WHAT A TANGLED WEB: TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND THE KNOT OF PLAGIARISM IN THE POSTMODERN ACADEMY


Though semester's end is typically plagiarism season, the early fall of 2002 brought an unusually grim harvest. In the course of preparing for and writing this review, three cases of plagiarism crossed my desk. All three clearly constituted plagiarism by any traditional measure, though in truth they were as different from one another as the three students who did (or didn't do) the work. After considerable soul (and Internet) searching and hours of conversation with colleagues, they were differently resolved—in some measure because of the thoughtful discussions in the two books under review here. Collectively, these texts challenge the monolithic interpretations of plagiarism that would lump all acts of textual appropriation as transgressive and seek to understand the historic scope and modern problems that make defining and adjudicating plagiarism difficult. They also suggest that the rise of composition scholarship, the ascendance of postmodern theory, and the increasingly public anxiety about ethics in the University demand that we re-see our definitions, policies, and historical perspectives on plagiarism.

Rebecca Moore Howard's fine history of the subject successfully argues that patchwriting, or the too close appropriation of source material by

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a student writer, “has a legitimate and valuable place in literacy instruction” (xxii). Comprehensive and thoughtful, her book reviews the history of rhetoric to discover how the direct incorporation of an author’s words without explicit acknowledgement, what we call plagiarism, has slipped from its place as a recognized and valuable mode of classical and medieval scholarly discourse to that which is “immoral, transgressive—a threat to culture, the academy, and writing” (26). Her final recommendations for pedagogy and policy will challenge many readers to radically re-think their definitions of plagiarism and their process for teaching students to master academic writing.

By Howard’s definition, patchwriting is what one of my students had done. In her attempt to tackle the legal language and technical history of her subject, she patched together long passages of text with only minor syntactic and semantic changes. She had duly cited all of her sources both within and at the end of paragraphs, so there was clearly no intention to deceive. In fact, she was so anxious to correctly cite everything that she pointed out several concerns she had about correct documentation in the paper and even made pencil clarifications on the final copy before she handed it in. Further, she was articulate in her oral presentation, working largely without notes in her responses to her classmates’ questions about the topic, and so clearly she had worked hard to understand the research. Thus, it was with some surprise that I began to feel a familiar chill as I read the paper. This was too good, the words and style too polished. And when I checked all the sources she had so conscientiously provided, there it was. But what was it, exactly? Her intent hardly seemed criminal, and she had clearly worked hard on the paper and the research. I was hesitant to criminalize her actions at this point and thus reluctant to fail the paper.

Howard argues that intentionality is precisely what should determine how we understand this student’s process. In the introduction to her book, she makes what is perhaps a very controversial argument and certainly one that has important consequences for both policy and pedagogy:

I am prepared to take a further step and recommend that the category of plagiarism be redefined by educational institutions: that authorial intention become a component in determining what is and is not plagiarism, and that patchwriting qualify as plagiarism and thus a transgression only if the author’s intention is fraudulent. (xxii)

There is no question that this assertion will strike some (perhaps many) readers as unworkable. Making distinctions among fraud, ignorance, and laziness as the chief motivator for patchwriting is one thing. Believing that there is yet another motivator for patchwriting is another. Thus, she asserts that not only is patchwriting different from the fraudulent impulse that otherwise criminalizes plagiarism, but that

students’ patchwriting is often a move toward membership in a discourse community, a means of learning unfamiliar language and ideas. Far from indicating a lack of respect for a source text, their patchwriting is a gesture of reverence. The patchwriter recognizes the profundity of the source and strives to join the conversation in which the source participates. (7)

Section I, “Plagiarists: What a Mess!” overviews the current conversation as it is being carried out in recent scholarship, institutional policies, and handbooks on grammar and usage and finds the conversation fraught with paradox and hypocrisy at every turn. Howard is particularly troubled by “the criminalization . . . of writer-text collaboration” (44), which is part of her emerging and complex understanding of patchwriting. Section II, “Authors: How Did We Get into This Mess?” considers the history of rhetorical instruction as it intersects with discussions about the conflicting roles of mimesis and collaboration in writing. Howard’s exploration of the “standing on the shoulders of giants” (59) metaphor serves as the unifying theme by which she ties together historical discourse about the use of another’s ideas and words. She asserts that “[t]he ongoing, simultaneous competition of mimesis with originality and collaboration with autonomy suggests that in any age, representations of authorship are indeterminate, conflicted, and heterogeneous” (58), and her review succinctly demonstrates this to be true. Finally, Section III, “Collaborators: How Can We Get Out of this Mess?” offers models of contemporary and historical discourse communities that value writer-text collaboration and suggests pedagogy and policy that would allow “the full panoply of factors—text, writer, reader, and context—into the discussion” (164). Thus it was that I chose not to fail my student whose paper contained large chunks of patchwriting but instead took a teacherly stance by pointing out the problem passages. In the determination of her grade, I explained and adjudicated the problem as one of both style and documentation.

Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World, edited by Lise Buranen and Alice M. Roy, offers a breadth of voices on the subject that complements Howard’s in-depth review of patchwriting. Buranen and Roy’s intention is to show how “plagiarism speaks to us in many ways in many tongues, from many times and places” (xvii). Buranen and Roy have collected essays from scholars across the field of rhetoric and composition, including writing center constituencies, history of rhetoric scholars, and practitioners of collaborative pedagogy. The contributors offer
thoughtful responses to common scenarios and problems: What is the role of collaborative pedagogy in promoting or preventing plagiarism? Do writing center consultants cross an ethical boundary in their assistance to students? How do historical models of documentation inform our understanding of the boundaries on intellectual property? Readers will also be rewarded by perspectives from literary and legal studies, administrative case studies and models, and two fascinating essays on brand name use and the plagiaristic practices of literary “zines” in a section entitled “In the Marketplace.” At the conclusion of the collection, readers will find themselves vastly better informed about the landscape of plagiarism studies and likely with more questions than answers about whether there is a best response or best definition in all cases.

Collectively, the two books make several important arguments in our consideration of plagiarism in a postmodern culture. First, postmodern definitions of the subject as unstable and constituted entirely by socially constructed contexts or power relations—and thus without determinate agency—make it possible to suggest that at some level we’re all plagiarists of one sort or another. The business of tracking down and adjudicating plagiarists, then, invariably serves some other gatekeeping purpose, a kind of capitalistic sorting that preserves class and culture hierarchies. Howard argues that “even though plagiarism is represented as part of a natural, neutral, impartial, foundational textual ethic, the cultural work it accomplishes is anything but natural, neutral, impartial, or foundational” (14). Furthermore, notions of intellectual property, the ownership of ideas that make plagiarism possible are relatively recent inventions that underscore these material functions. Whether it be what Joan Livingston-Webber calls the “copyright megaholders” (Buranen and Roy 271) that persecute the “@nti-copyright” policies of GenX zine editors and writers or the property-laden metaphors that characterize the admonitions against plagiarism found in handbooks on documentation and usage, the distinctions drawn invariably have material consequences for the plagiarist and material gain for those in power. The concluding essays in Buranen and Roy’s text, with their grim look at the economic stakes in trademark language and copyright law, also suggest that capitalist interest in the proprietary author may triumph without, or perhaps despite, the subaltern discourse printed in zines.

This is not to say that a certain intolerance for fraud and deception shouldn’t be permitted, and neither book has much patience with cheaters. Ed White perhaps puts it most bluntly in the Buranen and Roy collection when he states, “But there is a blatant plagiarism that we cannot ignore because it subverts the very nature of education and reflects some aspects of what is worst in American society. Like date rape, fraternity drunkenness, and hate speech, it must be attended to institutionally, though most institutions prefer to pretend it is not going on” (206).

And here, quite obviously, was where another of my students stood. He had been noticeably disengaged from the second assignment in my creative non-fiction class, had not turned in any of the required process work, and when he handed in a paper on “Censorship and Music” it took less than ten minutes on an Internet search engine to turn up roughly three-quarters of his paper verbatim in three major sources—the URL for one of which he had carelessly provided. He received a zero on the paper I returned to him along with a copy of the sources as I had discovered them. Clearly the paper and the effort were fraudulent in intent. He appeared at my door a week later, looked me in the eye and asked, “So, is there any way I can pass English?” He bowed out gracefully when I replied that, no, sorry, mathematically a zero on the paper would sink him. Did he learn a lesson? Was the integrity of the institution preserved? Will he try this again? Perhaps the answer, paradoxically, to all of these questions is yes.

In the articulation of plagiarism within the academy, it seems different standards for students and faculty (or other professionals) apply when it comes to understanding how ideas or words may be “stolen.” On this point, the third section of Buranen and Roy’s text, titled “Literary and Theoretical Definitions,” considers the use of sources in other than classroom writing. Three outstanding articles in that section discuss historical texts, (“Literary Borrowing and Historical Compilation in Medieval China,” by Robert Andre LaFleur), the particular legacy of the Author in postmodern philosophy (“From Kant to Foucault: What Remains of the Author in Postmodernism,” by Gilbert Laroche), and the question of literary allusion and appropriation, particularly in the work of T. S. Eliot and Kathy Acker (“The Illusion of Modernist Allusion and the Politics of Postmodern Plagiarism,” by Kevin J. H. Dettmar). In her book, Howard explores this double standard by closely tracing the use of sources in professional prose. She demonstrates that “all of us patchwrite all of the time, but we usually cover the trail . . . When the trail is obvious, we call it plagiarism; when it is erased, we call it synthesis or even original writing” (7). Howard’s argument about the double standard is convincing, though recent headlines from The Chronicle of Higher Education suggest that the stakes have been raised for professional scholars as well. In addition to the scandals surrounding the work of Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin, consider the following: “Texas A & M Fires Professor On Charges That She Plagiariized Colleagues’ Work” or “Trinity International Dismisses Law Dean Over Plagiarism Charges” or “The Similarities of Two Presidents’ Papers.”
to deliver some kind of grace, punitively and emotionally. Ultimately, the
paper received a zero, which mathematically earned him a D- in the course. I
wondered how or if he would protest; I dreaded passing him in the halls. He
came to my office the first week of the new term not to protest, but to share
how he had lost faith in the school, essentially. He explained that he had never
been able to find a challenging peer group and thus was transferring at the end
of the spring term. We had a good conversation, though finally there was no
real explanation he could provide for his actions. He was retaking the course,
not wanting a D- to follow him to medical school, and if he puts forth nominal
effort, he will no doubt earn an A. Like his two colleagues, this young man,
though he hoped not to be noticed at all, in fact put himself into the spotlight.
They might have all wished, as in some ways I did, that the matter might be
ignored, that it would go away. But it won’t, and these two books demand that
we direct our attention to plagiarism with the integrity, complexity, and wisdom
that our students deserve.

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