Blurred Lines: Originality and Authenticity

Aziz Alfailakawi

Loyola University Chicago

Lauren Bialystok's "Lines in the Sand: Originality and Cheating in the Age of ChatGPT," problematizes the use of "originality" in educational assessments. If we use originality in the two ways Bialystok explicates, we are either referring to a form of novelty in the work, or in its production from its author. In the latter case this refers to the work as being generated independently by the author. In both cases, however, the main emphasis seems to be on production in one form or another. As Bialystok points out with her example on simultaneous mathematical breakthroughs, it is not the primary criteria for a work to be original in the sense of novel. Rather, what we care about is that it is, as Bialystok states, the "result of the student's epistemic labour."[1] If the emphasis, then, is on *how* the work is produced, we fall into a greater web of problems—issues of imitation, translation, writing centers, and collective originality come into play. If the work is to be independently produced, the lines of originality either blur or become so stringent nothing but a specific few works might be original. But originality is not the sole criteria of academic integrity.

Those familiar with Bialystok's prior writing know of her ongoing exploration on authenticity. In her work, "Authenticity in Education," Bialystok discusses authenticity as a central aim of education, stating "Authentic Learning … emphasizes process and creation rather than discovery or reproduction."[2] Much like originality, authenticity pertains to an element in the productive process of a work. Authenticity, even if not explicitly pointed to when judging a students' work, seems to encapsulate significant aspects of our evaluation. These terms overlap to some extent, and we run them together in our thinking about assessments and academic integrity. This response aims to explore this overlap and its implications, namely focusing on the question: *when evaluating an academic assessment do we want an essay to be original, authentic, or both?*

Although it might seem obvious that authenticity is not originality and vice versa, the two terms can sometimes be used synonymously.[3] To modify an example Bialystok uses in her 2014 paper "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," we might call a work of art "authentic" insofar as it was an

original work of a particular artist, as opposed to an imitation. Likewise, we can refer to an essay as authentic so long as it was an original piece of writing of an author. Each term even functions as a catch-all for numerous different attributes used in the assessment of students. As stated previously, originality in an essay might refer to either its novelty in its ideas and composition or its independence in its creation. We can further identify two more meanings of originality as genuineness in effort, or creativity. Authenticity in an essay, on the other hand, might refer to a work that is honest, sincere, real, or original.[4] The former two of these definitions, of course, refer to the quality of engagement in the creation of a work; the realness, honesty, or sincerity of effort. Through these distinct lists regarding the meanings of these two terms, we can see an overlap in the definitions of both words.

Bialystok asserts the aim of an essay is for a student to "express a novel and academically well-founded argument." The student is then judged on the criteria of academic honesty, that the essay was produced honestly, properly cites its sources, and that the subject matter relates to a sort of realness—its connection to the relevant subject matter and whether its argument has any factual basis. Through this example we might view the judgement of an essay as encompassing aspects of both originality and authenticity insofar as it is novel, produced honestly, and real. If we take the colloquial use of the term, we could say that what we judge an essay on is authenticity and call it a day. This use of authenticity would of course, then, encompass originality, plus the added elements of sincerity. However, this simplification would prove unsatisfactory.

Taking these concepts more abstractly, we can notice a tension between these two terms. To be authentic is not necessarily to be original, and vice versa. Despite one of the uses of authenticity aligning with the term "original," we can imagine an instance in which a person, or even a physical object, might be original yet inauthentic. Returning to the example of the essay: if I were to write a paper utilizing an organization of words and ideas wholly distinct from any put together before this might be thought of as original in the intended sense of the word. However, if I do not believe any of the words printed on the page it would be inauthentic. Perhaps this example is flimsy—one could argue for the authenticity of that essay based on my intentionality. If I were to intend to

write something completely inauthentic, I may end up sincere and honest in those efforts, ending up authentic in a roundabout way. On the other hand, if that were not my intention the essay would remain inauthentic as I produced a work ignorant of my relationship to the ideas produced. Furthermore, as Bialystok argues in her paper, the tension of originality as a concept comes into play. Considering originality may pertain to a sort of "first of its kind-ness," the originality of an idea may come under heavy scrutiny. Just as Bialystok touches on, the human mind functions similarly to a sponge; we absorb what is around us. We might not even realize that an idea we claim to be our own was actually someone else's, or even derived from the ideas of another. Can we truly be original in the way of novelty? It would seem pointedly difficult to do so.

Expanding on this tension of terminology, Bialystok identifies further friction between these concepts in an academic setting when examining the case of Eastern students and emulation. Although the writing of Eastern students might not meet the criteria of originality insofar as they are not novel due to the practice of emulation, they are not penalized. This is likely due to the aspect of authenticity present in the practice. These students do not pretend as though the writing is wholly original, but rather that it is authentic in that the ideas are engaged with and shared. Furthermore, we might even argue that authenticity is valued more so than originality in an academic setting when considering the aspect of "origin" in "originality." Bialystok makes an excellent point in articulating the form of thought process reached collectively as opposed to individualistically. Ideas cannot be wholly original on the premise that they are produced, much like we are produced, by a collection of experiences and sensory inputs being reconfigured internally to produce a reconfiguration of something previously existing.

Where does this leave us, then? We can see that despite authenticity and originality having elements in common, and both being relevant to academic assessment, they are very much distinct. Although we explicitly state that we value originality when evaluating the work of students, it seems that what we are really looking for is authenticity—a sincere engagement in the learning process. The objective in assigning an essay is to learn, something achieved through the aspects of authenticity in which one engages sincerely, and honestly

with the process of creation. That objective's subversion is what is lost when deferring the creative process to ChatGPT. Much like Bialystok states, the use of ChatGPT can be educational insofar as it is used to increase engagement in the writing process. Students could, theoretically, learn more of the material through dialogue with ChatGPT. This use of the popular AI would be more so as a tool in service of the learning process, rather than in opposition of it. We would still certainly run into issues with students asking ChatGPT to produce the entirety of their works, but this is not a paper on how to stop cheating. And if a student cheats, then at the very least we could say that the works produced by ChatGPT are inauthentic, even if the essay qualifies as original.

REFERENCES

1 Lauren Bialystok, "Lines in the Sand: Originality and Cheating in the Age of ChatGPT," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 1, https://doi.org/10.47925/80.1.103

2 Lauren Bialystok, "Authenticity in Education," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (2017): 11. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.168

3 Lauren Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," *Dialogue* 53, no. 2 (2014): 275. https://doi.org/10.1017/S001221731300111X

4 Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 275-278.