

# Plagiarism Across the Curriculum: How Academic Communities Can Meet the Challenge of the Undocumented Writer

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Student plagiarism occurs in all academic disciplines, and so, for those of us involved with Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing In the Disciplines programs, the first thing we have to admit is: yes, it is our problem. It's everybody's problem, at bottom, of course, but WAC/WID directors are ideally positioned to offer both new conceptual perspectives and new practical initiatives: nobody else on campus is concerned with writing in every department and discipline, and at all levels. Faculty are going to look to us to provide campus leadership on the plagiarism issue, and we need to be ready both to present a more nuanced idea of what plagiarism is, and to develop a coordinated and effective campus-wide plan to address its underlying causes, and thus help to stop it before it happens.

But is there a specifically WAC/WID approach to plagiarism? I believe that there is, and that if we construct university policies on this basis, we will be able to reduce plagiarism, to help students incorporate sources into their writing effectively and honestly, and to improve learning. The essence of this strategy can be expressed in four basic principles:

I: Prevent plagiarism through pedagogy.

II: Foster a serious ongoing campus dialogue about plagiarism as an intellectual concept and a social phenomenon.

III: Get students involved in developing anti-plagiarism activities. Help faculty, administrators, librarians, and tutors understand the student experience of plagiarism and incorporate that perspective into their interactions.

IV: When prevention fails, make the plagiarism intervention not only an occasion for punishment, but also an educational opportunity, a way to prevent the next plagiarism.

In what follows, I will flesh out these principles by providing a conceptual framework for re-examining our current collective approach to plagiarism, which has been, by common consensus, spectacularly ineffective. Beginning with basic principles of Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines, and then drawing on the "post-modern" critique<sup>[1]</sup> of the traditional consensus about plagiarism, and on research emerging from the British "academic literacies" movement,<sup>[2]</sup> I'll suggest why what we've been doing has not been working — and make my own small contribution to the goals articulated in Principle II.

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At the beginning of each section, I'll present some examples of concrete activities for putting each principle into action, most of which could be sponsored or initiated by the WAC Program, in collaboration with others on campus. Put together, these principles and these activities indicate the key elements of a comprehensive, campus-wide anti-plagiarism initiative constructed on the basis of WAC/WID philosophy, one which might have a hope of actually meeting the challenge of plagiarism.

**Principle I: Prevent plagiarism through pedagogy.***Suggested Activities:*

1. Working with faculty, librarians, Writing Center staff, and others, develop and disseminate materials for instructors to use in an anti-plagiarism learning module. This might have an online component, a printed component, an in-class (or in-library) component, maybe even a video component.
2. Encourage plagiarism-proof assignment design and course structure. Incorporate these issues into faculty training efforts, and make them part of the discussion as faculty propose new courses or bring up existing ones for re-designation.
3. Develop and disseminate materials and resources for students to help them understand what plagiarism is, and, more importantly, how to use sources in an appropriate and creative manner. These materials could be available online, in the library, in the Writing Center, in student handbooks, etc.
4. Survey faculty attitudes about the severity of the plagiarism problem on a particular campus, what they see as its causes, and what kinds of help they would like. Document current anti-plagiarism practices.

## I. The Instructor's Perspective: Anti-Plagiarism Culture in a WAC Course

The bureaucratic language of most university policies on plagiarism fails to capture the full essence of the plagiarism experience. It misses the emotional impact of plagiarism on the instructor who must detect it, deal with it, and live with it. It misses also the very different dread of plagiarism among students, to whom it frequently appears as an amorphous, free-floating accusation that may arise at any time without warning.

From the instructor's perspective, plagiarism is that growing discomfort we feel as we read a student paper — at first unconscious but gradually forcing its way forward until we can no longer avoid knowing — that results first in annoyance and resentment, later in anger and indignation, and sometimes in a feeling of despair and disgust. Because we as instructors do not find plagiarism so much as plagiarism finds us. It forces itself into our consciousness against our will, and we sometimes experience it as a sense of intimate violation. Augustus M. Kolich (1983) admits that

I have always responded to plagiarism as a personal insult against me and my teaching.... [P]lagiarism cuts deeply into the integrity and morality of what I teach my students, and it sullies my notions about the sanctity of my relationship to students. It is a lie, and although lies are often private matters between two people, plagiarism is never merely private because it breaches a code of behavior that encompasses my classroom, my teaching, my university, and my society... ( pp. 143, 145).

Kolich articulates, I think, a very familiar and powerful emotion that many of us have felt when we come across a case of plagiarism. Beneath the outrage is an implied definition of plagiarism that is so widespread and so seemingly natural that we may term it "the traditional consensus": plagiarism is

a crime that offends the basic values of the academic community. We feel powerless against it, and a desire for revenge begins to grow: offenders, we growl, must be dealt with severely.

This visceral reaction affects the types of questions that we receive in Writing Across the Curriculum programs. Probably many of us have had the experience of being approached by distraught faculty, and asked, in essence, "How can we catch them?" There's a lot of fear out there, among faculty in various disciplines, that if they follow our advice and assign more writing, then they're going to be made fools of, overwhelmed by student plagiarism. They may believe that they have developed relatively effective measures to minimize cheating on tests, their traditional method of evaluation, but they lack confidence that they will be able to counteract the vast repositories of exploitable material available for students to cheat on out-of-class written assignments. A WAC program needs to address such fears explicitly, and to provide anti-plagiarism materials, strategies, and measures as part of its support mission to faculty teaching in the program.

First of all, we need to change the terms of the debate. We should not begin with "How can we catch them?" because such a question is really a cry of desperation. It already concedes that the relationship between instructor and student will necessarily resemble that of cat and mouse: the student regarded as potential transgressor, against whom eternal vigilance is necessary, while the instructor is cast as a plagiarism-busting cop, auditioning perhaps for a new TV show, *Law and Order: Forensic Composition Unit*. People will want to quiz us on our opinions about the relative merits of Turnitin.com vs. Glatt Plagiarism Screening, but WAC directors should avoid getting bogged down in futile searches for a technological magic bullet, because what we have to offer is both a more nuanced way of thinking about plagiarism, and a set of pedagogical approaches to preventing it.

So if the correct question with which to begin is "How can we prevent plagiarism?," then the first level of the WAC response involves doing what we do anyway: advocating improved classroom instruction in writing. The basic principles of the WAC classroom — integrating writing with the learning of course material, nourishing the feedback/revision loop, intervening in incremental stages in the research and composition process — are precisely those best suited to head off plagiarism by engaging students in the specific language of a particular course. Idiosyncratic assignments make it harder to cheat, but, more importantly, they are also more directly relevant to the material and objectives of the course, so that students don't feel that their writing is a pointless add-on. Such an approach can both markedly reduce the temptations and pressures that lead to plagiarism, and result in a richer intellectual experience for the student at the same time.

But I do think that our responsibility as campus leaders against plagiarism needs to go beyond just reaffirming basic WAC pedagogy. One very practical thing that we can do for our instructors is to develop materials for anti-plagiarism education. We need to go beyond the legalistic warnings that we've restricted ourselves to up until now. I think that students often don't have any idea of what the final product is supposed to look like, and that they are often just flummoxed when it comes to trying to write from sources.

I include as a small example, an exercise that I've been developing to offer to faculty. It offers, on a scale from -4 to +4, definitions and examples of both incorrect and correct use of sources in analytical essays. I'll just mention two features that I consider important. First, you'll see that I seldom use the word "plagiarism." It's one of those words that gets students so upset that they can't really listen to you. Instead, I talk about "Fraud," two levels, and about "Inadequate Documentation," also two levels.<sup>[3]</sup> My second point is that I think that the positive numbers are just as important as the negative numbers. What I'd like to get across to students is that "avoiding plagiarism" gets you only to zero on the scale: it's the beginning, not the end, of the proper — and the creative — use of sources.

We also need to convey, through our example and our explicit instruction, the expectations, intellectual and behavioral, that apply to all members of the community into which we are inducting them. Even that standard warning on the syllabus, as Nick Carbone argues, can be re-worked so that it is more than a don't-do-drugs warning couched in bureaucratic terms (references to the Code of Academic Integrity) or in self-righteous moralistic ones (plagiarism is evil, dishonest; it's stealing, it's lying) with promises of the wrath of God — or at least of the Dean — for transgressors.

In every course, the instructor needs to specifically address what kinds of behaviors are to be considered legitimate and which illegitimate. For example, how much help from outside persons is acceptable? Many students with an imperfect grasp of English grammar frequently turn to friends or family members for "polishing." This would clearly be unacceptable in an ESL or remedial writing course where elimination of errors is a core goal, but some instructors in other kinds of courses might not mind or might even welcome that sort of help. That needs to be spelled out on the syllabus and in class. Such decisions and definitions will go a long way toward determining the culture of a course.

In their landmark article introducing the concept of "academic literacies," Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998) distinguish their approach from other prevalent models of student learning and writing pedagogy.<sup>[4]</sup> The first of these, which they call "study skills," sees "literacy [as] a set of atomized skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to 'fix' problems with student writing, which are treated as a kind of pathology." In the context of plagiarism, we do not have to look very far to see this kind of thinking applied both by institutions and by individual instructors. If only we could do a better job of making sure that all students are exposed to the basics of MLA or APA documentation style, this thinking goes, if we could get them to keep better and more accurate notes about sources, if we could teach them rhetorical models for keeping their own ideas clearly separate from those of their sources, then we would make significant inroads into the plagiarism problem, according to the study skills approach.

I am far from discounting the utility of teaching these skills in a comprehensive and accessible way — indeed much of what I have offered so far would fit cleanly into that context. But both classrooms and writing centers in universities around the world have over the past couple of decades increasingly bumped up against the limitations of conceiving student writing competence as an accumulation of separable skills. A more integrative approach might begin with acknowledging the necessary internal tensions in our conventions and requirements, what have been called "the contradictions of American academic writing":

Show you have done your research — **But** — Write something new and original

Appeal to experts and authorities — **But** — Improve upon, or disagree with experts and authorities

Improve your English by mimicking what you hear and read — **But** — Use your own words, your own voice

Give credit where credit is due — **But** — Make your own significant contribution (Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2004).

These paradoxes are at one level perfectly reasonable, something that every academic writer has to master. And yet they can be extremely intimidating and confusing, especially to beginning students making the transition from a high school aesthetic, in which copying verbatim from reference works may have been winked at as a form of research writing. Here the inequality of the secondary

education system may come into play: being explicit about expectations and standards can help to level the playing field, and to compensate, to some degree, for disparities of preparation. A student coming from a subpar high school faces enough challenges in college without stumbling into accusations of plagiarism that stem not from a desire to deceive but from unfamiliarity with tenets of academic procedure which the instructor and some students have internalized long ago as articles of faith. For such students, even seemingly mechanical aspects of research, such as following documentation formats, may turn out to be non-trivial, and may require much more in-class time than an instructor may have expected (Wells, 1993, p. 62).

We must be vigilant against fraud, but sitting back and waiting for plagiarism to come to us is not enough. The task of prevention is much more pleasant than that of detection, because it involves what we do best — teaching — and offers the prospect of engagement with students as partners rather than adversaries. Maybe, just maybe, we can teach our way out of this mess. Perhaps the most frightening specter that plagiarism evokes in us is the fear that the plagiarist may have really no sense of what it would mean to have his or her own writing voice. If our students do not feel that they have to do their own writing, it may be partly because they do not believe that they will be asked to do their own thinking in the world beyond college. We need to persuade them that we are serious when we say that we want to see them engage with the source text in an exchange of ideas, and even more basically we need to make certain that we are, in fact, serious, within ourselves, in the demands that we make of them. Because they can smell condescension a mile away. We need to take their minds seriously even if they don't yet do so themselves, even if nothing in their past lives or in the cultural environment of twenty-first-century America invites them to think independently. It's our job to treat them as self-starting thinkers until they develop and grow and justify our faith in them.

*Principle II:* Foster a serious ongoing campus dialogue about plagiarism as an intellectual concept and a social phenomenon.

*Suggested Activities:*

5. Develop materials and presentations addressing cross-cultural and ESL issues affecting plagiarism prevention. Moving beyond moral lectures, or technical demonstrations about documentation style, address the need for students to conceive of themselves as participating in an ongoing dialogue as a member of an intellectual community: locally in their particular classroom and campus, more broadly as part of an academic discipline, and as a citizen of the world.
6. Sponsor faculty forums, seminars, online discussions, and lectures by visiting scholars to encourage professional-level analysis of plagiarism as a complex problem with multiple causes and no single or simple solution. There is more to say about plagiarism than just agreeing that it is bad.
7. Sponsor student forums, focus groups, online discussions, etc. Ask students what they think plagiarism is, why they think their professors are so upset about it, and what they think themselves. Get them talking about the issue among themselves.
8. Establish the WAC Program as a campus clearinghouse for information and ideas about issues related to plagiarism: literary property, cross-cultural intellectual and educational traditions and their effects on concepts of authority and identity, etc.

## II. Plagiarism as Failed Initiation: A Writing In The Disciplines Approach

We need to get beyond agreeing that plagiarism is bad, and beyond shaking our heads and muttering about how kids these days don't attach the value to intellectual property or just to the plain hard work of writing that we would like them to. WAC/WID programs need to encourage serious re-examinations of our collective concept of plagiarism. We need to sponsor campus forums, develop faculty seminars, set up scholarly conferences, encourage web-based discussions — basically anything that we can come up with that will get people talking and thinking about plagiarism at a more sophisticated level.

A good place to begin this necessary re-conceptualization, I believe, is with the idea, emphasized by Writing in the Disciplines initiatives, of the specificity of academic disciplinary cultures, with their own subject matters, methodologies, conventions of writing and documentation, and codes of behavior. All students, whatever their cultural origins, are immigrants into such a discourse community, and the avowed purpose of Writing in the Disciplines is to initiate students as new members: they participate in a group of local writers in a particular classroom, more broadly as fledgling practitioners in the conventions of a given discipline, and beyond that as intellectual citizens who have internalized the values and practices of the academic enterprise as a whole. Plagiarism, I think, is best conceived as a failure of that initiation, on any or all of those levels.

A well-designed course is a rite of passage: it offers an invitation to enter a particular academic discourse community as a fledgling member. Through a series of graduated tasks, we present the students with the basic information, structures, and concepts which they need to understand fundamental ideas in the field, and we help them to develop the skills required to write papers that would be recognizable to other members of that community as participating in the conventions of the discipline.

When the process works correctly, students will be able to situate their writing voices in an appropriate relation to other voices, and to the basic subject matter, methods, terminology, rhetorical structures, and documentation conventions of a particular discipline. When this process of initiation breaks down, then we have plagiarism.

That this process sometimes breaks down is not so very surprising when we consider how complex an adjustment is necessary to make the transition successfully, not merely in students' intellectual development, but in terms of their concept of self. Pat Curie's detailed study (1993) of the microculture of a particular introductory college business course, taught by two experienced instructors, identified eight major conceptual activities, ranging from "finding and recording information" at the most concrete level, to "resolving an issue" and "speculating" at the more abstract end (p. 107). In order to enter this particular disciplinary community, students needed to call upon — or rapidly develop — multiple disciplinary-specific skills. And more than that, they needed to acquire not merely the "discourse conventions" of that community, but to comprehend and begin to internalize its "world view," as well (p. 114). Curie's analysis of the ways in which this process was mediated and structured in the course turned up some anomalies of which even the instructors were unaware:

In our discussion of the results, the professors were very surprised — or as one of them put it, "appalled" — to discover two major problems: a demand for complex conceptual activities before simple ones and a reliance exclusively on the assignment grades as



indicators of student learning. Further, they had been unaware of the number and variety of the conceptual activities demanded. (p. 113)

In order for a successful initiation into a disciplinary community even provisionally to occur, not only must the formal invitation — the course, that is — be structured logically so that it will lead the student by progressive steps toward mastering the implicit membership criteria, but the student must also be psychologically and intellectually prepared for the adjustment to one's self-concept that any such joining-up must inevitably entail. When we describe it this way, the wonder is that the transformation ever occurs at all, as it routinely does for many students, rather than that it occasionally fails to continue to completion.

WAC and WID programs have, to a large extent, succeeded in getting significant numbers of academics on board with the notion that different disciplines write differently, and so "content" courses need also to incorporate explicit instruction in how to write as a biologist or an anthropologist. This is a step beyond the "study skills" approach, and this second level of awareness Lea and Street (1998) characterize as "academic socialization," which they describe as oriented toward "inducting students into [a] new `culture.'" In the WAC/WID community, there is a tendency, I think, to present the process of academic socialization as a fairly smooth and natural experience for the student. Partly because we need to enlist the cooperation of faculty in all disciplines, many of whom need to be reassured that incorporating writing into their courses will be a positive experience, we have perhaps minimized the difficulties that students will inevitably encounter in trying to adjust to the conceptual and rhetorical demands of multiple disciplines across their college careers. We have assumed, that is, that the disciplines themselves are relatively coherent and homogeneous entities, consistent in their generic writing requirements and in their intellectual demands, and that the student population will be prepared by previous training to assume at least a provisional membership in a disciplinary community.

It is precisely these twin assumptions of disciplinary coherence and student readiness that have been challenged by Lea and Street (1998), and by those who have followed and developed the idea of "academic literacies":<sup>[5]</sup>

From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire. A student's personal identity — who am `I' — may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines...

To truly engage in the study of any subject at a college level requires more than just reading and writing "skills," narrowly conceived, and it calls upon instructors to engage students at a deeper level than just being clear about requirements and genres, important as that is. Rather, the basic ways that we think, what we accept as knowledge, even how we conceive of our personal "self," are implicated in something as seemingly straightforward as writing a laboratory report or analyzing a case study. Students are being initiated into a living community of scholars; they are being invited to participate in the making of knowledge.

If the plagiarist is trying to "pass" as a member of a community into which he or she has been imperfectly integrated, then we can see why it is off the mark to conceive plagiarism as theft: the plagiarist is not going to snatch and run, but rather is going to hang around the neighborhood and try

to look like he or she belongs. The issue is not really literary property per se — it's very difficult to see how the author of a published source is materially injured, either economically or in any other way, when a student writer appropriates the text for a classroom assignment. Our concern is not for the plagiarized author, but for the plagiarist, or rather for what the act of plagiarism reveals about the relation between the student and the instructor, or between the student and the subject matter of the course, or between the student and the process of academic inquiry as a whole — or between the student and him- or herself.

The traditional hypothesis has been that plagiarism is a cynical act, expressing contempt for the whole academic enterprise. The plagiarizing student wants the three credits, perhaps, and a decent grade on the transcript, but really has no interest in how they get there. But even under this scenario, we can perhaps identify other players who may bear some of the responsibility. Does the overall atmosphere of the institution promote a love of learning or does it encourage students to regard their courses as mere means to an end? Has the instructor structured the course appropriately so that the final grade will not appear to be a commodity that could conceivably be stolen, but rather a skill that can be taken away only within the student's own educational experience?

An alternative model of plagiarism — and this has been pursued very energetically by Rebecca Moore Howard, Lise Buranen and Alice Roy, and Margaret Price, among others<sup>[6]</sup> under the general heading of a "post-modern" critique of the traditional consensus — would not assume that the student is morally dishonest, or even intellectually disengaged from the course. Rather, they suggest that if students engage in copying a source text, the most likely explanation is that they have not yet developed adequate critical reading skills to decipher it. It's a cognitive breakdown, not a moral one.<sup>[7]</sup> If at least some plagiarism is found to originate not from a lack of moral fortitude or from a lazy desire to avoid the hard work of writing, as the traditional consensus would have it, but rather may stem from a feeling of frustration at being called upon to complete a task that is outside of one's background training and present capabilities, then the extreme penalties attached to plagiarism may be inappropriate in some cases. What if some plagiarism results from a breakdown in the feedback loop between instructor and student? If the task is unclear, or it calls upon learned competencies which the student in a given population may not reasonably be assumed to possess, then the instructor may bear some of the responsibility. Dorothy Wells (1993) calls this "the plagiarism of desperation":

writers who are uncertain of their abilities, of the appropriateness of their authorial voices, of the meanings of the materials they read, or of the teacher's expectations for the assignment prefer "getting something in" to getting nothing in. (p. 61)

When the penalties for non-production of text are severe, as they are in most college courses, then we can be quite sure that all students will produce something, even if they are unprepared to complete the task as assigned. For such "desperate" students, "splic[ing] together fragments that seemed to relate to the paper topic" (Wells, 1993, p. 61) appears to be the only possible action.

We need to stress to our students that writing is an appropriate contribution to an ongoing conversation, one which started before they arrived. Successful writing in a discipline requires in a student a series of very complicated skills, akin to walking into a cocktail party and finding a way to join in the conversation, when it turns out that most of the participants are speaking in a slang of their own which you do not initially understand. The instructor of the course is supposed to perform the introductions, serve as a guide, point out the major players, help explain the key terms that they're using, and offer tips on how best to comport oneself so that one starts to sound like an insider.



Our efforts, as WAC/WID directors and as members of academic communities, need to be focused on contextualizing plagiarism as a complex social phenomenon, a culture-specific behavior with multiple causes and no easy responses. As Margaret Price (2002) suggests, the crucial first step is for all of us — as individuals, as disciplinary communities, and as academic institutions — to acknowledge that we don't know everything about plagiarism, that even basic definitions contain distressing pockets of ambiguity:

But plagiarism is not stable. What we think of as plagiarism shifts across historical time periods, across cultures, across workplaces, even across academic disciplines. We need to stop treating plagiarism like a pure moral absolute ("Thou shalt not plagiarize") and start explaining it in a way that accounts for these shifting features of context...A situated understanding of plagiarism will preserve, not harm, academic values of honesty and integrity...We can explain that what we call plagiarism is located in a specific setting: this historical time, this academic community...And once we have acknowledged to students and ourselves that plagiarism is part of an ongoing, evolving academic conversation, we can invite students to add their own voices to that conversation. (p. 90)

*Principle III: Get students involved in developing anti-plagiarism activities. Help faculty, administrators, librarians, and tutors understand the student experience of plagiarism and incorporate that perspective into their interactions.*

*Suggested Activities:*

9. Involve students in grassroots anti-plagiarism organizing activities: e.g., development or revision of an Honor Code, with student participation in its promotion and implementation. Encourage serious student intellectual activity, such as prizes for senior theses or best papers written in writing intensive courses, or public scholarly presentations of honors projects, in order to give a high profile to students' original academic works.
10. Train tutors, workshop leaders, and instructors to understand the experience of plagiarism from the student perspective, as an indispensable first step toward addressing the problem effectively. Encourage tutors, librarians, and others with one-on-one contact with students to raise issues of plagiarism—and proper use of sources—when appropriate.
11. Involve the library staff in training students not just to find sources, but to evaluate them for appropriateness for a given project, and to use them effectively and honestly in their own arguments. Information literacy must be a core goal of all contemporary universities, and anti-plagiarism efforts need to be a key component of any such initiative.
12. Conduct anonymous surveys to gauge student understanding of plagiarism as a concept, their attitudes toward it, its prevalence, methods, trends, etc.

### III. The Student Experience of Plagiarism: Insights from the Academic Literacies Approach

The world of the university as experienced by students sometimes seems hardly to intersect, at critical points, with the intellectual world of their instructors. Professors tend to complain that students today have little tolerance for ambiguity, but in fact it is instructors' ideas about plagiarism, at least as reflected in the traditional consensus, that are considerably simpler and less nuanced than those of some students:

When I'm taking notes for an essay in English I begin to take on other people's opinions on certain things and I end up with these big notes, some of which is mine, some of which is other people's and I begin to think, is that what I've said or what someone else has said? It comes that close, and I sometimes feel it's possible that I could have copied, just, like a sentence — an expression — from somebody else, describing what I agree with. (qtd. in Ashworth & Bannister, 1997)

For this student, the issue of plagiarism is not a matter of dishonesty but more a question of anxiety about originality. It is also a question about the boundaries of identity: where, exactly, do ideas which are "mine" leave off, and ideas which are "other people's" begin? It is, of course, a question without a clear answer, and any honest account of any creative process, academic or otherwise, will have to acknowledge these kinds of doubts about the tenability of the concept of ideas as anyone's personal possession. And yet, for "publish or perish" faculty, such ideas are, quite literally, all that they have; it is their claim to ownership and origination of ideas that is the basis of their continued employment. Perhaps this is why we tend to oversimplify the complex issues surrounding plagiarism: because it threatens the very way that we put food on our tables.

Not only is the intellectual concept of plagiarism understood differently by faculty and undergraduates, but it has a greatly different affective impact as well: it is a much more emotional issue for instructors than it is for most students. Some students in Peter Ashworth and Philip Bannister's 1997 study "were perplexed as to why academic staff tend to be so uptight about this issue, especially in relation to undergraduate-level studies where students are generally not involved in producing original work but rather engaging with well-established ideas." The raw emotions of instructors reading a plagiarized paper, such as Kolich (1983) describes, seem like vast overkill to many students. Here, I think, we encounter the identity-formation not only of the student but that of the faculty member: academic writers are heavily invested in their own scholarly contributions and the development of their own written voice; for some of them, it seems to be their principal professional — and even personal — possession, and this root of their identity may feel threatened by the existence of plagiarism. Students do get that their instructors are likely to go ballistic at the merest hint of plagiarism, but they do not necessarily understand why. Ashworth and Bannister (1997) conclude that among their interviewed students "there was no hint of the idea that scholarship is a communal activity, to which each contributes, acknowledging the contributions of others." Professors begin with a series of accepted assumptions about why citation is important; they see it as universally obvious that one acknowledges the contribution of others' ideas to one's argument in order, on the negative side, to avoid the theft of intellectual property, but, on the positive side, in order to make clear exactly what "original" ideas one has contributed to the discussion, something that would remain invisible without an explicit articulation of the context.

None of this is equally obvious to students, according to Ashworth and Bannister. While their instructors regard plagiarism as a straightforward moral issue, a deliberate act of fraud, students are equally convinced that it's something that can happen to them against their will:

The idea that it is possible to be found guilty of this most cardinal of academic sins even when making an effort to avoid plagiarising was entertained as real by nearly all interviewees. A central element of this fear was the almost unanimous belief that plagiarism can occur by accident, regardless of personal awareness of the university regulations.

Arguing that "one explanation for problems in student writing might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing," Lea and Street (1998), in their brief specific treatment of plagiarism, turned up key differences in underlying assumptions, especially concerning authority and identity. Instructors tend to see the rules about plagiarism and documentation as straightforward and unambiguous, and hence any violation of them

to be basically an instance of dishonesty. For students, however, Lea and Street found that plagiarism came across less as a moral issue and more as a question of how to establish a relation to authority. As one of the interviewed students put it: "I don't know anything about the subject other than what I've read in books so how on earth could I write anything which was not someone else's idea?"

In their provocatively-titled article "The Responsible Plagiarist," Abigail Lipson and Sheila M. Reindl (2003) approach this issue of power and authority from a slightly different perspective. For them, the key problem is that some students

clearly do not experience themselves as members of the community of the mind...They cannot make clear the relationship between their own ideas and the ideas of others because in their experience they do not have their own ideas, and therefore there is no relationship. They misappropriate their sources' ideas or words because, being voiceless themselves, they default to a master, a truth, or a (poorly understood) rule in performing what they see as their scholarly responsibilities (p.12).

These disenfranchised or "voiceless" students are not being dishonest; they are overly reliant on their sources because they have not discovered how to project "themselves" into their texts, and so they adopt various strategies for deferring to authority. Lipson and Reindl offer a taxonomy of such "responsible plagiarists" that includes the "apprentice" (who conceives writing as the mimicking of excellent examples), the "truth seeker" (who conceives ideas as independent of context or speaker), and the "tax preparer" (who hides behind a mountain of citations to conceal the lack of independent input into the paper) (p. 8).

The process of finding one's "voice" as a writer, in academia or outside it, is an extremely complex one, because essentially one needs to become comfortable in a new culture. As one British student put it:

It's difficult when you start out in academia, you could not be sure about what it means to be a student. So when I first started I was again unsure about what to do in terms of references and that sort of thing. So you could say that in some of my essays I did things wrong unknowingly because I didn't reference it right. But that was something to do with my lack of experience in academia. (qtd. in Ashworth and Bannister)

This student looks back on the naivete of freshman year. The process of learning what plagiarism is will be figured here as parallel to the process of finding out "what it means to be a student" or of gaining "experience" in the ways of the university. This student now recognizes that he/she could have gotten in trouble for some of these missteps — technically they were plagiarism — but the student just as stoutly maintains that they were honest errors, born of ignorance rather than arising out of a desire to deceive.

For students, the motivation that leads to the production of a text which the instructor judges to be "plagiarism" is absolutely critical; it can condemn, extenuate, or exonerate. But for most instructors, there is no need to inquire into motives or intention; the established fact of the purloined text is self-apparent evidence of guilt.

In the last few years, I have started inquiring into the process of plagiarism. I have taken to requiring any student caught plagiarizing to write me a letter narrating and analyzing the train of events that led to that action. Here's a typical excerpt from one of them:

...I received a low grade on my first major paper...I felt that my writing was bad all of a sudden. For days I could not look at my graded paper because I felt extremely disappointed in myself. I thought that I was writing well but that paper gave me a realization that I have failed in my effort...I felt that everything I wrote sounded juvenile. So I went to the Internet to get ideas. Then

I went back to write the paper. Every time I wrote a sentence I erased it and wrote another one. This went on for a while until I quickly decided to steal someone else's idea. I did not think this behavior through I just looked at it then cut and paste it into a word document.[8]

Like most who have written such a letter for me, this student describes her action as a final act of spontaneous desperation at the end of a long, complex chain of cause and effect. Perhaps she presents her action as a momentary impulse because she's seen enough cop shows to know that things might go easier if she can rule out premeditation. But it's also the case that she sees the action of plagiarism as arising from a series of prior events: her depressed state of mind, her disappointment in her grade on the previous paper, her consequent loss of confidence in her intellectual abilities. Partly this had to do with her relationship with me, the instructor. She traces at least one strand in her action to the consequences of feedback she receives on the paper — though she goes on to acknowledge, later in the letter, that her dismay upon seeing the grade rendered her unable even to read my comments on the paper; when she finally did go back to them, after the subsequent plagiarized assignment, she discovered that there were positive comments mixed in with the negative.

The one generalization that one can make about all these student views is that plagiarism, a concept which appears quite simple and clear to faculty, is a far hazier proposition from the other side of the desk. Students know that it's supposed to be bad — their instructors' stern warnings and indignation have conveyed that much effectively — but they're not sure what it really is. It's everything and nothing. It's a vaguely-defined offense in the official student handbook. Students fear being drawn in to a Kafkaesque maze of accusation and punishment for a crime that they don't even know that they have committed.

Principle IV: When prevention fails, make the plagiarism intervention not only an occasion for punishment, but also an educational opportunity, a way to prevent the next plagiarism.

*Suggested Activities:*

13. Train faculty to detect plagiarism, and to track down sources of plagiarized papers — search-engine strategies, Turnitin.com, Glatt plagiarism screening, etc — .but emphasize how to use these technological tools without creating an adversarial atmosphere in the classroom.

14. Working with campus judicial officials, administration, faculty, and students, develop an effective procedure to deal with cases of plagiarism, focusing especially on approaches that are not purely punitive, though they may have involve some significant sanctions. For example, with the voluntary participation of the instructor who uncovered the plagiarism, the student would receive an Incomplete in the course, enroll in a semester-long anti-plagiarism workshop (see #15 below), and receive a passing (though perhaps reduced) grade in the course upon successful completion of the workshop. The Dean of Students (or other appropriate judiciary officer) would retain a central file of students who go through this process; second offenses should be dealt with more severely.

15. Develop a semester-long antiplagiarism workshop for first offenders. This will address not only the moral aspects of plagiarism, and the technical aspects of proper documentation, but, more basically, the proper (and creative) use of sources, the place of dialogue and interaction with the ideas of others in the intellectual life of academia.

16. Make students part of the process of developing the workshop, and administering the program. For example, some judicial decisions might be made by an Honor Board of students.

## IV. Academic Communities and the Undocumented Writer

Plagiarized texts — like non-plagiarized texts — arise in complex ways from the specific context of the writing situation. The student paper is a passport application, evidence that the student has mastered the basic requirements for citizenship in a particular academic community. When crossing physical borders of a country, if you have written your own passport you will be arrested. When crossing into a discourse community, however, if you have *not* written your own passport, then you will be arrested.

Some students, of course, are literally immigrants into American culture. There has been a lot of attention in recent years to the ways in which our institutions of higher education depend on culture-specific assumptions about academic genres and procedures, and this has been especially true about plagiarism.<sup>[9]</sup> A recent study of international students at one U.S. university found that there was considerable understanding among faculty about these differences in intellectual traditions, especially in terms of relation to authority, and a sensitivity to adjusting their practices about plagiarism to take account of them:

All professors were aware of at least some of the cultural differences in the educational backgrounds and writing styles of international students. They were not surprised to see students from Muslim or some of the Asian cultures quote extensively or even reproduce large chunks of text verbatim when asked to reflect on a topic. Their reactions to these incidents were not to interpret this as plagiarism or cheating but to ask these particular students to redo their work. (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999, p. 509)

When they are dealing with students who clearly hail from exotic cultural backgrounds, faculty seem very willing to entertain the idea that plagiarism may be an artifact of a collision of cultures. While they still will insist that these international students must eventually master the norms of the institutions in which they have chosen to enroll, these professors do not insist on treating the initial versions, even those which may "reproduce large chunks of text verbatim," as evidence of academic dishonesty. Rather, they regard such problems in a student's text as an opportunity to educate. Making allowances for where a student is coming from, in terms of background and preparedness, these instructors seek to find ways to initiate these students into the procedures and assumptions of American academia in general, and of their discipline in particular.

When the students in question are not "international students," however, there is considerably less inclination to regard an instance of plagiarism as a matter of miscommunication caused by the disparate backgrounds of the student-immigrants. If students appear to be native participants in American culture, then, the assumption goes, they should not need remedial instruction in basic U.S. academic values. But such a position, I would argue, considerably overestimates the degree of preparation in general academic procedures that we can reasonably expect in today's students even from fairly decent high schools, and, even more importantly, it underestimates the complexity of the tasks that students face in accommodating themselves to the social practices of the university and of various separate disciplinary discourse communities. Tony Becher's description (1989) suggests the rather daunting prospect faced by those who would join such communities, even as temporary visitors in general education courses:

The tribes of academe...define their own identities and defend their own patches of intellectual ground by employing a variety of devices geared to the exclusion of illegal immigrants...[Among these are] explicitly cultural elements: their traditions, customs and practices, transmitted knowledge, beliefs, morals and rules of conduct, as well as their linguistic and symbolic forms of communication and the meanings they share. (p. 24)

Full membership in such academic disciplinary communities is reserved for those with advanced degrees in a field — and not even all of those — but even in an introductory undergraduate course in the disciplines, students are going to be called upon to master a certain degree of what has been called "the hidden curriculum" or "tacit knowledge."<sup>[10]</sup> In order to succeed in such a course, students must go beyond "the ability to reproduce discourse forms" to include "knowledge of the culture, circumstances, purposes, and motives that prevail in particular settings" (Paltridge, 2002, pp. 19-20). The process of initiation of a new student-immigrant into a disciplinary community of practice, even at an elementary level, is thus a complex transition, in which much of the most crucial information is never spelled out explicitly, but needs to be acquired almost by osmosis, simply by being in the classroom and seeing the ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving appropriate to the discipline being modeled by the instructor in the process of discussing course material, giving assignments, and providing feedback on them. Imparting this implicit knowledge may not even be a conscious goal of the instructor in the course, to whom such procedures have become internalized to a degree that to explain them would seem like explaining how to breathe. But of course to students who are new to the discipline, the oxygen may sometimes seem mighty thin, and a little instruction in the use of breathing apparatus would be far from unwelcome.

There are various models to describe the skills that students must acquire in the course of a university education. Vijay Bhatia's "generic competence," for example, is a combination of "linguistic competence" (knowledge of academic language conventions) with "communicative competence" in order to "interpret and create culturally appropriate texts."<sup>[11]</sup> A similar approach from Freebody and Luke defines four "roles" that new initiates must learn to play in relation to discipline-specific texts: "breaking the code of texts; participating in the meaning of texts; using texts functionally; and critically analysing and transforming texts to develop coding, semantic, pragmatic and critical competencies" (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004, pp. 68-69). All of these approaches suggest the minefields that new initiates to academic disciplinary communities must negotiate, but these models are seldom applied to discussions of plagiarism, which is usually regarded as a simple instance of dishonesty. The internalization of these specific "cultural elements," however, constitutes a considerable burden for students to shoulder in the course of their education, and, as Ann Johns (1997) suggests, some students may experience this process explicitly as a conflict of identities:

If students want to become affiliated with academic discourse communities, or even if they want to succeed in school, they may have to make considerable sacrifices. To become active academic participants, they sometimes must make major trade-offs that can create personal and social distance between them and their families and communities. Students are asked to modify their language to fit that of the academic classroom or discipline. They often must drop, or at least diminish in importance, their affiliations to their home cultures in order to take on the values, language, and genres of their disciplinary culture. (pp. 65-65)

Students are desperate to join the discourse communities of academia because they see such membership as a gateway to middle-class life in the larger society. Just as immigrants from other countries will do whatever it takes to become part of American society, whether they have the legal credentials or not, so some plagiarists may perhaps be described as undocumented writers, presenting forged passports that they hope will somehow admit them to a disciplinary discourse community that operates by opaque and mysterious rules which they do not yet understand.

We cannot condone fraud, but we need to go beyond policing borders, and recognize plagiarism as symptomatic of deeper tensions in a student's writing environment. It may indeed reflect a defect in the student's moral compass, but it is probably also highly influenced by inadequate educational preparation; by pressures from family, work, and classmates; and by problems in the intellectual atmosphere of a particular classroom or institution, or of American society as a whole.



As WAC directors, we need to push for a coordinated campus strategy against plagiarism, based on a nuanced understanding which will include taking account of the partial responsibility of contemporary academic culture and practices for the plagiarism problem. If today's students are under unprecedented time and financial pressures, resulting in a distressing commodification of their educational experience, we need to recognize that instructors and administrators are under different but equally arduous pressures — heavy loads, overuse of part-time faculty, large class sizes, disincentives to prioritize good teaching — which has led to erosion of some of the fundamental ways in which we interact with our students. We inherit many problems from the secondary education system, of course, but then we add some of our own. The modern university is big, bustling, and impersonal. Students often feel like teachers don't know their names or care about their problems; sometimes they're right about that, usually they're wrong, but that's how it feels. Some faculty are disengaged from undergraduate teaching, their minds on their research, and so they rush through material in a haphazard fashion that is not pedagogically sound. The "plagiarism crisis" is not something that has dropped out of the sky without our complicity or our participation.

So it's hardly surprising if our students believe that we simply will not notice if they plagiarize their papers, because too often they don't believe that we will even bother to read them. Or, if we do notice, they expect us to turn our heads, as happened so often in high school. If, as the traditional consensus has it, the plagiarist has become cynical, it may be partly because he or she believes that we are cynical, too, and may be shocked to discover that, sometimes, we are not. We cannot, as individual teachers, change the entire educational system, and so we are tempted to adopt a stringent policy against the only people that we do have power over: our students. We think that we are drawing a virtuous line in the sand: *my* classroom, we vow, will have strict standards, even if others do not. But sometimes our righteous wrath comes down on the most vulnerable person in the network of relationships, the student, who is at the end of a long chain of cause and effect, who is a product of the system, rather than against the societal forces of indifference and neglect that have ultimately produced the plagiarism.

Some of my colleagues, when they have uncovered a case of plagiarism, simply let the student re-write the paper; others will fail the student on the paper or in the course, without any further action; still others always turn the plagiarist over to the Dean of Students for campus judicial proceedings. At various points in my teaching career, I have practiced all of these approaches; today, however, I find none of them adequate to the complexity of the plagiarism phenomenon. The first approach has the virtue of educating the student, but it can leave the impression that plagiarism is not that big a deal, just a writing mistake, like having inadequate transitions; the second and third approaches convey the message that plagiarism is serious business with devastating effect, but the student may not learn anything from the experience except that instructors are powerful and can be capricious. And the very inconsistency of these approaches turns plagiarism into a crapshoot: what happens to you depends on the judge that you happen to get — and in the forensic composition system, the instructor too often tends to be investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner.

So what we need, I suggest, is an approach that does not leave the instructor, or the student, alone with this problem. We need a system that is consistent, that conveys the importance of plagiarism — but also conveys the reason why. If plagiarism is caused by a faulty initiation into the academic community in general and a disciplinary discourse community of practice in particular, then those communities should be involved in the solution. There needs to be a process of review and reconnection: the student's shaky grasp of the purposes and procedures of a college education need to be addressed in an extensive as well as intensive way, and in the end there needs to be a ritual that repairs the process of membership-creation that has broken down.

There are many ways that this could be done, and the exact modality will vary from institution to institution, but here's one proposal. When an instructor (who voluntarily agrees to participate in this program) uncovers a case of significant plagiarism, the following procedure goes into effect. The instructor permits the student to complete the course, but informs him/her that the final grade will be an Incomplete; the student is not permitted to drop the course, or else the instructor will report him or her to the campus judicial system. In the semester following the incident, the student must enroll in an anti-plagiarism workshop, taught by an experienced writing instructor, that addresses, in a small group format, some fundamentals of academic life. There will be discussions of documentation style, of course, and quizzes on how to recognize plagiarism; beyond that, there will be extensive readings and discussions about how academia works and what intellectual purposes citation is supposed to serve in a discipline that proceeds as an ongoing dialogue. There will be attention to critical reading skills, to source evaluation procedures, to ways of establishing a proper relation to a source, and, for those that need it, to ESL problems. Plagiarism will be placed within its cultural context, and differences between intellectual traditions across the world on matters of intellectual authority and identity will be discussed. By the end of this process, the student should have a thorough understanding of where he or she went wrong, and should have increased confidence the next time a writing assignment calls for the use of research. At this point the student will re-write the original plagiarized paper, and turn it in to the professor, who will then give the student a passing grade in the course, though one perhaps reduced from what it otherwise would have been, at the instructor's sole discretion.

A purely punitive approach to plagiarism will not serve to deter the behavior, even though, most of the time, caught plagiarists tend to accept the moral valuation that their instructor has attached to their actions. Whether they really believe this or only adopt this opinion rhetorically as part of a plea for mercy is hard to say. I do believe that I can safely state, however, that if you scratch a plagiarist, you will find a student who has multiple problems that do not have only to do with academics. Plagiarism usually takes place in the context of turmoil in a student's life — depression, family pressures, catastrophic life events such as a death in the family, unexpected pregnancy, or loss of a job, difficulties in balancing employment responsibilities with schoolwork, etc. None of these, of course, entitles anyone to perpetrate fraud, and I am very far from advocating that we simply condone or forgive this behavior. But I am suggesting that if we truly want to eliminate plagiarism, we need to do a better job, as educational institutions, in addressing the material and spiritual needs of our students, as well as their purely intellectual ones. We need to take plagiarism as a sign that all is not well in a student's overall relation to the educational environment, in the broadest sense.

None of the principles that have been articulated here will do anything about plagiarism, of course, if they are not put into action on the ground in each institution, adapted for the local situation and campus culture. By virtue of its unique position at the center of campus writing, the WAC/WID program has a responsibility to provide leadership against plagiarism, and has the capability to sponsor anti-plagiarism activities as part of its core missions: curriculum development; faculty training and professional development; support for student learning; and program administration and assessment. Ultimately, though, these activities must be coordinated into a comprehensive campus-wide strategy, with support from students, faculty, and administration. The entire academic community is affected by this problem, and all of its constituents must be actively involved in the initiative if it is to stand a chance of succeeding in meeting the challenge of plagiarism.

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## Notes

- [1] Drawing most immediately from "collaboration theory" and other recent developments in composition studies, "a postmodern perspective," according to the editors' introduction of an anthology on the subject, is one which "suggests that one cannot own ideas or words. All we can do is honor and recompense the encoding of those ideas, the use of those words, in the certainty that such honor and compensation are negotiated in contexts of time and place" (Buranen and Roy, 1999, p. xviii).
- [2] The "academic literacies" movement has been very influential in Britain and elsewhere, but has had less impact as yet in the U.S. I'd like to thank Colleen McKenna and Phyllis Creme of University College London and Sally Mitchell of Queen Mary, University of London for introducing me to the concept at the 2004 National WAC Conference in St. Louis, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.
- [3] See Howard (1995) for a discussion of the need to reform plagiarism policies to take account of these distinctions.
- [4] "An academic literacies approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power." Lea and Street trace their theoretical roots to "'new literacy studies,' critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics, [and] cultural anthropology," while they describe their methodology as an "'ethnographic style' approach": they conduct extensive "unstructured, in-depth interviews" with both instructors and students, and then interpret those results in an effort to understand the symbolic, discursive, and social relations in the classroom of the modern university.
- [5] The anthropological stance of "academic literacies" researchers has sometimes been criticized as overly passive, as merely describing interactions between instructors and students and not providing enough suggestions about how to improve them. Richard Winter, for example, suggests that this approach "seems to limit the options for change by treating current academic boundaries and practices rather too much as fixed and inevitable, albeit problematic and the source of much student pain" (118). Theresa Lillis makes use of Bakhtinian dialogism in an attempt to transform the academic literacies approach from "an oppositional frame..., a *critique* of current conceptualisations and practices" into a "design frame...which can actively contribute to student writing pedagogy" (192).
- [6] For a provocative collection of such perspectives, see Buranen and Roy's anthology. The most extensive treatment of plagiarism from a post-modern perspective by a single author is to be found in the work of Rebecca Moore Howard.
- [7] See Curie (1998) for a discussion of "cognitive overload" in ESL classes (p. 10) and Howard (1995) for a description of how "patchwriting" can arise from "moments of cognitive difficulty" (90).
- [8] This student, enrolled in my 2003 writing intensive sophomore-level literature survey course, had incorporated unacknowledged passages from an Internet source into a relatively minor study question assignment.
- [9] Dryden (1999) describes the Japanese ideal of undergraduate writing as weaving a "beautiful patchwork" of language taken from various sources (pp. 79-80). Buranen (1999), trying to document these cultural differences in the U.S. context, found them elusive; indeed, some students were indignant at the notion that the intellectual traditions of their home cultures valued nothing but slavish imitation of authority (pp. 76-80).

Pennycook (1994), although ostensibly responding to Deckert (1993), actually offers a fairly comprehensive treatment of the cross-cultural issues involved in plagiarism.

[10] See Becher's application of these terms, derived from B.R. Snyder and T. Gerholm respectively (1989, pp. 25-27).

[11] See Paltridge's account (2002) of Bhatia's terms (p. 19).

## Appendix

Please feel free to use the "[Writing From Sources Scale and Anti-Plagiarism Student Exercise](#)" with students in classes or with faculty in training sessions. Please retain the credit (at the bottom of each page) to "WAC Program, Rutgers-Newark, [jonhall1@andromeda.rutgers.edu](mailto:jonhall1@andromeda.rutgers.edu)."

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