

# Trust, betrayal, and authorship: Plagiarism and how we perceive students

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The subject of plagiarism among teachers can be something of a Rorschach test when it comes to the identities of their students. Students are

- A. Deceitful and trying to put one over on their teachers
- B. Lazy and trying to get by with the least amount of work possible
- C. Confused about how to use and credit other sources of information
- D. Struggling to write with new information and new genres
- E. All of the above

Option “E” probably comes closer to how many teachers feel about their students. Teachers want to like their students and to believe in them as honest people. They look at each face that enters their classroom with optimism and trust. Most teachers I know would rather not be suspicious of their students. Yet some students do cheat or lie, and when the teachers I talk with find that a student has been dishonest their responses reveal betrayal, anger, and a visceral sense of disappointment. Such disappointments can leave teachers increasingly wary of their students—on guard against dishonest behavior and against an-

other betrayal of trust. They look at their students and silently vow not to be fooled again.

Such emotional responses to plagiarism are rarely addressed in the professional literature that focuses on issues of ethics and good teaching practices. Yet, the emotions that are unleashed by cases of plagiarism, or suspicions of plagiarism, influence how we perceive our students and how we approach teaching them. Clearly, the level of trust we feel in someone has a profound effect on our actions toward that person and our reactions to everything that person does. If our trust in a person is betrayed, it not only damages that relationship but also inevitably makes us warier of the next person we encounter. In terms of our students, our responses to them and to their writing must be influenced by whether we assume their efforts will be honest or duplicitous.

The emotional impact of plagiarism is not confined to teachers or classrooms. In recent years, story after story in the popular media has raised an alarm about a plagiarism epidemic. The stories are filled with statistics (some that are accurate) detailing the descent into dishonesty for young people. According to these stories, the majority of students are much busier downloading papers than doing their own work. This portrait

of students depicts them as slothful and morally lacking. As one teacher was quoted, "There is a great deal of temptation out there, and there are certain students who give in to that temptation because it's so easy" (Robelen, 2007, p. 16). The siren call that students cannot resist in these stories comes from the Internet. Like so many recent social anxieties, the fear of plagiarism is often connected to the new online technologies that allow for ways of creating, editing, and sharing texts that were only dreamed of in the past.

As is often the case with statistics, there are others figures that challenge whether plagiarism is rapidly increasing, though these are more rarely reported in the mainstream media. Yet, the narrative of lazy, deceitful young people dominates public conversations about this issue, as well as the conversations among many literacy teachers. Reflected in this narrative is a discomfort in older people, including teachers, with the ways that online technologies are altering ideas of authorship and ownership of texts.

## Solitary authors or social writers?

Many teachers still proceed from a conception of authorship rooted in 19th-century romantic ideas of individual genius and inspiration. From such a position, ideas are the product of individual insight and inspirations and, once written down, create unique documents representative of the autonomous ideas of the author. Students, then, are expected to come up with original ideas and present them in their own words. Students failing to meet these standards are perceived as either intellectually or morally deficient (Howard, 1999).

Of course, Bakhtin (1981) and others would argue that words do not belong to a single individual. Every word has been spoken before, every sentence draws on other ideas, and every essay or story mixes elements and ideas of other essays and stories to create new works. In fact,

scholarly work is often a combination of other sources and our own thinking. We read, listen, reflect, write, and speak in a combination of our own ideas and the ideas of others. To paraphrase Isaac Newton, if we expect to see farther it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants. This social definition of authorial identity, Howard (1999) argued, is a more postmodern concept that conceives of authorship as a social phenomenon in which we are always drawing and combining ideas from others. When we learn to adapt these forms of social authorship to the appropriate cultural conventions, we are rewarded, and when we do not, we are punished.

There are several conflicting ideas involved when we think about student authorship and plagiarism. We want students to draw on their creativity and create original work, yet we want them to become readers and writers who draw from the ideas of others. We fear, however, that they will take the wrong things, or too many of the right things, from others. As a teacher it is not always easy for me to define to students how to balance these competing ideas. When we ask students to take ideas and words from others, but only in a certain way and not too much, we are asking them to learn a nuanced set of cultural attitudes that are not unlike knowing how and when to speak, eat, and use a napkin at a formal restaurant. Unfortunately, what students are often taught about using other sources begins with a lecture about plagiarism that emphasizes the penalties and punishments they face should they transgress. It is as if, on the way into the formal restaurant, students were stopped at the door and told that if they made an error of etiquette they will be thrown out before they are taught the cultural customs they need to follow. The situation becomes more complex if we consider that, as Gee (2004) pointed out, these kinds of nuanced literacy practices must be acquired through cultural customs and trial and error as much as through direct instruction.

## The complications of online literacies

These issues of student work and plagiarism have become more complicated in the last 10 years as evolving online technologies have allowed and encouraged creating texts as collages and hybrids of other texts. This “sampling” culture can be seen in the file sharing of music; the collages of images and words on Myspace.com pages; and the videos on YouTube.com that, for example, combine images from a television series with music from a popular song. All of these practices are popular among students and are sometimes baffling to teachers, but they construct authorship as being overtly about connecting and combining other texts.

Given the complexity of conceptions of authorial identity and the skills necessary to write with other sources in a way that draws on them in a culturally appropriate manner, it is unfortunate that discussions of plagiarism often remain driven by emotions of fear, betrayal, and mistrust. When the issue of plagiarism comes up, the subject turns all too quickly to detection and punishment rather than how to engage students in increasingly sophisticated literacy practices. The advent of “plagiarism detection” software services, and the corporate advertising and marketing campaigns that have accompanied it, have intensified this focus on detection over instruction. The best known of these products is Turnitin.com. Turnitin sells itself as a “comprehensive plagiarism prevention system [that] lets you quickly and effectively check all of your students’ work in a fraction of the time necessary to scan a few suspect papers using a search engine” (Turnitin.com, 2007). Students or teachers submit papers to the service and it supposedly identifies evidence of plagiarism from public sources and other student papers. When a student paper is run through the software, it is added to the company’s database. Although Turnitin has become popular with some schools, or at least some administrators, there are several problems with it.

Research on Turnitin (Bishop, 2006; Royce, 2003) has indicated that it can produce many inaccurate reports that indicate both plagiarism where it doesn’t exist and miss plagiarism where it does. In addition, there are legal questions raised by the automatic inclusion of student papers into the database that have led to lawsuits (Robelen, 2007).

Yet, even if these services were completely legal and perfectly accurate, what concerns me from a teaching perspective are the conceptions of student identity that are implied by using Turnitin or other similar software services. The use of such a service for student writers begins from a presumption of guilt. If we tell students that their papers must go through such a service before we read them, whether we threaten immediate punishment or not, we are telling them that we do not trust them to act honorably. We also tell students that when it comes to writing with other sources, the emphasis is on avoiding plagiarism not drawing from and synthesizing the ideas of others. We tell students that their writing is not their own and that we will turn the judgment of their writing over to computer software.

Such an approach creates a poisonous atmosphere between teachers and students that makes them adversaries instead of collaborators. It creates a prison culture of guards and the guarded—a cat-and-mouse game of detection and mistrust in which the fear of being caught can also breed a desire to get around the rules. As Carbone (2001) succinctly argued,

It assumes the worst about students and the worst about teachers. It assumes students have no honor and need always to be watched and followed electronically, a big brother welcome to academic traditions. It assumes teachers are too beleaguered and inept to design classroom assignments and practices that teach students how to write responsibly. Much of what Turnitin.com proposes to detect can be avoided by careful assignment planning and teaching...by paying better attention early on to students and the work they do.

Recently, some teachers have been arguing that they are using Turnitin in the same way that students use spell checking software and that it can be a valuable teaching tool. Students I have talked with don't buy this argument for a moment and still suspect that the software is being used for detection and punishment. They understand that surveillance is surveillance no matter what spin gets put on it.

## Missed opportunities for teaching

My opposition to such plagiarism software services grows from the conviction that if we use them we are not only poisoning classroom relationships, but we are also missing an opportunity for teaching. I believe that, whether a paper is intentionally plagiarized or poorly documented and researched, such moments offer important chances to teach students about writing and life.

Students who copy papers or passages intentionally certainly mean to deceive. Research at many levels, however, indicates that such copying is more likely to be driven by desperation and a desire for success (or fear of failure) than by a simple desire to cheat. Students in panic should cause us to consider the pressure on them, and we should respond to that pressure by getting them to work with us rather than against us. Instead of beginning with a classroom discussion of plagiarism penalties, we should focus on teaching students how to respond to pressure and how to work with deadlines and the people who set them. In addition, we should teach students that they create identities in everything they write. We need to help them understand the importance of trust in the relationship between an author and the audience. Quite frankly, I think it would be difficult to talk about trust in a convincing way while using a service such as Turnitin.

When a paper displays unintentional plagiarism or work that has gone uncredited in a paper that has cited sources in other places, we have a

teaching opportunity to work with students through their assignments and drafts. We can help them learn the customs that guide how we draw on and acknowledge the work of others in our own writing. Howard (1999) and others have argued that students writing in new genres often initially engage in "patchwriting" until they master the conventions of the unfamiliar genre. As teachers we ought to regard patchwriting as a teaching moment and not a moment for academic death penalties. Obviously, huge class sizes and overwhelming paper loads work against this kind of teaching. Still, even working with some papers as drafts and approaching each assignment as a process that builds on ideas discussed in class helps move students toward better writing practices and away from the paranoia of potential plagiarism punishment.

Finally, if students regard the work they do for a course as meaningless except for the grade they receive, their motivation to do their best work will fade, and their desire to beat the system and cheat will increase. Canned assignments that never vary year to year, that ask for the regurgitation of information rather than engagement with ideas, and that are driven by standardized high-stakes assessment lead students to lose interest in their work beyond the motivation for the highest grade possible. As teachers we must try, even as the institutional and cultural waves beat against us, to work with students to create assignments that engage their lives, interests, and individual intellectual questions.

Am I naïve? Perhaps. Yet even in the face of the plagiarism situations I have run into during my teaching career, I continue to believe in the integrity of students and their desire to learn. I continue to believe that such situations call for better teaching, not more punishment. I even believe in redemption. Will I feel angry and betrayed the next time I come across a plagiarized essay? Undoubtedly. But I will do my best to get beyond my emotions and to believe that that student can be taught, and the next one, and the next one.

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