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POINT OF VIEW

Forget About Policing Plagiarism. Just <u>Teach.</u>

By REBECCA MOORE HOWARD

If you are a professor in the United States and you have a pulse, you have heard about the problems of Internet plagiarism. Exactly what you have heard may vary, depending on what you have read, whom you have been listening to, and how you have been filtering the information or opinions that you have encountered. But everyone is worried about it -- and for good reason.

Students can gain easy online access to an astonishing array of ready-made term papers, and for a fee, they can get custom-written papers within 48 hours from online sites. Send in the assignment and a credit-card number, download the attachment when the finished paper comes back two days later, print it out, and presto! Assignment completed. Fifteen-page paper on Plato's attitudes toward Homer? No problem.

Professors cannot always spot plagiarism, especially if a student gets a paper from a closed, subscribers-only Web site or hires an online ghostwriter. But often, they manage a digitized gotcha. No longer do they need to spend arduous days in the library, searching for the sources of a suspect paper. In faculty lounges, professors brag to each other about the speed and ease with which they located downloaded papers.

Actually, a whole gotcha industry has sprung up.

Turnitin.com, Plagiarism.org -- each week brings news of another Web site that will help catch the miscreants. Never mind that some of the sites fail to distinguish between quoting and unattributed copying; never mind that they blur the distinctions between omitting quotation marks and downloading an entire paper; never mind that some require the professor to violate students' intellectual-property rights by contributing students' papers to the program's database.

What drives all the new sites and the professors' anxiety is the concern that ethics, integrity, and honesty are flying out the window on digitized wings. That is a legitimate concern to which we must collectively attend.

But professors should also be worried about even more

compelling issues. In our stampede to fight what *The New York Times* calls a "plague" of plagiarism, we risk becoming the enemies rather than the mentors of our students; we are replacing the student-teacher relationship with the criminal-police relationship. Further, by thinking of plagiarism as a unitary act rather than a collection of disparate activities, we risk categorizing all of our students as criminals. Worst of all, we risk not recognizing that our own pedagogy needs reform. Big reform.

I use the word "stampede" deliberately. We are in danger of mass hysteria on the plagiarism issue, hysteria that simplifies categories and reduces multiple choices to binaries. It appears that the Internet is making cheating easier; hence, it appears that the Internet is encouraging bad morals; hence, it appears that morality is in precipitous decline. And there we are at the ramparts, trying to hold back the attack. We see ourselves in a state of siege, holding the line against the enemy.

All those who worked to get advanced academic degrees in order to police young adults, please raise your hands. No hands? Then let's calm down and get back to the business of teaching.

We like the word "plagiarism" because it seems simple and straightforward: Plagiarism is representing the words of another as one's own, our college policies say, and we tell ourselves, "There! It's clear. Students are responsible for reading those policies and observing their guidelines."

Then, when a "plague" of plagiarism comes along and we believe academic integrity itself is under attack, things get even simpler. Encouraged by digital dualisms, we forget that plagiarism means many different things: downloading a term paper, failing to give proper credit to the source of an idea, copying extensive passages without attribution, inserting someone else's phrases or sentences -- perhaps with small changes -- into your own prose, and forgetting to supply a set of quotation marks.

If we ignore those distinctions, we fail to see that most of us have violated the plagiarism injunctions in one way or another, large or small, intentionally or inadvertently, at one time or another. The distinctions are just not that crisp. We have to pull back from the mass hysteria and remember that the P-word covers a wide variety of behaviors, circumstances, and motivations. Accidentally omitting a set of quotation marks is not the same as submitting a downloaded paper.

Now, a downloaded paper is something that no professor should tolerate. It has to be punished. We assign papers so that our students will learn from the experience of writing them; if they do not write them, they do not learn. We have to protect education; we have to demand that our students learn. But even

as we're catching and punishing plagiarists in our classes, we have to ask ourselves why they are plagiarizing. Some of the possible answers to that question are not very appealing. But just as we cannot ignore students' plagiarism, we cannot ignore these possibilities, either:

* It is possible that students are cheating because they don't value the opportunity of learning in our classes. Some of that is cultural, of course. Today's students are likely to change jobs many times before they retire, so they must earn credentials for an array of job possibilities, rather than immersing themselves in a focused, unchanging area of expertise. The fact that many of them are working long hours at outside jobs only exacerbates the problem.

* It is possible that our pedagogy has not adjusted to contemporary circumstances as readily as have our students. Rather than assigning tasks that have meaning, we may be assuming that students will find meaning in performing assigned tasks. How else can one explain giving the same paper assignment semester after semester to a lecture class of 100 students? Such assignments expect that students will gain something from the act of writing, but they do not respond to the needs and interests of the students in a particular section of the class. They are, in that sense, inauthentic assignments.

We expect authentic writing from our students, yet we do not write authentic assignments for them. We beg our students to cheat if we assign a major paper and then have no further involvement with the project until the students turn in their work. Assigning and grading a paper leaves out a crucial middle: working and talking with students while they draft those papers. You're too busy? Then what about dividing your students into small groups that you, a teaching assistant, or a tutor can meet with, or that can respond to their members' work before the papers reach you?

We deprive our students of an authentic audience if we assign papers that are due at the end of the term and that the students never see again. We deprive them of an interested audience if we scrawl a grade and "good work" on a paper -- and nothing else. We deprive them of a respectful audience if we tear apart the style, grammar, and mechanics of their papers, marking every error and accusing them of illiteracy for their split infinitives, without ever talking with them about what they were trying to accomplish, how they might achieve their goals, and why all the style, grammar, and mechanics matter anyhow.

I raise those possibilities for myself as well as for my colleagues. I have not only witnessed those practices; I have engaged in them. They are, in fact, temptations to which we regularly succumb, just as our students may succumb to the temptation to plagiarize.

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Do professors' shortcomings excuse students' textual transgressions? No. But they do demand that we recognize and reform pedagogy that encourages plagiarism because it discourages learning. We have to be ethical, too.

So do our institutions. If professors' working conditions are such that they cannot give, work with students on, and respond to authentic writing assignments, then the working conditions need to change -- whether that means cutting class size, reducing teaching load, or placing more emphasis on teaching in decisions about hiring and promotion. Writing is an invaluable means of learning. Professors must demand that their students do the writing that they are submitting as their own; professors must assign essays that foster learning; and institutions must ensure that their professors' working conditions make good teaching possible.

Rebecca Moore Howard is an associate professor of writing and rhetoric, and director of the writing program, at Syracuse University.

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