

Writing Across the Curriculum

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Plagiarism in English 101

An earlier version of this piece was written for English 704, Teaching College Composition II, while Cynthia Marshall, Writing Center Assistant Director, was a graduate teaching assistant in the English department.

Commenting on first drafts of position papers, I was interested to read the work of one of my better students, “Ray,” a non-traditional student in his early thirties. His topic, according to his title, was “Should Children Have Chores in Addition to Homework?” Ray had struggled with his first topic, school prayer, and turned in his draft a day late. A week earlier, I’d run into him in the library where he was doing research and looking frustrated, so I was glad to see a completed draft.

About halfway into the first paragraph, the text began sounding familiar. As I continued, I realized I was reading a recently published parenting column by John Rosemond. Immediately, I flipped to the back page and saw that there was no list of works cited. Rosemond was not mentioned anywhere in the paper. There were no quotation marks around the stretches of text that were Rosemond’s. After comparing the published column and the draft, I noted that Ray’s only contributions to the paper were the phrases “In a recent *Time* magazine article” and “which is rare,” both of which were incorporated into

Rosemond’s text, and a concluding paragraph that was his own.

During the previous week, we’d discussed the position paper assignment, including source use, in class. I had referred students to the *St. Martin’s Guide* chapter on citations. Students had brought sources to class and wrote works cited list entries for them, then shared the entries with the class. Although I knew many students needed practice using MLA format, I assumed that our in-class activities sufficed as an introduction.

I received another plagiarized paper in that same batch of drafts from “Kelly,” a traditional-aged student. At the top of her draft she wrote: “I did not document because I put it all in my own words, and I don’t understand where to document.” She, like Ray, had received in-class instruction. She had been given the same opportunities to ask questions. Kelly’s vocabulary and awkward sentence structure illustrated that she had taken prose from her source material without quoting or including parenthetical citations. She had, however, included a bibliography. I warned Kelly that without in-text documentation, her source use would constitute plagiarism, and I provided an example of how to do parenthetical citations. In a conference after drafts were returned, she asked me further questions about citation. Because Kelly admitted her lack of understanding and asked for help, I saw her plagiarism

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Helping Students Remain Academically Honest

Students who interpret research-based assignments as “just getting information and sticking it in a paper” may plagiarize because they interpret the assignment as a matter of jumping through some hoops. . . .

On October 3, 2001, the English department hosted a brownbag discussion of plagiarism. Rich Bullock, Director of Writing Programs, provided the following handout to summarize his part of the presentation. His suggestions are very helpful, and I am grateful to him for allowing me to reproduce them here.

Joe Law

1. Make your expectations explicit

Students always interpret assignments. They may interpret them as difficult and complex or as easy and simple, or somewhere in between. Students who interpret research-based assignments as “just getting information and sticking it in a paper” may plagiarize because they interpret the assignment as a matter of jumping through some hoops—no engagement or ownership involved, so cutting and pasting is justified.

To help students understand what you want, **tell** them: lay out your expectations as clearly as you can; and **show** them: make available examples of what you want (good student writing from previous courses, a mock-student essay that you’ve written yourself), perhaps on the Internet.

2. Rethink your assignments’ topics

Instructors who ask students to write the same sorts of essays term after term are also asking for

recycled essays. Instructors whose assignments are wide open are asking for term-paper-mill submissions.

Some suggestions:

—Alter your assignments from term to term

Ask students to approach a topic from different perspectives or to use different tools or approaches; ask them to combine scholarship with some “creative” or personal approaches; give them a specific format to follow, one that changes in obvious ways from term to term.

—Restrict topic possibilities

The more choice you allow, the more open you are to attempts at cheating. You needn’t insist that every student write on exactly the same topic, but you may want to look for certain angles or parts of the material that are less likely than others to be already available for purchase. (If you’re teaching a much-assigned text or topic, you might browse the on-line term paper mills to see what sorts of papers are out there and then tailor your assignments accordingly.)

3. Rethink your assignments’ structure

The best way to encourage cheating is to ask students to write an essay and then, a few weeks later, collect their final drafts. You have effectively given up control over their work and invited various kinds of cheating. A more pedagogically sound and more-

difficult-to-cheat-with method looks something like this:

—**Ask for a one-paragraph topic proposal**

Collect it, read it quickly, and *make a change or two in what the student proposes*. (See #2, above.)

—**Ask for a rough draft**

Again, read it quickly, offering suggestions for improvements. Run it through Turnitin.com now.

—**Impose a deadline for changing topics**

Plagiarism often results from panic, and the student who says, “I changed my topic over the weekend” should make warning bells go off in your head. Insist that once you’ve approved a topic proposal or seen a draft, students

may not change their topics. Don’t be surprised by sin.

—**Then read the final draft**

You can do this much more quickly than you might have if you were seeing it for the first time; it will be better because you’ve already seen it once (and so requires fewer comments).

4. Let students know you’re watching

Ask students to give you an electronic version of their drafts with the understanding that you may run all or some of them through Turnitin.com. Review the university’s definitions of academic dishonesty in class. I assume that the vast majority of my students are honest, but I’m on the lookout for those who are not.

International Students and Academic Writing Is It a Problem of Plagiarism or Academic Literacy?

Steven Wyrick, a graduate teaching assistant with the Department of English, is pursuing an M.A. in English with a concentration in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Students attending American universities learn very early in their academic careers about Western notions of attribution and the pitfalls of plagiarism. Faculty members prepare and distribute syllabi containing information aimed at ensuring their students understand that plagiarism is a serious matter that will not be

tolerated. Yet, plagiarism in academic writing—the appropriation of another’s ideas and words without proper attribution and documentation—continues to occur.

Though some students intentionally plagiarize, many simply do not know how to select, quote, summarize, paraphrase, synthesize, and document source material. This is especially true of those international students who speak English as a second language (ESL). The foundations of their academic literacy may not have prepared them to understand and meet the academic writing

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As I read through this list of suggestions, I realized that they aren’t just negative and sad reactions to student dishonesty; they’re elements of good teaching and the sort of thinking that keeps teachers and students alike alive and engaged.

—*Rich Bullock*

Research shows that cultural phenomena, native educational experiences, and second language hurdles are often the source of plagiarism in the academic writing of international students.

demands placed upon them in an American university.

These academic deficiencies are a major challenge to university faculty as they balance the need for content instruction and attention to academic writing skills against limited classroom time, student contact, and other academic resources. While faculty should not condone acts of plagiarism by anyone, it is necessary for them to understand the factors that may lead an international student to plagiarize. Research shows that cultural phenomena, native educational experiences, and second language hurdles are often the source of plagiarism in the academic writing of international students.

International students from India, China, Korea, and other Asian countries grow up in a cultural environment that makes memorization an integral part of their literacy. It is quite common for these students to memorize lengthy passages of authoritative and/or culturally significant texts for later recall and recitation. Because their teachers know the memorized passages quite well, it is often unnecessary for these students to provide citations. Further, the Chinese and Koreans, in particular, believe that writers do not own their words and that sharing knowledge is a respectable activity; therefore, borrowing words freely from others has positive rather than negative connotations.

Research provides numerous examples of how native educational experiences might cause international students to plagiarize inadvertently. In many countries, summarizing, paraphrasing, or changing the words of a published

author in any other way would be seen as a mark of disrespect. Students in these countries are encouraged to borrow directly from the writing of others. The educational focus in Korea is on grades and passing examinations—all in preparation for passing university entrance exams and getting into the best universities. Japanese students usually engage in writing activities that require personal response to texts with very little emphasis on citing sources and virtually no requirement to respond to texts from a critical point of view. Having these types of educational experiences, these students are at a loss about how to proceed when faced with having to produce academic writing according to Western standards.

Further exacerbating the problem of academic writing in English for international students are the hurdles they face in using English as a second language. It is almost certain that most of these students first learned English as a foreign language. Generally, they have had very little, if any, access to teachers who were native speakers of English or to native conversational speakers of English. So, international students studying in America apply what they learned in English as a foreign language (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and imitative processes) to using English as their second language. This approach proves especially inadequate when these students are faced with learning how to select, quote, summarize, paraphrase, synthesize, and document source material. These students must depend upon a less-than-ideal command of the English language when summarizing and

Preventing Plagiarism in Lab Reports

At a recent WAC workshop about plagiarism, **Beverly Schieltz** (Biology) shared the Fall 2001 issue of *Strategies*, a publication for science instructors. It included a letter from John W. Stahl (Geneva College) offering a solution for the problem of plagiarism in lab reports: “An easy way to catch cases of mindless rote copying

of the introductory and discussion portions of lab reports is to simply change small aspects of the experiment from year to year.” Stahl incorporates leading questions that call for “some level of deeper thought and analysis of the experiment. Often, these can be changed in subtle but discernible ways so that it is obvious if a student copies older work.”

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paraphrasing—to say nothing of the need to understand what they read in their sources and to learn the technical aspects of citing a directly quoted source.

Much of the research about plagiarism and international students concerns those from Asian countries, but ESL students from any cultural or educational environment not grounded in the Western notions of attribution might unintentionally plagiarize. An understanding of the cultural, educational, and linguistic challenges such international students face is a necessary first step for university faculty to assess academic writing skills, to develop and implement pedagogical strategies to overcome such challenges, and to make appropriate decisions in the face of suspected plagiarism.

For Further Reading

- Angélie-Carter, S. (2000). *Stolen language? Plagiarism in writing*. Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Leki, I., & Carson, J. (1997). “Completely different worlds”: EAP and the writing experiences of ESL students in university courses. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 39-69.
- Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others’ words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 201-230.
- Thompson, L. C., & Williams, P. G. (1995). But I changed three words! Plagiarism in the ESL classroom. *The Clearing House*, 69, 27-29.

Further exacerbating the problem of academic writing in English for international students are the hurdles they face in using English as a second language.

Plagiarism: Causes and Prevention

General warning indicators of plagiarism

- Low grade in the course
- Poor attendance, missing assignments
- Signs of external stress
- Signs of cultural and educational deprivation
- Sullen, hostile demeanor (more common indicator among men)
- Signs of driven-ness and perfectionism (more common indicator among women)

As part of an English department brownbag discussion of plagiarism (October 3, 2001), Professor Martin Maner began the session with some remarks on what he sees as some causes of plagiarism and measures that can be taken to prevent it. He has generously allowed me to use his notes to reconstruct some of his comments.

Dr. Maner also provided the ten warning indicators of plagiarism in the sidebars on these two pages.

Joe Law

Causes

There are a number of general sources of the problem—corruption in public life, glorification of criminals, loss of service ethic, youthful sense of entitlement—all of them adding up to a sense that “everybody does it.”

The American education system contributes to the problem as well—and at the highest levels! For example, the new *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2001), defines “paraphrasing” in a way that actually invites patchwork plagiarism: to paraphrase is, in the words of the *Manual*, to “summarize a passage or rearrange the order of a sentence and change some of the words” (349). In its example of “proper paraphrasing,” the *Manual* omits a page reference in favor of a blanket mention of the entire source—so that a student imitating this example would force

a professor to search through the entire book to check a paraphrase! If documentation technique is this shoddy at the level of those who write the rule books, imagine how poor it is in the hand of a professor who hasn’t even read the rule book! Furthermore, most faculty are “niche” specialists, not well versed in research methods, the teaching of research as a discipline, or the teaching of documentation and “fair use.”

Institutions of higher education—including our own—add to the problem. There’s a kind of pervasive cynicism when we’re supposed to put grandiose GE goals on our syllabuses: “we’ll introduce you to critical thinking, democratic values, world diversity, a sense of history and connectedness, and personal development, and so on, but please sit in this lecture hall with 350 others—and by the way, we’ve chained the teacher in a basement cell to grade 350 papers every week.” Students quickly discern the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the situation, and who can blame them for imitating it? In a real sense, students cheat because we cheat the students.

This is unlikely to change at an institution where faculty are overworked and badly underpaid. I have had faculty tell me outright, it is too much work to assign papers using sources, and FAR too much work to track down plagiarism.

Prevention

The best way to prevent plagiarism is to require students to

develop their papers one stage at a time, monitoring each stage of a paper's development.

I often use a contract that spells out four types of dishonesty for which I will flunk a student. I hand out two copies, and I have them sign and return one copy.

In the courses in which I assign research papers, I go over every aspect of this issue in great detail. I assign readings in my own text. I work through an ungraded in-class example with them, in which they practice finding synonyms for every word, and then turn the syntax around, and then cite. This pattern becomes automatic to them: diction, syntax, cite; diction, syntax, cite. Then I have them turn in an ungraded exercise in paraphrasing one sentence. Then I have them turn in a graded one. Then I have them sign and return an agreement that they understand all this.

That should prevent plagiarism, shouldn't it?

It does not.

We are talking about a social pathology here—a culture of entitlement that elicits theft, encourages it, rewards it, and treats it as excusable. This in turn elicits a psychopathology among a sick few, and attempts to prevent plagiarism are merely a challenge to the sick ones. These people really believe that everyone does this, that they've done nothing wrong, that the warnings don't apply to them, and that everyone steals. It's a culture-wide sickness.

Many teachers are blandly optimistic, relentlessly positive, and naive about the psychopathology involved in plagiarism. Plagiarism is an epidemic, nationwide. It must be handled in a much tougher way than simply flunking a single paper, because "give back what you stole, Timmy" is no punishment at all. And a plagiarism detection service (like Turnitin.com) is not a panacea. It takes careful attention to student work, sometimes hours in the library, to track down plagiarism.

Specific warning indicators of plagiarism

- Sudden change of paper topic at the eleventh hour
- Well-written passage next to badly written passages
- Low placement or diagnostic scores but professional-quality writing; discrepancy in skills level between performance on in-class and take-home writing assignments
- Material that should be cited (facts, statistics, quotations) lacking citations

Correction

The September 2001 newsletter listed the classes that were designated writing intensive during the 2000-01 academic year and the faculty who taught one or more writing intensive classes. I have learned that three classes were missing from the list:

BIO 304: Plant Physiology

TH 372: Musical Theatre History and Literature 1

TH 373: Musical Theatre History and Literature 2

Also omitted were the names of six faculty members who taught writing intensive classes:

Mitchell Arnold

Joe Deer

Karen Breckenridge

Terry Heck

Don Cipollini

Jacqueline Rose

My apologies for the omissions! If I've still not included your class or your name, please let me know. The September newsletter is available online at www.wright.edu/academics/wac.

Joe Law

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as a sign that she was struggling with academic writing. Punitive measures didn't seem warranted.

In Ray's case, however, I was shocked at the magnitude of the plagiarism. Invoking the academic dishonesty policy seemed like the appropriate course of action. I pulled Ray into the hallway to inform him and told him that there was a problem with his position paper. He was immediately on the defensive. When I said that nearly the whole paper was from another source, Ray acknowledged using Rosemond: "Oh, you mean the newspaper thing." Ray then stated that he thought "that was what we were supposed to do—get sources." I told him (not very tactfully) that while the assignment involved locating sources, the draft was supposed to be *his* writing with the sources used to support his arguments. In retrospect, I see that my handling of the situation was not conducive to starting a dialogue about academic standards for source use.

Although I had doubts about Ray's level of misunderstanding, I now think that I should have told him during a conference that I wouldn't accept the draft because of the documentation problems but would look at a new draft on a different topic. I might have referred him to the library for research assistance, and I would have scheduled a follow-up conference to discuss his new draft and any lingering source problems. This approach would have given a frustrated but capable student guidance while demonstrating that plagiarism is detectable and serious.

In "Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty," Rebecca Moore Howard labels certain types of plagiarism "patchwriting." Patchwriting,

"copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonyms," seemed to describe Kelly's and, to some extent, Ray's source use.

Patchwriting differs from other types of plagiarism because it illustrates students grappling with new ideas and writing styles (788).

Reading Howard's work helped me recognize that students cope with the rigors of college writing in ways that are not always academically sound. In first-year composition courses, the students are beginning academic writers—and learning often involves making mistakes. As an instructor, I began differentiating between immoral use of another's work, as in cases when papers are borrowed, purchased, or stolen, and the use of another's work as a model. I decided to handle future cases based on Howard's "Proposed Policy on Plagiarism," which imposes harsh punitive actions for "cheating," allows for either punitive action or further instruction for "non-attribution," and identifies "patchwriting" as a separate category of "transitional writing" that is used as a stepping stone to the finished draft (798-802). In this policy, the instructor's response to patchwriting accommodates students inexperienced with documentation standards.

I do realize, of course, that instances of plagiarism are not always clear-cut. Where is the line between patchwriting and non-attribution? At what level should students be held accountable for violating citation rules? With respect to the situations in my class, was Ray's paper an attempt to learn or an attempt to deceive? Was Kelly's? How can I judge students' intentions?

Wright State's current aca-

Patchwriting, "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonyms," seemed to describe Kelly's and, to some extent, Ray's source use.

demic integrity policy provides greater autonomy for instructors dealing with plagiarism than the previous policy. However, greater autonomy carries with it more responsibility. Punishing students might deal with the problem on the surface, but it does nothing to fill gaps in students' understanding. Faculty should be aware that more control also means more responsibility both for identifying infractions and imposing penalties *and* for improving student learning.

Richard Murphy's "Anorexia: The Cheating Disorder" addresses his own hyper-alertness to plagiarism, resulting in falsely accusing a student of cheating. When Murphy reports that he experiences "the excitement of judicial satisfaction" (900), he overlooks that some situations of plagiarism are teachable moments. Catching a student plagiarizing is not simply an opportunity to assert intellectual dominance over students, nor should instructors become cynical about every student's integrity because of isolated negative experiences. Murphy himself points out "the comic peculiarity of my claiming to be committed to helping students learn but sometimes spending large chunks of everyone's time trying to corner them in a fraud" (902). It is unfortunate that such a gap separates some teachers' missions from their actual activities.

With Ray, I fell into that trap. By rushing to punish a student, I overlooked some important factors. First, because Ray's writing style was more mature, I assumed that he was adept at using sources—and forgot that he was a beginning academic writer in a first-year composition course. Second, I did not consider that Ray's experience as a stand-up comic might have influenced him, with comedy's

borrowing from other sources without direct acknowledgment. Ray used Rosemond's text but then added his own commentary at the end. He said he'd intended to add his own work later, implying that Rosemond's text merely provided a model. Third, I ignored Ray's frustration with his topic. I suspect that spending a few moments to help him select a new topic or engage in productive research the day I saw him in the library might have prevented his turning in Rosemond's column.

I now tailor assignments to make intentional plagiarism difficult. Paper requirements never come directly from the textbook. Students submit preliminary writing about their topics early in the quarter and cannot switch topics after a certain point without approval. I also require copies of selected source material to check source use. And of course, we discuss how to summarize, paraphrase, and quote; how to do parenthetical citations; how to create a works cited or reference list. I also inform students of the university's academic integrity policy. I don't discuss patchwriting with students, lest they view it as an alternative to earnest drafting.

Plagiarism will not go away. But the more attention it receives and the more facets of the issue come to light, the better the decisions faculty and students alike can make.

Works Cited

- Howard, Rebecca Moore. "Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty." *College English* 57 (1995): 788-806.
- Murphy, Richard. "Anorexia: The Cheating Disorder." *College English* 52 (1990): 898-903.

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WAC Workshops

Winter 2002

What's New in the New APA Publication Manual?

Presented by Joe Law
Thursday, January 17, 2002
3:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.

Grading Exams Quickly and Consistently—It Can Be Done!*

Presented by Carol Engelhardt (History)
Wednesday, January 23, 2002
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

Working with ESL Students*

Presented by Rick Johns (Director, LEAP)
Wednesday, February 6, 2002
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

Turnitin.com—A User's Report*

Presented by Joe Law
Wednesday, February 20, 2002
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

* Lunch will be provided at these sessions.

All sessions will meet in the Center for Teaching and Learning (023 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library). To register or to get more information, call Joe Law (x2155).

More details will appear in the January WAC newsletter and on FAC-L.

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