Fighting Plagiarism with Humor

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Abstract

The case for using humor as a tactic in combating plagiarism among college students is described. A web site, www.writeyourowntermpaper.com, parodying term paper mill sites, was developed to help students understand what plagiarism is and warn them against the consequences of academic dishonesty. The site utilizes non-academic language as well as humor to convey its message, and is intended to supplement to existing, traditional instructional plagiarism avoidance tools. Results of a student in-class survey indicate that the use of humor does not trivialize the seriousness of plagiarism in students’ eyes.

Academic integrity is much more important than simply guaranteeing that students adhere to rules of test taking and plagiarism avoidance. It is linked inextricably to transmitting general ethical values to students. The ethical scandals that plague American business, politics, professional sports, and other institutions reflect the disastrous impact of the erosion of integrity in American society. Educators are certainly concerned that students not cheat on exams or engage in plagiarism, but in the long run the larger goal is to transmit ethical standards of conduct to future generations.

This is no easy task and too frequently students perceive what faculty and college administrators say about academic integrity and plagiarism as unrealistic, teachy-preachy, moralizing. In class discussions and homework essays, I have encountered students who express the view that integrity is a utopian idea, totally inapplicable beyond academia. Nineteen-year-old students have told me quite authoritatively that in the real world people lie, cheat and steal to succeed. This cynical view of the world reflects an acceptance of the culture of cheating (Callahan, 2004) and reminds us of the need to be resourceful and creative in our efforts to inculcate values of integrity that can be transferred and generalized from the academic experience to society at large.

If the seriousness and earnestness of the message gets in the way of a successful communication of that message, then perhaps modifying the message to make it more interesting and the audience (students) more receptive might be in order. The utility of humor in teaching has been well established in pedagogical literature going back more than a quarter century. In their seminal 1979 paper, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman pointed to considerable evidence establishing the importance of humor as a pedagogical tool. More recent research suggests that humor creates a positive environment which enables students to focus and learn better (Garner, 2006). More recently, Torok, McMorris, and Lin argued that “teachers not only must competently convey knowledge, understanding, and appreciation about a specific subject but also must do so in a way that is engaging and interesting if they wish to be effective.” In a study of 124 college students they found that “humor has the power to make teachers more likeable, facilitate understanding of course materials, lower tension, boost student morale, and increase student attentiveness” (p. 18).
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Creating writeyourowntermpaper.com

My own recent experience in developing a parody web site on plagiarism at Baruch College may offer some insight. Academic integrity and ethical issues pertaining to the handling of information in society receive considerable emphasis in my Information and Society course at Baruch College (the course is cross listed in the Library’s Information Studies program, the Communication Studies department, and the School of Public Affairs). The course syllabus includes a lengthy commentary on academic integrity as a set of mutual obligations between students and instructor. Students are expected to master course materials, prepare for class, participate in class discussions, and abide by college rules regarding cheating and plagiarism. In turn, the syllabus asserts that academic integrity means that students have the right to expect that their instructor will prepare for class, engage with them, treat them with respect, read and listen to what they have to say, take them seriously, and give them feedback in a timely fashion. Regarding plagiarism specifically, students must complete a library-designed plagiarism avoidance tutorial and interactive quiz within the first two weeks of the semester. In addition, the course features a period-long lecture and discussion of arguments against plagiarism and a critique of google.com’s policy of promoting plagiarism through its acceptance of advertisements for term paper mills. A homework assignment requires students to view a video of this class presentation and write a brief evaluative essay.

Some students respond positively to the emphasis on integrity issues, but a significant number express discomfort with what they perceive as the “emotionalism” or even “obsession” with plagiarism that they feel permeates my teaching. In course exit surveys administered each semester, approximately 20 percent of students typically feel that the emphasis on plagiarism in the course is overdone (Bornstein, 2007a).

Taking a hint from students who clearly want me to “lighten up,” I explored the use of humor to fight plagiarism, unveiling last year www.writeyourowntermpaper.com as a web site that spoofs sites that sell term papers. The project originated from a confrontation with a young man who materializes on campus every semester to distribute business cards for a term paper mill. The cards peddle pre-written term papers for $9.95 per page or custom written term papers for $16.95. When I suggested to this young man that he should be ashamed of himself for standing outside an institution of higher education trying to get students to cheat, he denied that he was advocating cheating and insisted that the term papers offered for sale “are for research purposes only.” I asked him why students would pay money to buy papers for “research purposes” when the library’s web site provides access to more than 200 databases and 35,000 journals and newspapers for free, but he declined to continue the conversation.

Shortly afterward I decided to create a “counter business card,” designed to look similar to the term paper mill’s card, but with text that satirized the plagiarism offers and encouraged students to do their own research and write their own papers. Building on a working relationship with students in the Direct and Interactive Marketing Lab, which is housed in the library and develops posters, brochures and promotional campaigns for the library, I discussed the project with several marketing students and enlisted a graduate student graphics designer to work with me. I wrote the initial copy and she designed the business card. Whereas the term paper mill’s business card drove students to their web site, our card encouraged students to go www.writeyourowntermpaper.com. The marketing students suggested that I should go beyond preaching about academic integrity and think about “selling” academic integrity to students, making it something that was desirable, beneficial, useful, an “in-thing.” This discussion led
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quite logically to creating a writeyourownterm-paper.com web site – we already had business cards advertising the web site.

For a nominal fee the URL for www.writeyourowntermpaper.com was registered at Go-Daddy.com the next day and arrangements were made with the college technology staff to host the site on the college’s web site. The site’s structure parodied that of the typical term paper mill site. Very little of the copy was actually humorous in and of itself, though it was written in largely non-academic style. Material from a standard anti-plagiarism lecture usually presented to my classes and student groups (e.g., academic tutors, honor graduate students) was reworked in non-academic prose, using language, cadence, and punctuation more akin to marketing copy than what one would find in an official student handbook. The message was serious, not humorous, but readable and approachable – an attempt at being serious and “hip” at the same time. For example, the home page opens with the following copy:

Someday you’re going to be tempted. Some guy is going to be handing out flyers for a term paper mill. Or you’re going to bump into a web site offering term papers for sale. Or a friend is going to hand you some line about taking a short cut instead of working your butt off on your term paper. Or you’re going to figure what’s the big deal of patching together sentences here and there from some articles or books. Before you go down that path to plagiarism, think twice.

Another page offers a definition of plagiarism:

Plagiarism: What is it? Simply put, plagiarism is turning in somebody else’s work as your own. Since you didn’t do the work, but are pretending you did, you’re lying, cheating, being dishonest. Not exactly the kind of person most of us aspire to be. Not exactly the kind of person most people want to hang out with. Or fall in love with. Or hire for a job (Bornstein, 2007b).

The site prominently features links to all the traditional, serious anti-plagiarism resources at the college, including tutorials, guide sheets, academic honesty material in the student and faculty online handbooks, research databases, etc.

There was humor as well. One section suggested that “the schoolhouse and the big house” share a common concern about plagiarism, referring to an old Saturday Night Live skit from 1981, “Prose or Cons.” In that skit, Eddie Murphy portrayed Tyrone Green, a jailhouse poet, who recited his award winning poem, “Kill my landlord, C-I-L-L, Kill my landlord.” The narrator says that plagiarism is an extremely serious problem in prison. “Here an inmate caught in an act of plagiarism is removed from the cellblock for his own safety,” as guards carry an inmate out kicking and screaming. As the inmate is carried passed his cell, Eddie Murphy reaches through the bars and smashes the culprit over the head with a book, and says, “Why don’t you see what you can steal outta that” (SNL, 1981) The web site links to a transcript of the skit, but unfortunately no video is available.

The web site goes on to say that, “we decided to ask inmates at some of the nation’s most prestigious penal institutions what they think of plagiarism,” and links to a crime gallery database of prison inmates. Students click on a finger print and get cartoon criminals saying things like:

If you can’t write your own ransom note, what kind of kidnapper are you? – convicted kidnapper

There ain’t nothing lower than a copycat killer – no sense of originality whatsoever.” – convicted killer on death row

There may be no honor among thieves, but at least we don’t plagiarize,” — convicted thief
An interactive game, patterned after a similar feature that appeared last year on the whitehouse.org website, was also created. The whitehouse.org game invited visitors to find out what the “National Security Database” had on them, by typing in their name and viewing randomly generated humorous responses. Donna Cheng, the graduate student web designer worked diligently to develop a national plagiarism database for writeyourowntermpaper.com. Students enter their name and search to see what the database has on them. The database is programmed with 12 random gag responses. A student typing in “John Smith” might get responses reading:

- John Smith found out the hard way that turnitin.com catches plagiarized papers.

- John Smith tried to convince a professor that a custom written paper bought from a term paper web site should be considered an original piece of work, not plagiarism.

- John Smith copied an article and turned it in as term paper to the very same professor who had written the original article.

- John Smith bought and turned in the same term paper as five other students in the same class.

- John Smith is too cheap to pay more than $9.95 a page for a term paper.

An online “store” features ads for anti-plagiarism coffee mugs and tee shirts, with slogans like “Nobody luvs a cheater;” or “Plagiarism stinks;” (The marketing students have suggested that we actually sell these items as a way of augmenting the site’s impact.)

Is Plagiarism Too Serious to Joke About?

Before going live with the web site, student, faculty and administrative colleagues on the college’s Academic Integrity Committee were invited to preview the site and provide feedback. Comments were generally positive, especially from student committee members. However, a highly respected faculty colleague in the English department criticized the site for treating a very serious subject in a non-serious manner and thereby trivializing it. This criticism was not particularly surprising. As long ago as 1979 the observation was made that many faculty believed that humor did not belong in the classroom (Bryant et al, 1979). More recently, one proponent of the pedagogical use of humor observed that “unfortunately, some educators believe their role or their topic is too serious to engage humor or view humor as merely a disruption” (Glenn, 2002). Does humor trivialize serious subject matter or merely offer an alternative approach towards addressing those problems?

In the comedic work of George Carlin, Lewis Black, or Jon Stewart humor communicates serious content. Satire has a long and important history in our culture and should not be dismissed easily as a tool in addressing serious problems. In the case the plagiarism spoof site, for example, when the crime gallery kidnapper says “if you can’t write your own ransom note, what kind of kidnapper are you,” a serious problem point is being made with humor. The site is posing the same point as asking, “if you can’t write your own analysis of a problem, what kind of analyst would you be, or what kind of lawyer, or what kind of teacher? When the death row murder says, there’s “nothing lower than a copycat killer,” isn’t the message that there’s nothing lower than someone who copies the work of someone else? When the plagiarism database says “John Smith found out the hard way that turnitin.com catches plagiarized papers,” doesn’t that convey the same message as a declarative statement that the college uses turnitin.com as a means to identify
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plagiarized papers, but in a more engaging, even funny manner? When the database says that John Smith bought and turned in the same paper as five other students in the same class, isn’t that conveying the same message as a declarative statement pointing to the dangers and futility inherent in buying term papers rather than doing one’s own work? The use of humor is not meant to replace or displace more traditional and “serious” instructional tools, but to supplement and complement them.

To test whether the web site’s humor trivialized the problem of plagiarism for the intended audience, 20 students in my course were assigned to examine the site and fill out an anonymous survey, which in no way impacted their grade in the course. Asked if the definition of plagiarism on the web site was clear, 70 percent strongly agreed and 30 percent agreed. Eighty percent felt that the web site was “better and more interesting than the (online) plagiarism tutorial and quiz.” Several students did criticize the web site for not teaching them anything they did not know already from the tutorial or other instructional materials.

However, student comments demonstrate quite clearly that the site was not perceived as trivializing plagiarism, but on the contrary conveyed serious ideas:

- It also used fear a lot better, if you plagiarize than that there would be severe consequences.

- I think the site does a great job of bringing to light the fact that it’s a serious offense if a person is caught plagiarizing work.

- I think the web-site is great in the way that it shows just how bad plagiarism is. It shows it’s not only cheating the system, but basically you’re cheating yourself. It clearly shows and defines what plagiarism is, this way the student has guidelines to follow.

- This site contributes a firm understanding of the meaning of plagiarism and the consequences plagiarism can bring. An highly educational and informative site for students to use and to be aware on how to avoid plagiarism and it's consequences.

- I thought the site was to the point and cute. It was a lot more interesting than the plagiarism tutoria.

- I felt that the site was very clear to understand the consequences of plagiarism. I very much so think that even a grade schooler could understand what plagiarism is by viewing and reading the site. The site has very good reasons not to plagiarize. They even break it down for you on why it’s very wrong to do so.

- The site, writeyourowntermpaper.com, is highly informative, without being boring. It is also simple, but is not "dumbed-down." It makes a difficult subject easy to understand on all levels, from clearly defining what plagiarism is and what can happen to a person if he/she is caught doing it (Bornstein, 2007 c).

Conclusion

Despite the English professor’s fear that the site trivializes the problem, students clearly reported that the site effectively communicated the definition of plagiarism, arguments against plagiarism, the negative consequences of being caught plagiarizing, and even a fear of those consequences. The writeyourowntermpaper.com web site offers a humorous tool to supplement existing anti-plagiarism instructional methodologies, an additional means to inculcate the values of integrity in students. Faculty members at other institutions are more than welcome to link to the site, or to use it as the basis for developing their own. It is asked only that such sites include an acknowledgement of material that was re-used or adapted.
References


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