occurs in classrooms and is a staple of learning. Look into the eyes of a student who repeats a previously stated idea, sometimes within a few minutes of hearing it, and we often see no intent to deceive or knowingly “copy.” Instead, we may see that the student sees his or her (repeated) idea as a “new” idea. How we view these moments of copying determines how we will respond to students’ classroom offerings. And, how we see and respond to this notion of copying in our classrooms is fodder for a larger discussion of “giving credit” in our profession.

You are teaching a class of Grade Two children and have just asked, “How could we arrange an introduction to this orchestration that you have created?” Sam eagerly raises his hand and says, “We could have the drums and glockenspiels play an ostinato!” After soliciting several other children’s ideas, you call on Julie. “The drums and glockenspiels could play an ostinato four times,” shouts Julie.

How would you respond? Was Julie copying Sam’s idea? Do you scold her for not paying attention, for not listening? Or, do you take Julie’s idea without judgment about its originality and greet it with the same freshness as its delivery: “Yes, there’s an option for us, Julie!” If Julie had said, “Let’s use Sam’s idea and repeat the ostinato four times,” we would know that Julie knew she was copying Sam. Would your reaction to Julie have been different had she said that? If you want to discourage copying in your class, would you take the

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additional step of insisting that students either come up with a “new” idea or not volunteer an answer at all?

Which would you choose for Sam’s reaction to Julie?
1. I just said that! (sarcastically)
2. She stole my idea! (indignantly)
3. Yeah, I think so, too! (happily)
4. Yeah, both of us thought of that! (welcoming the corroboration)

Number 4 is my choice. In it, Sam shows self assurance and calm response to hearing his idea copied. As professionals, we often have similar choices. Which of the four responses do you normally have when you believe someone is copying your ideas? Is the response you have different from the response you wish you had?

Just as Sam did, we have choices for how we react when we hear someone use an idea that we considered ours:
1. We can feel cheated that someone stole our idea. “How dare she use my work without asking permission!”
2. We can feel betrayed that we were not acknowledged as the originator of the idea. “He is trying to pass my work off as his own!”
3. We can feel affirmed that “our” idea resonated so well with someone else. “Isn’t that amazing that this idea caught on so quickly?”
4. We can feel compassionate goodwill toward other professionals who have taken as their own, something that also had substance for us. “This is exciting that the same ideas that have made sense to me all these years are also making sense to others!”

Avoiding the chastisement to “come up with a new idea,” I welcome young children’s repetition of others’ answers and frequently take the same attitude with adults. Similar answers shade listening and open novel perspectives to pursue. And, with free-flow from thinking to speaking, safety from threat allows us to say what we think without first searching for whether that idea has already been stated. In classes of any age, is it not true that there are times when we encourage, even expect, students to repeat ideas verbatim, and times when this practice is totally unacceptable? Is the line between the two really that obvious to all?

Professional educators tend not to be as accepting of or lenient with each other as we are of young children; we expect ourselves to “know better.” Presuming innocence and naiveté from anyone under 12 is fairly common. Yet, when and how would it benefit us to presume benign motive, to help colleagues “know better” without shutting them down or shutting them out?

In the classic four phases of creative thought, periods of preparation and incubation morph into moments of illumination and verification (Wallace, 1926). An idea or solution pops into our heads and the moment of enlightenment is ours, it feels like our thought, the direct result of our thinking. Moments, weeks, even years later, however, we may reread an article or book, encounter the very same thought, and be startled into wondering: “Is that where I got this idea? I thought I came up with it!” Even more difficult to trace than written ones are previous oral and aural generations of our thinking.

Wisdom often comes in simple moments: little glimpses can offer big insights. About 30 years ago, I observed a teacher as one child in her class accused another of copying his idea. The teacher’s response totally reframed the moment when she said, “Well, maybe it’s a good idea if two people thought of it!” This is one way to process seeing our ideas copied; similar ideas need not have grown from the same seed.

Those capable of adopting a magnanimous attitude about being copied are certainly swimming against the cultural current. In the midst of clamor for “exclusive rights” and touts of “exclusive interviews,” preventing idea-mongering from taking hold in our children and in ourselves is an uphill battle. Competition grows ever steeper for “original” ideas, novel publications, unique packaging, and “first discovery” research. As we strive to compose satisfying careers, we can ask ourselves: What is it that we are competing for? Whom is it that we are competing against? What is it that we “win” when we succeed in the competition? And, will the toll paid have been worth the “prize?”

Are We Plagiarizing?

Many (most?) reading this article have been accused in large or small ways of “stealing” ideas, of not giving proper credit, of rehashing old ideas and presenting them as new ones. And, some of us are not even aware that our scholarship has been impugned. Even though the accused had no intent to improperly credit and may contest the accuser’s definition of “stealing,” claims of stealing ideas can be personally devastating and professionally paralyzing.

When we “lift” someone’s written text and present it as our own, it is considered plagiarism. And, to a generally intolerant society, plagiarism has stiff, sometimes career-ending consequences. University students can be severely punished or expelled; journalists can be dismissed and discredited; and scholars can be shamed and publicly vilified, all for intentionally or unintentionally “copying” someone’s words. Carelessness, sloppy scholarship, and lack
of ethical boundaries tend to be culprits for plagiaristic acts. Yet, accurately detecting plagiarism is extremely murky business.

Definitions for what constitutes plagiarism abound and some are quite sweeping. Universities offer an array of descriptions for "plagiarism." In some definitions, written text is "protected territory"; in others, ideas should not be plagiarized; and yet others move the boundaries of plagiaristic acts to include "taking" spoken words and artistic expressions. Variance between infractions such as "claiming another's work as one's own," "taking intellectual property," or "lack of acknowledgment or credit-giving" further muddies intellectual waters and our professional culpabilities. Yet, if we did not mean to use without credit, we are innocent of wrongdoing, right? Not according to those who define and hold accountable plagiarists who intentionally or unintentionally use another's spoken words, written words, ideas, or artistic expressions. Given this palette of definitions, are we ever not plagiarizing?

**Are We All Expected to Cite?**

21-year-old Marissa Cooper (Poughkeepsie, New York) was preparing a term paper and asked for help in getting started. As I read through her first two pages, I noted statements that called for citation. "How do you know this?" I asked, "Where did you get this information?" As we discussed scholarly expectations for finding and citing sources that corroborate or verify, it became clear that Marissa really wanted to learn "the ropes" of scholarly citations. So, I said, "Especially as a novice scholar, you will want to show that you have done your homework by citing nearly all claims that you make." Then, Marissa asked, "So, when do I get to the point of not having to cite all my ideas?"

Oh! Marissa's question prodded me to wonder: Is there a sliding scale of expectations for citing, of onus for finding printed corroboration? Do standards of crediting differ for beginning scholars (citing and corroborating most ideas) as for prolific ones (few or no citations are adequate)? At what point and in what way does this "crossover" occur? If the standards are different (and I believe they may be), what is it in our view of the author that causes us to either demand a citation or accept the author as the only necessary source? In short, is one's knowing or believing more broadly acceptable than another's knowing or believing?

**Should We Always Give Verbal Credit?**

A gifted teacher of music and theater (Mary Opland Springer in Seattle) has, over the years, significantly influenced my confidence in story-making as I teach music to young children. In my initial attempts at this strategy I attributed some activities I had developed to her inspiration, especially when I was demonstrating them in Mary's presence or in the presence of those who knew her. Over the years I made the practice my own, yet I know these ideas are in no way exclusive to my teaching. Now, my tendency is not to mention the original "spark" (Mary) that got me started on this practice, especially since the activities I use no longer have direct connection to her.

During any given presentation, should we always credit those who have influenced, inspired, or provided impetus for an activity or idea? If intellectual and practical distances have separated one idea from another, is it still necessary to credit the former? When we cite someone verbally, do we attribute ideas with prejudice toward eminence, in other words giving credit only to well-known individuals, only to individuals likely known by the audience, or those who have published their ideas? Giving credit in print is much more fluid than in verbal presentation. And, frequent verbal credit-giving can begin to sound like name-dropping for those in the audience more eager to hear the content than in knowing from whence it came.

**Getting Credit from Others**

Aside from the ethics of properly citing words and ideas that we know are taken from a specific source, what is the root of our need to get credit? Is it our desire to be seen as an expert, as an innovator, as an inventor of ideas, as a purveyor of wise and provocative explanations? In building a career, young professionals (especially) may be carving a niche for themselves and, therefore, target clever phrases, ideas, or activities as their "brand." Yet, for all of us, it can be risky to get caught in a wave of protectivism, locking identity with "work" and "work" with ownership. A potent quote that I read years ago and for which I have no citation addresses this identity quandary: "If I am what I do, then when I don't, I'm not." The risk begins when we believe so strongly in the truth of our ideas that we want others to do so as well. Yet, when that goal is achieved, others assimilate our ideas (often a compliment) to the extent that the ideas no longer "belong" to us (often a loss of credit).

**When Credit Is Undeserved**

In the early years of my career, I sat in a workshop conducted by a woman who had recently attended a workshop of mine. Imagine my initial feeling of acknowledgment, then my private sense of embarrass-
ment, when I looked at her handout to see my name listed where the composer would be on the handwritten score of a folksong I had shared with her.

Whatever I should have done at that moment, I didn’t do. Whether it was naivety or awkwardness on my part, I did not speak up to the group and correct the misconception on the spot. When we receive recognition, we may initially feel complimented for the acknowledgment, for the perceived rise in stature. When we hear credit mistakenly attributed, however, to an undeserving source, we can feel indignant toward both the giver and getter of that credit. When credit given is undeserved, we can publicly or privately speak up, an act that serves our profession and standards of scholarship: “I heard you attribute that practice to Parmin, but it actually predates her work. Some sources you might consult (reference) on this topic are...”

When Credit Is Desired

A group of teachers worked together for years as they developed activities and ideas that constituted an approach to music education. Only Sandy, however, took the initiative to write and publish the resulting work. An idea may have originated in Wendy’s or Patty’s classroom and been extended by the group, but from the moment the book was published, Sandy got “credit” for it. She was seen literally and figuratively as the “authority,” and the book was the only written and distributed source for these collaborative developments.

A brief acknowledgment in the foreword of the book credited Wendy and Patty for their general contributions, but was that enough credit? Would it be enough for you? If not, how could it or should it be more?

One elementary music teacher friend (Arva Frank in Corvallis, OR) for many years trained her students to give themselves silent and invisible “pats on the back” anytime they felt like it. Such a simple, sanctioned act of self-credit-giving children a humble means for feeling satisfied, even if no one sees or hears. Maybe we could get more adept at that kind of patting!

Some among us are hyper-vigilant about getting credit.

- A person expects exclusive use of a phrase or common descriptive words.
- A person believes he or she is entitled to credit when a particular strategy of teaching is used.
- A person sees his or her work as an all-encompassing theory, yet others use only bits and pieces that make sense for their students.
- A person claiming ownership of a name or idea is offended if it is used as is without credit and also offended if it is altered, then used with or without credit.

What is at the base of the need for credit, really?

- Is it an issue of money: that we feel robbed of income if someone does not cite and therefore perhaps purchase our book, our article, or our materials?
- Is it an issue of stature: that not getting credit somehow diminishes our sense of contribution, of identity, of position in the field?
- Is it an issue of memory: that we recall the precise setting in which we gave someone an idea, even though that person seems unable or unwilling to recall it?
- Is it an issue of ownership: that we think we have exclusive rights to the ideas or materials and therefore we have exclusive rights to how it grows (or doesn’t) and develops (or doesn’t)?
- Is it an issue of ethics: that giving us credit for something we “created” is just the right thing to do and, therefore, not getting credit means that the person is unethical and unworthy of our respect?

What is actually being taken from us when we do not get adequate credit for “our” work? Is something really lost, irretrievably lost? In some settings, what is lost is trust and, in breaches of ethics, trust may be most difficult to restore.

Giving Credit Away

What is my idea, and how do I know that it’s mine? Ideas pop up, sometimes when we least expect them, and often when we have no clue from where they came. When we suddenly make a connection, come up with a term or phrase, or create a way of doing something, is there a fool-proof way of knowing that we are the “first” to think of it? When something “clicks” for us, it feels like ours, doesn’t it? What onus do we have to track down any previous encounters we may have had with that idea, from books, lectures, conversations, or media reports? Is this even possible? And, what effects do these “find-the-source” constrictions have on cognitive spontaneity and intellectual discourse?

Do We Own Ideas?

Ideas not owned cannot be stolen. True? Trademarks for goods and services can be registered; printed and recorded matter can be copyrighted. Yet, appropriately there appears to be no category for ideas to be officially registered as “owned.” Common mottos and sayings are snatched up and trademarked, musicians are legally charged with “stealing” melodies from long-forgotten demonstration tapes, coined words and phrases are suddenly on the lips of everyone from news anchors to teachers, and copyright symbols now appear on scores of public domain songs. Should we get better at protecting and verifying ownership of our ideas, or should we get better at giving away the notion of creating or owning them?
In some sense, we likely plagiarize everyday. The nature of memory and recall prohibits us from tracking and tracing our thought patterns at all times. “Cryptomnesia” describes a type of “hidden memory.” We learn through normal channels, retain memories unconsciously, then believe them to be original when we suddenly retrieve them (Jung, 1970). According to research in learning, memory, and cognition, when we encounter incoming information, we can either track the origins of new information or think creatively about that information, but we cannot do both simultaneously. And the more concerned we are about anticipating our subsequent responses to incoming information, the less efficient we are at accurately processing and retaining that information (Marsh, Ward, & Landau, 1999). So when we listen with a mind-set of making immediate connections to something we know and think, we are much more likely to remember that connection than we are to remember the person or the source which sparked it.

Cognitive psychologist Richard Marsh has studied the various pathways connecting cryptomnesia and plagiarism. Although this phenomenon may be a welcomed explanation for inadvertent plagiarism, it should not be a tidy excuse for improper scholarship.

If we want to understand how it is that people design skyscrapers, or write music, or write a New York Times best seller, I think we need to acknowledge that nothing we design is ever truly novel — every creative effort contains vestiges of what we have experienced in the past. (Carpenter, 2002, p. 26)

With aging often comes forgetting. Forgetting where ideas originally came from results in a greater sense of entitled ownership, and a greater sense of ownership can lead to a demand of credit due. Look to those who have spearheaded a movement, been at the forefront of educational reform, or devoted their lives to developing certain theories, and you will often find that protective ownership increases with age. For these pioneer-minded individuals, seeing their ideas or materials used without acknowledgment of their names can feel like identity theft. And the great irony is that the widespread absorption and seamless implementation of leaders’ works (that cause such oversight of credit) were precisely the goals of these innovators’ efforts in the first place. Though perhaps

1This article was nearly completed before I accidentally came upon the term “cryptomnesia” and its implications for this discussion. Being able to cite authors who have been working on this concept for years felt affirming; yet, I wonder: would I have considered my observations less true, less astute had I not discovered this connection? Did crediting other authors lend credence to my own thinking?
What Would Be Given Away?

If “giving it away” were one answer to the woes of not getting credit, what is it we would be willing to give away: the notions that we own our ideas, that we are entitled to credit, that we need to fence our work as personal property? Fences not only draw boundaries, they require (sometimes frequent) repair and protection against trespassing.

Years ago, an educational colleague commented on a faculty spat by calling it the “cock on a dung heap” posturing: crowing and squabbling over a tall pile of manure. Erma Bombeck’s famous line that “the grass is always greener over the septic tank” is a similar sentiment. Could there be a working parallel here? Do not think I am saying that our work is waste matter: not at all. The question is, what is beneath our posturing? What is it we are guarding? In mediation, I help disputing parties distinguish between their positions and their issues, not necessarily an easy nor a painless process, but one that taught me to look for these distinctions. In any type of conflict, when we hold firmly to a position without considering the underlying issues causing us to do so, we risk guarding the wrong pile.

Tensions for giving credit and getting credit are not unlike those occurring in some quarters about the charge of cultural appropriation. Wanting to use what we have learned can conflict with how we are using what we have learned. Being thrilled with new ideas means we take them as our own, adopting them into our repertoire and wrapping them with our own teaching style. The over-used concept of “authenticity” has been heralded the past several years as the ultimate measuring stick for quality and originality, but authenticity may itself be an illusion. Just as cultures are fluid and evolving, so are ideas and activities. And the more we try to make a thing static by defining, decoding, describing, and separating it from other things (fencing it), the less it tends to resemble the “original” (authentic?) thing itself. Holding onto ideas is like holding onto water: grabbing tighter does not necessarily help us.

At the time of a Chicago conference in 1990, I was playing a key role with a “method” that we tried to “hold onto,” by drawing lines around its distinctions and preserving its uniqueness. At that conference, however, I was forever changed by an impassioned “Give it away” speech by a faculty member from the theater department at a local university. Anecdote after anecdote, he made the case for “giving it away,” not just letting go of “it,” but giving it away. Each time he said the phrase, he emphasized the words “give it away” by making a shooing motion with his hands: an amazing message of professional philanthropy!

Two reasons come to mind for entertaining the act of loosening our grips on expectations for credit and ownership:

1. to acknowledge that good ideas happen to more than one person in more than one place at more than one time, and
2. to minimize the polarizing effects that pit one person or group against another when wrong-doing or wrong-thinking is assumed.

Responding to Credit Issues

How we navigate issues surrounding crediting depends, in part, on what our goals are. The six options listed below are grounded in behavior choices and habits of mind that assist and empower us to

- preserve standards of scholarship and ethical practice,
- revive professional courtesy,
- act as stewards of our profession, and
- embed our responses with benign intent and trust-building words.

Disputes will occur. To greater and lesser degrees, it is likely that we will all feel credit infringement. What are our options? We can speak up and act in ways that increase communication (teach, inform) rather than stop it (stunt, shun), and we need neither to defry nor demonize colleagues, past and present, as we find our “standing place” within the profession. We can listen or read from the position that ideas are likely presented in “good faith,” with no intent to deceive, defraud, or claim others’ ideas as one’s own. We can open to benign motives and nonmaleficence in an author-presenter’s intent. This attitude then guides our consequent choices of comments to the presenter or writer. We can communicate requests and recommendations for credit with words that encourage continuing communication, openness, and collegiality, rather than in ways that chastise, accuse, and estrange.

1. When we know of a colleague’s uncited quote of written text, we can speak or write to that person, without presuming intent to deceive or misuse: “I thought those words seemed familiar to me, so I looked in this text. Check this source and then you can decide how you want to fit that reference into your writings. Let me know if you’d like to talk about this further.”

2. We can stay open to the possibility that others may not know that the ideas they espouse are not uniquely or originally their own. And, for those who tout ideas as original or protected, we can speak up: “I know this must feel unique to you, but it’s actually a concept you’ll find in several sources. I think you’d enjoy reading some of the roots for the ideas you are recasting.”

3. When we react to a colleague’s presentation with “I’ve heard it all before” or “This has been around for
years," we can remind ourselves that others are entitled to "new" discoveries of "old" ideas. It is important to "grow" our colleagues without being dismissive and discounting, without shutting them down. We can acknowledge good thinking and good communicating without demeaning "dated" or familiar ideas: "You’ve done a terrific job of putting your own style on such a familiar theme. I’m glad you are reviving some of these practices (ideas)."

4. We can muster compassion when we see a posture of arrogance "crowing" atop a mound of ideas. We can remember that what appears as a position of strength and assurance may be masking underlying issues of vulnerability and fear. When we hear someone being given credit (or demanding credit) for something that is common practice, common knowledge, or rooted in another’s work, we can inform: “You need not credit [name] with this practice, because it is widely used and generally accepted by many professionals in our field. You may have learned this practice from that person, but crediting that individual sounds like he/she invented the idea, and that’s a bit unfair to him/her as well as the rest of us.”

5. We can guard against dismissing colleagues as “not understanding” and “not being current,” just because they do not use specific, popular jargon or do not know specific literature. For decades, teachers have said, “Oh yes, that idea. Twenty years ago, we called it something else, but it’s the same thing in a new package.” Not using identical terminology or explanations does not equate with not knowing and not understanding. We can look for and point out similar ideas that connect and enlighten.

6. We can make crediting easier and scholarship more habitual by placing full citation information on all of our course and presentation handouts, as well as any articles we may photocopy. By including name, institution, date, direct quote designations, accurate source citations, proper reference formats, and appropriate place or event identification, we clarify and situate our other's work, we can inform: "You need not credit [name] with this practice, because it is widely used and generally accepted by many professionals in our field. You may have learned this practice from that person, but crediting that individual sounds like he/she invented the idea, and that’s a bit unfair to him/her as well as the rest of us."

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A longtime friend and lifetime educator (Fleurette Swee­ney, Vancouver BC) is the only person I know who is totally unencumbered by credit-seeking. She has said (and meant!), “Whatever you have learned from me is yours. Whatever I have thought or written or said, is yours. No need to give it a second thought that you may have learned it from me. If you think it or use it, it is yours.”

Most powerful for me during the “navigating possibili­ties” opening session at Colloquium 2005 was the notion that stars are only constellations because we project a design onto them. We are the agents of those descriptors; stars are not inherently grouped or configured, certainly not as lions and bears. This would explain why Americans look for the man in the moon, and Japanese look for the rabbit in the moon.

In sorting out, then, how to anchor our behaviors regarding giving credit, getting credit, and giving credit away, the concept of projection can provide a useful metaphor. Ideas, like stars, are there whether we see them or not, whether we know about them or not; without our projection they have no identity in the context of our lives. Getting and honing ideas, then, may be more our way of constellating (projecting our format onto) what is already there than it is our right to claim what is there as our own. Constellating ideas warrants different attribution than creating them, and what we see as we gaze at the stars often depends on what meanings we bring to them as well as what meanings we are trying to glean from them.

A friend of mine, Susie Beardsley (Bozeman, MT), and her young daughter Zoey were lying on the trampoline in their yard looking at the stars. As Susie pointed out the constellations, Zoey tried her best to spot them in the night sky. Then, Susie noticed that Zoey was looking at her arm, then looking at the sky, back at her arm, then the sky. "What are you doing?" asked Susie. Staring at a cluster of freckles on her arm then looking back at the celestial display, Zoey answered, "I’m trying to find one that looks like me!"

References