Personalizing the Anti-Plagiarism Campaign

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Abstract

In response to a pamphlet on ways to avoid plagiarism published by their university, a science professor and an English professor reflect on their own writing practices. They also explore such topics as electronic plagiarism detectors, the history of "imitation" in literature, the Popperian formulation of the scientific method, the postmodern notion that "everything is already written," the problem of "unconscious plagiarism," Foucault's "author function," and the different assumptions about truth made in the "objective" work of science and the "subjective" work of the humanities. They reflect on some reasons why teachers' guidelines may foster plagiarism among students, and they suggest ways to frame assignments that help students to do their own work.

So it isn’t the verbatim use of others’ words that is plagiarism; it isn’t the incorporation of others’ ideas. It is the unacknowledged use of others’ words and ideas. This seems clear. One acknowledges what has gone before. We have many ways of doing this:

a Ph.D. student writing a dissertation does a review of the literature;

Dante chooses Virgil as his guide;

T.S. Eliot quotes the endless voices that find their way into his poem, that are the context for its meaning, that become part of the new work, and he annotates to avoid the charge of plagiarism. "April is the cruelest month," says Eliot, opening The Wasteland, and his ideal reader recalls Chaucer’s pilgrims walking to Canterbury to renew their spirits in the “shoures soote,” the sweet showers, of an April day.

Eliot knows the depth of his debt to his predecessors. "Minor poets borrow," he says. "Great poets steal."

What ties a physicist and an English teacher together in this essay is our attempt to contextu-ralize the issue of "plagiarism" across the disciplines and to see what we both agree on. Science is objective; the humanities are subjective. Science winnows out forgeries and false results. One piece of valid scientific research opens the door to the next piece. What results finally is another step toward the “truth.” Humanists, by
contrast, are not bound to what is “valid” or “true” and what is not. We have different categories. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” says Keats. “That is all/ ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” So what is beauty? In science it is often described as an elegant proof that reveals new knowledge. In the humanities it is a thousand other things, all subjective, all partly original and partly borrowed. The humanities is less about truth than about forms, taste, values, emotions, and the power of human expression—though we may often feel that a great imaginative work expresses a truth of human experience. At their best we could say that works of art and philosophy are metaphysical rather than physical. They attempt to pierce a veil of perennial mystery, to make a connection to other human beings, to make sense of existence. Science seeks the unknown truth that is already there, waiting to be discovered.

So what does stealing in each field mean? What is growth? What is property? Who owns what? How do we communicate these ideas to our students?

Is Everything in the Humanities Imitation? The Case of the Freshman Writing Class.

In the 1990’s David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow, two well-known compositionists, had a debate at a major conference about whether a student could, as Elbow offered, “write without teachers.” The debate led to a trio of articles that appeared in College Composition and Communication in 1995. Elbow’s famous book, Writing Without Teachers, published in 1973, had come at the beginning of a revolution in the teaching of writing that moved composition teachers away from an emphasis on product to an awareness and methodology of process. Elbow said that by letting go of the rules and letting the hand make its way across the page, a student could come to writing something she didn’t know she knew. Echoing professional writers, Elbow said, “writing is not what you start out with; it is what you end up with.” Others have put it in similar ways: “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking . . .” (Joan Didion). “Writing has been a way of explaining to myself the things I do not understand” (Rosario Castellanos). “. . . If I knew what the meanings of my books were, I wouldn’t have bothered to write them” (Margaret Drabble). (All quoted in Maggio.) The process takes us “underneath” consciousness, to a realm of knowing and connections that emerges only when we “let go” of strictures. In some instances, that composing part of the self will naturally shape itself into an appropriate structure. But if not, we can attend to the formal needs of the composition—the need for an introduction, conclusion, correct grammar—later on. Eventually, Elbow says, we edit fiercely. But first we must clear space for words to come.

Bartholomae took the postmodernist side. There is no writing without teachers, he said. What comes up when one lets go, he claimed, is not a fresh idea but all that the student has heard and read before. Ask a student to tell the story of the death of a grandparent and he will write a scene from a sentimental novel. “It was a sad day, but I think we learned something about love and knew that grandma had influenced us all.” (My own rendering of this example comes from Lee Ann Carroll’s description of it in her essay “Pomo Blues.”) The student has had many teachers; he just doesn’t know it. What he writes is the “master narrative,” which is “already written.” This is not plagiarism. There is no intent to steal, no lifting of words. Just a reliance on the familiar and acceptable, due to fear, perhaps, or a lack of a will or the encouragement to go deeper. Or maybe due to an assumption that what the teacher wants is precisely this bland formula, as teacher and student make a contract that will lead to a passing grade in the course. Does the teacher really want to hear that the student hates his grandmother?
Personalizing the Anti-Plagiarism Campaign—DeLuca and Tomkiewicz

Elbow might counter that if the student keeps writing long enough, the hatred will surface without our prompting, along with a reason for the hatred that will deepen the writing.

Bartholomae would say that we have to teach the student that what he is likely to say (we all loved grandma) is prepackaged. Then we have to teach him the language and the concepts with which to think more deeply, which may mean in a way that is more appropriately distanced from his “feelings,” particularly as we move into academic discourse, where the concepts are difficult, precise, outside the realm of ordinary language, where the student could contextualize his hatred for grandma by observing something about the culture of grandparents in contemporary America. Bartholomae and others (see Soliday, for example) would say that the student needs to “make the familiar strange.”

Elbow would counter that even if something has been said before, the student has the right to discover it herself. An idea can be in the atmosphere or in someone’s book, but that doesn’t mean that the student doesn’t follow her own connections to arrive at it. The next step may be considering others who have explored the same notion, but the student gets credit for her own thoughts and words as they have come to her. The teacher then is not in the position of the spoiler but acts as someone who might say approvingly that “great minds think alike.” Or “by the way, you might want to take a look at this essay. Its concerns are close to your own.”

Nobody has the last word here. Obviously, both Bartholomae and Elbow are right. The classroom is a fraught place where we live with these interrelated and sometimes subtle issues: where students use the ideas floating freely in their store of cultural archetypes; where students plagiarize subconsciously; where they steal ideas without attribution; where they need to make distinctions about when an idea has entered the common store and can be freely used and when it hasn’t; and finally, where they engage in the most obvious form of plagiarism, overtly lifting another’s words and ideas with intent to deceive the reader.

A student’s understanding of the parameters of plagiarism doesn’t come quickly. It involves a level of consciousness of one’s field, one’s forebears, a general intellectual and aesthetic awareness that is many layered. And then, finally, with all that consciousness, one may find, as Eliot does, that one steals anyway and gets away with it, because the results, with all their conscious and unconscious borrowings, are magnificent and totally new.

The Limits of Acknowledgement: An Extended Anecdote in the Humanities

I am writing a flyer for a conference on the uses of contemplative practice in the classroom. That phrase, “the uses of contemplative practice,” describes the conference well. But it lacks drama. It needs something striking to precede it, to go before the conventional colon. I want an echo of a poet or a guru, to locate myself at a moment in a great tradition. So I start leafing through poetry anthologies, looking for a phrase that I can use to begin the conference flyer, a phrase that will lend both authority and surprise to the title and stand for the whole irresistible context in which this event takes place: the context of contemplative practice with its koans and zenlike paradoxes and encouragement to just sit still for awhile and breathe. I browse through Rumi and Kabir, through Whitman and Dickinson. I look at Ginsberg writing about Whitman: “What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman” (p. 136), says Ginsberg. Why is Ginsberg recording his thought in just this way? Because he is answering Whitman, who writes in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,”

What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you . . .
I considered long and seriously of you before you were born (lines 87 – 88).

In responding to Whitman’s claims, Ginsberg creates a dialogue between them. Whitman’s long lines and wild bearded persona become Ginsberg’s. He would not have been “Ginsberg” without Whitman. He would have been a poet, most likely, though not this precise poet.

But I can’t find anything from Ginsberg today, so I turn to Jon Kabat-Zinn’s book on meditation, Wherever You Go, There You Are. And I come upon a chapter heading: “This Is It” (p. 14). He begins the chapter by describing a New Yorker cartoon. “Two Zen monks . . . one young, one old. . . . The younger one is looking somewhat quizzically at the older one who is turned toward him and saying: ‘Nothing happens next. This is it’” (p. 14). And I think, aha! “Nothing happens next.” In this age of standardized testing and outcomes assessment, what better title than “nothing happens next”?

So then I ask: where did the New Yorker cartoonist get the line “This is it” from? It’s a familiar enough statement, of course, so maybe no reference is necessary. On the other hand, Alan Watts has a book called This Is It, copyright Vintage, 1958. Maybe the cartoonist read Watts. And where did Watts get the title? Could it really have started with him? Maybe it came from a 14th-century monk composing on a mountain top, writing “This is it, this mountain. Up, down, same difference. Wherever you go, there you are.” How many times does it happen that the last person to use the phrase, or the idea, gets credit for it from the reader? In my own writing I quote meditation teacher David Nichtern as saying that as a meditator, “you take your seat” with dignity. Then I read more and I find that everyone says, “you take your seat.” Nichtern wasn’t trying to take credit for the phrase. I just attributed its first coinage to him. He was the one who taught it to me.

So, to return to the flyer, I decide that “Nothing happens next” should be the main title of the conference. Contemplative academics will get it immediately and others will notice that many other things happen next, and they might just stop by to see what sort of nonsense we’re up to. I remember Browning’s line (I think it was Browning), “They came to scoff and stayed to pray.”

And being an academic, I will know to put an asterisk next to the title and then, in fine print at the bottom of the flyer, I will cite Kabat-Zinn. I won’t cite the New Yorker though. Why not? Well, Kabat-Zinn has already done that. Or maybe I’ll decide that the title is already so much a part of common parlance, at least among contemplative academics, that I won’t need to cite it. Would Kabat-Zinn be offended if I didn’t cite him? Probably not. Still, I’ll probably cite him. Then I get the benefit of making the connection to him. People know and respect him. I will get “borrowed glory” from his name.

As I watch myself putting together a small piece of writing—a title for a flyer—I realize that I am “stealing” freely from a vast store of other people’s written work. The process illustrates for me the larger point that no matter how fastidious we are in citing sources, no matter how original we think we’re being, we are connected to hundreds, thousands of other people for our individual achievement. Being an academic, I know the rules of what I can get away with, what I need to acknowledge. But that acknowledgement in no way covers my debt.

Moving from Small Science to Big Science: the Effect of the Internet

It may be that the issue of plagiarism, at least within the context of scholarly work in the sciences, loses its urgency after graduation because graduate students start to rely more on self-generated observations and less on published
(and often overused) material. Hence they encounter fewer opportunities to plagiarize. Indeed in the experimental sciences, it was a common experience that most laboratory research and field observations were generated by the investigators, and the resulting scholarship was intimately correlated to these observations and hence, again, the opportunities for plagiarism were reduced.

But significant segments of today’s science are different. In many areas “small” science—work conducted by an individual or a small team—is being replaced by “big” science—work by groups of investigators—to create large, experimental databases that, in almost all instances, are globally available through the Internet. Research topics such as genome structure, space observations, ice-core drilling, and deep-sea research are all too big for an individual or a group to carry on alone, and they are being financed and organized through governmental, inter-governmental or international agencies with data posted on the net. Much of the resulting scholarship is anchored to these databases with an obvious increase in opportunities for plagiarism.

The Limits of Acknowledgement: An Extended Example in the Sciences

Toward the end of my first reading of CUNY’s anti-plagiarism pamphlet, I find myself feeling horrified. Have I been plagiarizing? I have just finished writing a book on energy use and the consequential climate changes. The book sits now on a publisher’s desk and goes through the usual vetting process. I wrote the book with the premise that the issue of global energy use has reached the existential point where it is directly related to the future existence of the human race. Some characterize the situation in terms of a feeding transition that will take place as organisms suddenly need to change their food source. The present estimate is that this transition will occur over the next two or three generations, that it will require collective action in response, and that, at least in democratic societies, this action should be initiated by the election of legislators who will respond to it. But in order for voters to respond intelligently to this crisis, they need to understand what’s happening. Thus, my book, which is heavily based on centralized data sources that, in the majority of cases, are freely available through the Web. And since climate change affects and will continue to affect global income distribution, competition for natural resources and economic security, it is no surprise that one can find opinions, references and new research throughout the media.

So I had good reason to worry. Was I using all of this research appropriately? My wife and I were recently married by Judge Richard Owen, an opera composer of some notoriety, who is famous in certain circles for coining the phrase “subconscious plagiarism.” He used this phrase in a trial in which former Beatle George Harrison was accused of plagiarizing the melody for “My Sweet Lord” from the Chiffons’ 1963 hit “He’s so Fine.” The two operating criteria for plagiarism, he said, were opportunity (Harrison had heard the song) and sufficient similarity. Intent to copy was not necessary.

Controversial topics like energy use and climate change are prime suspects for “subconscious plagiarism.” So I asked my wife, who is a psychologist, what to do about my own work.

You have three options, she said:

1. eliminate the cause of your anxieties by dropping the project;
2. live with your anxieties; or
3. confront the cause by checking for plagiarism. Use the same tools that an unfriendly reader or your publisher might use.
If I had been at the beginning of the writing process I would have considered option one. I am at an advanced enough stage of my professional life so that this would have been the option of “least resistance.” But as I had finished writing the book, this option was undesirable. My physician told me that the second option could be very unhealthy. So I was left with the third option.

Much recent discussion in academia on plagiarism detectors has focused on Turnitin.com, a service marketed by iParadigms, LLC. But by the time I discovered it, our college had already tried and rejected the software. Faculty were not eager to adopt it, and the library expressed reservations on the grounds that the material submitted to Turnitin was stored in its database, thus infringing on students’ rights to privacy.

Then I made direct contact with iParadigms. They had responded to the privacy concern by developing another product, iThenticate, which did not add analyzed documents to their database. I told them that I wanted to put the first three chapters of my book through this new plagiarism check. I explained that our school had rejected Turnitin due to their concern about violating students’ privacy rights. Now that iThenticate had developed software to address that concern, I offered to experiment with it, submit a report to our Provost, and thus provide a point of entry for a new discussion. Routine adoption of software such as this was, in fact, recommended by the Graduate Center pamphlet (p. 21). iParadigms responded that their usual charge for individual uses was $5,000, but that since my intended use was limited to three chapters and would serve as a trial for a change in institutional policy, they would let me use the software for $1,000. After some arm twisting, my department agreed to pay. But this was in August and my contact at iParadigms was on vacation. So after a week without a response, I looked for an alternative solution.

I settled on EVE2, a product of CaNexus.com. Their searches are restricted to the Web, their product sells for $29.99, and they offer unlimited use. Thus, I was able to run all 15 chapters through the program. EVE2 has three settings: “Quick,” “Medium,” and “Full Strength.” I used the first chapter to normalize the various settings: the chapter contains 4500 words; the Quick setting took 15 minutes to run; the Full Strength took 80 minutes. The program didn’t find any plagiarism in either setting. But that chapter isn’t representative of the book because, as an introduction, it doesn’t contain any data. The second chapter, however, makes extensive use of governmental and intergovernmental data sources. For this chapter, two Quick searches indicated that 4.47% and 6.02% was plagiarized and the Full Strength check found 10.97%.. (The discrepancy is a measure of the irreproducibility of the research.) The report came with a set of websites from which sentences were found to match. I then decided to run all 15 chapters at Full Strength. The results were that three chapters showed above 10% plagiarism. In addition to chapter 2, chapter 13, which deals with the political landscape, showed 14.97%, and chapter 14, which deals with early signs of climate change, showed 11.17%. Five chapters were found to be free of plagiarism while the rest ranged from 6.7% down to 0.85%. A comment at the beginning of each report tells the user to take scores of under 15% as evidence that the document has not been plagiarized.

I then ran a comparative reference analysis on the three chapters that showed above 10% plagiarism. This was a lengthy process. The quoted websites that were found to have texts similar to mine were of two main categories: sites that provide the original data text of the relevant international treaties, and an assortment of sites, many of which were unfamiliar to me, that have used the data sources for a variety of objectives. Some of the comparisons were useless: they simply pointed to a random assortment of generic expressions such as “Framework Convention on
Climate Change,” “Greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere,” “countries,” “Rio de Janeiro,” etc. The software almost completely ignored my use of quotation marks, but it served the useful purpose of helping me to catch instances where I had forgotten to introduce the quotation marks or to note the origin of a piece of data in a table or a graph. The analysis also introduced me to reports on related issues that had escaped my attention.

A few days after I finished the analysis, the representative from iParadigms contacted me, apologizing for the delay in response and ready to make the final arrangements to provide me with access to iTenthticate. I described to him what I had done, and indicated that I would be very interested in taking one chapter and comparing the findings of EVE2 against iTenthticate. But at this stage, I was unwilling to pay $1000 for the privilege. He assured me that my findings would be dwarfed by what his software would uncover, but he made no proposal on how I could check this out. I wondered if what he was actually saying was that his software would provide proof that after all this effort I had subconsciously plagiarized my book.

A Short History: the Humanities

Ancient, medieval, and Renaissance writers of Europe were aware of the inevitability and the merits of “imitation”—looking to the great works for models—and of the desirability, at the same time, of fashioning something new. But the notion of originality was nowhere as fiercely articulated as it is today.

The classical [Greek and Roman] theory of literary production . . . encourages imitation, avoids independent fabrication, and holds the subject-matter of literature as common property . . . but it insists that imitation is not enough, and demands that individual originality be shown by choosing and using models carefully, by reinterpreting borrowed matter, and by improving on those models and that matter. (White, p. 18)

In the fourteenth century, Chaucer freely borrowed from other writers, seeing himself in a line of artists and philosophers who referred frequently to one another and shared a common store of ideas, plots, character types that they all could freely access. In a website for a Chaucer course at Florida International University, I found the following lighthearted acknowledgement of Chaucer’s wholesale incorporation of others’ plots, and an odd rationale for why it was okay for him to do so, followed by a warning that such reasoning would not protect them now:

Perhaps Chaucer presumed that his works would be read for centuries because he himself translated or freely borrowed and adapted the works of ancient and even relatively contemporary Continental authors in a manner that we would now consider as plagiarism or violation of copyright. Not so today. You must cite any secondary source you use in your papers: this includes paraphrased material. Submitting portions or full text of another’s work as your own will result in a failing grade in the course and a report to FIU [Florida International University] administration. Consult FIU Student Handbook for procedures that will be enforced. http://comptalk.fiu.edu/chaucer.htm.

Shakespeare, of course, also appropriated whatever he needed from his sources. But White observes (and the same could be said, of course, of Chaucer):

[It] is a commonplace to say that the originality of his genius never appears more clearly than when one of his works is compared with the sources which he found useful in writing it. Whatever he wanted, he took; the results compose the best possible body of proof for
the classical theory that literary excellence depends, not on the writers’ ability to fabricate plots, but on his power to do something original with a plot, wherever he gets it. (White, p. 106)

The “modern idea of the author,” says Martha Woodmansee, is a Romantic conception, Wordsworth’s “writer as genius.” The “genius,” Wordsworth explains, does “well what is worthy to be done, and what was never done before . . . widening the sphere of human sensibility . . .” adding “a new element into the intellectual universe” or using objects “in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown.” Wordsworth, Essay, Supplementary to the Preface, in 1 The Prose Works of William Wordsworth 82 (W.J.B. Owen ed., 1974. Quoted in Woodmansee, p. 16).

This may not seem so different from the “emulation” of a Renaissance artist like Edmund Spenser. But the Romantics were less interested in bowing to the ancients than in defining a new kind of poet, what Woodmansee, with a somewhat jaundiced eye, calls “a secular prophet with privileged access to experience of the numinous and a unique ability to translate that experience for the masses of less gifted consumers” (Woodmansee, p. 3). He was also an advocate of copyright laws that would give the author rights to his works in perpetuity (Woodmansee, p. 4). This, says Woodmansee, despite his own cooperative efforts. “His collaboration with Coleridge is legend, and his extensive reliance on the writing of his sister Dorothy is now also beginning to come to light” (p. 3).

Two hundred years later, that inflated and legally guarded sense of authorship is once more called into question by intellectuals. But at the same time, of course, the newspapers and the talk shows report with glee the newest evidences of authors stealing or misrepresenting themselves in their work. Foucault, in an attempt to realign the way we think about the individual writer, created the phrase the “author function.” “What is an Author?” he asks. The name of the famous author is a mode of classification that shapes the way we understand a body of work. Sometimes Foucault seems to be celebrating this “author function” as when he notes that the works of Marx and Freud function to create two whole new discourses: Marxist political theory and psychoanalytic theory. But he also implies that the “author” is a term that can be ambiguous in its inclusivity. What counts, he suggests, is not the writer but the production—the elaborate cultural apparatus that is associated with that author. The questions we should ask, he writes, are not: “Who is the real author?” but:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”

“Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”

“What placements are determined for possible subjects?”

“Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?” (p. 1636)

One thinks again of T.S. Eliot. And if one notices that Wordsworth had some help, how does that alter the author function that is “Wordsworth” in any number of critical texts and websites? Does the author function now expand to include the conception of subterranean collaboration? Of deception?

Lately, following on the success of the film Capote, people note that Harper Lee had a hand in writing In Cold Blood, but got no credit for it—in the sense of not getting any royalties, not having her name on the title page. Capote became a celebrity. We may know that Lee was there, that she wrote for Capote (see, for example Garrison Keillor’s review of a Lee biography, in which he notes that Lee takes 150 typewritten pages of
careful notes, “puts her writerly intelligence at the service of her friend” who never acknowledges her work [p. 11]). That partnership is subsumed under the author function “Truman Capote.”

In the same essay, Foucault describes writing as an “interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier. . . . Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind” (p. 1623). What does it matter if there are two authors, or ten?

Roland Barthes explores the same phenomenon. I quote from Wikipedia, the collectively written, continually edited, online encyclopedia, disdained by some for its shifting nature, its lack of singly-authored articles that stay the same, but remarkably useful and balanced in its entries:

In a famous quotation, Barthes draws an analogy between texts and textiles, declaring that a “text is a tissue [or fabric] [brackets theirs] of quotations” drawn from “innumerable centers of culture,” rather than from one, individual experience. The essential meaning of a work depends on the impressions of the reader, rather than the “passions” or “tastes” of the writer; “a text’s unity lies not in its origins,” or its creator, “but in its destination,” or its audience (“Death of the Author”)

The elegant dismissal of the author, the notion that “it’s anybody’s text,” can lead us to a landslide of relativism—which is undoubtedly true. A friend of mine sends me a poem about the sadness of seeing another spring begin. I focus on the word pollen, and hear my husband sneezing in the background. So I mention the association in my response. “Wow,” says my friend, the now offended poet. “I thought I was writing about the passage of time; I didn’t know I was writing about allergies.” Oh dear, I think. I should apologize for being so shallow. But I’m not feeling a sense of loss at all this spring. I’m happy this spring. In fact, I liked the poem much more when it was about hay fever. But I’m probably in the minority. I remember reading Jonathan Culler on deconstruction long ago (I think it was Jonathan Culler). He was responding to the notion that indeterminate meanings would lead to chaos. Some misreadings, he observed, are more important than others.

Maybe this elite conversation has its limits. But it’s a useful counterbalance to the plagiarism police. And I understand the point that Foucault and Barthes make in their elusive essays. Writing, says Barthes, does not need to be imagined from the author’s point of view, six months, say, in the author’s life. Writing is always “here and now” (p. 255). Barthes’s perspective gives us another lens through which to see the phenomenon. Would I write this sentence if it were tomorrow? Barthes might call our jottings a “tissue of quotations” that fall into place at a particular moment, sometimes to good effect and sometimes not. And yet we do discern a voice, a repetition of concerns and phrasings and images and opinions. We do find something that seems “authentic” and particular to what we know of a given author.

Harold Bloom’s famous book The Anxiety of Influence argues that in order to continue writing in the face of the brilliant productions of their forebears, artists have to deliberately misread their works. They have to make believe, in some sense, that what others have done hasn’t already said what they want to say, and probably said it better because they got there first and were probably smarter. He’s not saying that the second writer steals what the first has done but that the second writer must, to clear space for himself, misread the first poet, deny that his poem says what it does, in order to find the courage to write his own poem. “The poem,” says Bloom, “is a poet’s melancholy at his lack of priority.” A poem, finally, is “an achieved anxiety” (p. 96). Temma F. Berg, in an essay called “Psychologies
of Reading,” notices that although Bloom’s work falls into the “reader response” category of criticism, Bloom never refers to one of the earliest reader-response critics, I.A. Richards, in his own discussion of influence. And maybe, says Berg, the reason is that I.A. Richards is the one that Bloom needs to misrepresent—the heavy father—to clear space to write The Anxiety of Influence.

Lessons from the Sciences

The CUNY Pamphlet devotes a special section to plagiarism in the sciences. The context that unacknowledged copying of text or ideas is a serious ethical violation in the sciences, as it is in any other scholarly work, can obviously never be challenged. However, the search for knowledge in the sciences is based on following the scientific method. The Popperian formulation of the scientific method was introduced to differentiate “objective” knowledge of the physical world from other forms of knowledge for which subjective interpretations are allowed and encouraged. The method is anchored on two pillars: observations and refutability. Theories in the sciences are constantly being tested against new experimental observations. It is common that developments in measurement techniques that improve resolution by a significant amount require development of new theoretical approaches. For observations to be meaningful in challenging current theoretical understanding, they must be presented in a form that other scientists can scrutinize and/or reproduce. The more entrenched the theoretical framework that the observations intend to challenge, the more scrutiny these observations will face. Thus, a repetition of an experimental protocol that is designed to reproduce published experimental results is a common starting point for graduate students beginning their theses and dissertations.

Within this framework, cheating, forgery, intellectual theft, are unfortunately as common in the sciences as in other disciplines. In most cases such behavior is motivated by the same driving forces: greed and fame. Recent famous cases are abundant and include the Stem Cell case in Hwang Woo Suk’s laboratory, the painting of black patches on a white mouse to represent successful skin grafting (Hixson), some of the cold fusion pronouncements, etc. In all these cases the need for reproducibility ensures that sooner or later the misconduct is exposed and the culprits are disgraced.

The Popperian formulation of the scientific method is a guideline that sets boundaries for what should be cited in a given work. We can be further helped by observing the American Chemical Society’s (ACS) guidelines for published work (onlineethics.org). These guidelines are used as a source in the CUNY guide.

The ACS guidelines target authors, editors and reviewers. And we can generalize these distinctions beyond the sciences. According to the Online Ethics Site of Case Western Reserve University for Science and Engineering (onlineethics.org), which includes the ACS Guidelines, to plagiarize is: “To appropriate the writings, graphic representations or ideas of another person and represent them as one’s own, (that is, without proper attribution). Plagiarism is a form of intellectual property violation.” This is a working definition that most people would accept. But the ACS adds in its preface, “The advancement of science requires the sharing of knowledge between individuals, even though doing so may sometimes entail foregoing some immediate personal advantage” (onlineethics.org). So inevitably we draw upon the work of other scientists without citing them. The goal is clear: the purpose of scientific writing is the advancement of science, and any rules that are imposed should be judged according to their perceived role in advancing or detracting from the achievement of that goal.

Further, in its list of guidelines for authors, the ACS states: “An author should recognize that
journal space is a precious resource created at considerable cost. An author therefore has an obligation to use it wisely and economically.” To insure that economy, the guidelines specify:

4. An author should cite those publications that have been influential in determining the nature of the reported work and that will guide the reader quickly to the earlier work that is essential for understanding the present investigation. Except in a review, citation of work that will not be referred to in the reported research should be minimized. An author is obligated to perform a literature search to find, and then cite, the original publications that describe closely related work.

The ACS makes clear that the editor is not responsible for tracing misconduct by authors. The belief is that the system itself is self-correcting: in the long run, misconduct will be exposed and will not pose obstacles to the advancement of science. Excessive citation by authors is seen as a defensive posture through which the author “protects” himself against mistakes, bad judgment, bad writing, etc., through citations, thus shifting the responsibility to the cited work.

The CUNY guide provides the following example for handling debatable material:

Estimates of the number of deaths in Russia during 1915 range from over two million to two and a half million.2


(Avoiding and Detecting Plagiarism, p. 19)

But is this citing of sources really useful? The reader has two estimates of Russian casualties in 1915 with a difference of 25% between the two estimates. Is such a difference important to the author’s argument? If it is not important, one reference should be sufficient. If the difference between the estimates is important, then the only way for the reader to decide whose is the better estimate is to go to the original articles and examine the methodology. In my opinion, if the difference is important to the author’s argument, it is the author’s responsibility to arrive at the best available estimate. The citations do not relieve the author of that responsibility. The accountability is his.

**Giving Students Mixed Messages**

By the time students are in graduate school, we hope that they have absorbed the distinctions laid out above. But among undergraduates, the situation is more complex. Plagiarism as a student phenomenon is a subject that many teachers seem to take solace in bemoaning—as if on this one thing we can all agree. But to get some understanding of where plagiarism comes from—other than the obvious: lack of time, lack of skill, desire for a better grade, laziness, the lures of term paper writers, etc.,—we might start by noticing the many confused and over-simplified messages students hear from us.

Follow the form, we say. Following the form is not plagiarism. The form is a container into which you pour what you’ve learned. The form will guide your mind in the right direction.

Avoid using others’ words and phrases. When you do use them, put quotation marks around them.

But: and this is a great complication: Use the language of the discourse. We say things in this way. Our meanings are very precise. Our words signify more than your ordinary language does.

But, again, don’t steal others’ words. If you do, you are committing a serious violation.
Some ideas are common knowledge; some are not. You need to understand the difference.

Have a thesis, a bold assertion. Don’t say “I think,” or “in my opinion.” That weakens your writing. Put your thesis out there with certainty. Write about what you know. Then you will be the expert.

But you probably don’t know very much about the material of this course. You need to do research.

Be humble. You stand on the shoulders of so many giants that you can’t begin to fathom them. And the teacher will ultimately decide, on a dark night, after having read one too many papers just like yours, what letter grade accurately describes the value of your work.

Some merciful freshman English teachers tell students to find a personal voice: to find their own words, their own way of seeing things. The initial results can often have the canned quality of that sentimental deathbed scene mentioned earlier. So there needs to be time for revision in such a class, to get the impulse to prettify (or to rant indiscriminately) out of one’s system, so that one can go to a deeper, more complex level of knowing. Maybe the teacher assigns a deathbed scene from Dickens or a less masterful example from a minor author. Or maybe one watches a film clip. And the students get to see their models up close.

Some teachers ask students to frame a “research question” rather than a thesis sentence. This alleviates some of the student’s stress at needing to pretend that he knows what he thinks before he’s researched it. It also counterbalances the arrogance of a common sense reaction to uncommonly complicated issues.

One useful piece of advice for teachers is to make assignments that are particular to the course in a way that cannot easily be found on websites, in fraternity files or from professional term paper writers. We can ask students to choose a topic specifically tied to something happening in the class, to “scaffold” (build, sketch out or outline), to write in sections, to revise, maybe to write in class, to read aloud to others in small groups, to share drafts online. The writing can become such an integral and evenly spaced part of the course that the students are forced—or allowed—to “do their own work.” They are taught to value their thoughts and to recognize that the more they have read, the more likely it is that the voices of others will enter their heads and their writing. This is not a student problem, it’s everyone’s problem and every educated person’s blessing: the burden and benefit of ongoing study.

And maybe too we can acknowledge the excesses of our own pronounced goals for our students. Maybe they cannot possibly do all the reading and writing we demand without cheating in some way, reading the first line of every paragraph in a long work, turning to a more experienced person to proofread their work or help them write a few paragraphs. In overloading them, we teach them to cut corners. Maybe we need to give them more time, and to teach them to value their work so much that the idea of plagiarism will be anathema to them. Why on earth would somebody do that?

The problem of plagiarism is a problem of a proliferating print-based culture. The ideas of ownership and copyright vie with the persistently human practice of imitating what comes before. Plagiarism in the university is also a phenomenon engendered by the ideal of universal education. Everyone must write, we say. The culture demands it. But everyone doesn’t want to write. So some people will find other ways to deal with the demand.

Judge Owen and “subconscious plagiarism” notwithstanding, the issue is also one of intention: what do our students think they’re doing?
Chaucer was well aware that he was borrowing from other writers. But he probably didn’t see himself as tricking his audience. To do his work meant to include the wisdom and artistry of his forebears, demonstrating his learning, establishing his authority, adapting stories in the service of his art and the deep pleasure it must have given him to create a work as beautiful as The Canterbury Tales. How many people had copies of Boethius? How many could read Boccaccio? Like the frescos of Giotto or Cimabue, his work functioned to bring stories to an audience that might otherwise not have come to know them.

Our students are often doing something else: taking a short cut to a goal which a teacher has imposed on them. Getting the degree. If they are alienated from the process, if its endless tests and requirements seem arbitrary and distant from their own needs—other than that most practical need to graduate—then we teachers need to address that alienation and find ways of teaching that help them to internalize the value of that education we their teachers so value. It won’t happen by threatening. We need to find the intersection between their personal value system and the larger culture: from the word to the world, as Paulo Freire said. That should be our goal. And maybe that goal should be in the larger service not of perpetuating the corporate march toward accumulating more wealth for a small number of people, but in developing the personal and communal integrity to address the problems of war and the potential destruction of the planet—whether through bombs or environmental degradation. Our students’ impulses to cut corners can also come from a cynicism they develop as the watch their elders making a mess of the world they are inheriting. If their elders have no integrity, if they are not careful with the very earth itself, then why should students be careful with a term paper? Students imitate their forebears: they learn to play the game.

The New York Times carried a front-page article recently on the astonishing success of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that allows its entries to be edited by anyone—provided that the additions are responsible and well-informed. There are some “protected” articles, the editors say: the George W. Bush entry, for example, is not open to editing. Nor is the Einstein entry. Some entries are frozen for awhile and then reopened to the community. What defines Wikipedia, says its founder, Jimmy Wales, is a “volunteer community” of core editors and “open participation” (June 16, 2006, p. C1). When competing writers get too competitive about changing an entry, Wales says, Wikipedia introduces a “cooling off period,” and after awhile the bickering, the “revert war,” as he calls it, dies down (p. C9).

The Times article quotes a 23-year-old writer, Kathleen Walsh, who contributed a paragraph to an article on the contrabassoon. “I wrote a paragraph of text and there it was,” recalled Ms. Walsh. “You write all these pages for college and no one ever sees it, and you write for Wikipedia and the whole world sees it, instantly” (p. C9).

The Times observes that Wikipedia is a “symbol of the potential of the Web.” It is also a symbol of a shared body of work where people don’t fret so much about ownership—as if anyone ever really owns anything completely, as if we aren’t all in the debt of countless others. And what emerges from the enterprise is a communal document of enormous usefulness to a world community of readers.

Such a vision—an authorless universe, one where one pays more attention to the production than to who owns it—is not a solution that most writers in the humanities would welcome. The sciences, however, see the world differently. In principle, scientists seek “truth and understanding” of the physical world. That is their goal. Observations and their theoretical interpretations within the context of prior works are primary. If what claims to be an original contribution to the goal of advancing truth is in fact valid, sooner or later the scientist will get the credit. The reward often comes to scientists way before the credit,
from our knowing that we did put a solid brick (if only a very small one), in the unfinished structure of scientific knowledge.

Great literature, art, philosophy, music enriches us all in a way that can parallel the advances in science. And maybe in that sense, the “author function” of Shakespeare is a stable brick in the structure of enlightened civilization just as a vaccine for smallpox is. Moreover, the “real world” for which we are anxiously preparing our students is a world of collaborations at every level, whether we are scientists or poets. A “Scorsese” film has a list of rolling credits that goes on for several minutes. The computer we write on is the product of innumerable minds at work for many years. A science laboratory needs manufacturers of equipment, suppliers of raw materials to make that equipment. So maybe a change of perspective would help us to find a less frantic and suspicious way to deal with this singular issue, “plagiarism,” which is intimately entwined with all learning and creativity. By imitating and recombining and taking a step beyond what we are taught, day by day, in large and infinitesimal ways we perform acts of discovery and creativity that define our very existence and can never be accomplished alone.

A final note: We submitted our essay to the plagiarism detector iThenticate on the “strong” setting. It reported that the portion detected as plagiarized was 11.06%. Since the amount was below 15%, readers should “please check the results carefully to make sure plagiarism has in fact occurred.”

References

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Online Ethics Center. http://www.onlineethics.org/


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