

Confessions of an Academic Honesty Lady

by Judy Hunter (May 1997)

When I think about my role as the person who delivers the academic honesty lecture to new students each year, I always think of Dana Carvey's incarnation of Church Lady on the old TV show *Saturday Night Live*. I picture myself beginning my talk by saying "Do you think your tendency to plagiarize has anything to do with . . . [I purse my lips and narrow my eyes] . . . *the Devil?*"

This recurring image does not comfort me. In this essay, I'd like to examine the forces that complicate the view that plagiarism is evidence of a moral failing. I'd also like to tell you about ways in which the Tutorial Committee is considering changing the academic honesty lecture for next year and ask you for your suggestions about ways we can improve our joint efforts to teach students about the penalties for violating the academic honesty policy. Perhaps more important, I'd like to focus on our joint efforts to teach students about the purposes and ideals of academia.

From the beginning of my work on the lecture, I resisted the language we ordinarily use to deal with issues of academic honesty -- language based on a rigid system of ownership of words and ideas. As Rose asserts, the language in which we describe plagiarism is based on the idea that words are property, that words can be owned:

Metaphors of property and product are used to talk about the nature of language and thought. Words and ideas are "owned" and "borrowed" as though they were capital. Writers "give credit" to other writers. . . . "Credit," "credence," and "creed" - - property, authority, and belief- - are obviously closely bound together in the prevailing set of values. (37)

Academics, whose livelihood often depends on the publication record they "own," may have little difficulty accepting such assumptions, but the notion that words are property may seem less obvious to our entering students. As many recent writers point out, these assumptions are culturally based, and cultural ideas change over time. Before the eighteenth century, people tended to think of words and knowledge as communal property; only when technological advances like the printing press and mass media affected western cultures did people begin to believe that ideas and words can be owned (Rose, Howard, Pennycook, Lunsford and West).

Our popular culture offers repeated challenges to the notion that words can be owned by an individual. For example, society's reaction to public figures accused of plagiarism certainly does not reinforce the notion that borrowing words is a problem. Many respected individuals from many spheres have been accused of plagiarism: presidential candidates like Joseph Biden; deans of academic institutions like J. Joachim Maitre, formerly of Boston University; famous historians like Stephen B. Oates; novelists like John Gardner; public figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. In such cases, the accused either deny guilt or claim that everyone does what they did; supporters of the accused offer excuses ranging from justifiable literary license to understandable youthful rebellion to variable cultural norms.

In fact, the norms about borrowing that most of our students have encountered in their education before college certainly differ from those of much of the collegiate academic world (White). Copying, borrowing with only minimal citation -- these are allowed, if not encouraged, in many overcrowded public schools, where teachers deal routinely with 125 to 150 students each day. Fuzziness about who owns words is common in other areas of society as well. Books and articles by politicians are ghostwritten; scientists who are heads of labs are listed as authors of articles written by others; clerks routinely write some judges' opinions; famous journalists have some of their articles written by others (Posner). It's no wonder that students might underestimate the college community's strictness toward and solemnity about academic honesty.

The norms held by different cultures throughout the world posit different views about the ownership of words. Pennycook, who taught for years in China, points out that his Chinese students had memorized large chunks of text and were able to reproduce them word for word many years later. To students schooled in such a system, our Western concept that individuals can own ideas and words is difficult to fathom. The question remains, can we accuse Chinese students of plagiarizing when they reproduce, perhaps years later, something they had memorized? Do those words that have remained in a student's head for so many years really belong to the "author" any more, or are they some curious amalgam acted upon by both the author and the memorizer? At what point, if ever, can the student, the one in whose head the words have worked whatever magic words work in the brain, claim "ownership" ? Even within the academic community, the issues of "ownership" are complicated and unclear.

The post-structuralist questioning of the very concept of authorship calls into question the notion of ownership. If the author is dead, as some claim -- that is, if knowledge and ideas are not attributable to one agency embodied in a particular person -- then ideas cannot be owned by individuals. If we accept this reasoning, then the assumptions upon which we charge students with stealing the words or ideas of others may be misguided. Pennycook summarizes this position:

. . . challenges to the notion of the author and individual creativity, and [the] argument that meanings are in a sense in circulation, that language is constantly cycled and recycled, raise profound questions about how we consider the notion of textual borrowing or plagiarism. (211)

Pennycook is especially concerned with how these questions affect undergraduates learning to write. He sees an irony in the fact that Western academic tradition claims to value individual creation, but in reality relies heavily upon accumulated knowledge, the kinds of disciplinary knowledge embedded in the canon. The effect of this irony is most obvious for undergraduates,

(especially if they are writing in a second language) who, while constantly being told to be original and critical, and to write things in their "own words," are nevertheless only too aware that they are at the same time required to acquire a fixed canon of knowledge and a fixed canon of terminology to go with it. (213)

Even if we reject post-structuralist ideas about knowledge, we may still view creative thought more as an addition to a storehouse of knowledge than as a completely new entity. Howard reminds us of the aphorism, popular in the pre-modern era, that emphasizes not individual

inspiration but the accumulation of knowledge: "A dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant may see farther than the giant himself" (789). According to Howard, the premoderns saw language as communal and learning as a cooperative activity in which the most recent learner delights in and happily uses the accumulated wisdom of all those who have gone before. While we could argue that our system of citation, which continually alludes to the contribution of previous writers, acknowledges this indebtedness, we could also argue that, whether or not we cite, we are always dependent on and indebted to those who have gone previously.

The strict claim that words and ideas are owned by individuals is also challenged by new pedagogical practices, especially academia's recent emphasis on collaborative learning. As more professors encourage students to turn in group work and grade students on learning done collaboratively, our ideas about ownership of knowledge must change. Collaborative practice must affect our view that words and ideas are individual creations, owned by their creators (Bazerman, Rose).

Emerging technologies also affect how we view the creation, manipulation, and ownership of words and ideas. Just as the introduction of the printing press coincided with the acceptance of the idea that words can be owned, so the spread of the use of the Internet and other computer technologies is changing our notions of who owns language, or indeed of whether it can be owned. According to Howard, the very existence of hypertext indicates a move toward collective authorship. In hypertext, people write collaboratively and use non-linear connections; the product shows few indications of who said what. In addition, to a large extent, the readers rather than the writers control the way the message is read, since they can follow whichever links they choose; thus, it is clear that they contribute to making meaning from a text. As Howard says, hypertext creates a "collective, always unfinished text" (791). Lunsford and West agree, asserting that the Internet, among other innovations, must change the way we view the creation and ownership of knowledge; they suggest that what may become valued (and thus be subject to copyright) is not the knowledge itself, but the connections, additions, and comments that are added to that knowledge (402).

As we consider all these challenges to the ownership of words and ideas, we may understand better why students get confused at academia's attempts to draw clear lines between what is original and what is borrowed. After all, when we assign them a paper we are assigning them to do a sophisticated task. Students are asked to encounter texts: to summarize, paraphrase, respond to and question the words and ideas. When the students use the text in these ways, they may find the boundaries blurring between creating a unique response and appropriating the text in an illegitimate way. It is no wonder that some students, confused, unsophisticated, fearful, stray into forbidden zones.

Given the difficulty of this task, we in academia must accept our obligation to teach students how to use texts. The [honesty lecture](#) is one such attempt. But this teaching is complicated and requires more than just a simple lecture. Howard offers evidence of just how complicated this teaching is when she redefines what some may regard as evidence of plagiarism as a step toward understanding and using texts. She points out that students may have positive motivations for what she terms "patchwriting," which occurs when writers mix parts of sentence structures and wording from the original with inaccurate synonyms, sometimes with a few deletions or

additions. Students often believe that such writing is paraphrase, while many academics would define it as plagiarism. Recognizing the difficulty that inexperienced writers have in knowing how to paraphrase well, Howard suggests that students struggling to understand a text may begin by patchwriting but can be taught to move beyond that strategy; in rewriting under the guidance of their teachers, they can learn to paraphrase acceptably. Thus, she believes that plagiarism policies ought to be revised to recognize patchwriting as a "pedagogical opportunity, not a juridical problem" (788).

So what do all these considerations imply for my lecture and for our joint attempts to teach our diverse student audience about academic honesty? What we say, both in the lecture and in individual classes, must allay the fears of nervous and unsophisticated students who struggle to deal with complicated texts. We must warn off dishonest students who seek to get a grade they have not earned. We must reeducate international students who believe that education means memorization and regurgitation. We must appeal to skeptical students who reject the notion of ownership of words. And we must serve the needs of the institution, which must have some way of assessing whether students are capable of negotiating among others' words and ideas and their own.

I hope to appeal to these multiple audiences by focusing on what academics do, rather than on what students should not do. I want to help students understand how scholars take ideas, whether those ideas are "owned" or not, and comment on them, embroider them, respond to them, add to them. I want to emphasize that learning, exploring a subject, is a social process, one that involves dealing with others in the field and out of it, and an aesthetic process, one that involves appreciating the beauty of words and ideas. In a discussion about paraphrase that took place on the Writing Across the Curriculum listserv, Mary A. Janda emphasizes both the social and the aesthetic aspects when she uses the metaphor of a dance to describe what students learning to paraphrase must understand:

It's a little like inviting students to join in a dance, isn't it? We're all moving around in the discourses, each with a greater or lesser familiarity with the other dancers. We know where to put our hands and how to move our feet and how to stay out of the way and how to command the floor when we want to. But to teach newcomers is a different matter. . . .

I've found that the big leap students have to make is from thinking that they can simply partake of another person's thought without acknowledging that it is not theirs to realizing the power that they claim by distinguishing their own thinking from someone else's. I teach paraphrasing, but I hope for epiphany.

I'd like to think that the academic honesty lecture can help start our students on a path toward such an epiphany. I want us to teach them to participate gracefully in the dance academics perform with their colleagues in using words and ideas: to share ideas, to develop thoughts and strategies, to work away at an idea, to consider who said it, under what circumstances, and with what words. I want them to appreciate what it means to have an idea, an interpretation, a revision of their source. I would like for faculty members at Grinnell to emphasize the beautiful and social dance that scholars do, and then say to students, "This is what you need to practice doing too. And to do it well, you must cite your sources. Try to cite them correctly, but at least cite them somehow, and we'll talk about how you may cite them better." When students come to

understand that scholars consider and build on the work of others, and communicate that understanding to still others, then the academic community's assumptions about academic honesty will fall into place, will seem more natural, more intuitive. In sum, I want us all to make sure that we are teaching students about a very complicated but very important concept before we hold them accountable for violating rules that they may not understand.

Most students at Grinnell do learn to write without plagiarizing, probably from getting lots of practice, from looking at models, and from talking about writing and about learning. Let's continue to help them do this. I hope that, as I revise the academic honesty lecture, I will make it less scary and more positive. The Tutorial Committee has asked that next year's version involve the students more actively; it will consist of a 20- minute lecture and a 20- minute session of group work to be evaluated by the tutorial professor. Ideally, these two activities will build toward the individual [academic honesty exercise](#), which will also be revised and shortened for its next use.

As I work on revising this material, I welcome and appreciate your comments on the lecture or responses to this essay. I hope we can continue to talk to our students specifically about issues of academic honesty, and more widely about what academics do as they move about in their discourses and position themselves in relation to others: how the historians foxtrot and the mathematicians waltz and the sociologists tango. Only in this way, by emphasizing and demonstrating the moves and rhythm and steps we use in relation to the words and ideas of others, can we sincerely invite our students into the dance.

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