

An Account of the Complex Causes of Unintentional Plagiarism in College Writing

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Several recent articles indicate that plagiarism remains a nagging problem for writing teachers and WPAs, despite the contrary promise of methods emphasizing the writing process. For example, Susan McLeod's article in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* asserts that most WPAs are likely to have to deal with cases of plagiarism, although they are reluctant to talk about this subject because it goes against their basic orientation toward "student-centered and supportive" pedagogies (7). Surely every teacher of writing and WPA has been confronted by cases of cheating where students submitted identical papers, where they incorporated into their paper long passages of text from another source, where they purchased a ready-made term paper, or where, out of laziness or haste, they just did not bother to document bits and pieces of material from secondary sources. When cases of plagiarism arise, teachers and program administrators are forced into the unwelcome role of disciplinarian, but the atmosphere of suspicion in such confrontations conflicts with the trust and mutual respect that is fundamental to the best writing instruction. As McLeod points out, however, the literature presents little serious study of the subject; most of what is published either complains about its persistence or recounts teachers' emotional response when they discover copied essays (7).

McLeod's discussion divides plagiarism into two categories—intentional and unintentional. Although the typical discussion of plagiarism does not always take into account a student's motive, intentional plagiarism is the sort that raises teachers' hackles. When teachers believe they have been given plagiarized work, they feel violated. They think that the student was trying to put something over on them, was playing them for a fool, was letting them down, or was being lazy. A couple of essays graphically convey this emotional response. Augustus Kolich in "Plagiarism: That Worm of Reason" tells how his colleagues discuss the "cheaters" that they have caught and how he himself has "burned a fair number of plagiarists" (142). He captures well the sense that teachers have been insulted and degraded by such students (144). Richard Murphy tells how he tried to track down his students' original sources when confronted by

what he thought were two cases of plagiarism. Murphy's account particularly illustrates the great damage that this approach to plagiarism can do to both teachers and students. One of Murphy's two accused students, who had disobeyed his restriction against using a secondary source in writing an assignment on Joyce's "The Dead," was found guilty and suspended from the university (900), and the other, under the pressure of her teacher's accusation, falsely "confessed" that her emotional paper on anorexia had not really been about herself, as the assignment had stipulated, but about "a friend" (902). Only at the end of semester did the teacher discover that the student had apparently been too ashamed by his inquisition to lay claim to her own experience. Murphy does not make explicit the point of these two horrific tales; he says he does not intend to explore the causes of plagiarism or the ways in which teachers ought to respond (898). But the damage done to students in these two accounts does beg for analysis. Surely our pedagogy should not take such a heavy personal toll on the lives of students when it goes awry. Indeed, a contributing cause in both of these instances seems to be the nature of the assignments that students were carrying out. Alice Drum suggests that instead of dealing with plagiarism solely from "moral and ethical implications," one might more fruitfully consider it a pedagogical problem (241-242). Students who plagiarize have not carried out an assignment and thus have not engaged in activities designed by their teachers to aid learning (242).

Drum, like McLeod, divides plagiarism into the same two categories. (She calls them conscious and unconscious.) These two writers, along with Kolich, suggest sensible ways to deal with intentional plagiarism, ranging from assignments that are hard to plagiarize (McLeod 9) to "encouraging [students] to commit themselves to intellectual inquiry and originality" (Kolich 148).

The matter of unintentional plagiarism, however, deserves more attention than it has been given. Drum, who notes that many students do not know how to avoid plagiarism, also points out weaknesses in most handbooks in how to integrate source material into text (242). McLeod discusses unintentional plagiarism as a problem of unacknowledged quotations and suggests that the teacher or WPA needs to determine whether the copied text resulted from the student's unfamiliarity with academic conventions or from an intentional expropriation of material. Still, much more needs to be said about unintentional plagiarism, both because I think that this form is much more common than teachers realize and because the causes are much more complicated than generally acknowledged. McLeod gives examples from Mike Rose and Fan Shen suggesting that the problem is especially pervasive among minority stu-

dents and those from non-Western cultures, but her treatment of this aspect is cursory.

In my twenty-two years of teaching writing in a historically black, public, open-enrollment college, I have had ample time to reflect on this matter of unintentional plagiarism--or what might perhaps better be called the "plagiarism of desperation." The subject had special interest for me during ten years when I directed a writing lab that was open to students not just from English classes but from across the campus. In this setting, the teacher/tutor works one-on-one with students, asking what this sentence means or why that word was used: I could not escape awareness of the prevalent use of unacknowledged material. Time and again, students brought in hastily typed term papers, due the next period in their sociology, substance abuse, or history class, only for me to realize from the disjointed flow of thought and the awkward shifts in style that the paper was a case of patchwork plagiarism. This was the rule, not the exception, and when I asked students to explain the meaning of their texts, all too often they could not. When I told them to bring in the sources for the paper, I found that students in all too many instances had not taken time, or had not been able, to read the material with understanding. With the press of deadlines, the student had spliced together a paper out of fragments that seemed to relate to the paper topic. I saw that much of the plagiarism in term papers for content-area classes resulted from desperation. Desperate measures are required in desperate situations, and 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; and this is the only product they can produce under the circumstances.

Experiences in writing classes have only confirmed my sense of the difficulty of this task of producing documented academic writing, and I have experimented with ways to help students learn this skill. Yet even when the teacher gives careful attention to the mechanics of documentation, assigns secondary material in the range of the students' reading abilities, and leads discussions on the topic so students have an opportunity to develop a working thesis, a multitude of problems appear; the "simple" task of writing a research paper is not so simple. Numerous reasons cause these difficulties. Some have been well understood from the early days of composition research, for example, in Mina Shaughnessy's seminal account of basic writing, *Errors and Expectations*, but our ability to talk reasonably about other difficulties is more recent. Concepts drawn from linguists who speak of code switching and register shifts (see, for example, Lobov, Smitherman, Farr, and Daniels) and from social constructionists with their

discourse communities and cultural texts (see Geertz, Bruner, Bruffee) help us to understand more fully the complexities of the task we are assigning, therefore making it easier to decide how best to help students learn to accomplish these tasks.

In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss many of the skills necessary to writing a research paper and suggest reasons for the difficulties students find with these skills. If WPAs can clarify for colleagues in other disciplines the variety and difficulty of skills required to perform these assignments, we will receive a better reception for our ideas on how to teach writing across the curriculum. Also, unintentional plagiarism will become less pervasive.

The Mechanics of Writing the Research Paper

In many respects, mastery of the mechanics of the research paper should be the easiest part of the whole enterprise. To document material appropriately, incorporate quotations into a text, and employ the other manuscript forms, in the style unique to each discipline, only requires following instructions in a handbook. For years I have told students to look in their handbooks and follow the patterns laid out there, only to be sorely disappointed by their submissions. Then one semester I decided to tackle the problem head-on. I brought a variety of books, essay collections, magazines, and journals to class, had the class members choose partners, and instructed them to spend the class period (90 minutes) devising a perfect Works Cited page from the materials, with four entries, one of each basic category. I assumed that the class would complete the work in perhaps 30 minutes, and then I would have to cajole them into starting a new lesson for the remainder of the period; however, the exercise took all groups the entire period, with students working energetically and optimistically on a task that seemed to them hard but fair. Even though I insisted that I would allow no errors (in actuality, maybe one or two insignificant ones), they did have their books, their partner, and their teacher for consultation. Suffice it to say that for students from too-large public high schools, where little research beyond basic encyclopedia reports is assigned, what seemed like simply copying a pattern was really much more complicated than I had imagined. Many had doubts about where to find publication information for citations; had never focused on the difference between editors and authors or on the difference between popular magazines and scholarly journals; had not developed an eye for the differences between periods, commas, and colons in a citation or for the significance of spacings and margins. In short, the hour was filled with 30 students

busily learning to make distinctions that most had never noticed before and asking numerous questions of me, of fellow students, of the handbook. I felt that the hour was well spent because the perfect (or nearly so) Works Cited pages were proudly submitted, and I realized that these students had learned a lot of basic discriminations for following formats they would not have learned on their own. I have tried this approach now in a number of basic composition classes, always with the same result. Of course, the fortunate students who have written numerous research papers in secondary school and who have had ample opportunity to acquire these subtle discriminations of text would find such a class a waste of time. I merely caution teachers of unpracticed writers to make certain that their students are able to follow their simple directions: "just follow the format in the handbook."

The next skill required in writing a term paper, again one that we assume to be rather mechanical, is effective use of quoted material; yet closer inspection reveals this to be more of an art than we generally recognize, full of pitfalls for students who have done very little reading that formally employs quotes. Where to incorporate a quote in text, how much of a passage to use, how to edit a quoted passage using brackets and ellipses, how to work a quote into text fluidly and coherently, and how (and whether) to introduce it are all considerations beyond the abilities of basic writers, who need sufficient practice, feedback, and reading experience with quoted material to produce a research paper that sounds "right." The best way to accomplish this is through "errors and expectations," with a teacher who views errors as initial attempts and expects students, with feedback, to try again and again until they are eventually able to reproduce the model text in the handbook or the scholarly article. Obviously, a writing program with large numbers of unskilled writers must offer numerous opportunities, probably through a series of short papers in many classes, for students to practice these skills. Teachers in disciplines other than English must be part of this concerted effort to give constructive practice, not punishment and poor grades, in the mechanics of writing the scholarly article.

The Difficulties of Reading Scholarly Texts

Of course, there is more than this sort of mechanical skill required for learning to use another's text appropriately. Quite a few essential skills related to reading and thinking are also involved. First, a student must be able to read the material being used for the research paper, that is, to create

meaning from the text. He/she must be able to distinguish between primary and secondary ideas, between the important and the trivial. Of course, hermeneutics--reader-response theory--and deconstruction have indicated the complexity of this matter; questions raised range from how human beings process language to whether a determinate meaning resides in the text. Although classroom teachers may resist these sometimes abstract theories, pedagogical practices require, at a minimum, awareness of the difficulty of reading unfamiliar material for which there may be little contextual background for orientation to meanings. We tell students to paraphrase material appropriately so as not to plagiarize, but we rarely focus on what this means. For scholars who have spent years reading in an area, this ability seems to be second nature; however, A.L. Becker's account of the years he spent deciphering a 14th-century Javanese text indicates the difficulty of this process when one encounters a new discourse area. As he says, "the continued study of a distant, unrelated literature seems to require a gradual giving up of things one previously thought to be quite natural in language and a slow addition of things [which] those who . . . own the story find quite natural" (1). That is, for those initiated into a discipline, the conventions, vocabulary, and assumptions of its texts seem quite natural, but students who come to the discourse as if to a foreign language must shed some of their own expectations about what is "natural" in a text and gradually acquire expectations of the new area. Becker explains that, in his 14 years of studying the Javanese text, he had "described its grammar, its function as a language act, the history of the fable it retells, its plot, the rhetorical figures it employs, its original medium and subsequent transformations in and out of Java, its humor, even the distinctive voices in it--but its theme remain[ed] elusive" (9). What he lacked, he decided, was a prior text, as if he were watching his first cowboy movie rather than his two-hundredth. Because he had no contextual background for the reading, "the most stereotypic and bleached features seem[ed] strikingly original" (10).

Another vivid account of the difficulties that cross-cultural texts present to students can be found in Fan Shen's discussion of the differences between discourse patterns he internalized from his Chinese education and those required in American classrooms. In order to organize material and write critical responses that Western discourse considered appropriate, he had to construct a separate self, an "English identity," and only from this stance could he write English compositions (459-462).

Although these examples of cultural differences are extreme, the academic text that we require is alien to many of our students, and this difficulty of discerning tone, of distinguishing between the important and the trivial, is encountered even by scholars who move from one area of

inquiry to another. How much more so for our students? Few accounts give such a profound sense of student difficulties in reading scholarly texts as does Mike Rose in his anecdotal *Lives on the Boundary*. Especially pertinent is the chapter "The Politics of Remediation," from which the account of Marita cited by McLoed is taken. This chapter, filled with story after story of students that Rose worked with in UCLA's Tutorial Center, illustrates amply why students' encounters with texts are not simple. The reasons range from unfamiliar vocabulary to the dissonances created by conflicts in value systems. For example, he tells of Lucia, a psychology major who could not make sense of her Szasz readings. His "sophisticated prose, certain elements of his argument, particular assumptions and allusions, were foreign to her" (182); even worse, many of his ideas clashed with her own view of the world. Many of academe's accepted notions regarding language, signs, and meaning are developed in what Rose calls "high-powered liberal studies." As Jerome Bruner has also written, a very expensive education may be a prerequisite to acquiring certain concepts central to current literary criticism and philosophy (155). Few of the students I teach have had the sort of education that outfits them contextually for reading many current scholarly works in the social sciences and humanities.

The Difficulty of Writing One's Own Scholarly Text

One common type of research paper, assigned especially in the standard freshman composition class, is the issues-oriented argumentative essay. Widespread testimony from teachers indicates the difficulty of merely getting students to support an argument. Teachers complain that students have no idea that their opinions must be substantiated. The sense that "everyone is entitled to his own opinion," which runs strong in America, is certainly found among the college-bound. An accompanying notion seems to be that no one has the right to criticize the opinions of another. Sources as widely divergent as Harold Bloom, William Perry, and Blythe Clinchy indicate how common this sort of relativism is. Bloom opens his well-known critique of American higher education, *The Closing of the American Mind*, by observing that almost every student who enters the university "believes, or says that he believes, that truth is relative" (25). This, Bloom asserts, "is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate," and his students become indignant if the teacher challenges someone's opinion or requires that it be supported. Perry, in his influential "Perry model," sees relativism as an important step in the intellectual and ethical development of college

students but one from which many students never emerge. He illustrates this stage with this student quote: "Where authorities don't know the Right Answers, everyone has a right to his own opinion. No one is wrong!" (79). Students are in the transition to the higher stage of "Commitments in Relativism" when they begin to realize that "Authorities . . . want us to think about things in a certain way, supporting opinion with data." In a final illustration, Clinchy's research with students at Wellesley on their reactions to moral situations indicates that students believe they can not make moral distinctions for another. They can have their own values, but it is unethical to impose these on others or to suggest that the values of others are wrong. The majority of those she interviewed refused to condemn even the extreme example of Hitler. As one put it, "Well, it [his actions] would be wrong for me, but I couldn't say it would be wrong for him." In many cases, the teacher of argumentation has enough just to begin to combat this passive relativism by getting students first to take positions on issues and then to provide supporting arguments and data for their positions.

Once students have acclimated to writing issues-oriented argumentation, however, they encounter new difficulties with the analytical or critical essay. The development of a line of thought, used as a structure in which to incorporate the ideas of others, is beyond the abilities of many students with normal secondary educations. Again, Rose says that many students come to college able to summarize narratives or give personal responses to plays, but they have trouble with tasks that require what he calls "critical literacy," that is, "framing an argument or taking someone else's argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue, or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on" (188). This is apparently a problem with students other than basic writers. Josephine Miles, in an essay appearing in the *Borzo Reader*, observes that her very able and advanced undergraduates, who had "read widely and well in books of essays in ideas," did not understand how to develop their own ideas. They thought of ideas as "at best abstract words or phrases; at worst, as . . . 'opinions or untrue facts'." Able and well-prepared students, without a great deal of coaching from their teacher, could not come up with an idea from their rich reading and "two or three ways in which it might be developed into an essay" (12). Yet when we assign a scholarly research paper, we expect students to develop an idea of their own, usually in an area about which they know little, and then to hold onto this idea while they read and use information from persons who in all probability know much more about the topic than they do. As Rose's poignant example of "Marita," cited by McLeod, illustrates, students find the expectation of developing their own ideas worrisome, especially those from cultures where young people, females in particular, are expected to

be deferential and obedient. As his student "Rose" said, she couldn't carry out the teacher's assignment on an address by then-President Reagan because "you can't criticize the president" (190). Such a student will in all probability feel the same way about any printed text.

The Difficulty of Establishing Appropriate Voice

Appropriate style and voice is always problematic when unpracticed students move from the personal essay into academic writing. This matter has been well explored in the literature, but few have spoken as passionately and clearly as Mina Shaughnessy. Her entire book concerns the struggle of basic writers to produce text that resembles, in its mechanics and vocabulary and in its "register," the texts they are reading and the seeming impossibility that their own prose, with its halting, error-laden movement, will ever sound like printed text. Yet, she points out, students do want to try to reproduce the style of prose they are reading, and the only way they can do so is with error-filled practice. If they waited to use unfamiliar words and phrases "until they could manage them perfectly, they would not learn to use them at all" (194). When teachers respond haughtily, angrily, or impatiently to these sorts of errors, many students are confronted by the choice of producing simple primer text or drawing heavily upon the text of the sources to produce the appropriate style. In the writing lab, I had a recent experience with a social science graduate student who had plagiarized passages of text for this reason. She had understood the material she was working with, but she could paraphrase the conceptually difficult passages in only simple, straightforward language. She used phrases from her sources because she felt that her own prose was not in the right register. She had not yet acquired the discourse of the community to which she was seeking admittance.

The Questions of Authorship and Academic Style

A final note must be added to this account of the difficulties of reproducing academic texts because viewed from a couple of rather new perspectives, the problem takes new shapes. One perspective, growing out of feminist and black-studies critiques of academic prose styles and the epistemologies they represent, would encourage non-mainstream and non-Western students to use their own language to represent their constructs (see, for example, Mudimbe). Increasing interest in the narrative as an alternate mode of thought (see Bruner's *Actual Minds and Acts*) is already transform-

ing academic prose for some scholars into a more personal medium, one that might conceivably offer fewer problems to some students.

The second perspective, calling into question our modern notion of the individual's ownership of texts, seems to be gaining momentum at the present time. In their discussions of plagiarism, both McLeod and Kolich briefly allude to new questions being asked about text ownership. Kolich mentions the increasing practice of joint- and anonymous authorship in business and commercial writing of sales letters and advertising copy, for example (146). McLeod also notes that "the notion of stealing ideas or words is not only modern, it is also profoundly Western" (12). In their co-authored *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, Andrea Lundsford and Lisa Ede explore the subject of text production and text ownership from many angles, offering their personal narrative about writing their book, the results of their study of collaborative writing in the workplace, a history of authorship, and a discussion of how poststructuralism is affecting authorship. Although they stress academia's resistance to changing notions of authorship, their book's tone and methods might indicate that the shift in attitude toward scholarly writing continues apace. As long as students are required to write academic prose, however, WPAs will have to understand the complex reasons that make this a difficult endeavor for so many.

Suggestions for Change

If we accept that the task of writing academic prose, so often assigned in the form of the research paper, is as complex a skill as I have argued, then what should a teacher do? How can we possibly succeed, given the constraints under which most of us work of too many students and too little class time for intensive one-on-one work? Perhaps within the present arrangement of the freshman writing program there is no solution, but if writing-across-the-curriculum programs allow discussion among faculty who teach undergraduates and some rearrangement of class schedules for writing support classes, a profound change could be effected.

A theoretical model might well be Vygotsky's suggestions for teaching "highly complex internal processes." (See Chapter 6 of *Mind in Society*.) In addition, Jerome Bruner gives a useful account of the implications of Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Chapter 5). As Vygotsky writes, "'good learning' is that which is in advance of development"; that is, contrary to the usual notion that students learn a complex skill when they are developmentally prepared to do so, he asserts that school learning must *precede* developmental readiness. Teachers tend to despair when encountering students who have so far to

go to produce the educational product desired, but Vygotsky offers a solution to this problem by describing the intervention of a mentor who, through sensitivity to the conceptual level of his or her learner, sets structured tasks and provides the necessary task modeling, so the learner can accomplish the task first with assistance and then alone. As Bruner points out, use of the mentor/teacher enables Vygotsky to link the meaning-making apparatus of the individual thinker with the discourse-generating function of the culture. This is what caring and informed teachers have said all along.

Shaughnessy calls for "a few years of steady reading, writing, talking, and listening in an academic setting [which is] certain to increase the intellectual tenacity" of students (273). Rose's account of his own schooling eloquently testifies to the power of mentoring teachers to transform lives. In terms of a college program, he suggests that students must have ample opportunities to practice academic writing, to talk about reading and writing, to fill in the backgrounds they lack. As he says, "You could almost define a university education as an initiation into a variety of powerful ongoing discussions, an initiation that can occur only through the repeated use of a new language in the company of others" (192).

Education begins in conversation between teacher and student and slowly evolves into conversations among teacher, students, and texts. There's no quick teacher-proof and labor-efficient way to bring students into the very particular conversations that constitute higher education and that underlie writing scholarly texts and research papers. Yet if we are going to produce large numbers of students who are liberally educated, there's no other way. Meanwhile, as teachers of writing and WPAs work toward this idyllic setting, we must be mindful of the difficulty of the tasks we set and balance compassion with tough expectations when assigning academic research papers.

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