

Responding to Plagiarism: The Role of the WPA

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WPAs don't like to talk about plagiarism. There is little serious study of the subject in our professional literature; the few who have written about plagiarism either bemoan its persistence (see, for example, Brown, Kolich, McCormick) or discuss how individual teachers respond--or should respond--to it (see, for example, Drum, Brooks, Murphy). This distaste for the subject is not surprising. The job of writing program administrator is usually conceived of by the WPA as an extension of process-oriented writing pedagogy--i.e., student-centered and supportive; such a conception sometimes makes it difficult to admit that there are always a few students who need reprimands, not support. Moreover, as Kolich has observed, most of us would like to believe that when students are fully engaged in writing as an intellectual process, they will not feel the need to cheat (141). But in spite of our reluctance to talk about the subject, it remains an issue; sooner or later, those of us who step into administrative roles find ourselves trying to calm an incensed teacher who is certain that a student who has shown dramatic improvement in his writing has done so by plagiarizing. Furthermore, how the WPA should proceed in such cases is not always clear, because it is not always clear (to teachers or to students) exactly what is meant by the term plagiarism. I would like to look at two definitions of that term, definitions that suggest two different roles for the WPA: that of disciplinarian/guardian of program integrity, and that of facilitator of communication between student and teacher.

First, however, I want to argue that the WPA should handle all cases of plagiarism in his or her program, for the good of the program, the students, and the teachers. A breach of academic integrity guidelines can be a legal issue; to protect the writing program from accusations of unequal treatment (and perhaps from resulting lawsuits), cases of plagiarism in writing classes should be handled not by individual teachers but by a WPA who knows the procedures to follow and who can work closely with the campus legal advisors if necessary. Plagiarism is also a moral, and therefore a highly emotional, issue. (Some of the articles that deal with plagiarism use the following terms to describe it: "the worm of reason" [Kolich 144], "a disease" [Drum 241], "intellectual larceny" [Mawdsley 55]). Because it challenges some of their most deeply-held values, teachers

tend to personalize a case of suspected plagiarism; their first impulse is often to lash out at the student. WPAs must in some cases protect the student in question, since even the most experienced teacher, blinded by moral indignation, can make terrible mistakes. Witness Richard Murphy's touching story about one of his students. Suspicious of her use of sources, he confronted her and forced her to admit that her essay detailing her battle with anorexia was not her own; later, when he read her journal, he discovered entries that convinced him that the illness and her descriptions of it were in fact very much hers. In his zeal to pursue what he thought was cheating, he realized he had used his teacherly authority to pressure the student into denying her own experience:

What must she... have thought about it all--the course, me, the whole project of learning in school? What calculation, what weariness with it all, must have led her to deny her own paper? "Is this paper about you?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

I had not meant for it to come to this. (903)

Taking suspected cases to the WPA first can provide a cooling-off period for the teacher, as well as a second opinion on the paper, to help prevent such an impulsive and potentially harmful confrontation. Having the WPA handle plagiarism cases also protects teachers from irate cheaters who have been caught red-handed (and perhaps also, as in one case I handled, from equally irate parents who couldn't understand what the fuss was about). Teachers should be free to focus on pedagogy rather than on disciplinary action; a confrontation between a surly plagiarist and even the most experienced teacher is usually not good for that teacher's morale.

Let us look, then, at the legal definition of plagiarism, which may surprise some readers. It is as follows: "intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise" (Kibler et al. 70). The key words here are "intentionally or knowingly"; according to Kibler and others, a student must be bent on cheating in order to be legally prosecuted as a plagiarist, or must be so well-versed in documentation practices that intent to deceive is implied because of this knowledge. (A librarian whose master's thesis was lifted almost verbatim from an earlier thesis on the subject would be expected to understand the wrongness of what he/she was doing, for example. Undergraduates, as all teachers of writing know, could not be considered experts in documentation practices.) This legal definition is especially important for the WPA to know in light of the much broader one used in

our professional literature, a definition which I will discuss later. The WPA must first decide whether the case in question is intentional plagiarism. If the answer is "yes," he or she must then be prepared to act as disciplinarian and as guardian of program integrity. This role must be handled carefully, since lawsuits can be brought against universities for improper handling of disciplinary action.

To discipline a student for an intentional breach of academic integrity in a way that would withstand close legal scrutiny, a WPA needs what the courts term "clear and convincing evidence" (Kibler et al. 49). It is not enough that the teacher suspects the student's sudden improvement to be the result of cheating. To substantiate the accusation, one needs a witness to the fact that the student didn't write the paper, or needs to have in hand the source from which the student copied. Evidence is usually scarce, however, because hard-core cheaters (and alas, some of these do go to college) are hard to catch. Such students often get a good deal of satisfaction out of figuring out and then beating any given system; trying to track down their sources is time-consuming and usually fruitless.

The best way for a WPA to deal with such cheating, then, is to try to prevent it through good pedagogy and common sense. Experienced teachers know how to do this, but if your program uses teachers who are new to the classroom, it would be worthwhile (in your role as guardian of the program's integrity) going over some of the obvious ways with them:

1. Control and monitor topic selection for papers.
2. Don't allow last-minute topic changes.
3. Establish precise criteria for papers and don't accept those that deviate.
4. Assign the paper in stages (tentative bibliography, outline, drafts).
5. Require rough drafts to be turned in with the final draft and don't accept papers without the rough copies.
6. Require substantial changes between the rough and final drafts.
7. Require original copies rather than photocopies.
8. Keep papers on file if you assign similar topics year after year. (adapted from Kibler et al. 28).

9. Above all, establish a classroom atmosphere where these practices are understood as part of the discipline of learning to write (numbers 5 and 6 encourage multiple drafts and real revision, for example), not as a rather paranoid attempt to catch one or two plagiarists.

Occasionally, however, you do get enough evidence to confront a confirmed cheater. Schools that have gone to a portfolio system for establishing competence in freshman composition have found identical papers in different portfolios. Recently at our institution a student using our computer lab bragged to the lab monitor that the paper he was writing was in fact for someone else, a young man who was paying him rather handsomely for his work; all the while he was helpfully saving the evidence of his cheating on the hard disk for us, under his user number. In such cases, when the evidence is in hand, the WPA then needs to ensure due process—in other words, that the student understands and has an opportunity to respond to the accusation of cheating, that the proposed disciplinary action fits the severity of the infraction, and that guilty students are treated equally.

To help ensure due process, WPAs should have a clear written policy on plagiarism, a policy which spells out not only what plagiarism is but also the procedures by which cases will be handled. Such a policy should be made available to students, either as a class handout or as part of a student handbook, so that students have been told ahead of time what constitutes academic cheating and what the consequences of such cheating will be. The policy should be in concert with campus-wide policies on academic integrity; if there is not already such a policy, the WPA, in consultation with other faculty and with the campus legal office or legal advisor, should write one. If teachers find clear evidence of cheating, the WPA should confront the student with that evidence, give the student a chance to respond, take proper disciplinary measures, and document the case with clear paper trail which can be picked up later if the student becomes a repeat offender. (First-time offenders in our department get an F on the assignment with a warning that a second offence will require that they fail the class; I send a stern letter to their advisors for their file with a copy to the office of student affairs, which keeps a master file on such cases.) Although due process does not require a formal right to appeal, students should still be told of appeals procedures in order to give them every opportunity to learn that what they have done is not acceptable. I often find, as in the case of our young man in the computer lab, that students who cheat regularly have figured out the rudiments of the university's chain of command, and will try to bluff their

way up the line. Letting these students know ahead of time what their options are (and alerting the appropriate people that such students are on their way to see them) can save all involved some time and effort.

So far I have discussed only the legal definition of plagiarism, which focuses on intent. I have defined the role of WPA as that of disciplinarian in such cases, since it is part of our job to encourage the learning process—and students who cheat certainly have something important to learn about taking responsibility for their own education. But there is a second and much broader definition of plagiarism, one that appears to be the operative definition in most journal articles on the subject: that is, *any* copying from sources without proper documentation, whether the student intends to deceive or not (see Brooks, Brown, Dant, Drum, Kolich, Malloch). Some of our most respected reference books define the term just as broadly; *The St. Martin's Handbook*, for example, defines the act as “the use of someone else's words as your own without crediting the original writer for those words” (566). There is no mention of intent. The revised edition of the venerable *Harbrace College Handbook* states that intent doesn't matter: “Failure to cite a source, deliberately or accidentally, is plagiarism—presenting as your own work the words or ideas of another” (424). In its discussion of plagiarism the *MLA Handbook* goes so far as to imply that whether unintentional or not, the act can be penalized by failure of the course or expulsion from school (22). A university that expelled a student for unintentional plagiarism would seem to be on shaky legal ground, and certainly in questionable moral territory. Unintentional plagiarism is not cheating at all, but a simple lack of understanding about the conventions of documentation.

Looking at the disparity between our rather loose professional definition of plagiarism and the legal definition of the same term, it would seem that we need to rethink how our profession defines the term, separating out the intentional from the unintentional cases and shaping our role as WPA accordingly. In cases of unintentional plagiarism WPAs should play a very different administrative role—not that of disciplinarian, but facilitator of communication between teacher and student. We should view this inadvertent plagiarism as a pedagogical rather than as a legal and moral issue, working with both teacher and student to ensure learning of a different sort—about documentation practices.

The majority of the plagiarism cases I handle as a WPA are in fact of this second kind; they stem not from the student's desire to deceive but from a lack of familiarity with or an understanding of how to acknowledge

sources. As academics, we are so familiar with these conventions that we may forget how strange they actually are. The very notion of being able to "own" words or ideas is after all a relatively recent one. Classical notions of art involved mimesis, or imitation: originality was not valued, nor was the individual artist; writers borrowed freely from one another. Few of Shakespeare's plots were his own. A book of scholarship on one of Shakespeare's contemporaries is entitled euphemistically *John Webster's Borrowings*; Webster's plays are in fact a patchwork of quotations from other sources. It is perhaps not by accident that our modern notion of plagiarism was born at about the same time as two other ideas: the romantic notion of the single, original author expressing his innermost feelings through art, and the capitalist notion of private property. Ideas, words, and phrases are now (in what is surely a curious phrase) "intellectual property," to be trespassed upon only with permission of the owner.

The notion of stealing ideas or words is not only modern, it is also profoundly Western. Students from certain Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures are baffled by the the notion that one can "own" ideas, since their cultures regard words and ideas as the property of all rather than as individual property. (As theories of the social construction of knowledge, applied to composition theory by Kenneth Bruffee, begin to move our Western notion of individual ownership of ideas toward a more collective, collaborative model, we may need to change our Western stance on the owning and sharing of ideas.) Furthermore, how one treats authoritative texts is very different in different cultures. Chinese student Fan Shen tells us that he was confused when his writing teacher in this country told him to "be yourself," when his culture's political and literary tradition required modesty, self-effacement, and deference to authority. "I remember in China I had even committed what I can call 'reversed plagiarism'--here, I suppose, it would be called 'forgery'--when I was in middle school: willfully attributing some of my thoughts to 'experts' when I needed some arguments but could not find a suitable quotation from a literary or political 'giant' " (460).

International students are not the only ones who get into trouble over documentation conventions. Students often come to us from high schools where they have written papers by carefully copying information from encyclopedias, as Dant points out. But that strategy no longer works for them in college, and students not only have to learn new strategies, they have to un-learn the old. When students like this are accused of plagiarism, they become confused, hurt, and discouraged; sometimes they even drop out of school. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose describes such a student,

a young woman he calls Marita. In freshman English her class had read a discussion of creativity by Jacob Bronowski and were supposed to write papers in which they agreed or disagreed with the scientist. Unsure that her own views on creativity were of any worth, Rose tells us, and wanting to do well on the assignment, Marita went to her local library and looked up "creativity" in the encyclopedia. She found helpful information, some of which she used, and she listed at the end of her paper her composition textbook and the encyclopedia as sources.

What had she done wrong? "They're saying I cheated. I didn't cheat." She paused and thought.

"You're supposed to use other people, and I did, and I put the name of the book I used on the back of the paper."

The counselor handed me the paper. It was clear by the third sentence that the writing was not all hers. She had incorporated stretches of old encyclopedia prose into her paper and had quoted only some of it. I couldn't know if she had lifted directly or paraphrased the rest, but it was formal and dated and sprinkled with high-cultural references, just not what you'd find in freshman writing. I imagined that it had pleased her previous teachers that she cared enough about her work to go find sources, to rely on experts . . . [H]er conscientiousness and diligence, her commitment to the academic way, must have been a great joy to those who taught her. She shifted, hoisting herself back up from the recesses of the counselor's chair. "Are they going to dismiss me? Are they going to kick me out?" (179-180)

Students like the young woman Rose describes and our international students with different cultural notions about sources do not need admonitions and disciplinary action; they need further help with their learning, further instruction in the social behavior of those engaged in scholarly conversation. In some cases, they also need our sympathy and our intervention with their teachers. To help students like these, we need to establish policies that allow the appropriate learning to take place--that allow students a chance to rewrite the patchwork paper, learning through revision how to document correctly.

When a paper that seems to consist of unacknowledged quotations is brought to us, how can we tell that the student didn't really mean to plagiarize? We cannot completely understand students' intentions, of course, any more than we can always understand our own. But we can come close in our role as facilitator of communication by simply talking to

students as well as to their teachers. I always begin by telling students that there have been some questions raised about their paper and then (very kindly) asking them to tell me how they wrote the paper; the process tells much about the final product. I usually find that the intentional plagiarist has almost nothing to say about the process of writing the paper, since he or she didn't really write it. Then I ask the student (sometimes less kindly and more insistently) to explain specific parts of the paper to me; at this point the real cheaters react either with belligerent non-compliance or--less often--sheepish admission. But when I talk to students who have not plagiarized intentionally, they tell me readily about their sources and about the process of researching as well as writing the paper. They are not belligerent so much as hesitant and uncertain. In these conversations, I usually find what others have found (Brown, McCormick): even when these students have received intensive instruction in how to document sources, they are still confused about how and where to document. In cases like these, the WPA meets with the student and the teacher, facilitating the conversation and helping them decide together how a required rewrite of the paper should proceed.

But sometimes when I talk to a student like the one mentioned in the opening paragraph, a student whose writing shows dramatic improvement, I find something quite different. I find that the student became very interested in the topic while researching it and now wants to discuss it endlessly with me; or I discover he went to the writing lab for help with organizing his ideas and found a tutor who helped him think about the paper in a new light; or he tells me that in our computer lab he was taught how to revise his papers, something he had never done before, and revised this one five times. In short, I find that the student learned something about the writing process in his composition class, and on the paper in question he was putting that learning to use. His writing really did improve as a result. What does one do in a case like that? In the role of facilitator, the WPA congratulates both the teacher and the student for a job well done, and quietly celebrates.

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