

Kelli McBride "Cheaters Never Prosper or Learn" (Research Paper Sample)

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Cheaters Never Prosper or Learn

Humans have been cheating since Eve took that first bite of the apple. Shortly after Eve's afternoon snack, she faced the consequences of cheating. We see it in every culture, in every profession, at nearly every age. Humans are always on the lookout for a shortcut.

10 Sometimes, cheating doesn't seem so bad. If an average person gets caught cheating on taxes, then we don't usually vilify her. Instead, we say, "The IRS gets too much of our money anyway. You can't blame a girl for trying." If a popular personality gets caught cheating, then often the public forgives him or at least justifies his actions. Bill Clinton cheated many times, but his approval rating remained the highest of any president.

Of course, we have a low tolerance for other types of cheating. Sports figures who point
shave get little sympathy. Police Officers who bend the law for their own purposes are quickly
booted out when caught. Perhaps, though, our intolerance for cheating reaches its height in
academic areas. In school, we actually differentiate between two types of cheating. Academic
misconduct concerns cheating in which a student buys a test, looks on someone else's exam, or
20 any other area where the student's cheating harms herself only. Plagiarism is a special form of
cheating wherein the student steals another person's words, ideas, or work and passes it off as
his own. For many academics, no other offense is as great as plagiarism. However, most

students do not understand the seriousness of this act, nor do they realize the futility in cheating. For many reasons, plagiarism is not worth the effort it takes to cheat.

Plagiarism is a waste of time most obviously because the student never learns the skills at which he is cheating. We go to school to learn. Sure, we end up taking many courses that have nothing to do with our career plans and do not interest us. However, that's the price we pay for a liberal arts education. The theory of liberal arts is that of the renaissance man: a person who knows a little bit of everything. Education is about making us well-rounded individuals (Curry 47). That means Math majors get stuck in Art History classes, English majors end up in Statistical Analysis, and all majors must take at least six hours of writing classes. These classes witness the most attempts at plagiarism. However, what plagiarists often fail to realize is that those classes in freshman composition are only the first on a long list of classes that will require them to write. A national study conducted by Harvard University in the mid-80's asked colleges to estimate the amount of writing the average student did during a four-year Bachelor's degree. The study found that most college students, no matter what their degree, wrote more after taking freshman composition courses. Teachers assigned junior and senior level students, on average, three research papers ranging in length from six to twenty pages. Harder to quantify, but still significant, were the number of writing assignments such as book reviews, abstracts, proposals, and technical reports. Overall, the study made it clear that most writing takes place during the junior and senior years (Blackstone et al. 17-22).

The plagiarist, then, only hinders his college plans by not doing his own work. The ideal place to learn to write is in freshman writing classes, yet this is the place more people are likely to cheat ("Brave New World?" 15). What these students don't realize is that the English teacher

is usually the most understanding of all instructors who will grade their papers. Professors in other disciplines may know only grammar and punctuation rules, or they may adhere to strict ideas of organization and presentation. English teachers are usually more flexible because they understand the variety and difficulty of writing. Plus, most college English writing courses judge writing based on the process a student takes. Rarely is the entire grade for a paper assessed on the last draft. Instead, teachers look at how students put that final version together. In other classes, very little effort may go into judging a student's process. The bottom line is all that counts.

However, the plagiarist can only see the here and now. He either wants a better grade than he thinks he can get on his own, or she is too lazy to do her own work. For either reason the result is the same: the student does not learn an important college skill. Instead of taking advantage of class time, he doodles. Instead of writing and learning how to improve her skills, she waits till the last minute and copies something off the Internet. Eventually, though, somewhere in their college career, these students will need those writing skills.

One of the ironies of plagiarism is that it often takes more time to plan and carry off than simply writing the paper in the first place would have done. To cheat, and do so effectively, a student must take care that every writing he turns in maintains the same style. The careful plagiarist, then, will take another's paper and rewrite the entire thing using her own vocabulary and style. This can take almost three times longer than turning in her own work (Ship 299). Even plagiarists who don't bother rewriting a paper almost double their work time (300). If the assignment is a research paper that has several graded components, then the student must often manufacture these to match the final product. The time spent doing this

could have been used to research and write an original paper. Given the fact that many instructors set aside in-class writing and research time, these cheaters spend classes trying to hide the fact that they aren't working. This can increase stress and anxiety. Overall, plagiarism results in more work than it saves.

Finally, the consequences of plagiarism are too severe to risk. "Most schools impose severe penalties for plagiarism; you could receive a failing grade for the paper or for the entire course. Some schools expel students for honor code violations" (Batteiger 147). The problem is that most students think they will not get caught. This fake sense of security is based on several factors. One, most humans tend to believe bad things happen to other people. So we speed down the highway believing that because we haven't been caught then we won't be caught. Two, this sense of infallibility lies in a complete misunderstanding of writing. Beginning writers often fail to realize how individualized their styles are. Most teachers can catch a plagiarist based solely on vocabulary usage and sentence structure. My personal best time for catching a plagiarist is halfway through the first sentence of the essay. I was right; he copied it from his government textbook. The following are excerpts that illustrate how style and tone can unmask a cheater. They are from one paper turned in by a student [note: both of these excerpts are exactly as the student wrote them]:

Excerpt 1: Capital punishment in punishment by death for committing a crime.

Since the early 1800's most executions have resulted from convictions for murder. The death penalty has also been imposed for such serious crimes as armed robbery, Kidnapping, rap and treason. In the early 1900's, 36 states of the United States had laws that permitted the death penalty. These laws were greatly influenced by a 1972 decision

of the Supreme Court of the United States, which had banned the death penalty as it
90 was then imposed, the court ruled that the imposition and carrying out of the death
penalty” was cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the 8th and 14th Amendment to
the constitution.

Excerpt 2: It is a curiosity of modern life that we find ourselves being lectured on
morality by cold-blooded killers. Mr. Willis previously had been convicted of aggravated
rape, aggravated kidnapping, and the murders of a Louisiana deputy and a man from
Missouri. Mr. Shaw committed another murder a week before the two for which he
was executed, and admitted mutilating the body of the 14-year-old-girl he killed. I can’t
help wondering what prompted these murderers to speak out against killing as they
entered the death-house door. Did their newfound reverence for life stem from the
100 realization that they were about to lose their own?

These passages are obviously not by the same person. In fact, the second excerpt is
from Ed Koch’s essay, “Death and Justice” (876). Even to untrained eyes, the difference would
probably pop out, but to a teacher the change in vocabulary, syntax, and phrasing as well as the
many errors in grammar and structure in the first excerpt make it clear that the student has
stolen the second excerpt from somewhere else. This alone is enough to fail the paper, though
the teacher must take the time to clearly note the differences in style. Fortunately, most
plagiarists make it easier for a teacher. They steal from well-known sources, articles and essays
in the textbook for the class, and the Internet. Mr. Cox, an English teacher at Seminole State
College, still laughs at the memory of a student who copied Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I
110 Have a Dream” speech and tried to pass it off as his own. What made it even more ludicrous is

that Cox assigned this reading for class discussion, so the student knew he was familiar with the text (Cox). Barring acts of excessive stupidity as in the previous example, the plagiarist simply doesn't understand the individuality of her own voice. She has failed before even handing in the plagiarized paper. Now it is up to the teacher to decide her fate. If she's lucky, she'll only fail the paper and jeopardize her course grade. If she's unlucky, she'll be expelled from school and a permanent record of her cheating will follow her.

Plagiarism is not a light offense. It carries with it severe penalties. These penalties far outweigh any fleeting benefit one might get from cheating. Sooner or later, a student will need to know how to write. This skill is one of the most common and important from class to class and job to job (Shipp 301). Cheating only delays the inevitable. And if a student cheats because he doesn't want to spend time writing, then chances are he will spend more effort in avoidance strategies than he would spend doing his own work. That is perhaps the ultimate irony in the whole mess.

Anyone contemplating plagiarism should remember the cliché: "What goes around, comes around." Somewhere down the road, it could be days or it could be years, that student will need those skills. The difference is that she won't be able to fall back on someone else's words or ideas without courting legal action. Considering the consequences, why would anyone want to cheat? You can bet if Eve had been able to look into the future, she would have passed up that apple for a nectarine.

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