Reflections on the Cultural Climate of Plagiarism

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IF FREQUENCY OF E-MAIL DISTRIBUTION is any indication, college professors and administrators indeed took notice of last fall's article in the *New York Times*, "A Campus Fad That's Being Copied: Internet Plagiarism" (Rimer 2003), on Rutgers Professor Donald L. McCabe's recent study of cheating in college and universities. I received four copies of the article: two from faculty colleagues on my campus, one from a campus administrator and another from a colleague at a university where I formerly worked. As a writing teacher, I receive many articles and announcements about cheating from colleagues, though never four of the same piece. The figures cited in the *Times* article are worthy of attention—38 percent of surveyed college students admitted to "cut and paste" plagiarism from the Internet during the year surveyed, while a slightly higher number (40 percent) that probably overlaps with the first group acknowledged plagiarizing from written sources.

These numbers demonstrate that cheating is a problem on college campuses and that the Internet is probably not making matters better, but plagiarism is certainly not a new phenomenon. Educators have attended and continue to attend to plagiarism in positive ways that help students better recognize, understand, and avoid it: we educate students on how to properly work with sources; teach them about standards of academic integrity; help them to understand academic culture; and explain the ramifications, both intellectual and ethical, of cheating. Some schools have developed pledges and honor codes to help cultivate an ethos of integrity on campus. As an extra measure, many instructors address the problem by designing projects which make plagiarizing difficult.

Yet incidents of plagiarism persist, and, as these numbers suggest, they are probably on the rise. This persistence, in spite of efforts to teach students what plagiarism is, why it is unethical, and how to avoid it, makes clear that the circumstances which lead a student to choose to plagiarize are considerably more complicated than the omnipresence of the Internet or simply not knowing any better. In fact, the high percentage of students who willingly admitted to "cut and paste" plagiarism for McCabe's survey is evidence enough that they do know what they are doing.

As director of a freshman writing program, I frequently deal with incidents of and issues related to plagiarism. I never cease to be surprised by the fact that many students who plagiarize are bright, well-intentioned students who, in fact, do know

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better. Most are students who possess moral convictions and ethical standards that would prevent them from stealing food, money, or clothing. Yet when it comes to the theft of another person's words or ideas, these same students appear to be guided by a different "moral compass." So writes David Callahan, in *The Cheating Culture* (2004, 14), as he examines the pervasiveness of cheating in American society that allows individuals to transgress those very convictions and standards that otherwise apply. Obviously, there is some sort of disconnect here, and if we are going to effectively address the problem of plagiarism on college campuses, we must understand the conditions that underlie this disconnect.

Cultural conditions

What are the circumstances that compel students to choose to go against their own moral and ethical standards and to plagiarize? This is no doubt a perplexing question, and I make no pretense of addressing it in all of its complexity here. McCabe's comments cited in the *Times* article, though, suggest one way that we might begin to think about it. He explains that "undergraduates say they need to cheat because of the intense competition to get into graduate school, and land the top jobs." The need that students express should not be taken lightly. Surprisingly, McCabe indicates that this need is *not* an effect of the expectations or requirements for courses being unreasonable; nor are the pressures created by workloads, deadlines and poor time management the primary issues. Instead, this need reflects an anxiety about the future, an anxiety reinforced by their experiencing higher education as professional preparation that is a highly competitive, high stakes endeavor.

It is not difficult to imagine some of the reasons for students' experiencing higher education this way. From a young age, both parents and the schools inculcate by a narrative that presents the conventional path to success—to living a good life—as paved with good grades, good SAT scores, and acceptance into a good college. All of these, it is assumed, lead ultimately to a good job. Historically, there has been some truth to this narrative, but when

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confronted with current economic uncertainties, it seems rather inadequate. Graduates now find themselves in intense competition for opportunities for the success myth that are more limited than they were at other times in the past.

The success narrative comes to college with students where it unintentionally continues to be supported in ways that we tend not to recognize. We continue to present the "top graduate school" and the "good job" (expressions which could stand to be unpacked) as the hallmarks of educational achievement, and we celebrate and distinguish those individuals who excel by these norms by providing them with honors and other forms of recognition.

We certainly want to acknowledge the achievements of our best and brightest students, but doing so in these ways suggests to all students that individual accomplishments evidenced by good grades are what is really important; top grades do provide the competitive edge. The effect of this critique can be especially problematic in a cultural climate that has become increasingly obsessed with competition and the accumulation of material wealth. In *The Cheating Culture* (2004), Callahan attributes this obsession to the rise of the market as the "dominant cultural force" in the latter part of the twentieth century, with the consequent effect of performance and profitability becoming the keys to success.

In this climate what counts most are numbers and results, and those who get results, those who make the grade, *regardless of how they go about doing it*, reap the benefits. As Callahan suggests, the fact that opportunities for graduates are becoming more limited; that the middle class in American society is shrinking; that the rewards for coming out on top seem astronomical (think for instance of CEO salaries), it is not surprising that, when faced with a choice between preserving one's integrity or doing what is unethical but may ensure some measure of success or security, many students will choose the latter.

Again, these are complex issues that demand greater attention than I have the space to give them here. My intention, though, is to consider that the conditions that lead students to choose to plagiarize might be located in a broad cultural climate that privileges an unhealthy

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competitiveness and the results that it garners as the means to the limited opportunities and material wealth by which success is measured. By thinking of the conditions that make plagiarism an option, we may begin to consider additional, and perhaps less obvious, measures for contending with its persistence.

Value of learning

We might, for instance, pay more attention to the way that we present writing to our students by showing them that we value the process of writing—which includes invention, drafting, collaboration, revising, and editing—and not simply the final product as what is essential to their learning. For students who see the objective of a college education as the attainment of top grades to provide the edge over others competing for the same limited opportunities, such an education can easily become less about learning and more about results. In this paradigm, writing tends to be viewed as a commodity whose value is measured exclusively in terms of the grade for which it is exchanged. It fails to acknowledge the essential functions that the activities involved with producing the document play in the learning process. We need to stress that writing doesn't simply document what they know on a topic; its processes enable comprehension of the topic. From a pedagogical perspective, the real crime of plagiarism is less that it is dishonest than that it precludes learning.

A logical place to begin the work of recasting the value of writing is in the freshman composition courses required for most college students. This effort would require that the instructors shift attention from creating projects that make plagiarism impossible, to designing those that reveal the ways writing contributes to learning; it requires providing opportunities to reflect on this dimension of writing that remains misunderstood by many students. Moreover, it necessarily needs to be consistently followed in other classes. To this end we might do a better job explaining why and how we require different types of writing in the assignments that we create for all of our courses, instead of simply listing how many points or what percentage of the final grade a paper is worth. Listing points or percentages to the exclusion of an explanation of how a project contributes to learning explicitly casts the text as commodity, its value only in the final product. Moreover, these efforts need to be extended by evaluation methods that take into account the process of production as well as the quality of the product.

Campus ethos

It seems important as well to continue finding ways to cultivate a campus ethos of integrity. Instituting honors codes and pledges of integrity have been effective towards this end. An earlier study by McCabe and his associates (2001), for instance, demonstrates that schools that had some form of code or pledge of integrity experienced significantly lower incidents of cheating than those without.

In addition to these efforts, it may be useful to reflect on the ways that our institutional and pedagogical practices continue to reinforce and reward aggressive competitiveness and an individualistic me-first climate, to the exclusion of recognizing those who have contributed to the integrity of a campus or local community. Now more than ever, it is important to develop ways to acknowledge those sorts of contributions.

Changing campus values may grow from and make possible conversations on campus about the nature of success and what it might mean to live well. This kind of conversation could help students to better see their education not simply as an obligatory credentialing

experience but as an opportunity to investigate and define the values that inform the life decisions they make and will be called upon to make beyond the campus.

Consequences of decisions

Finally, many of us are probably in need of dealing with incidents of plagiarism and enforcing policies concerning cheating more strictly. From my experience working with faculty members in both supervisory and consulting roles, I see that many are willing to treat a case of plagiarism as a learning experience, as an instance of a student misunderstanding the rules, and to provide the student with the opportunity to redo an assignment. Having done this myself, I understand that the impulse stems from a commitment to student success and to helping students learn. It is one thing, however, to make this sort of allowance in a freshman-level course when students are learning about matters of academic integrity; it is quite another thing to make this allowance for students beyond the freshman year.

If we are to assume that the standards of and methods for maintaining academic integrity are something that all students learn in their first year at college, then we undermine our own ethical and educational standards if we do not expect students to apply that knowledge in subsequent courses. How we deal with incidents of dishonesty is open to some discussion. Failing or dismissing a student or placing him or her on academic probation—the traditional stated consequence for cheating—may not be the most effective methods for dealing with the problem. If cheating is both an ethical transgression and evidence of a failure to learn, it harms the academic community as much as it does the individual. We may do well to name just how plagiarism compromises the integrity of a community, and to develop disciplinary methods that compel a student who cheats to contribute to building community in some constructive way.

Overall, these are difficult steps that don't necessarily target plagiarism directly. Perhaps they are most difficult because they ask us to examine the ways in which our basic and unquestioned pedagogical and institutional practices may be complicit in creating a climate of values that unwittingly supports plagiarism. At this juncture, however, it is important that we begin attending to some of the larger, difficult cultural issues that may be contributing to this problem. In my view, one of the most important things that a liberal education can provide students is the ability to see how the choices they make are situated in cultural contexts and to consider critically the far-reaching effects (rather than simply the individual effects) of choosing one course of action as opposed to another. These suggestions are intended to point in that direction.   □

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