

Academic Programs

From the Office of the Associate Dean

Plagiarism

Not all plagiarists achieve fame and in-depth coverage by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Chronicle*; most are students toiling in relative obscurity, cutting and pasting or lifting in its entirety the work of others. Intellectual-property rights in the 21st century may indeed be preempted by a return to the centuries-earlier, precopy-right practice of “If I find a poem nailed to the church door, I can simply change the names and make it mine.” In place of the church door, we have the global window of the computer. Technology has raised the crafty business of plagiarism and its detection to a whole new level.

My college has both an honor code and an ethics program. It also has an official but vague policy on plagiarism, which leaves the final determination of punitive measure up to the individual instructor; the college does ask instructors to file a report with the provost’s office. In the first week of the semester, I hand out a syllabus with a description of

and warning about plagiarism. I also spend time in that first week and throughout the semester describing ways to present secondary sources (direct quotation, paraphrase, summary); the categories of plagiarism (poor or lazy formatting of sources, unintentional, intentional); and the consequences of plagiarism (a grade of F for the paper, and, at my discretion, a grade of F for the course).

As I outline the categories of venal and mortal transgressions, I’m often reminded of Sister Mary Helen, my second-grade teacher, who drew an illustration of the soul on the backboard: a chalk circle, which she then filled with a snowstorm of dots representing our sins. A colleague of mine has created a marvelous high-tech version of his lecture on the sin of plagiarism, a Web site with allusions to Dante and the eighth circle of hell. Neither threat of failure nor fear of everlasting damnation, however, seems to deter some students.

Even an emphasis

on the process of writing – an earthly procedure more concrete than threats of divine retribution, involving drafts and peer-review sessions – does not stop some students, who will brazen their way through a barrage of probing questions in workshops. Their final papers usually feature blocks of silky-smooth contraband prose, interspersed with ungrammatical and unclear changes designed to cover up their theft.

For it is theft, plain and simple – or, more accurately, complex – as I tell my students. It is theft of another writer’s ideas, work, and time; it is theft of their fellow students’ time; it is theft of their own time, honor, and education; and it is theft of my time – minutes, hours, and days – that I’d rather spend reading, writing, or watching a softball game. And not only is it unethical, it’s foolish. One of my husband’s degrees is in library science – he once worked as a reference librarian – and I supported myself through most of graduate school by working in li-

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“Knowledge is power. Rather, knowledge is happiness. To have knowledge, deep broad knowledge, is to know truth from false and lofty things from low.”

Helen Keller

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“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

Albert Einstein

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barians. I teach research methods, for God's sake. I also have a tech wizard living in my basement – my 17-year-old daughter. “So just don't do it,” I tell my students.

And most of them don't – not because of all my lectures, but because they are honest, love writing, and want to learn how to do it better. Over time, their hard work has made the plagiarism by the few all the more appalling to me.

The most recent incident involved a student's submitting a retitled appropriation of the poem “When We Two Parted,” complete with “thee” and “thy,” for her final project in “Creative Writing: Poetry.” Charmed by a blogger's use of the lines, the student had apparently traced them to another blog created by someone who is a big fan of a writer he calls “George Gordon” (the poet formerly known as Lord George Gordon Byron). In another incident, in a nonfiction class, a student presented as her own work the text of a 2004 online human-resources guide. In terms of detection, this was a personal best: It took me 30 second to find the site after typing in one of the subheadings.

On another occasion, I didn't have to search at all: After a creative-writing student ended her dramatic reading of her newest attempt, the student sitting next to her said, “Why am I thinking of ‘The Last Unicorn’?” As a quick click verified, she was thinking of Jimmy Webb's theme song for the animated film because the student had appropriated the lyrics.

The most outstanding act of plagiarism by a student I have encountered – an act of theft surrounded by a virtual web of lies – occurred

two years ago in a nonfiction class, “Writing for Publication,” and involved a woman who should have known better. G. was in her 40s and in her senior year; her major was information technology. At the beginning of the semester, I gave my usual lecture on the need for both students and professional writers to cite or handle sources responsibly. For the first workshop, G. brought a piece called “Ten Ways for Working Students to Cope With Stress.” It was of nearly publishable quality, but there was something strange about it. Polished and professional, it lacked only one thing – or, more precisely, one part of speech. It contained no articles – the omission apparently a clever attempt to disguise the act of plagiarism.

I found “10 Ways the Working Student Can Cope With Stress” online in 10 minutes. The eighth listing of a search, the piece was a publication of the Counseling Center at the University of Pittsburgh. (I simply typed in the key words “ten ways cope stress,” conscious of the fact that now I too had been reduced to eliminating all articles. I emailed the student, asking her to meet with me before the next day's class; then I returned to the site, hoping to find some additional tips on stress.

The student had agreed to come in at 11 a.m. In preparation, I printed out the online article and typed up a report. I made duplicate copies – of the article, the student's paper, my report, my assignment sheet, my rubric, the course's syllabus with the sections on plagiarism highlighted – for the chairman of my department, the acting provost, the student's advisor, and the director of the advising center. The student arrived

at 12:30 p.m., an hour and a half late and just half an hour before class was scheduled to meet.

I asked G. to tell me about her process, and she began: She had to find a topic, make notes, and “get the right words.” I was tempted to jump up like Perry Mason, wave the print-out of the original article, and say sternly, “And you got them right here, didn't you?” but I waited. “My only concern,” she said, and then paused. I wanted her to tell me that she didn't “get” the assignment – really, both of our lives would have been simpler and happier, and I wouldn't have to send off all those packets of duplicates. “My only concern,” she continued, “is that I didn't do the heading correctly, and so I won't get an A.”

I explained that the format, while incorrect, was not my greatest worry, and that, in fact, I had a far more serious concern – plagiarism. And so began the stages of plagiarism grief:

Disbelief: How could I accuse her?

Denial: This was her own original work.

Astonishment: How could she and someone else have produced identical texts?

Confusion, Part 1: She forgot to acknowledge her source.

Confusion, Part 2: My assignment was not clear; she didn't realize that she actually had to produce her own original work.

Plea No. 1: No one could ever produce original work on her topic (which had been her choice).

Plea No. 2: Allow her to add a citation now.

Plea No. 3: Allow her to redo the assignment and remain in the course.

Plea No. 4: She didn't just cut and paste, she typed the entire essay her-

Plagiarism continued

self.

Plea No. 5: Change the grade for the paper to C, on the grounds of the above.

Plea No. 6: All right, give the paper an F; just don't award a final grade of F.

Defense: I never mentioned plagiarism in class.

Accusation: I am mean and unfair.

My plagiarist tried – unsuccessfully – to withdraw from the course to avoid her F and, when that didn't work, appealed my charges. Despite the student's protests and appeals, both my chairman and acting provost supported my decision to award the student a final grade of F for the course (possibly the earliest-recorded final grade in the history of academe). The following semester, G. repeated the course with another

instructor in order to, as her advisor said, "reclaim [emphasis mine] her good name."

I've had work of my own used without my permission. One of my essays appeared online both as part of a fundamentalist church newsletter (the theme of the issue was honesty) and as required reading for a journalism course. In reply to my letter of complaint, the pastor of the church pointed out – uncharitably – that he knew of two other Web sites where my pirated work appeared and that "at least we included your name." The professor of the journalism course never answered my letter. According to her home-page bio, she had a degree in journalism ethics.

It's the brave/sad new world of the Internet, where every blogbaby can have his or her Warholian 15

minutes of fame; it's a global market with everything ripe for the picking; it's the new frontier with no law and no order. On one of the days that the grievance process with G. was tediously unwinding, my in-house information specialist, my technology-savvy daughter, sent me an e-mail message at work. She wanted me to check out a hit she found on Google: A term-paper company was selling essays about an article of mine on student excuses.

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Permission to reprint from Carolyn Foster Segal

From Surviving to Thriving: Effective Teaching Strategies for Today's Classroom

Elizabeth F. Barkley presented the following information at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in October 2006.

Additional Ideas Generated in Response to Specific Issues

How to get more students to participate?

- Random selection
- Participation Points
- Imaginary Hard Candy
- Figure out topic– give different "clues" and have them find commonalities
- Submit Questions/Answers that tie info from course together
- Have all students stand up until

they participate, at which they can sit down

- Organize into small groups and have groups report back
- Rewards (e.g., food, give-aways, points)
- "Top 5" lists
- "Tell me what you know" board

How to get students to take responsibility for their learning?

- Give students lots of opportunities to succeed and step back and let them learn (or not)
- Lay out what is required clearly and hold the students to it with a smile
- Use appropriate language: It is not 'my professor gave me a C' it is

"you earned a C"

- Clear expectations, explored early, Student and Teacher expectations, goals, etc.
- Help students see value of the content, how it is useful
- Teach students some metacognitive skills
- Build it into the format of the class
- Make them think it is relevant and important
- Make them learn they should prepare for their peer groups; expect that they will prepare
- In lecture, don't give all the information
- Ask for thoughts about reading at beginning of class
- Give them rope and they can hang

Collaborative Learning in Arts Classes: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice

Elizabeth F. Barkley presented the following information at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in October 2006.

Additional Ideas Generated in Response to Collaborative Learning Challenges

What are some ways I can ensure equal participation (preventing domination and/or passivity)?

- Use clock timer to control individual time
- Make joke about allowing time for other students to speak
- Round Robin policy (at least initially)
- Form long-term groups and use peer evaluations
- Anonymous questions in students' journals
- Timed quick work for everyone to think of responses
- As for responses from those individuals/groups that haven't spoken yet

What are some ways I can have students 'report back out' to the class?

- Groups self select speaker
- Instructor-assigned speaker
- Offer extra credit points
- Each student reporter is given 30 seconds to report
- Each group asked to summarize discussion
- Use an overhead to report and present ideas
- On-line report; Discussion Board
- Report nonverbally (charades, movement, etc.)
- Report back with questions, not answers

What are ways to deal with groups that work at different rates (some finish early, other finish late)?

- Have both core tasks and extra tasks
- Stagger response so early finishers' responses can be incorporated in later finisher's responses
- Early fishers to observe and listen to other groups
- Bonus problem

- Group activity before break
- Early finishers divide up and go to other groups to help

What are ways to deal with grading/evaluating that balance individual and group accountability?

- Memo that records what individuals did on project
- Peer grading
- Group grade and individual grade; cheater accountability
- Group members evaluate each member's work

What are some ways teachers can move students from group work back to whole class or individual work (regain control)?

- Time that goes off
- Verbal command
- Lights
- Cluster chord on piano, or musical cue
- Raise hands
- Using PowerPoint signal