

COMMENTARY

TEACHING THE ETHICS OF SCHOLARSHIP IN A G.E. CLASS

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One of the topics we teach in English 10 is the ethics of scholarship. Borrowing someone's ideas would necessarily warrant some kind of professional courtesy, as shown in the citation and proper acknowledgement of sources. While it may seem easy — something that is already a template in Microsoft Word or that would require a writer to Google “ Online Writing Lab@purdue website to find out the correct format — it is harder to unlearn a bad habit. The fact is that many students are simply clueless when it comes to proper citation. In a freshman class of 25, you should consider yourself lucky if five students know how to cite sources. Most have no idea what it is, and they have to unlearn the bad habit of simply copy/pasting someone else's work and passing it off as theirs. Teaching the ethics of scholarship will take a lot more time and effort.

In his definition of the ethics of scholarship, medieval scholar Etienne Gilson parallels the virtues of “moral honesty” and “ intellectual honesty”; he reminds scholars that as we cannot possibly know everything in our field, there is no need to pretend to do so. Gilson (1996) cites the following values: intellectual honesty, dedication, humility and an open mind. A scholar “realizes his own ignorance and is working very hard to reduce it” (p. 409). There must be a “scrupulous respect for the truth”. A scholar cites sources only when it is absolutely necessary to do so, and if he has actually read the source he is citing. It must also be accurate. “If you are a true scholar and write down that quotation for me, you will not write it from memory at the risk of changing a word or two in it, because through changing its words you might change its meaning, impose on a man what he never said, and impose on me the false conviction that this man said what he really had not. There are no negligible details for intellectual honesty, any more for moral honesty” (p. 410). A scholar should be dedicated to the production and acquisition of knowledge coupled with the value of intellectual humility and accuracy. An open mind would mean that the scholar is amenable to learning “old truths” and well as the pursuit of

new ones. In such a university, “one would not consider such a place as a mere nursery of future scholars, but as being already a meeting place of young scholars bound to do credit to their own university and their country” (p. 411).

In the course of writing papers required for class, some students are used to copy/pasting material on the Web, and after an hour they have a magnum opus. In grade school and high school, they were not reprimanded, nor did they receive any sanctions; no reminders that in doing so they would be engaged in an act of intellectual theft or stealing. Their “new work” is excellently written, in a language and style far advanced than their current level of writing. Once I had a student who passed a concept paper with hyperlinks no less, but he had the nerve to say he wrote it. Coming from an exclusive high school, he claimed he dreamt in English, which had no bearing whatsoever on the issue of plagiarism. So he got a 5.0 for that paper with no chance for revisions. Maybe the issue of ownership of material posted on the Web wasn’t clear to him since there is just so much information out there.

First, the problem: -Ignorance of the ethics of scholarship. Since many come to the university totally unaware of the rules for research, only dire threats from their professors compel them to try to follow some of the rudiments of citation. Some still copy/paste in small doses, but the widespread copy/pasting of whole paragraphs is minimized. The concept of ownership and the need to respect another person’s intellectual work is new for some students.

Maybe it is the availability of material and the facility to copy electronic text that has made plagiarism so easy. Looking at the vast amount of information on the Web, unless the professor makes the effort to look up some of the sources the student used, plagiarism could go unnoticed. Another student copy/pasted poetry from another person’s blog, entered it in a contest, and won. It was only later that someone said that the poem sounded familiar, and it was discovered that the student had in fact plagiarized someone else’s poetry and passed it off as her own. Another student passed a concept paper on Plato’s concept of shadows in his allegory of a cave. I was amazed and doubtful that a freshman had read so much of Plato and could write so well. It was only when I subjected her to an oral examination that she admitted that it was the paper of her sister’s boyfriend that he wrote in a Philo class. Recycling papers from one class to another or even “shopping” or stealing corrected drafts outside the rooms of other professors teaching the same G.E. subject happens quite a few times in a semester. It is impossible to trace a stolen paper when there are more than 60 sections of English 1 in a semester, or more than 20 sections in English 10. Thus students are warned not to leave their final papers outside the professor’s door since there are students who routinely “shop”

around for papers near the end of the semester that they can retype and pass off as their own in another section. If a student who wrote poorly in class exercises suddenly writes so well, then it leaves room for doubt. The only recourse would be an oral examination on the paper and to rewrite the paper on the spot under direct supervision. For plagiarism the penalty is an automatic 5.0 for the paper. Better that the student learns that the penalty is severe now, rather than later.

Maybe what students need to see is that in the course of producing knowledge, they are participating in an “academic conversation,” and therefore using someone else’s words just won’t do. So how do we develop the culture of ethical scholarship? First, professors must cite their sources not just when they write but also in a class discussion or debate to differentiate their own reading of a text and that of other scholars in the field. Situate your own reading of a text vis-à-vis other scholars, then students will realize that different viewpoints should be acknowledged and respected. Showing by example is crucial. When students see the academic rules at play on a daily basis, then it is easier to imbibe these rules as the norm, not just in the nitty-gritty job of writing.

Second, teaching academic writing with the prerequisite research skills is crucial. With the review of the Revised General Education Program (RGEP) program that is now ongoing, this skill has perhaps been overlooked. Ideally, a GE class which would entail research requires that the professor be as thorough with checking the student’s research skills as well as the content. The emphasis is form and content, not just content or substance. Skill courses like English 1 and English 10 have a different focus unlike other GE courses since the concentration is primarily on skills in academic reading and writing. In English 10 particularly, writing four papers (report, reaction, concept and position) would require checking the paper writing process from the outline to the finished product. The focus is the organization and writing process, as well as the content. Students are taught how to do research, summarize, organize and develop ideas, use transition and proper citation of sources. Do all students need to take an academic writing course to lay the foundations for research in the university? Yes, I think so. Maybe not on the same ladderized basis as the old Comm 1 and Comm 2, but at least *one* writing course in their life in the university. Since many students go to the university unprepared to read and to write academically, special effort has to be taken to hone these skills especially in freshmen in preparation for their upper division courses. Only very few come to the university already equipped with the necessary reading and writing skills. Every G.E. professor should be circumspect in checking content and organization, structure and citation of sources. But amidst so many requirements

it is difficult to cover so much ground from the content, grammar, organization, development, let alone the risk of plagiarism.

For professionals and graduate students, it is assumed that they had undergone these requirements in college, and thus there is no excuse for any researcher, businessman, or lawyer to lift paragraphs from someone else's work and pass it off as their own. The penalties should be clear, and there should be no exceptions by profession or because of one's stature or financial contribution to a university. The rule against plagiarism must apply to all, with no exceptions. But I would think that the guilt in the accidentally dropped footnote is perhaps not equal to the brazen theft of someone else's ideas. Perhaps a gentle reminder to the youngest future scholars to the more seasoned researcher that professional courtesy would be a good thing, rather than a witch hunt that would stultify one's creativity and imagination.

Maybe the best deterrent against plagiarism is in educating students about the proper protocol and for them to see how their own work participates in the field of academic debate.

As Carlos Fuentes (2006) writes, "university spaces are essential as spaces for reflection, research and critical thinking – the structures we must establish to fight intolerance, lies and violence" (p.68) We cannot "create" knowledge on the basis of a lie due to plagiarism. And as we reflect on and create knowledge, we need to respect the integrity of another writer's work. Teaching the ethics of scholarship to the future scholars and thinkers of our society should also serve as a reminder of our own academic integrity as we do our own work.

Reference

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