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DOING HONEST WORK

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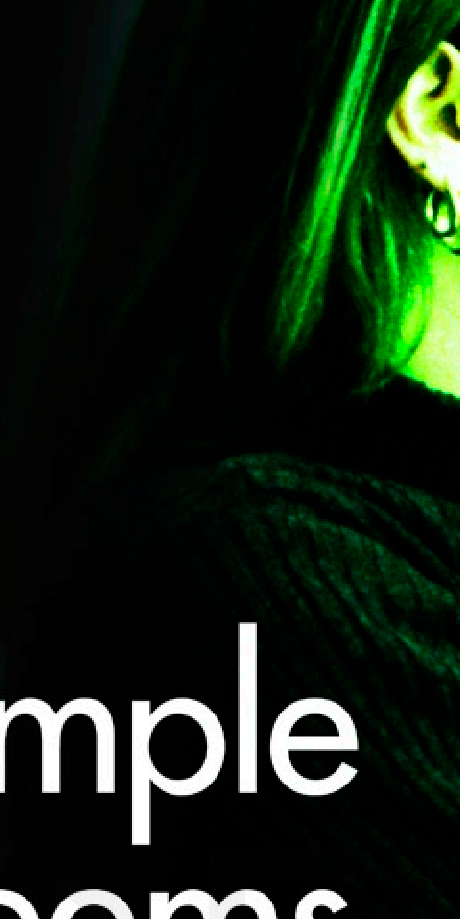

It's Not as Simple as It Seems

DOING HONEST ACADEMIC WORK IN AN AGE OF POINT AND CLICK

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There have been and always will be those who try to game the system. The academic system is no exception, and probably since the time Plato and Socrates gathered students around them to discuss the philosophical verities there were those in the group who calculated how they could creatively prune what the master teachers asked them to do and substitute for it what they were willing to do. Today, when we ask students to research and to write, we often encounter situations where our assignments are circumvented. Asking for original and documented final products, we are given material that is presented wholly as the student's own, but which has been, in ascending order of turpitude, erroneously or incompletely cited, inadvertently borrowed, purposely taken and recombined (known in some circles as *patchwriting*), or, as the ultimate offense, purchased from an outside source and presented as one's own work. All of these, whether done in ignorance, by mistake, or as part of gaming the system, fit loosely under the rubric of *academic dishonesty* and are often lumped together under the term *plagiarism.* Within schools, colleges, and universities, these actions are also typically labeled in moralistic terms and punished accordingly. As one university website notes on its *Sources on Plagiarism: A Faculty Guide,* plagiarism is seen by some as much a character flaw as anything else:

> "The reasons for [plagiarism] are many: *poorly developed* research skills, *sloppy* note-taking, *lack* of understanding about proper citation techniques, poor time management *skills, procrastination,* the challenge of *'getting away with something,' insecurity* about one's academic abilities" [emphasis added] (Reynolds 2006, 1).

For some, plagiarism is thus located as more of an ethical than an instructional issue. And, as everyone reading this knows, once detected, student plagiarism at almost all institutional levels is also routinely punished and sanctioned with loss of grade, credit, and, at the extreme, suspension and expulsion from the institution.

Does Everybody Do It?

Plagiarism is not just a concern for those of us involved in teaching. Over the years there are resurgences of plagiarism charges against famous and historical figures when it is found, cyclically, that they were not the originators of previously attributed witty or memorable remarks. (Two cases in point are the bon mots of Will Rogers and Mark Twain, often furiously debated as to origin.) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a perennial target of this postmortem debunking, especially with regard to the originality of his dissertation, and phrases and stories in some of his sermons. Just recently unattributed borrowing was captured on film in the stump speeches of presidential candidates who evidently used others' words without acknowledging the sources, giving fodder for opposing camps to gleefully note their opponents' moral lapses. The courts in this country are often asked to rule whether lyrics of popular songs, or plot lines for movies or novels have been stolen and used without attribution or payment. In 2002 two popular and best-selling historians, Stephen Ambrose (in *The Wild Blue*) and Doris Kearns Goodwin (in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* and *No Ordinary Time*), were found to have published sections in their books from either unattributed or unquoted sources. Both were charged, at least in the court of public opinion, with plagiarism. Goodwin's career suffered somewhat, while Ambrose, who footnoted sources but was uninterested in using quotation marks, largely shrugged off the controversy. In the intervening years, Ambrose has since died, and Goodwin's contracts and sales appear to have recovered.

Even in what one would assume are the sacrosanct confines of the pulpit, unattributed appropriation is possible, as I found just this summer when one of the Diocese of Richmond's more earnest priests delivered a guest homily in my church using yet another of his seemingly inexhaustible supply of edifying stories from his childhood. One skeptical parishioner Googled a recurring and irritating phrase from the sermon, and was rewarded by finding—and sharing with fellow parishioners—that "Father Jim" (not his real name) had indeed lifted the story, in toto, from a published account on the Web.

Plagiarism in the Classroom

In my thirty years of experience as a teacher, I have my own stories of student plagiarism. During my third year of teaching high school a student copied word for word a model essay from our grammar and usage textbook, and submitted it as her own work. Only at the end of the year did I realize that I had not only not detected the copying, I had given the student a B on the piece and urged her to be more imaginative in her writing. It was far too late to reprimand the student or change the grade, but the embarrassing experience made me pay more attention to the contents of the textbooks I was using.

Not much later, in my second year of my university teaching, I received an essay from an otherwise unexceptional freshman that featured remarkable and sophisticated insights regarding an obscure French short story writer. In the university library I found the original essay, most of which the student had submitted word for word as his own. This piece of detection satisfied me at the time—I had suspicions, and I was right! I was right!—but my sense of vindication evaporated when I brought the student in for a conference and told him I needed to submit the plagiarized paper to the university honor court. My student did not play his assigned role of malefactor, and his reaction and demeanor floored me. He was clearly contrite, humbled, and shocked; he accepted my charges and was, duly, failed in the course and suspended for a semester. For my part, I was disturbed. Like many teachers who experience such incidents, I did not feel unalloyed triumph in catching the cheat; I felt I needed to do something in my own teaching that would ensure that this would never happen again. As a pragmatic person, it seemed to me only partly helpful to add more citation instruction to my classes; I also began setting up assignments where it would be useless, impossible, to plagiarize. For me, the issue began to recede.

But even with new instructional strictures in place, in one recent course, despite a semester-long schedule of discussing and exploring research topics, establishing a topic, outlining the topic, and conferring face-to-face regarding the topic, one of my graduate students in young adult literature avoided me and all assignment details and deadlines the entire semester. When she turned in her final paper on Nancy Drew, however, it was clear that she was not the writer. Naively, also, she had listed electronic sources in her bibliography, and in a few clicks I found the three sites that constituted the bulk of her almost wholly copied paper. The student was, sadly, a school librarian, and after an honor court hearing, she failed the course, had a sanction notice placed on her transcript, and left the university, never to complete her degree or her library certification.

Recently I returned to the secondary classroom, and in Trailer 11 at Live Oak High School (Christenbury 2007) I found a highly sensitized group of students. Despite a direct statement on consequences of plagiarism in the Live Oak handbook, specified penalties, and work on my part to prepare my students as they wrote the curriculum-mandated research

PROOF

paper, a single reminder to a single student to remember to cite sources inspired a general upset in the entire class. One student, who had taken on the role of class spokesperson, wrote me in an e-mail:

> "It was kind of disheartening and I, along with some other classmates, felt as if you believed that we'd actually be dishonest to plagiarize by stealing someone else's ideas! It's unfortunate and disappointing when some people actually research and took time out to write their paper, but are accused of allegedly cheating" (Christenbury 2007, 40).

Some worry that the schooling system itself is so flawed that students are forced to take extraordinary measures to survive it, if not prosper

PROOF

The student e-mail was just the beginning; what ensued was weeks' long intervention of multiple parents who requested immediate clarification and reassurance regarding the research paper assignment. Eventually, one parent wanted to involve the Live Oak principal. It appeared that the exhortation to check sources was seen as a plagiarism charge in and of itself, and the events signaled for me a new degree of sensitivity to the issue of plagiarism.

The Plagiarism Debate in Academia and the Courts

Within academia, both at the secondary and at the university level, much of the current discussion regarding plagiarism avoids issues of labeling and condemnation, even in the extreme cases of appropriation for credit. Some worry that the schooling system itself is so flawed that students are forced to take extraordinary measures to survive it, if not prosper—one writer calls it being "firmly behind the academic fence without a key" (Colvin 2007, 150). Others note that many students, especially those in colleges and universities, just do not understand the discourses of academe (Gee 1996).

More specifically, some condemn a system where the rules of citation and scholarship are never made clear to struggling students and never sufficiently practiced so that students can successfully avoid the problem.

> "Because of misunderstandings of citation and plagiarism and because of misperceptions of students, administrators and teachers often misread what students know and understand about plagiarism, what they need to learn about citation, and the space they need to be given to practice performing the identity that will allow them to get being a student "right," especially in regard to plagiarism" (Valentine 2006, 104–105).

Of particular concern in the current literature is the situation of those from other countries studying in America for whom "perceptions of intellectual property—particularly as it pertains to students—are different within different cultures" (Thomas 2007, 82). In American classrooms are students who come from countries where these ideas differ: "what counts as original in the United States is not what counts as original in many other countries" (Valentine 2006, 103). Valentine recounts the story of a Chinese graduate student, Lin, accused of plagiarism, as a case in point.

> "[L]iteracy practices such as plagiarism are not simply located in text. Rather, in this case, the plagiarism is located in what Lin and the professor take to be their relationship. For Lin's part, this meant incorrectly thinking the professor would recognize his use of sources as honest work for a graduate student. For the professor's part, this meant incorrectly thinking Lin was trying to get out of work because he thought she was not expert enough to recognize his work as that of other scholars. In other words, a text that, to Lin, demonstrates his familiarity with sources and his hard work is a text that, to the professor, demonstrates plagiarism and an attempt to fool her" (104).

As another complication, some argue that plagiarism is not "something fixed and absolute" (Price 2002, 89) but "is difficult, if not impossible, to define" (Price 2002, 88), citing, in particular, the thorny areas of what constitutes common knowledge, the role of *intent* in plagiarism, and the complicating factors of using collaborative writing.

Regardless, the plagiarism debate has intensified. As point and click, electronic access, and word processing make source appropriation even more facile than the previous generation's practice of copying by hand from that antique (but once ever-reliable research companion, the bound encyclopedia), through technology we are also more able to detect citation misconduct at all levels and, depending upon the academic system in which students find themselves, punish it. With the explosion of websites where papers can be bought or borrowed wholesale (the site names are wonderfully revelatory: schoolsucks, cheathouse, bignerds, antiessays, research haven, hot essays) and where our electronic capabilities make blocking and copying almost instantaneous, we are in a new era of what is possible in the realm of writing, research, and academic integrity.

The reaction—the proliferation of commercial sites to detect plagiarism and the widespread use of Google to find specific phrases—is a countertactic by instructors at all levels to combat issues in citation, borrowing, and plagiarizing. Indeed, despite the concerns regarding instructional responsibility for plagiarism, cultural confusions by international students about Western definitions of originality, and even the difficulty of defining plagiarism itself, some in academe are afflicted with what Amy E. Robillard calls an affective response to plagiarism, "plagiarism anxiety" (2007, 13), which she argues is closely allied with the anger many instructors feel when students plagiarize. For these instructors, the policing and enforcing of modern detection services, such as Turnitin.com, efficiently pinpoint inappropriate appropriation in student research and writing—and nail the malefactors.

And though catching the cheats may have its satisfactions for beleaguered teachers, it has not gone unchallenged. Pursuit of plagiarism also reopens an old debate regarding the legitimacy of the entire teaching/learning/testing/credentialing cycle and calls into question what remains, for some, a completely flawed system. In a passionate article, "The Scarlet 'P'," Sean Zwagerman (2008) argues that:

> "....aggressively punishing academic dishonesty, and monitoring students so vigilantly that we are always conscious of dishonesty's actual or potential presence, validate the significance and legitimacy of grades, intensify the obsession, and further the disintegration of the student/teacher relationship...we should consider the ethics of encouraging students to be grade junkies and then punishing those who cheat to get their fix" (685).

The author also notes that not only are student and teacher relationships corrupted, the entire education process of critical thinking is similarly perverted.

> "Conversely, plagiarism detection treats writing as a product, grounds the student-teacher relationship in mistrust, and requires students to actively comply with a system that marks them as untrustworthy....Surveillance technology...reinforces rather than interrogates social roles and power differentials, as if they are natural and immune to scrutiny. Such technology is thus incompatible with—is, in fact, hostile toward—critical thinking" (692–93).

And as if the above were not enough to make one pause, while the sanctions of schools and colleges for proven plagiarism are not currently under review in the courts, the use and legality of detection mechanisms for plagiarism are. Turning the original argument on its head, in 2007 students at McLean High School in Virginia (joined by two high school students in Arizona) sued Turnitin.com's parent company, *iParadigms,* for almost $1,000,000. The students contended in A.V. v. iParadigms that the company's basic strategy of archiving student papers was a violation of property rights (Glod 2007), if not of academic integrity. A year earlier, students at Mount Saint Vincent University in Nova Scotia argued that "all plagiarism-detection software" be banned, and the university's contract with Tunitin.com was ended (Zwagerman 2008, 706). In the United States, though, the courts ruled for iParadigm in March 2008 (O'Toole 2008), observing that the archiving of student papers was fair use and actually protected the originality of the students' work by using it to combat future plagiarism.

A Teacher's Responsibility

So what can and should an instructor do? As a teacher with years of classroom experience at the middle school, high school, and university levels, some of which involves incidents of student plagiarism, I have appreciation for all of the arguments above, if not total sympathy. It is, no doubt, a complex issue. On the other hand, there are some conclusions we can reach.

First, I think we must agree that plagiarism is hardly as simple as it seems. It is not, actually, a blatant retreat to the safety of moral relativism to note that the concept of originality itself—or of explicitly acknowledging one's sources—is not shared by all cultures (as argued above) or even uniformly embraced

PROOF

in all periods of history. As an English instructor, I take some interest in the fact that Shakespeare took his plots and many of his characters from outside sources and, like his peers and his predecessors, never acknowledged the debt. A popular version of *Hamlet*, for instance, was known to Shakespeare and evidently had a long run on the Elizabethan stage (Greenblatt 2004, 294). Shakespeare's later interpretation was most likely influenced by this earlier play, and we also know that he used other sources that scholars can trace. Shakespeare read the Francois de Belleforest sixteenth century French tale of Hamlet, which was, in turn, indebted to the twelfth century Latin text by Saxo the Grammarian who was, for his part, "recycling written and oral legends that reached back for centuries before him" (Greenblatt 2004, 296). Acknowledgement of these sources was not made by Shakespeare nor, in his time, was it considered necessary. In even earlier Western literature, epic accounts—particularly those regarding familiar and archetypal heroes—similarly borrowed and appropriated plot devices, lines, and images. Medieval readers and hearers did not find this in the least alarming; it was part of a tradition of quoting without attribution. Thus, it is simply not always so that societies value, as we do in this country in the current age, the idea—some would call it a fiction—of total originality. This is, of course, intellectually interesting, but it also has real significance when we falsely assert the absolute historicity of originality and of acknowledging all source material.

> *Instructors need to make time in classes to work with students regarding citation, summarizing, and paraphrasing skills, and to discuss the elusive concept of common knowledge.*

Second, plagiarism requires active instruction on the part of teachers and practice on the part of students. It is not enough to cite the school or university handbook definitions and regulations, and to point out punishments and sanctions. Instructors need to make time in classes to work with students regarding citation, summarizing, and paraphrasing skills, and to discuss the elusive concept of common knowledge. Two recent books devoted entirely to this topic may provide a comprehensive strategy. (Please see the Gilmore 2008 and DeSena 2007 texts noted in "Works Cited.")

PROO

In addition, in class, teachers can:

- Discuss what is common knowledge and how that definition can shift, depending upon context and individual
- Explore the difference between errors in citation and deliberate falsification, highlighting one of the more crucial aspects of plagiarism: intent
- Teach citation, summarizing, and paraphrasing skills, and practice them (see both the Guinee and Eagleton 2006, and the Vosen 2008 articles for specific and practical strategies)
- Create assignments that do not lend themselves easily to plagiarism or that truly interest students and are thus less likely to be plagiarized
- Use incremental deadlines and credit points to encourage real research and not cutting, pasting, and copying
- Use incremental deadlines to discourage end-of-project purchase of research papers
- Reward citation
- Experiment with collaborative research
- Encourage the use of original and tailored forms of research, such as interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, almost all of which cannot be found on and appropriated from websites

Most powerful and included in the list above, teachers have a responsibility to create assignments where blatant plagiarism is less likely. While the story told by Melissa A. Vosen of her 18-year-old student who, in a class memoir assignment, wrote glowingly of "the joy and satisfaction she felt" (2008, 43) as she witnessed her 12-year-old daughter excelling in gymnastics was probably an anomaly (Vosen writes that she "laughed hard, at the same time…was appalled and little sad"), student interest will usually trump plagiarism temptations. One assignment I routinely use, which may be very untempting to plagiarize, requires a range of research skills, and may interest students to the point where they do not copy or appropriate, is one where I ask students to research the day of their birth. Students have to read the newspapers—one national, one from the community in which they were born—for the events of the day. They have to interview family members, in particular their parents, about recollections of the momentous date and use personal material such as their own baby book. Students can then concentrate on any aspect of the day: the international scene, the movies playing, the cost of any goods or items, the weather, the sports scores, the car ads. How they weave this together is an individual choice, and I give them guidance on writing this personal yet scholarly account of a day in history.

This assignment gives students a sense of history; it gives them a sense of themselves within and as a part of history. It makes them turn to primary not just secondary sources; it gives them an opportunity not only to interview but to use and interpret those interviews; it asks students to choose what is most important to them; it capitalizes, again, upon that undeniable interest all of us have in that ever-fascinating subject, ourselves. I have never had, I might add, a student plagiarize this assignment or fail to turn it in. There are few activities I can say this about, but "The Day I Was Born" is a relatively surefire assignment (Christenbury 2007, 234–35).

Students who are scared, insecure, and who want (of course) to pass and get grade and credit are those most likely to plagiarize. Students who feel they have something to say, who have some authority on the topic, and who are interested in what they write are less likely to turn to outside sources.

But It's Not Ever Simple

I research my own work and write my own words; I take satisfaction in both and can't recall ever being tempted to do otherwise. Yet it is not hard for me to imagine the panic of the 18-year-old who plagiarizes her memoir in faith that her own life is not sufficiently interesting to garner grade and credit. "Father Jim" also gets some sympathy from me: having established a reputation for his storehouse of uplifting childhood vignettes, he is overwhelmed with parish responsibilities, out of new ideas, and, faced with yet another Sunday homily, finds a Web source compatible and convenient. It is not hard for me to believe that overscheduled politicians and deadline-driven historians must rely upon the work of speechwriters, research aides, and fact-checkers who may not be as careful with direct wording as they might be. Finally, even while I may be wholly unsympathetic and hope that he or she gets caught, I also understand the desperation of the student who, for whatever reason, waits until the last minute and then outright buys a paper for class.

But what of this last and puzzling story? I end with a tale that, to my mind, underscores the complexity of the issues, if not the vagaries of human nature. For five years I was the editor of my profession's flagship journal, a publication which had at the time a staggering readership of sixty-five thousand. Every year *English Journal* received one thousand manuscripts for consideration, and I used a phalanx of outside reviewers to help make decisions on the content of the eight yearly issues. Very occasionally I would ask individuals for submissions and, even more occasionally, colleagues from across the country would spontaneously submit articles. One winter I was delighted to print a brief, humorous piece that was unsolicited, but which fit nicely into the issue's

PROOF

theme, and was submitted by a well-respected colleague, widely known in the field and who had, with his typical wit and style, caricatured a type of teacher. It was generous of him to send the piece in; his action was flattering to me and my nascent editorship; the piece was pointed and well written; and I squeezed it into the issue. Two weeks after publication a letter came to me from a longtime *English Journal* reader, and in it she enclosed a copy of a somewhat yellowed syndicated newspaper column that contained, word for word, much of my colleague's article.

Why would an academic of his professional stature—not to mention proven ability—do this? What need would he have? When I called him on the phone to talk and to share the letter and article, I was saddened to hear the same kinds of phrases I had read from other such cases. My colleague did contend that he vaguely remembered reading the piece; it just must have stuck in his mind and those memorable phrases and ideas must have crept, inadvertently, into his otherwise original prose. From my perspective, the extent of the precisely identical language just belied this explanation, but the damage was done, and the article was printed under his name and with my editorial approval. I sadly wrote the *English Journal* reader that I had brought the original newspaper column to the writer's attention and was terribly sorry for the incident as the writer, inexplicably, maintained that he had little memory of the many identical sections and phrases he had appropriated. The years have passed, and I have kept this story to myself. My colleague is now recently dead, but every time I read of yet another memorial to his career and professional generosity, I think of that article in *English Journal* and what might have inspired him—especially at the height of a distinguished career—to take wholesale from another and pass it off as his own.

I have no idea of what he was thinking. After all these years, I have little to conclude other than it's not as simple as it seems. But I do have a strategy: I can work with the students with whom I have contact, and, in my classroom and with my course assignments, teach and shape honest academic work. Such work is worth doing and worth rewarding, and even if that sentiment is not shared by all in this age of point and click, I have no intentions of giving up the struggle.

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