PLAGIARISM DESERVES TO BE PUNISHED

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"College Plagiarism Reaches All Time High"

"Studies Find More Students Cheating, With High Achievers No Exception"

Headlines like these from *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times* scream at us about an increase in plagiarism. As a society, we feel embattled, surrounded by falling standards; we bemoan the increasing immorality of our youth and of our society. Plagiarism, we know, is an immoral act, a simple case of right and wrong, and as such, deserves to be punished.

However, there is nothing simple about plagiarism. In fact, the more we examine plagiarism, the more inconsistencies we find, and the more confusion. How we think about plagiarism is clouded by the fact that it is often spoken of as a crime. Plagiarism is not only seen as immoral, it is seen as the stealing of ideas or words. In his book, *Free Culture*, Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig questions what it can possibly mean to steal an idea:

> I understand what I am taking when I take the picnic table you put in your backyard. I am taking a thing, the picnic table, and after I take it, you don't have it. But what am I taking when I take the good idea you had to put a picnic table in the backyard—by, for example, going to Sears, buying a table, and putting it in my backyard? What is the thing that I am taking then?

Lessig was getting at the idea that when a person borrows an idea no harm is done to the party from whom it was taken. His example is important because it makes us question whether theft is an apt way to think about plagiarism.

But how is Lessig's idea of taking a picnic table different from taking an idea and reusing it in writing? One obvious difference is that in writing it is the acknowledgement of one's sources that makes taking something okay. But another, less obvious but more important difference is that taking ideas and using them in your own writing is a sophisticated skill that requires a good deal of practice to master. There are at least three important things to understand about the complexity of using sources. First, ideas are often a mixture of one's own ideas, those we read, and those we discuss with friends, making it hard, or even impossible, to sort out who owns what. Second, writers who are learning a new field often try out ideas and phrases from other writers in order to master the field. This process allows them to learn, and is a far cry from stealing. Third, expectations for citing sources vary among contexts and readers, making it not only confusing to learn the rules, but impossible to satisfy them all.

It is quite hard to separate one's ideas from those of others. When we read, we always bring our own knowledge to what we're reading. Writers cannot say everything; they have to rely on the readers to supply their side of the meaning making. One difficulty arises when you read an argument with missing steps. As a good reader, you fill them in so that you can make sense of the argument. Now, if you were to write about those missing steps, would they be your ideas or those of your source?

Knowing about such difficulties, teachers and writers often question whether it's possible to have an original idea. Many have come to the conclusion that we always write recirculated ideas that we have borrowed from others and reworked. But surely we know when we reuse words? Surely we should be able to attribute them? Perhaps not. Words are not discrete entities that can be recombined in countless ways, but rather, they fall into patterns that serve certain ways of thinking, the very ways of thinking (habits of mind, you might say) that we try to instill in students. The fact is that language is formulaic, meaning that certain words commonly occur together. There are many idioms, such as "toe the line" or "cut corners" that need not be attributed. There are also a whole lot of co-occurring words that don't quite count as idioms, such as, "challenge the status quo," "it should also be noted that...," and "The purpose of this study is to...," that similarly do not require attribution. These are called *collocations*. When it comes to academic writing, there are a great number of them that student writers need to acquire and use. What this means is that not every verbatim reuse is plagiarism.

Moreover, imposing strict rules against word reuse may function to prevent student writers from learning to write in their fields. When student writers reuse patterns of words without attribution in an attempt to learn how to sound like a journalist, say, or a biologist, or a literary theorist, it is called *patchwriting*. In fact, not only student writers, but all writers, patch together pieces of text from sources, using their own language to sew the seams in order to learn the language of a new field. Because of the complex way in which patchwriting mixes text from various sources, it can be extremely difficult to cite one's sources. Despite this lack of attribution, much research has shown that patchwriting is not deceitful and therefore should not be punished. In fact, some scholars are interested in exploring how patchwriting could be used by writing teachers to help student writers develop their writing skills.

The third reason that it is not always easy to acknowledge sources is that expectations for referencing vary widely, and what counts as plagiarism depends on context. If, for instance, you use a piece of historic information in a novel, you don't have to cite it, but if you use the same piece of information in a history paper, you do. Journalists typically do not supply citations, though they have fact checkers making sure they're right. In business, people often start their reports by cutting-and-pasting earlier reports without attribution. Furthermore, research has shown that the reuse of words and phrases in science articles is much more common and accepted than it is in the humanities; this may be because words are regarded as neutral tools to be reused in objective discussions, or because many scientific terms and collocations do not lend themselves to being paraphrased.

Additionally, in high school, student writers likely used textbooks that did not contain citations, and once in college, they may observe their professors giving lectures that come straight from the textbook, cribbing one another's syllabi, and cutting and pasting the plagiarism policy into their syllabi. They may even notice that their university lifted the wording of its plagiarism policy from another institution! In addition to these differing standards, which seem to turn on differences in genre or field of study, research has also shown that individual experts such as experienced writers and teachers do not agree whether or not a given piece of writing counts as plagiarism. Given such wide disagreement over what constitutes plagiarism, it is quite difficult, perhaps impossible, for writers to meet everyone's expectations for proper attribution. Rather than assuming that writers are trying to pass off someone else's work as their own and therefore deserve punishment, we should recognize the complexity of separating one's ideas from those of others, of mastering authoritative phrases, and of attributing according to varying standards.

While the feeling that plagiarism deserves punishment is perhaps widely held in society, the understanding that plagiarism is often not deceitful and does not deserve punishment is also present. The latter understanding is held by writers who recognize that originality is not about divine inspiration. Today, many writers and writing teachers reject the image of the writer as working alone, using (God-given) talent to produce an original piece of work. This image of a lone author capturing never-before-heard-of ideas simply is not supported by writing research, which shows that writers both recombine ideas to create something new and collaborate with others when generating their texts. Interestingly, the image of the lone, divinely inspired writer is only a few hundred years old—a European construct from the Romantic era. Before the 18th century, there were writers who copied and were nevertheless respected as writers. Rather than seeing copying as deceitful, copying can be taken as a sign of respect and as free publicity as well.

Today, millennial students may copy without deceitful intent, but for different reasons. Reposting content on their Facebook pages and sharing links with their friends, they may avoid citing because they are making an allusion; readers who recognize the source share the in-joke. In school, millennials may not cite because they are not used to doing so, or they believe that it's better not to cite some things because using too many citations detracts from their authority. In either case, these are not students trying to get away with passing someone else's work off as their own. In addition, writers from some cultures (particularly those educated outside Western schooling contexts) may not see copying without attribution as plagiarism because it is culturally accepted that communal ideas are more favored than individual ideas. It is also believed that educated audiences will know the source material, so students may not recognize plagiarism as stealing; instead it is a sign of respect and sophistication in writing.

Despite these complexities of textual reuse, most teachers nevertheless expect student writers to do their *own work*. In fact, student writers are held to a higher standard and punished more rigorously than established writers. What is more troublesome is that teachers' determinations of when plagiarism has occurred is more complicated than simply noting whether a student has given credit to his or her sources or not. Some research has shown that teachers let inadequate attribution go if they feel the overall sophistication or authority of the paper is good, whereas they are stricter about citing rules when the sophistication or authority is weak. They tend to more readily recognize authority in papers written by students who are members of a powerful group (e.g., whites, native English speakers, or students whose parents went to college). Thus, in some instances, plagiarism may be more about social inequity than individual deceit.

As we come to realize that (1) writers combine their ideas with those of others in ways that cannot always be separated for the purposes of attribution, (2) writers often reuse phrases in acceptable ways, and (3) citation standards vary widely and are often in the eye of the beholder, the studies and articles panicking over plagiarism make less and less sense. In looking at plagiarism from the different perspectives offered by collaborative and culturally different writers, we can see that much plagiarism is not about stealing ideas or deceiving readers. Unless plagiarism is out-and-out cheating, like cutting and pasting an entire paper from the Internet or paying someone to write it, we should be cautious about reacting to plagiarism with the intent to punish. For much plagiarism, a better response is to just relax and let writers continue to practice the sophisticated skill of using sources.

Further Reading

For college teachers who want to help students learn to avoid plagiarism, guidance is available from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003). The document "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices" defines plagiarism, discusses its causes, and provides a set of teaching suggestions.

For more on how millennial culture shapes attitudes toward plagiarism, see Susan D. Blum's (2009) book, *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture* (Cornell University Press). Based on interviews with 234 university students, Blum argues that the values of communalism and shared authorship, and not the belief that plagiarism is deceitful, influence this generation's use of sources. For more on how plagiarism is entwined with issues of social identity, Shelley