

## THE PLAGIARISM PLAGUE

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My heart sank. Joe Hotz (not his real name) had struck me as one of the better students. The assignment had been to read James Joyce's short story "The Dead," watch John Huston's film adaptation of it and then write a one-page essay analyzing one scene. But something did not smell right. I had already graded a half-dozen short essays by Hotz, so I knew his style. This was not it. I searched for one suspicious sentence using Google, and *voila!* He had cribbed his report from someone else.

That was an English class. Worse, in a way, was the case of two students in a journalism ethics class who knew well the current scandals of a humiliated young trio of reporters: Janet Cooke of The Washington Post, Stephen Glass of The New Republic and Jayson Blair of The New York Times. Their careers had shattered like a dropped glass after they had faked stories. How could these students commit the very offense their course aimed to prevent?

To some, academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, is neither a crime nor a sin; it is a mistake. To me, because I see a university education as not just intellectual, but moral, it is all three. The 19- to 25-year-old conscience is still being formed. But the student who finds someone else to write his research paper today is more likely to become the driver fleeing the scene of an auto accident tomorrow than is the student who presents his true self in the classroom.

Evidence shows that academic dishonesty in its various forms is spreading like the flu. A recent New Yorker article profiled a young man who compulsively "writes"—that is, pastes together—crime novels using passages pilfered from piles of other books. To some this is merely a copyright violation that "hurts" no one—no one except the deceiver, who degrades himself and the culture he typifies, where in business and politics the contradiction between the face and the public mask do not matter as long as the charade makes money for some and amuses others.

### **The China Syndrome**

An explosive investigation by The Chronicle of Higher Education, co-researched with The New York Times, assesses the increasing recruitment by U.S. universities, anxious to boost both diversity and income, of students from China's expanding middle class. As a result of China's one-child policy, nouveaux riche families are free to invest heavily in their one offspring's future. This can include sending him or her overseas for an American education and paying (hurrah for the university!) full

tuition, whether or not the young person speaks any English or has been intellectually prepared by China's rote-memory learning system to meet American standards. Many of these students stumble through their early college years and drag down the standards in classes, as teachers limit discussion and cut down oral presentations to give the foreign students a break.

Wanting Tang, for example, described on her Facebook page as "really fun" and "really serious," was guided by an agency in Shanghai to the University of Delaware. Her family paid the agency \$3,300 to prep her for the university's entrance exam and another \$4,000 to write her admissions essay and put together her application. Some other agencies falsify school letterheads and create doctored transcripts and counterfeit letters of recommendation. After interviewing 250 students headed for the United States, a consulting company in Beijing concluded that 90 percent provided false recommendations and 70 percent had other people write their personal essays.

Delaware's president admits that many of the applications are false but notes that it is a problem many universities are grappling with. Interviewing applicants in China would assess their real aptitude, but that would be costly. The Chinese plagiarism phenomenon has been explained on a Georgetown University blog as the result of cultural differences, like the Chinese pressure to conform, the tendency to consider the professor a "sage on the stage" and an understanding of term papers as a copy-and-paste collection of information. American individualists, by contrast, consider academic papers to be creative research projects where "one missing reference could get someone expelled."

## **How Widespread?**

But recent headlines demonstrate that plagiarism and its near relatives are not foreign imports. Plagiarists present themselves as people they are not: the Yale University head football coach described himself on a résumé as a candidate for a Rhodes scholarship, which he was not; the vice president of Claremont McKenna College submitted false statistics for the U.S. News and World Report rankings; a 19-year-old Long Island college student was charged with scheming to defraud, criminal impersonation and falsifying business records after he took the SAT and ACT tests for at least 15 students, charging each \$3,600.

More troublesome are the academic black—or gray—sheep who by theory or practice facilitate plagiarism. In his article "Uncreative Writing," Kenneth Goldsmith of the University of Pennsylvania extols "patchwriting," a way of "weaving together various shards of other people's words into a tonally cohesive whole. It's a trick students use all the time, rephrasing, say, a Wikipedia entry into their own words." He describes a published essay strung together in this manner as "a self-reflective, demonstrative work of original genius." This is a trend among young writers, says Goldsmith; "For them the act of writing is literally moving language from one place to another."

A commentator counters that this practice is “perfectly compatible with the larger culture’s recent depredations: the corporate cooking of the books at Enron, the bundling and sales of toxic mortgages by America’s leading bankers, the daily misrepresentations of advertising, the stonewalling by church officials in the pedophilia scandals, the mendacity of campaign ads, etc.... reframing issues with no regards for facts or consequences.”

In “The Shadow Scholar,” in the Chronicle, Ed Dante (a pseudonym) confessed that he has written 5,000 pages a year of term papers that students handed to professors as their own, including 12 graduate theses of 50 pages each. His staff of 50 is overwhelmed dealing with English-as-a-second-language students who probably should not be in college and lazy rich kids who would rather buy a paper than write one.

Faculty member readers of the Chronicle blamed admissions offices for letting in weak students, grade grubbers who threaten to sue professors who mark them too low, parents who pressure faculty, students who cheat rather than work—as if faculty members had nothing to do with the students’ decision to fake it. Some faculty members “solve” the plagiarism problem by not assigning papers. Dante answered: None of his clients reported that the originality of his or her work had been questioned. Not one had been caught.

George Mason University’s Web site History News Network, in an article posted in 2010, summed up academic plagiarism charges against the popular American historian Stephen Ambrose. In January 2002 Fred Barnes had reported in *The Weekly Standard* that Ambrose’s history of the Air Force, *The Wild Blue*, included phrases and sentences from another book without attribution. This opened a floodgate. For five months other writers scoured Ambrose’s work and came up with phrases in seven of his books that had been borrowed from 12 writers. Ambrose defended his methods: He writes at his computer, surrounded by interview transcripts, documents and books, which he mixes together to describe an incident. He uses quotes to set off material from interviews, footnotes to source material in other books.

In the end, the Network judged Ambrose’s offenses as misdemeanors—just sloppy accrediting, although still ethical lapses. Ambrose survived, but two problems remain. One reporter found the same manner of “mistakes” in Ambrose’s 1963 University of Wisconsin doctoral thesis. A more thorough faculty mentor at the beginning of his career might have helped spare him his later embarrassment.

## **Plagiarism’s End**

Why cheat? Cultural forces promote it. A university must ask itself to what degree it is willing to distinguish its code of behavior from that of the larger society. Is education moral or merely money-centered? The underlying reason students like Hotz cheat is that they have not committed themselves

to the level of work they are obliged to do in college. They do not see study as a priority. When study interferes with their real priorities—football practice, frat or sorority life, an off-campus job, romantic interest or just hanging out—they calculate that they can con their professors and get away with it.

They may be right until they run up against a professor who cares about the quality of their work. Modern professors can be firewalls against plagiarism if they assign readings by the best stylists—Thoreau, Orwell, E. B. White, Joan Didion, Rebecca West, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf—so students get a feeling for great writing as something to be imitated, not abused; assign a short written reflection (or more) each week to get a sense of each student’s style; assign major paper topics inspired by the course, so the student is familiar with some sources; require that half the sources be from printed sources, not material snipped from the Web or Wikipedia; meet personally with the student a week before the paper is due for a progress report, including three pages of a rough draft and discussion of two of the library books; and explain the purpose of documentation, that the reader must be given access to the writer’s sources.

Uncovering plagiarism demands effort. Google any suspicious phrases or use the Internet-based service called Turnitin, which will reprint papers with every purloined passage in a separate color. Return papers in class and read aloud, without naming the author, an offending passage, followed by the same passage from its original source. It is another way of saying, You will be caught.

The sanction for plagiarism must be at least an F on the paper, accompanied by a letter in the student’s file to be consulted if it happens again, with the understanding that a second offense would mean expulsion. This policy will be effective only with leadership from the president and full cooperation from the faculty. If, however, some faculty respond to the plagiarism plague by not assigning papers or by misguided mercy, the problem will continue. As one of my students said recently, “You plagiarize because you don’t value what you are doing. And if the teacher doesn’t expect much of you, you’ll cheat.”

About 40 years ago, I published an article on Norman Mailer in *Commonweal*. A few years later I saw an ad in a journal for a collection of essays on Mailer and ordered the book. It turned out to be a self-published collection of student seminar papers. The professor had made publication part of the syllabus. And there was my article with a student’s name on it.

I was not angry, but sad. Why had this professor allowed this young man to hurt himself in this way? Did the student do it again? Where is he today?

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