

Faculty Need to Look Beyond Moralistic Charges of Plagiarism

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Plagiarism is a hot issue, not only in academe, but in recent years, in the public eye. The convention of citing sources is not as uniform nor as easy as our culture seems to assume. MiraCosta is teaching-centered. With that in mind, I'd like faculty to reconsider the issue of plagiarism with as little prejudice as possible.

Let's be aware of our own practices:

As faculty, it's not unheard of to pass out a copy of something without citing where the text came from, whether a page or a full article. It's not uncommon for cartoons to adorn syllabi, office doors, power points. Images are used, especially on web pages, to speak to the visual learner and just to look cool. Cartoons and images seldom carry the references from whence they came. We rarely think about these common, academic practices; but they are a form of plagiarism. Ok, it's true, the majority of us in no way claim these as our own work, and yet the uninitiated student may think that because we passed it out, posted it, showed it in class, that it is our work. I would never walk into your class and say, "The source of that image isn't referenced, that's unethical." Yet it is. Unethical. At least in a small way, a little white lie way. Caught in the act, we shake our heads and admit, "Yes, I should have put where that came from. I'll be sure to do that next time."

Let's think about the context more broadly:

Imagine students entering a class for the first time in psychology, chemistry, nursing. They didn't have this particular subject in high school; they don't know any of the principles or theories guiding the curriculum. That's fine; they have several weeks before the first test and many opportunities to learn from: textbooks, the faculty, classmates, skills lab, research. Such a student would never be failed in a class for not knowing a single process, like how to use SPSS to discover the mean or how to use the outline function of MS Word or how many ml of solution to use in an experiment. Yet entering a classroom without knowing how to cite sources academically might cause the student to be labeled unethical, given a failing grade, or in some cases, even be dropped from a program.

Let's define our terms more discretely:

There's a difference between academic dishonesty—copying someone else's answers on a test, stealing a teacher's test answers from a file cabinet, buying a paper, or having a friend write it for you—and patchwriting—copying blocks of text into one's paper without proper attribution. Plagiarism in its traditional definition includes patchwriting, but in our current technological time, and with recognition that not all disciplines agree, let alone all cultures, we need to separate patchwriting from academic dishonesty and see those who patchwrite as merely a couple of steps away from solid academic practice. A patchwriter has learned that textual support is necessary, and they may have even selected such support well. What they haven't learned or performed adequately is the assignment of quotation marks and/or reference of sources. These are teachable acts. But when faculty presume that students must have already learned proper citation practice elsewhere, they may not provide enough guidance about the expectations for papers in their classes. We can't assume. Let me provide a contemporary analogy. It's become common for

syllabi and first class meetings to announce a cell phone policy because these technological devices have been put into the hands of the masses without any etiquette existing for their public use. We might find it annoying that such announcements are necessary. At live theatre performances, I decry them. Yet they serve a function and after said warning, someone being publicly humiliated or thrown out for incessant ringing is not uncommon. You might say, “Yes, but my syllabus also says plagiarism won’t be tolerated and I even announce it in class, so students know.” However, for far too many students that announcement without details, without education, is insufficient. They may have:

- had classes where they were told not to bother citing (when only the textbook was being used)
- had high school teachers who told them that if they paraphrased they needn’t cite.
- come from a country in which English was taught through the copying of great works as a common practice. (Our need for textual support looks quite similar.)
- included an author’s name as the only reference the teacher required.
- encountered this only in an English class where quotations were the only things cited (so facts and data don’t register as needing citation).

Any or all of these factors might come into play. Patchwriters are teachable. They haven’t been unethical; they haven’t stolen. They just need to be taught the expectations of your field, your classroom, your assignment. Learning how to provide their own unique perspective merges with a need for academic support and attribution of that support is a difficult act, but not a moral one. We need to *teach* students who patchwrite and charge students with academic dishonesty when they actually steal—with writing, the purchase or borrowing of a paper definitely qualify.

What next...

When we assign writing:

- we need to teach the importance of attribution as an academic concept.
- we need to teach students the parameters of our citation expectations.
- we need to build in opportunities for success and failure without labeling anyone’s ethics.
- we need to clarify disciplinary issues for students
 - whether we value quotation more or less than paraphrasing
 - whether a chain of sources at the end of a paragraph takes care of citation or whether individual facts/theories/data/sentences need citation
 - whether APA, MLA, CBE, Chicago or another citation method is best.

Select resources (*Denise’s favorites, available for loan*)

DeSena, Laura Hennessey. Preventing Plagiarism: Tips and Techniques. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2007. Print.

Haviland, Carol Peterson; Mullin, Joan, eds. Who Owns This Text? Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2009.

Howard, Rebecca Moore; Robillard, Amy E. eds. Pluralizing Plagiarism: Identities, Contexts, Pedagogies. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook, 2008.

Posner, Richard A. The Little Book of Plagiarism. New York: Pantheon, 2007.