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**Academic Integrity and Student Plagiarism: a Question of Education, Not Ethics**

By Susan D. Blum

Student plagiarism is a problem on many college campuses. The two main approaches that institutions use to prevent it call for treating plagiarism either as morally wrong or as a crime. But neither avenue can be universally successful.

Institutions that approach the problem of plagiarism as a matter of morality often create honor codes. Such codes appeal to the desire of students to do the right thing. The codes assume that, with appropriate social pressure, they will. Students are asked to affirm that they will practice virtuous conduct as members of an academic community.

But while students may subscribe to the principles embodied in the notion of academic integrity, other principles can lead them to plagiarize or accept their classmates' infractions. For instance, friendship and friendliness — student solidarity — are virtues that often take precedence over adherence to an academic code of honor.

The second approach to preventing plagiarism — treating it as breaking a rule, or as a crime rather than a sin — emphasizes law and enforcement. Many colleges regularly revise regulations dealing with academic integrity, and call on faculty members and administrators to vigilantly enforce them. Colleges now also often rely on electronic plagiarism-prevention resources like Turnitin — whereby professors submit student papers to that Web site and receive an "originality report" demonstrating whether any part matches existing works in the database.

Although some students may embrace rules governing academic integrity, others are likely to see them as akin to other regulations or laws that they follow reluctantly or ignore. The laws regarding drinking, for instance, are routinely flouted at almost every college, and those regarding music downloading, a form of sharing intellectual property, are broadly disregarded.

Traditional efforts by administrators to prevent plagiarism fail for a number of reasons. For starters, students have only a vague sense of what is meant by the moral quality termed "academic integrity." Also, rules about intellectual property are in flux.

In addition, our notion of the originality of utterance as the product of the unique, isolated, authentic self had its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. Students today have been immersed in a culture that revels in trying on different personae and sharing freely. There is no inviolable connection between words and the self that produces them. Students are not wedded to the integrity of their own writing and do not necessarily assume that others are either.

Moreover, students are mostly focused on success and achievement, a bottom-line mentality that has helped them gain admittance to the highly selective institutions that are, in fact, trying to enforce the norms of academic citation. If students pursued education for its own sake — as do most professors — they would try to produce academic work that increases learning and to model their behavior on their professors'. But many students don't especially value the process of classroom learning — so, in fact, any process will do.

All of those trends signal that we need an alternative to the top-down approaches of plagiarism prevention represented by honor codes and rule enforcement. A third strategy treats academic integrity, especially the mandate to cite sources, as a set of skills to be learned. That notion has both philosophical and practical dimensions: Students must be persuaded of the value of citation — which is far from self-evident — and instructed over time in how to do it.

The nuances of citation are complicated, even though we summarize them by saying, "Give credit." Faculty members in various disciplines differ vastly in their expectations concerning citation and quotation. In engineering, for instance, quotation is not considered desirable, while in the humanities it is expected.

Cross-culturally, examples of literal transmission of words and phrases outnumber examples of each generation's starting afresh and creating something brand new. Young people, with their astonishing ability to memorize and mimic, are always expected to learn from the old, to defer to them, to memorize and chant and recite until the rhythms are embedded in their psyches and souls, until they are all socialized and can act properly, having embodied the wisdom of their predecessors. Countless studies demonstrate the value that most people place on oral transmission of tradition: Jewish and Christian Scriptures, folk tales throughout the world, and so on. Even written texts may rely mostly on collecting previously written fragments, as in incorporation of traditional texts in the Chinese classical histories.

Professors who teach writing and composition struggle to educate students about what citation means and how to avoid plagiarism. Unlike administrators and faculty members who merely announce the guideline "Cite your sources," writing teachers admit the paradoxical nature of drawing a firm line between what is original and what is borrowed. But even sensitive composition teachers can't simply deliver a comprehensive lesson about citation. Writing specialists, whether teachers of composition or analysts of literature, know that integrity is a slippery concept that cannot be conveyed in a single precept uttered once and for all.

Of course, writers also see practical and professional benefits to being quoted by name. Academics increasingly rely on "citation indexes" in various databases, including Google Scholar, to demonstrate their scholarly impact. Researchers depend on getting complete citation information so they can track down sources. But students, whose writing goes into a vacuum, usually unread by anyone but a single instructor, cannot be expected to understand the pragmatic reasons for which citations are demanded.

Indeed, the professorial insistence on citing sources often seems arbitrary and puzzling to students. Even a member of my senior research team, majoring in a field that requires a lot of writing, admitted to not understanding why she had to give a page number for a quotation from a journal article, since inclusive page numbers were given in the bibliography. She had accepted the basic guidelines about citation but could not quite grasp all the nuances of their application.

Students can recite the guideline for giving credit to anything that is not "common knowledge" — such as that there are 12 months in the year or that George Washington was the first American president. But what about technical terms defined in textbooks? What about the selection of certain texts to answer the question posed by the professor? Should the professor get credit for the question? For the syllabus?

Strict admonishment — "no copying" — is inadequate, whether as timeless morality or as universal practice. Students need to be taught the genre requirements of academic writing. They need to be shown how to do what we, their teachers, are asking of them. They need to learn how to cite, how to refer, how to use quotation marks for direct quotations as opposed to indirect ones.

Given the nuances of citation and their entanglement with issues of educational goals, originality, intertextuality, selfhood, and individuality, it is clear that students cannot simply be handed a brochure and be expected to get it. The message has to be broadcast over and over, by many sincere people who have given it much thought. Colleges can take the following steps:

* Organize conferences with faculty members and students. Put the issues out in public; spell them out so everyone knows what we are talking about. Allow students a voice in framing the issue.
* Admit that the rules are rather arbitrary. Intellectual property is not an eternal value.
* Demonstrate and admit the lack of agreement between students and faculty members or administrators.
* Raise the problem of intellectual property as a theoretical and historical issue.
* Separate intellectual, legal, and bureaucratic dimensions of academic citation.
* Compare students' quotation and intertextual practices with academic citation practices. Be explicit about the similarities and differences in citing and quoting, paraphrasing, and borrowing. Show there are different norms in different contexts — for instance, quoting from movies versus books in papers — all legitimate in their own way.
* Sort out the various sorts of plagiarism. Just as we distinguish between tasting a grape at the supermarket and stealing a car, we don't want to lump together all infractions of academic-citation norms. There are big differences among imperfectly mastering citation norms, incorporating a sentence, omitting quotation marks, and turning in someone else's paper.

Treating academic integrity as a constellation of skills, taught largely through the long apprenticeship of higher education, is the most promising approach for getting students to follow the rules of academic citation, and the one with the least likelihood of providing a shortcut. That means teaching students what academic integrity involves, why professors value it, and how exactly to carry it out.

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