

Academic Dishonesty: A Plague On Our Profession

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We live in a time when corporate misdeeds are being exposed at alarming rates; when accounting and auditing schemes are coming to light with frightening frequency;¹ and when political claims, promises, and assurances are subject to ridicule and doubt.² These lapses in ethics and honesty have not suddenly sprung upon us; they developed over time. Some of the origins of such cultural decay begin in the schools where plagiarism is sadly common and where such dishonesty seems not to be rooted out emphatically and methodically.

Plagiarism is intellectual theft, no less a moral offense than would the theft of a car, money, or jewels would be. While intellectual theft is less tangible than other theft forms and other species of academic dishonesty, it is nonetheless very real. Many plagiarizers claim, when caught, that “everyone is doing it,” “it’s not a big deal,” or “I didn’t mean to cheat.”³ Such statements suggest that too few people know exactly what plagiarism is; they are unaware of rules against plagiarism; and/or they have learned through benign neglect from teachers, school administrators, school boards, and parents that plagiarism is not a big deal.

Plagiarism and other academic dishonesty take many forms, some familiar to all; others less common.⁴ Some of the more familiar such behaviors include: copying test responses from a classmate; taking exams for others; doing another’s assignments; not citing others’ work included in course papers, take home exams, or other assignments; and purchasing research papers from companies too willing to sell these to unscrupulous students. Some other less familiar dishonesty methods include: fabrication of quotes and other spoken or written materials with made up sources; and getting exam copies in advance from accomplice sources. Other academic misconduct sometimes accompanies plagiaristic practices which border on or equate with criminal activity such as: breaking into teacher offices/files to gain surreptitious access to tests or answer keys; sabotaging peers’ ongoing work or experiments; and gaining illegal access to school computer data bases in order to alter official grade records.

The author has taken active interest in plagiarism over the years, serving on students conduct code committees over the past twenty years and raising the issue in ethics, persuasion, and interpersonal

communication classes as a vehicle of instruction in these courses. Academic dishonesty is familiar to students as validated each year by an almost universal show of hands when students are asked if they personally know others who cheat and/or if they have personally witnessed cheating. When the topic of cheating is raised in class, few students express heightened interest; many students claim not to have been confronted with the issue by parents or previous teachers except when personally caught plagiarizing. When students have been asked to respond to whether or not they would expose students they knew were cheating, most report they would emphatically not report such behavior. Their typical rationales for refusing to report cheating are: "it's not my job; that's the teacher's job;" "they are not hurting me; only they are potentially hurt by cheating;" "I cannot prove they were cheating, so I'll stay silent;" or "if they need to cheat to pass, who am I to cause them to fail?"⁵ This benign neglect of cheating has remained consistent in the author's classes and in individual conversations with students over the past fifteen years.

In many conversations with middle and high school teachers and students, similar responses are given. Teachers at all levels seem to take one of the following stances when probed about their views on plagiarism: (1) it's too dangerous legally to charge students with cheating;" "It's too much work taking me away from my regular work to bother with investigating, reporting, and defending my accusations;" "Students will just cheat another way if punished and/or I'll just have them repeat my class next year if I discover and report such behavior;" or "I fear I will not be backed up by administrators, peers, or parents if I do actively act on cheating in my classroom."⁶ Cheating is not just a teacher's dilemma; it is a blemish on the institution of learning; it is imperative that fellow teachers, school administrators school boards, and parents support the detection of and the punishment of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. Failure to do so vigorously implicitly condones such behavior and severely damages the reputation of an academic institution as well as putting in question the honest efforts of non cheating students. The case of the Kansas teacher who ferreted out cheating by students under her supervision and who when severely punishing those known to be guilty by refusing to pass them on to the next grade was rebuked and reversed by the local school board illustrates the fear and doubt such action engenders.⁷ No one else in that school or district is likely to look for or deal with in any tangible way cheating until radical value changes occur.

Cheating is a mindset; it grows like a cancer. When one student "succeeds" at cheating, word of that success is bound to surface among peers. Such behavior is contagious; others will inevitably follow

and spread like a disease unless eradicated. The author's experience with students reported to have cheated show that most of these individuals cheat serially; that is, they cheat in almost every class, every year until caught; and sometimes, even after being caught, they continue the practice until expelled. If a student is apprehended, reported, and severely admonished on his/her initial cheating attempt, there seems to be a chance that this behavior will be curtailed. Word of teacher vigilance of, administrative support for, and board backing of plagiarism detection, reporting, and sanctions spreads like a fire in school gossip chains as do benign neglect or over lenient teacher, administrative, and board attitudes and behaviors. The value of individual and collective honesty has to be taught, role modeled, and rewarded in the schools; to neglect or refuse to do so is malfeasance.

Most students want to be honest; dishonesty is not innate; it is learned. Preemptive instruction, role modeling, and rewards must precede the learning of cheating. Such instruction required teacher vigilance, care not to create circumstances where cheating is easy, available, neglected, or rewarded. Common school teachers must be told by parents in teachers' presence that they will not tolerate cheating and that they expect teachers to deal with such behavior by any student, including their own, severely if caught. School boards and administrators must be helpful and supportive of teacher efforts to eliminate, discover, and sanction academic dishonesty. Teachers must take cheating seriously and treat the practice consistently, firmly, and humanely holding values of honesty and integrity as archetypal values.

Lest we believe that plagiarism is exclusively a student matter, consider the following examples: Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware in his 1988 presidential campaign chose to quote British Labor Party leader, Neil Kinnock's words without any attribution to the original speaker. His plagiaristic behavior contributed to Biden's withdrawing from the campaign.⁸ Such disgrace was not limited to Biden; many people's beliefs that politicians in general are scoundrels had their beliefs somewhat validated thus harming the many honest politician's reputations. Noted historians Alex Haley, Doris Kearns Goodman and Steven E. Ambrose were accused of scholarly plagiarism in the writing of their books.⁹ Such behavior magnifies student cynicism of the view that plagiarism is wrong since famous scholars engage in the same practice. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was accused of plagiarism and there were some who actively excused his behavior as a difference of cultures.¹⁰ Several print and electronic media reporters, too, have had difficulties with plagiarism including Mark Hornung, editorial page editor for the Chicago Sun-Times;

Ken Hamblin, Denver Post columnist; Bob Hepburn, Washington bureau chief for the Toronto Star; Nina Totenberg National Public Radio reporter formerly of the National Observer; and Fox Butterfield, Boston bureau chief for the New York Times. Most of these have landed other jobs adding some truth to the belief that plagiarism is not such a terrible act.¹¹

¹ See July 24, 2002 issues of *Time*, *US News and World Report*, and *Newsweek* magazines for coverstories relevant to business scandals.

² See any of numerous TV and radio talk shows such as: “The Beltway Boys” on FOX; “The Capital Gang” on CNN; “This Week” on ABC; “Meet the Press” on CNBC; “Face the Nation” on CBS; or Rush Limbaugh on syndicated radio for examples.

³ These quotes have come from students the author has spoken to from his classes and/or in academic dishonesty hearings where the author participated; student names are excised for legal reasons.

⁴ See Gary G. Neils. (1996). *Academic Practices, School Culture and Cheating Behavior*. *Independent Schools Association of the Central States* for an extensive list of academic misconduct behaviors.

⁵ These comments come from class discussions and written class papers in the author’s Communication Ethics class from 1994 to 2001 relevant to reporting plagiarism.

⁶ These comments come from personal teacher interviews conducted while the author taught university classes in Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, and Maine. Names of quoted individuals have been omitted for legal reasons.

⁷ Diane Carroll. (2002, February 8). *Teacher Quits In Dispute With School Board Over Student Plagiarism*. *Kansas City Star*, p. 1.

⁸ Larry J. Sabato. (2002, July 1). *Joseph Biden’s Plagiarism; Michael Dukakis’s ‘Attack Video’ – 1988*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-specialreports/clinton/frenzy/biden.htm>

⁹ Paul Gray. (2002, March). *Other People’s Words*. *Smithsonian Magazine*. <http://www.smithsonianmag.si.edu/smithsonian/issues02/mar02/presence.html>

¹⁰ Theodore Pappas. (1988). *Plagiarism and the Culture War: The Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Other Prominent Americans*. Haliberg Publishers.

¹¹ Trudy Lieberman. (1995, July/August). *Plagiarize, Plagiarize, Plagiarize...* *Columbia Journalism Review*. <http://www.cjr.org/year95/4/plagiarize.asp>