PREVENTING PLAGIARISM

BY GEORGINA HILL

Silence settled over the committee. We had heard the events and the evidence, and now each of us had to decide what stance to take, what possibilities to consider. Our discussion had lasted for two hours—a testament to the difficulty of balancing Christian concern for the young woman and the necessity of requiring integrity of her and the institution. Grappling for an appropriate response to repeated, blatant plagiarism was one of the worst challenges of my professional career.

When we better comprehend the reasons why students plagiarize, we can provide instruction and create assignments that deter this kind of behavior.

The student had submitted copied writing in four different classes. On every other front, she was a model student: active in outreach programs, bright, articulate, poised, quick to laugh and to help, committed, eager to do well. And here we were, two weeks before her graduation, deciding whether to expel her for dishonesty.

Although this was the most emotionally draining case of plagiarism with which I have been involved, it hasn't been the only one. As a writing teacher of many years and a teacher of writing teachers, I have heard many stories and surely, all the excuses.

Occasionally, students do a poor job of integrating the language and ideas from their sources and submit a paper in which they do not identify quoted passages and paraphrased sources. These students need additional instruction, but I would not classify them as dishonest—they have not intentionally and knowingly claimed ownership of someone else's work.

More often, a student will copy an article or a section of a book. Typically, this form of plagiarism is easy to spot because of the polished writing quality and style. A more problematic form is the resubmission of a paper written by another student. This type of plagiarism is difficult to identify since the papers are written at a student level. However, in both of these cases, students claim to have done work that they didn't do. That is, they cheated.

Cheating is always a lose-lose proposition. Students lose the learning resulting from the writing assignment. They miss out on the satisfaction of tackling a challenge. Most importantly, they lose the opportunity to practice their Christian values when they choose expediency over integrity.

And teachers lose. Cheating rattles our belief in students' willingness and ability to learn. When we can show that a student has plagiarized, we are faced with discipline decisions and unpleasant confrontations. Or worse, we cannot prove our hunch: A story sounds vaguely familiar, the quality is better than we expected, but we have no hard evidence, leaving us in a grading dilemma that challenges our integrity.

Therefore, if teachers can reduce cheating, everyone benefits. By better understanding why students plagiarize, we can provide instruction and create assignments that more effectively deter this behavior.

Why Students Plagiarize

Dishonesty. Often, as teachers, we are quick to attribute plagiarism to a lack of moral integrity. Although most plagiarism cases with which I have been involved include shadows of dishonesty, students who do not value honesty are the exception—and exceptions easy to remember.

One student submitted a freshman composition assignment that had been copied verbatim from an essay in the back of the textbook. When accused of plagiarism, he denied it—to the point of suggesting that even though Peter Elbow's essay was identical to his and was published in the textbook, perhaps it was because Elbow (a well-respected scholar on composition theory) thought and wrote as the student did! This student persisted on spinning a tale of lies, stumbling from one untruth to another. His is one of the most obvious cases of disregard for integrity that I have ever encountered. Fortunately, it has been the exception. Most students, when confronted, admit to plagiarism—then make excuses. Clearly, at heart, they value honesty, so why would they cheat?

Time. The major motivator to plagiarize is time. Students frequently underestimate how much time it will

take to do the hard work of writing. An honors student told me at the beginning of the term that his primary goal for the course was to learn to write without revising because "good writers" write "quickly and easily." He didn't yet qualify as a "good writer" because he always had to revise draft after draft to get a good piece. His assumption is typical: Good writing can be accomplished quickly. Consequently, students may procrastinate. The draft dashed off the night before the deadline lacks insight and finesse, but they have no time to do the necessary thinking, polishing, and revision. They know what a good piece of writing should look like, so "borrowing" from another writer seems the best way to save face.

Models. Students may unintentionally plagiarize because they are unfamiliar with documented writing. Many of the materials that students read lack formal documentation. Articles in newspapers, *Time, Newsweek,* or *Sports Illustrated* present information without footnotes. The writers do put quotation marks around a direct quote from a statesman or a coach, but the rest of the article rarely includes any attribution. Of course, in many cases, the reporter is on the scene and is describing the situation firsthand, rather than summarizing something that is already printed—a distinction students may not make. So when students set out to report on the effects of smoking, they take the stance of the firsthand reporter, even though their information comes primarily from printed sources. The final text *looks* like the articles they used for sources from *Health* and *Newsweek.*

Ownership. Who owns knowledge? And who owns the words in which knowledge is conveyed? Education consists largely of acquiring information and of claiming ownership of it. Consider a typical middle-school social studies assignment: *Write a report on Namibia.* The average U.S. student has no firsthand knowledge of Namibia and may even have difficulty finding it on the globe. Everything he or she gathers for the report (probably from an encyclopedia or the Internet) is unfamiliar.

The assignment asks students to take information from a published source. Granted, it does not say to copy directly; however, if all a writer knows about a subject comes from an encyclopedia, how many ways can that be reworded? For example, if the encyclopedia states: "Namibia is located on the west coast of Africa," in what other concise way can that be said? And since the young writer has no personal knowledge or opinions to add, why shouldn't she copy? If the information is available to everyone, why shouldn't the student claim ownership?

Ownership issues become increasingly complex as students advance in their studies. College students have amassed a fair amount of information and opinions that they can claim as their own, information and opinions also held by others. One freshman who submitted a paper written by a friend claimed that he didn't see why this was a problem, since he held the same beliefs that the friend had written about. On the surface, it sounds like a weak excuse, yet the comment does provide us a valuable glimpse into one rationale that students use.

Seeing broadly shared information and language as belonging to individuals is a difficult concept—one that we, as educators, across grade levels and disciplines, need to continuously help our students to sort through.

Assignments. Many assignments overtly encourage students to copy: the science worksheet in which the student copies the definitions from the textbook; the social studies report whose information comes straight from the encyclopedia. These assignments are primarily intended to convey facts or to facilitate memorization, and demand little personal involvement by the student. That is, the assignment does not require analysis or opinion or personal anecdote; therefore, a student can easily get an "A" by copying. Although the goal of such assignments is student learning, they reinforce a pattern that some students have trouble breaking. Such assignments imply that the role of a writer is to transcribe, rather than compose.

Prevention

Teachers can develop preventive

measures. They are not foolproof—the student who decides to cheat may still do so. However, teachers can make it more difficult by addressing some of the motivators.

Dishonesty. Starting at least by grade six and continuing through college, teachers in all subject areas need to discuss with students the ethical issues involved in copying another person's work and submitting it as one's own. Students need to learn the difference between rehearsing information and composing original material. For example, outlining a history chapter may call for copying long phrases or whole sentences because the teacher wants the student to *create personal notes based on the information to be learned.* That is different from writing a report on good nutrition where the goal is to *describe what has been learned*—a difference that needs to be explicitly addressed by the teacher.

Receiving a paper full of information on good nutrition copied from a textbook does not tell the teacher what the student has learned, any more than does getting answers copied from a cheat card during an exam. If we assign writing to discover what students understand and think about particular issues or events, and they sidestep that request by submitting someone else's understanding or thinking, this is as dishonest as putting another person's answers on a test. We all must assume responsibility for helping students learn the value of integrity.

Time. There are a variety of quick, easy checks that a teacher can incorporate into writing assignments to prevent students from procrastinating until the last minute. These nudge students to keep thinking and working on an upcoming paper and allow the teacher to determine who is having difficulty.

One of the easiest approaches is to have students spend five minutes in class writing on some aspect of their papers. Assignments might include:

- Tell why you are writing on this particular topic.
- Indicate the main point you want to make.
- List other stances someone might take on this topic.
- Summarize the latest reading you have done on your topic.
- Tell how you think you will begin the paper.

Let's say that a four- to six-page paper is due in three weeks. During the first week, ask questions that probe the topic or an angle the student might take. The second week, ask about the information the student is collecting. In week three, inquire about organization (lead paragraph, inclusion of examples or anecdotes, comparisons, etc.).

Such questions accomplish four things:

1. *They encourage students to work on the paper throughout the three-week period rather than putting it off until the last minute.*

2. *They give teachers a quick glimpse of who is on track.* Halfway through the second week, a five-minute chat with a student who is having difficulty settling on a topic can go a long way to getting him or her moving.

3. *Giving attention to the writing project helps tie it to the learning going on in class.*

4. *The answers provide a basis for questioning a suspicious paper.* If a student does not participate, then submits a polished paper, or writes in class about one topic and submits a paper on another, the teacher has evidence for asking questions about that paper.

This does make more work for the teacher; in fact, one of the difficulties with giving writing assignments is the time it takes to evaluate them. However, checking these entries doesn't take long—30 to 40 seconds per student. The teacher is checking how far along the student is on the project and whether there are any questions. These are not writing samples to be edited for correctness or commented upon for rhetorical sharpness. Out of 30 papers, the teacher might write comments on five. I use an all-or-nothing grading system: 10 points if the student wrote what was required—if not, zero.

Students can also be asked to submit pages of their draft. At the end of the first week, the teacher can ask for one page of writing, initial it, give the student 10 points, pass it back, and ask for two more pages the second week. The initialed pages are to be submitted with the final draft. These checks help ensure that students are writing. Of course, the more involved the teacher becomes in the writing process, the more likely that students will seek more guidance. So although the draft check may take five minutes for the whole class, that activity may prompt 20 minutes of after-class questions. Though time-consuming, this does help students to develop into writers and thinkers.

One noisy but effective activity is for students to talk in pairs for four minutes about their topics and then quickly write a summary of their partner's topic. Again, a quick glance at these papers will show who is not managing time well. Such activities provide fast progress checks for the teacher and remind students that writing takes time.

Models. Provide students with models of the kind of writing you expect. If the assignment asks them to justify a personal opinion, have them examine some editorials, looking carefully at how personal opinion is supported by evidence or logic. If students are supposed to use a variety of sources, provide samples from last year's essays to show them how to weave the work of other scholars into their own writing. Many students find it cumbersome to read materials that include references. Teach them why references are useful—and necessary—and why they need to become familiar with how such writing looks and sounds.

Ownership. Students need to understand how ownership applies to writing. Many writing classes include peer interaction in developing drafts. So how does a student distinguish between asking a classmate for help—perhaps even copying down the classmate's suggestions for rephrasing—and copying passages from an article? In both cases, the "others" probably said it "better." Writing is a collaborative activity; imitating other writers is one of the powerful ways we learn to write well. I can tell the difference between a religion major who is well-read in Ellen White and one who is not by how much the writer "sounds" like her. Since imitation is part of the process of learning to write, teachers need to help students

draw clear lines to exclude the unacceptable.

Ownership is also culturally defined. Until well into the 1700s, people thought of knowledge (and the language in which it was conveyed) as belonging to God, and thus available to everyone. Written language was a public domain that could not be "owned." The paper and ink could be owned, so laws protected publishers but not writers. Copyright laws protecting writers really have not been well-enforced until this century, and such laws are not universal. That is, a number of cultures think of knowledge and language as entities that cannot be owned—and thus cannot be stolen.

Students tend to understand ownership best in terms of their own thinking and learning. They can be encouraged to write about their opinions and to include examples from their own lives. This helps them develop a strong sense of ownership—of the authorial "*I*." Granted, most academic writing does not use the first person. However, students need to have a strong sense of the role of the writer as a singular self before letting it fade into the background. The process is much like learning to play the piano. We start by counting orally and using a metronome to train the sense of rhythm.

Assignments. Across all levels of education, teachers need to craft writing assignments that help students learn to do the following:

- Write cleaner, more interesting prose;
- Provide evidence to defend a position;
- Think through problems to solutions;
- Enter the conversation of a discipline.

Regardless of whether they are requiring a personal story, an exploration of colonial expansion, or an exegesis of a biblical passage, teachers need clearly expressed objectives. Rather than saying, "Write about a Bible parable," it is better to be more specific: "Interpret a Bible parable and support your assertions, using other biblical passages."

The major motivator to plagiarize is time.

Giving broad assignments such as "write a story," or "write a 10-page paper" are more likely to invite plagiarism than customizing the topic to the course and giving clear objectives. Generic topics are easy to get from the Internet or down the hall. Second, when the teacher seems concerned only with getting a finished product at the end of the term—a paper detached from the activities of the classroom—then it is easier to think of the paper as something one "gets"—rather like buying a pair of jeans—rather than something one *creates*.

Consequences

Plagiarism will probably always be with us, so it is necessary to have a contingency plan that spells out the consequences. At the beginning of the term, I make clear in the syllabus that it is the students' responsibility to prove ownership of their work. An obvious way is for them to provide notes and drafts that show the writing process. I tell them that I am expecting to see work in process, and that they are responsible for proving ownership. This is a shift from the standard practice of expecting the teacher to prove that the student did not write the paper.

A second necessary deterrent is *not* to allow students to redo a plagiarized paper for full credit. That is, plagiarizing should not be a way to extend deadlines. The most common excuse I hear is that the student chose to shortcut the assignment because she was pressed for time, so could she please have a little longer. Saying "Yes" to that request makes cheating a no-risk gamble. If students get caught, they get the additional time they needed; if they don't get caught, they didn't have to do the work. We cannot allow dishonesty to provide a way out of a tight spot.

Conclusion

At a department chairs' committee meeting, the dean passed out a list of World Wide Web sites where students could get college papers at the press of a key. One of my colleagues lamented the ease of turning in someone else's work and wondered whether we could afford to assign papers anymore. We can't afford *not* to. Writing is one of our most powerful learning tools. Janet Emig persuasively demonstrates how "writing represents a unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique."*

Teachers shouldn't assume that all students are going to cheat, but it is wise to recognize the seriousness of the temptation and to find constructive ways to offset that temptation. We have a responsibility to help our students practice integrity—even when it means more work.

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REFERENCE

*Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication* 28:2 (May 1977), p. 122.