

2003

To Catch a Thief: What to Do With Plagiarists in the Language, Literature or Culture Classroom

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Recommended Citation

Norton, Sue (2003) "To Catch a Thief: What to Do With Plagiarists in the Language, Literature or Culture Classroom," *Level 3*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.

doi:10.21427/D7R43J

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/level3/vol1/iss1/5>

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To catch a thief: What to do with plagiarists in the language, literature, or culture classroom

Presented at the Perspectives on Assessment Practices seminar organised by the Faculty of Applied Arts Learning and Teaching Subcommittee on May 24th, 2002

This paper conjectured why students in higher education, particularly in language, literature, and culture courses, plagiarise. It considered some of the ways assessors respond to plagiarism and suggested how we might reduce its occurrence.

It argued that most lecturers and tutors simply lack the time and, for sensible and practical reasons, even the motivation to track down the sources of suspect material in order to prove a charge of plagiarism. And anyway, the levelling of formal charges not only demoralises all concerned, but fails to respond to the conditions that give rise to plagiarism in the first place.

Rather than resort to judicial type practice, we might better serve our students and ourselves by recognising that plagiarism is a common recourse of those who have not developed learning strategies adequate to the tasks before them. While some students do wilfully and deliberately 'steal' material, others are ignorant of the academic conventions that would allow them to appropriately and legitimately incorporate borrowed material, and still others are simply at a loss for how to distinguish their own ideas from someone else's. The problem is as intellectual as it is mechanical.

Many of our students are badly in need of skill-building sessions that would help them to develop their own ideas, to incorporate the ideas of others, and to mediate between the original and the borrowed. They would also benefit from receiving assignments that, as their primary function, require them to evaluate, analyse, make relevant, or otherwise meaningfully contribute to the ideas and information they adopt from other sources.

By cultivating our students' critical thinking skills, and by creating assignments that strongly militate against their impulse to lift material, we will diminish the likelihood of plagiarism, thereby deriving greater professional satisfaction than we would by proving its occurrence.

In the DIT, plagiarism, along with other forms of academic cheating and falsification, is classed as 'unfair practice' and, if detected or suspected by an assessor, is to be formally reported to the Head of School ¹. The Head of School is to work with the Faculty Administrator to assemble a Panel of Enquiry, which is to be comprised of several Institute officials and two members of academic staff. The candidate is to be notified in writing of the precise allegations. On the appointed day, the Panel is to consider the allegations, everyone involved can call witnesses, and the Panel must render a verdict. The candidate, if pronounced guilty of unfair practice, can then face several possible fates, including failure, suspension, or expulsion. It all sounds very intimidating and codified but, in fact, no one I spoke to can recall a Panel of Inquiry ever having been assembled for an instance of alleged student plagiarism.

But, nevertheless, that is the Institute's official process for penalising plagiarists. In all likelihood, though, most plagiarism goes either undetected or unproven, and I would venture to say that, in many instances, it goes more-or-less intentionally overlooked.

For far from bringing about a full 'Panel of Inquiry', most lecturers, tutors, and teachers of all descriptions simply lack the time and, for understandable reasons, even the motivation, to hunt down the sources of stolen material. Not only do we lack the time, but most of us probably feel utterly demoralised by the prospect of having to accuse, try, and convict our students of a crime against scholarship, when we recognise, as lovers of learning, that the act

of plagiarism is more a symptom of an illness than the illness itself – the illness being any number of academic maladies from disinterest and apathy, to fear of the subject matter, to poor time management skills. Indeed many of us are probably a little bit heartbroken that our students will resort to theft in order to carry out the knowledge-enhancing and, of course, rewarding-in-themselves assignments that we carefully craft for them. And so, when we pick up a whiff of plagiarism from a submitted assignment, our heartbreak, our disappointment, discourages us from serious follow-through.

Those of us who teach language, literature, culture, and other humanities subjects are perhaps especially pained when our students behave dishonestly for the sake of meeting our course requirements. As we know from our more personal conversations with our colleagues, we have been so uplifted, so gratified, so generally moved by our subject matter that we are stunned and dismayed when our students, with whom we share all our best insights, of course, seem to think nothing of pirating large chunks of information from other sources and passing them off as their own.

Can so many (or such a good few, anyway) be so lacking in integrity?

The answer to that question is, I believe, no. And I believe we should take heart.

Certainly some students wilfully and deliberately lift material, cut and paste, borrow and steal, download, upload, all without attribution and in full cognisance of the dishonesty of their actions. Others, however, are simply befuddled by their own inability to distinguish their own ideas from someone else's. As a colleague of mine remarked recently, students have come to think of the Internet as an extension of their brains ². And why not? We are all increasingly using the Internet to be informed (and, of course, misinformed) about nearly everything, in a matter of minutes. Because information on every possible subject is now available, literally, at the touch of a button, there is no longer any effort involved in procuring it. Whether I want information on Romeo Montague or Romeo Beckham, I simply turn to my search engine, and, click, there I am, the possessor of reams of information on either. I don't even have to walk to the library.

Indeed library oriented, book-based plagiarism might, during these our cyber times, even seem a return to the good old days. For it seems that in some cases students have not only *not* written the material they've submitted, they haven't even read it. Last year one of the Spanish lecturers in my department received an essay from a student that had been entirely downloaded. The student protested that the work, in all its fluency, was entirely hers. The Spanish lecturer was quite certain the material had been wholly pilfered because the essay was in Catalan ³.

To be sure, many of our students are helpless in ways both intellectual and mechanical: they don't seem to realise that they are frequently not the owners of the ideas and information they are using, and, in my (and probably your) experience, they don't know how to properly attribute the material they use, even when they recognise they have borrowed it. What is more – and perhaps this is one of the more tenacious roots of the problem – they don't understand that it is, in fact, OK for them not to be the owners of the material they're using much of the time as long as they a) attribute it and b) comment on it.

Point 'b', it seems to me, is where students most often go astray -- yes, they sometimes yield to the temptation to patently plagiarise but, more routinely, they fail to make the material their own in any way. They 'borrow' information, they either attribute it or not, and then they stop there. They neglect to offer any sort of critical evaluation, or even mild appreciation, of the material they've borrowed. They take, in other words, no stance in their writing.

How to remedy this situation presents a pressing pedagogical challenge, particularly in the language classroom where students are already coping with fluency limitations and so may be doubly tempted to 'lift' material. The advanced EFL classroom, especially if it is in a tertiary setting and especially if it is geared toward English for academic, special, business or other

professional purposes, will typically involve learners in a good deal of writing and research. So perhaps the nature of our assignments should involve, as often as possible, the explicit expectation for our students to evaluate, analyse, criticise, remark upon, make relevant, or otherwise contribute to whatever has been gleaned from their secondary reading. Indeed 'contribution' itself might well serve as the declared main requirement for some of our assignments, if we are to quell the impulse to plagiarise.

Every September, I give a lecture on plagiarism to students embarking on the first year of our Degree in International Business and Language. I take them through a series of questions and answers such as, what is plagiarism and how can you avoid it? What is the difference between paraphrasing and quoting, and do you need to cite the source of something you've paraphrased? Is it better to summarise or to paraphrase? What kind of material requires documentation and what qualifies as common knowledge? And so on.

The part of this lecture that I try to deliver most forcefully is a show-and-tell segment using an overhead projector. I begin by explaining that any written assignment submitted should be comprised of material that is based upon the writer's own thinking, but that it is natural at this early stage in their academic careers to feel they have very little of their own to say. I impress upon them that it is in fact OK to have little knowledge of their subject matter right now, that that's the whole point of their being here and the whole point of doing research. What's not OK, I tell them, is to let someone else's thinking replace their own. Then I ask them to imagine they've been given an assignment in their Major Language (French, German, Spanish, or English) requiring them to write a researched, 3,000 word essay on the influence of Internet advertising on consumer behaviour in Europe. I suggest to them that, unless they have an abundance of pre-existing knowledge on this topic, a good deal of what they include in their essays will of necessity be derived from secondary sources. And, I tell them emphatically, THAT'S FINE. What you must do, I stress, is build upon whatever information or ideas you've gathered: comment on it; react to it; respond to it; make a comparison between the fact you've just gathered and one you already knew. In other words, elaborate on your newly acquired knowledge. And I throw up the following overhead transparency bearing a quote from an Irish magazine called dot.ie. It says:

With a host of e-commerce retails solutions on the market, the last obstacles to selling goods and services on-line are quickly disappearing. For many companies the problem isn't getting on-line, but getting their clients and customers to join them.

Then I throw up another transparency and suggest that, as a way of contributing to this gathered information, they might write something like the following:

The Internet is making it possible for more and more companies to do business abroad. A company can manufacture products in one country and sell them in another, without having to employ agents or rent floor space abroad. Thus, the number of small start-up companies is increasing daily. One source reports that, in France alone, they have increased by 58% just since January of this year (Lambert: 2001: 23). But, as Chris Barling points out in dot.ie, "[f]or many companies the problem isn't getting on-line, but getting their clients and customers to join them" (Barling: 2001: 51). In other words, while a great many businesses are ready and waiting on the Web, a great many potential customers are not. Until more people start logging on from home, thousands of entrepreneurs are likely to be disappointed.

I ask them to notice the combination of borrowed material with original thought (in this case, mine). I ask them to notice how I began with a generalisation or two, then moved to a paraphrased fact that I swiftly documented in a (fictitious) parenthetical citation. Then a line is directly quoted and documented. But the surrounding sentences are very much the words and ideas of the writer, myself. And, I say, notice my transitional words and phrases, the way they neatly link ideas. Notice how I introduce the originators of the quotes with, "[o]ne source reports..." and "...as Chris Barling points out...", rather than simply inserting them from on high as though their originators were self-evident, and so on and so forth.

I don't, during this once-off lecture, take the students through the precisions and rigours of well known style sheets, such as the punctuation requirements of the Modern Language Association, or the dating requirements of the Harvard Business System, because I am more interested in impressing upon them the spirit of academic integrity than its picayune details. My hope is that they will gain an appreciation for the general and perfectly reasonable requirements of academic integrity, as well as some of the skills and confidence to meet them.

Despite our best efforts as practitioners, I don't believe we can 'solve' the problem of student plagiarism so much as we can militate against it. We can work to create assignments that diminish its likelihood: certain types of portfolios, process based learning, student debates, oral presentations that are more Q & A than the uninterrupted delivery of material, essays and other written assignments that take as their expressed main requirement some evaluative or comparative, rather than informative, component. We should always be looking in student submissions for the commentary bits, the evaluative bits, the opinionated bits. Perhaps we should even mentally cross out all of the informative portions of the paper and look for the more critical, connective, or transitional portions of the paper. We should reward these portions. A friend of mine who teaches dance once told me that when one of his students falls down in class, the rest of the group is to respond by applauding. Why? Because the dancer wouldn't have fallen if she hadn't been taking a risk.

Further ways to combat plagiarism can be found on some worthwhile Internet sites ⁴. One article I came across, "How Teachers Can Reduce Cheating's Lure", offers some helpful points by Thomas Rocklin, Director of the University Iowa Center for Teaching. He suggests, for instance, that we give assignments that are closely connected to our individual course goals, assignments that make downloading less feasible. We can also work seriously with the stages of writing by requiring a thesis statement, an opening paragraph, an outline, and a first draft. Rocklin has in mind native speakers, but surely working through the stages of writing is even more pedagogically crucial to non-native learners. Finally, we should be open about the existence of pre-fabricated papers and other Internet sources. Rocklin suggests that we "download a few papers, discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Let students know that you know what's out there – and that most of it is not very good." ⁵

To these suggestions I would to add that wherever and whenever feasible, we should reduce the number of assignments so that we, both our students and ourselves, can actually concentrate on the quality of the few, rather than the quantity of the many. We might, for instance, give marks of increasing weight to the several drafts or stages of a single assignment, rather than assign multiple, disparate assignments.

Our aim, in other words, should probably be to diminish the likelihood of students pilfering material, rather than to catch them in the act. None of us wants to resort to judicial type practice, to Panels of Enquiry. We will serve our students so much better by recognising that plagiarism is a common recourse of those who have not developed learning strategies adequate to the tasks before them. And we will derive so much more professional satisfaction from reforming our 'thieves' than we will from convicting them.

Notes

1. See the DIT General Assessment Regulations, 29-33
2. I wish to acknowledge Mr. Noel Deeney, School of Languages
3. I wish to acknowledge Dr. Carmen Oroz-de Kelly, School of Languages

4. There are also several websites that market software to detect plagiarism. See www.plagiarism.org, which claims to be able to trace submissions through many of the web's largest search engines

5. Clayton, Mark. 'How Teachers Can Reduce Cheating's Lure.' [The Christian Science Monitor: Features](#), Oct. 27, 1994 Edition,

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