THE *PLAGIARIO* AND THE PROFESSOR IN OUR PECULIAR INSTITUTION

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Plagiarism, as an epithat for the theft of another writer's language or ideas, was invented by the Roman port Martial. Excoriating Fidentinus for "reciti[ing] my works to the crowd, just as if they were your own," Martial compared him to the worst thing he could think of—a slave stealer, a *plagiario* (46-47, 62-63).[1] Today we take precautions which did not occur to Martial. We distribute copies of our plagiarism policies to our students, even devote portions of several class sessions to explaining those policies. Yet many of our students plagiarize nevertheless. When we discover that they have done so, their behavior seems as reprehensible to us as the theft of a slave or an epigram seemed to Martial.

What I take to be the prevailing view of plagiarism in our profession today remains the Martialian one: that the act of plagiarism expresses deficiencies in the offender's moral character and not in our institutional practice; or, to preserve the terms of the vehicle of plagiarism's radical metaphor, that it is slave-stealing, and not the cultural practices which inspire it, which is damnable. Augustus Kolich believes that because "plagiarists deceive, they are unworthy of our shared virtue, and they are not generally teachable or worse, have refused teaching" (147). Lorna Peterson would improve the moral sensibilities of would-be plagiarists through use of "A Cognitive Developmental Model Based on Kohlberg's

Theory of Moral Development." The plagiarism policy of Dartmouth College advises students that "plagiarism is considered a form of intellectual larceny which has no place in a community of scholars," and warns prospective plagiarists that "offenders are suddenly confronted by deep personal tragedy which permanently damages their records and reputations and causes inestimable heartbreak to their families" (Bond et al, 23; as photocopied in Mawdsley, 55).[2]

I want to take issue here both with the underlying assumption of the prevailing Martialian view of plagiarism—the assumption that "Students plagiarize an essay when they know they are plagiarizing"—and with the conclusion commonly drawn from that assumption: that "Once they plagiarize an essay, [our students'] problems are essentially moral and not pedagogical" (Kolich, 147). My experience suggests otherwise. On the basis of information I have collected in a survey of student behavior at my own institution, I shall suggest that many students, even after they have passed through freshman composition courses, appear not to be certain when or how or why to use quotation marks or other forms of documentation, with the result that many of them routinely "plagiarize" without being aware that they are doing so—a circumstance which suggests that it is with pedagogical rather than moral deficiencies that we are dealing. In short, I propose to offer empirical support for Alice Drum's recent hypothesis that "many students do not know how to avoid plagiarism" and that "many college composition classes deal inadequately with the problem" (242).

Let me begin by suggesting that the rules governing plagiarism are more complex than we like to admit. It is easy enough to explain the flagrant violations. We and our students readily agree on the perfidy of submitting borrowed or stolen papers or of paying another person to write them for us. Once our explanations move beyond the flagrant cases of plagiarism, however, we are left with the more difficult task (which too often we undertake perfunctorily) of equipping our students with a body of rules and competencies which many of them find as difficult to master as many English professors appear to find the laws of copyright. Nor are those rules perfectly clear in our own minds. Try explaining to your students, for example, the rule which permits Robert Scholes to proceed without quotation marks or acknowledgment of the source of his allusion (Pope's "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,"

1. 340) when he writes that "even as a youthful apprentice, wandering in fancy's maze, [Pope] had begun to achieve a mastery of his discourse that enabled him to rewrite its possibilities" (663). Try explaining why Cleanth Brooks et al do not place their quoted and half-quoted material in quotation marks in this sentence: "[Emerson] famously denounced a foolish consistency as merely the hobgoblin of the small-minded" (671). Or try explaining why you would not have your students entertain doubts concerning the moral character of Shakespeare, larded though *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* be with half-assimilated and quite unacknowledged quotation from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.

If these tasks seem simple enough, try explaining to your own satisfaction in precisely what ways your behavior does and does not resemble that of your student plagiarists when you generously permit a colleague to copy your pricey but nevertheless copyrighted word processing program, or when you show your students the PBS performance of *Hamlet* which you so presciently recorded six years ago. You reply that your motives in engaging in these illegal behaviors were complex and deserve a sympathetic hearing. Of course they do. And so, perhaps we ought to acknowledge, do the behaviors of our student plagiarists.

DO STUDENTS "KNOW THEY ARE PLAGIARIZING"?

It is a fact that many of our students, when they undertake to fortify their own papers with the ideas of other thinkers, use their sources as carelessly as Shakespeare used his. They inhabit worlds in which the truths of the Martialian view of plagiarism are not axiomatic. They do not know, any more than Shakespeare knew, that "The discovered plagiarist is the automatic exile who can never return." They do not know that plagiarists are "unworthy of our shared virtue, and [that] they are not generally teachable . . ." (Kolich, 147).

Plagiarists are "unworthy of our [English professors'?] shared virtue. . . ." Let us pursue the implications of this line of moral reasoning. If students who "plagiarize" are "unworthy of our shared virtue," then surely so too are English professors who violate one or another of the copyright laws to which their librarians have so patiently called their attention. Let us grant that both the English professors and their students are "unworthy." But what do we

do once we have acknowledged the unworthiness of both parties? Surely the next step is to recognize that both groups of unworthies can be readily assisted in *becoming* worthy. They can be assisted in doing so (1) if they are properly advised both of what the pertinent regulations say and *why* they say what they say; (2) if they are given adequate instruction and practice in the skills they need in order to abide by the regulations; and (3) if the penalties for violations of the regulations are spelled out clearly and are consistently enforced.

How many of us can claim that these conditions obtain in the departments in which we teach? Doris Dant's recent survey of "Plagiarism in High School" indicates that 17% of the students in her sample of 309 enrollees in freshman composition at Brigham Young University "reported being actively encouraged by [their high school] teachers to copy reports word for word from other sources"; 50% of the students in her sample indicated that in writing their "reports" they had copied "much" of their material "word for word from other sources such as encyclopedias" (82)—most of them having done so apparently without penalty. As for their "understanding when they were high school seniors about how to avoid plagiarism," Dant found that

> 31.5% believed . . . all they need to do is put ideas in their own words and possibly supply a bibliography (they feel footnoting is unnecessary). 15.4% believed that they may copy information as long as either a bibliography or footnotes are provided (they feel that giving credit for another's wording is unnecessary). 5.8% marked that they had never heard of plagiarism (83).

That, apparently, is the situation with regard to instruction and practice in documentation in some of this nation's high schools. How different is the situation in college freshman composition courses?

PLAGIARISM IN THE HEARTLAND: STAFF VS. STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AT A REGIONAL MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

I want to describe here in some detail the situation at my own institution, Eastern Illinois University, where several semesters

ago I conducted a survey of perceptions of plagiarism among both English staff and students.

The survey was administered in the first month of the Spring '87 semester to a sampling of *208* students enrolled in 12 sections of the second of our two required composition courses (1002, Literature and Composition), and to all of our 50 staff members, *36* of whom returned completed questionnaires.[3] I should add that all of our staff regularly teach both 1001 and 1002 and that the published guidelines for the 1001 course stipulate that "At least one of the [required papers] should reflect principles of documentation." Instructors of both courses are asked in the guidelines to "read the Department's statement on plagiarism to all students and establish your intentions with respect to plagiarized work."[4]

I was of course to learn to what degree students and staff shared a common understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. Were the perceptions of instructors and their students similar? Did instructors agree with one another? At the beginning of both the student and staff versions of the survey, I asked respondents to read a three-sentence paragraph "from an article by Jean Seligman entitled 'Memorizing Vs. Thinking: Americans Study the Lessons of Japanese Schools.' " They were asked to "read the paragraph several times," advised that the material had originally "appeared in *Newsweek*, Jan. 12, 1987, pp. 60-61," and then given the following instructions:

> Below are some sentences (items 1 through 4) which make use of the *Newsweek* material. Assume that a classmate [in the instructors' version, 'one of your students'] has written them and that she plans to include them in a paper she is writing for this class. (She intends to attach to the completed paper a bibliography, or list of works cited, in which she will supply information about author, title, date, and pages of the *Newsweek* article.) The instructor has reminded her [or 'you have reminded your students'] to avoid plagiarism and she seeks your opinion about the sentences she has written. 'Do any of the sentences plagiarize?' she wonders.
>
> Keep in mind the contents of the *Newsweek* paragraph quoted above as you answer . . . *T*rue or *F*alse to the assertions below.

Then followed four sets of sentences (items 1 through 4) which

made use of the *Newsweek* material, each set being preceded by the assertion, "The following material contains plagiarism," to be marked True or False. ALL BUT ONE OF THE SETS (#3) CONTAINED PHRASES OF DIRECT QUOTATION FROM THE *NEWSWEEK* ARTICLE WHICH I HAD NOT PLACED WITHIN QUOTATION MARKS—PHRASES OF THIRTEEN, SEVEN, AND FIFTEEN WORDS IN ITEMS 1, 2, AND 4 RESPECTIVELY.

The results indicated some interesting differences of opinion. Instructors tended more frequently than students to find plagiarism in items 1, 2, and 4. In item 1, for example, 67% of staff respondents discerned plagiarism vs. only 51% of student respondents. Though 97% of staff (vs. 86% of students) agreed that item 3 did *not* contain plagiarism, there was less agreement among staff concerning the other three items: 67%, 69%, and 72% of staff detected plagiarism in items 1, 2, and 4 (vs. 51%, 58%, and 58% of students).

Why did 33%, 31%, and 28% of staff members discern no plagiarism in items 1, 2, and 4 despite the occurrence in these items of lengthy phrases appropriated from the *Newsweek* text without use of quotation marks? One colleague wrote by way of clarification, "I would not consider these plagiarism, since the student has made a good-faith effort to cite the source." Another remarked,

> Some student confusion results from our calling 'plagiarism' things which may not be errors in some other disciplines. In in-house technical writing, for example, block quoting of others' materials without citing sources is common and accepted.

These are eminently humane observations to which I need hardly add that not all English professors will vibrate in sympathy. As one student charitably lamented, "Many teachers don't see eye to eye."

Item #11 of the survey asked staff to respond to the statement, "In ENG 1002 this semester I have informed students that if I receive a paper containing plagiarism I will"—followed by the following set of choices:

A. Assign the guilty student an *F* for the course.
B. Assign an *F* for the paper and not allow the student to rewrite it.

C. Require the student to rewrite the paper, and I will lower the grade for the completed project.
D. Require the student to rewrite the paper; no penalty of grade for the completed project.
E. Other (explain) _____

The question was imperfectly constructed, to be sure. As several staff members commented, it failed to take into account such variables as the *extensiveness* of the plagiarism in a given student paper or the likely presence or absence of *intent* to deceive. Despite the manifest imperfections of the question, however, one is struck by the *range* of staff response to the item: 25% (9) marked option *A*; 25% (9) option *B*; 14% (5) option *C*; 6% (2) option *D*; and 31% (11) option *E*.

What inferences can be drawn from the results of this portion of the survey? The diversity of student responses to items 1, 2, and 4 suggests that the English department in which I teach (recall that these students had all successfully completed the first-semester Rhetoric and Composition course) has not been conspicuously successful in bringing freshman writers' perceptions of plagiarism into conformity with instructors' perceptions. Indeed my colleagues and I have not succeeded in reaching any very great degree of agreement concerning what does and does not constitute plagiarism even among ourselves—this despite the conviction of 86% of us that "Plagiarism is a serious violation of the Academic Conduct Code requiring a correspondingly severe penalty." For some of our students that "severe penalty" means an immediate *F* for the course. For others it means an *F* for the paper, or a requirement that the paper be revised, or a variety of "other" things. The student who tells us that he received a grade of *F* for the course for committing an infraction for which another instructor would have penalized him much less severely appears to have made a correct assessment of our current practice.

Item 16 of the Student Survey asked students to write "one or two sentences of your own, making use of information or ideas" contained in a thirty-two-word sentence from *Newsweek*, a sentence which I documented with the following parenthetical citation: "Seligman, p. 60." Full bibliographical particulars had been supplied in the reference to the same *Newsweek* article at the beginning of the questionnaire.

In the instructors' version of the survey I transcribed item 16

in full so that staff would have an opportunity to evaluate the task and to predict students' performance. All 36 of the instructors who returned the survey agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (64%) with the assertion that "It is desirable that all students enrolled in ENG 1001 develop competence in the skills of paraphrase and quotation called for in their response to item 16."

A substantial majority (69%) believed that in the semester preceding the one in which the questionnaire was administered they had given their own 1001 students "instruction and practice sufficient to enable them . . . confidently and competently" to compose the sentence(s) called for in item 16.

A majority (61%) likewise believed that "most ENG 1002 students, given the specific reminder to 'avoid plagiarism,' [would] place all quoted material within quotation marks" when they composed their *Newsweek* sentences.

How did students do on this task? In the sentences they composed in response to item 16, 115 of the 208 respondents (55%)[5] supplied *no* documentation of any kind—no quotation marks, no mention of the *Newsweek* article, no citation of author's name or of the page number, and this despite my having included the following admonition in the instructions accompanying the item:

> In the sentence(s) you compose, demonstrate your understanding of the proper procedure for using material written by other writers. Do not plagiarize.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

Perhaps one may safely assume that the situation at a regional midwestern state university bears some resemblance to that at other institutions as well. On that assumption I offer several suggestions which I believe may have general applicability to our practice:

1. It is likely that our opinions of what constitutes plagiarism differ to a greater degree than we realize from the opinions of both our students and our colleagues.
2. We probably tend to overestimate the degree of our students' competence in documentation and may in consequence assume that our student plagiarists proceed with a greater degree of intention to deceive than is in fact the case.
3. We probably do our students a disservice when we assume

that our current practice of distributing and briefly discussing our plagiarism policies offers them a clear notion of what we believe plagiarism to be and how we intend to deal with it.

Here are the responses of six freshman composition alumni to my own department's current practice. (These are typical remarks which I have culled from those which many of the students in my sample appended to their completed surveys.)

"For all I know I just committed plagiarism."
"I am not completely clear on plagiarism. It would be nice if we were given examples and maybe an exercise to do on dealing with plagiarism. . . ."
"Professors fail to discuss plagiarism because they feel it was stressed back in high school."
"I know what plagiarism is, but I'm not sure of the details about it."
"My 1001 teacher never even mentioned his penalty for plagiarism.
"My 1002 teacher is strongly against it and I'm afraid I will plagiarize unknowingly."
"I feel that a teacher must clarify his individual view of plagiarism. For example, a past teacher I had believed the use of someone's idea or words was a type of plagiarism."
"Usually I think students feel the use of others exact words is plagiarism not the idea or theory the article is giving."
"I pretty much understand plagiarism, except about using exact words. If you choose not to use quotes, can you just mix their words to make your own sentences?"

4. I suspect that what the results of the responses to item 16 signify is that a good many of our students, even after they have exited from our required composition courses, do not routinely use quotation marks or other forms of documentation when they make use of secondary materials, and they apparently do not recognize that their failure to do these things constitutes plagiarism. The 55% of the students in my sample who "plagiarized" did so in the absence of any possible intention to deceive. They did so in response to instructions informing them that their task in the sentences they composed was to "demonstrate [their] understanding of the proper procedure for using material written by other writers." And

they "plagiarized" despite my explicit warning to "Avoid plagiarism."

What shall we do about our student plagiarists? Many of us appear to have concluded that the offending students are unteachable. I can imagine the same argument being made about computer-illiterate English professors. But neither argument does much to strengthen the skills of the persons so labeled. Nor do I think we can circumvent the problem of plagiarism by insisting, as we often do, upon "originality" in the written work that our students submit to us.[6]

Certainly student plagiarists can be "taught." What they need is the same thing that computer illiterate professors need: many hours of patient instruction and practice in a skill in which they are deficient. Competence in the handling of secondary materials is not innate. Students are not endowed by their creator with unalienable expertise in the intricacies of paraphrase, quotation, and citation. They have not spent four years in graduate school refining their skills in documentation. And we should not be surprised to discover that most of them are as uncomfortable with the technique of documentation as many English professors are with the rudiments of computer programming—and for similar reasons.

Many of our students manifestly have *not* been offered adequate instruction and practice in the use of secondary materials before they enter our 1001 classes, and many of them (several hundred of my own students in past semesters, for example) do not receive adequate instruction and practice in the use of secondary materials in our own composition courses.

I urge instructors who think otherwise to test the validity of their assumptions by performing the following experiment in their composition classes:

1) Hand your students yet another copy of your plagiarism policy. Read it to them slowly.
2) Ask them to write a summary of the contents of a paragraph in a published essay.
3) After they have written their summaries, give them one last incentive to behave honorably. Remind them that the penalty for plagiarism is an automatic, irrevocable *F* for the course, and possible expulsion from the univer-

sity. Level with them. Tell them that they will also probably go to hell if they have plagiarized.

4) Then collect and read their summaries.

Read them and weep, for you will discover that many of your students have violated your "trust." And they have done so flagrantly—right after you *told* them that plagiarism was bad.

What shall we do about our plagiarists? Shall we burn them with the outraged rhetoric of our "shared virtue"? Or shall we *show* them how to use secondary materials responsibly, and give them frequent, carefully-monitored opportunities to practice those skills of paraphrase, quotation, and citation which are the first requisites of adult scholarship? If we choose the latter course, we will need first to sit down with our colleagues and try to reach some agreement about what does and does not constitute plagiarism and what penalties are and are not appropriate for the varying degrees of the offence we so commonly encounter in our students' writing.[7] Once we have reached some agreement on that very difficult question, we shall probably need to begin devoting a good many more hours of class time than we are accustomed to devoting to patient instruction and practice in the techniques of documentation. The consequences of our present practice should disturb us.

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NOTES

[1]The quoted phrase is from Ker's translation of the *Epigrams*, Bk. I, XXIX. The epithet *plagiario* is applied to Fidentinus in Bk. I, LII. The charge of theft is repeated in Bk. I, XXXVIII, LIII, and LXXII.

[2]Instructors weary of meting out the usual damages to their students' records and reputations may find their imaginations stimulated by the approach of David Bleich, who publishes and deconstructs a suspect text submitted to him by the unfortunate "Mr. P" (372-78). More likely to prove useful for most of us, however, is Alice Drum's suggestion that we "focus on the pedagogical implications of what [student plagiarists] have not done—completed an assignment" (242).

[3]The results of the survey represent the perceptions of 72% of Eastern Illinois University's 50 English staff members and 14% of the 1,495 students enrolled in English 1002 in Spring 1987. I administered the questionnaires in sessions of approximately 25 minutes during regularly-scheduled class times. Instructors were obliged to leave the classroom while the surveys were being administered. Students returned the completed questionnaires anonymously, and

with the assurance that "*your instructor will not see your responses, only the [final] tallies*" of the results.

I am endebted to my graduate assistant Tim Ipema for assisting me in coding and transcribing some of the data collected in the survey, to my colleague Bill McGown for his statistical analysis (using SPSS programs) of that data, and to Vic Bobb for providing the initial stimulus for undertaking this project.

[4]The department's plagiarism policy reads as follows: "Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—'The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's original work' (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of *F* for the course."

[5]Eight students (4%) offered *no* response to question 16. Seventeen students (8%) supplied *one* of the following pieces of documentation: quotation marks, Seligman, page number, or *Newsweek*. Eighteen students (9%) supplied *two* of the above pieces of documentation. Fifty students (24%) supplied *three* pieces of documentation as well as quotation marks if needed.

[6]The proposition that one can reduce the incidence of plagiarism by insisting that student writing be "original" and "creative" seems counter-intuitive, but it is nevertheless an empirical proposition which is capable in principle of being empirically investigated. In the absence of evidence supported by t-tests, chi-square tests, and Pearson product-moment correlations, however, I think one may properly remain skeptical.

[7]Eighteen students in my survey (9%) acknowledged that they themselves had plagiarized in 1001 and that their plagiarism had *not* been detected. Another 43 (21%) indicated that they "personally know someone whose plagiarism in ENG 1001 was *not* detected."

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