

Ethical Issues in Graduate Writing

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THE ISSUE OF ACADEMIC integrity and student writing has taken on a particular urgency in the age of the Internet and Turnitin.com. The stakes are highest in graduate education, where the emphasis is on the production of individual and original research. Graduate-level writing demands that students negotiate a variety of unfamiliar genres, learn new disciplinary vocabularies and stylistic conventions, and establish complex relations with previously published disciplinary scholarship. In the most fundamental way, scholarship is writing, and the process of becoming an advanced-level academic writer is simultaneously an acculturation into the discourse community of the academy and part of a student's professional development. However, writing instruction at the graduate level is not often formalized in any sort of structured and directed way, and many graduate students must build and rely upon a support network of instructors, colleagues, writing tutors, and editors to help them meet these challenges successfully. In this essay I draw on the contemporary scholarship of writing specialists dealing with plagiarism, academic integrity, and graduate student writing to identify and examine issues of academic integrity that arise when graduate students get help with their writing. This chapter focuses on the importance of establishing and maintaining ethical relationships among teachers, students, and writing consultants in order to develop the atmosphere of collegiality necessary to teaching the practices of academic integrity to future scholars and teachers. First, I attempt to give readers a feel for the contemporary climate in academia by presenting tales from the field: real-life stories that reflect current trends in thinking about writing and academic integrity. I then go on to show how these trends are codified in the language of plagiarism policy and argue that these trends have resulted in the establishment of an unhealthy—perhaps even harmful—ethics of graduate student writing. I argue that these

ethics can be traced back to myths about writing, originality, and collaboration that have gained currency in academia, and I conclude by suggesting that teachers, students, and administrators alike are responsible for creating an alternative, more positive ethics of graduate writing.

“Plagiarism” and Academic Integrity

Graduate research and scholarship are typically presented in writing: in seminar papers, research reports, conference presentations, and published articles. While graduate-level research presents the opportunity for academic dishonesty, instances of such offenses as those listed on the Syracuse University Academic Integrity Office website under sections IIB and IID of the university Policy¹ are likely to be rare. Most often, the terms “cheating” and “academic dishonesty” are used when talking about plagiarism. Indeed, it is the potential for plagiarism that is greatest, since plagiarism is first and foremost an issue that arises from presenting research in written form, and writing is the primary, if not the only, medium in which research is presented. There are indeed some unscrupulous researchers out there, willing to falsify or manipulate data or break confidentiality and steal the work of others in order to pursue their own selfish goals. Unfortunately, the doors to research and scholarship that have been opened by the digital, computerized world of the Internet and word processing also lead to increased opportunities for the appropriation of others’ words and ideas, to the current jeremiad against cheating, and to the development of plagiarism detection software. More often than not, it is not appropriation itself that constitutes a violation of academic integrity; rather, it is unauthorized or unacceptable appropriation that leads to accusations of academic dishonesty.

The Syracuse University Office of Academic Integrity has adopted language from the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ position statement on plagiarism (“Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: WPA Statement on Best Policies”) to define plagiarism as follows: “In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2003). Graduate student writing presents particular concerns to those who genuinely wish to promote an atmosphere of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility among the graduate community and across the entire campus. At this advanced level of study, teachers tend to expect that graduate students are familiar with and well versed in the writing tasks they are asked to complete. However, many teachers do not have the time, the disposition, or the teaching tools required to offer the kind of writing instruction that many graduate students need to be successful

scholars. Thus graduate students are challenged to seek out and find the writing support they need.

Tales from the Field

Because many graduate students seek help with their writing, and because they are expected to produce original work, the problem of engaging in “unauthorized cooperation in completing assignments” (Syracuse University, 2005) takes on special urgency for faculty, students, and administrators, even more so given the current rhetoric of “crisis” that prevails in contemporary public debates about academic integrity. I offer two brief anecdotes from my own experience as someone who regularly works with graduate student writers in illustration of two particular aspects of this “crisis.”

Anecdote #1. In August of 2006, during the orientation for new graduate students at Syracuse University, I approached a representative of the Graduate School and asked if I could leave promotional flyers for the newly created Graduate Editing Center (GEC). I was asked a question or two about the GEC and then the conversation turned very serious, as I was advised to see to it that the GEC would run every piece of student writing it received through some kind of plagiarism detection software or service. I was informed that graduate students (in the sciences, especially) were cheating at epidemic levels, and that the GEC should be the “front line” in the fight against academic dishonesty. In short, regardless of the intentions of the GEC’s creators and editors, this stakeholder in graduate student education felt that GEC editors should place policing, rather than teaching, at the top of their priority list.

Anecdote #2. Several months later, near the end of the Fall 2006 semester, a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant in geography adamantly and somewhat resentfully demanded to know why the instructors of the university’s writing courses had not done something to take care of the plagiarism problem. This TA was frustrated by the dishonest behavior of his students and at a loss regarding what action ought to be taken in response. In the mind of this teaching assistant, the task at hand was to teach students the content of the course. Issues related to writing, such as plagiarism, were somehow not related to content and were, therefore, the responsibility of somebody else.

Brief as they are, these anecdotes highlight a number of remarkable perceptions about the “crisis” of academic integrity: 1) issues of academic integrity and plagiarism are frequently blurred together, so that in everyday terms they become one and the same thing; 2) graduate student cheating is an epidemic; 3) forensic technology should be employed to combat these offenders and bring them to justice; 4) teachers might not be adequately prepared to handle cases of suspected academic dishonesty; and, most significant, 5) the

responsibility for addressing issues of academic integrity and the prevention of plagiarism resides solely with writing instructors and consultants.

A Police State?

The current state of affairs illustrated by these examples is, at best, unhealthy and, at worst, damaging to efforts to establish a culture of academic integrity. However, we should not be surprised, since much of the language found in academic integrity statements and policies reinforces the notion that we are in a state of moral crisis. The definition of academic integrity included in the invitation to contribute to the present volume reads as follows: “Duke University’s Center for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity as ‘a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.’” The experts at Duke² suggest that it will require some sort of heroic and noble effort to act honestly, responsibly, and fairly and to give and receive trust and respect in the current “adverse” climate where cheating is the norm.

The information publicly available on the Syracuse University Office of Academic Integrity website is similar. While “educational strategies” are listed among the procedures for preventing behavior that might be construed as dishonest, a closer look reveals that these strategies have not been developed or implemented to nearly the same extent as the procedures and policies for policing and punishing suspected dishonesty. And Syracuse University is not alone; most such statements of policy and procedure imply a discipline-and-punish model grounded in a commitment to uncovering and dealing with dishonest behavior that “interferes with moral and intellectual development, and poisons the atmosphere of open and trusting intellectual discourse” (Syracuse University, 2005).

As a result of the overemphasis on detecting, policing, and adjudicating, the call for a commitment to laudable values such as the one quoted above from the Duke University Center for Academic Integrity becomes more a call to join the police force than an attempt to raise consciousness about issues of academic integrity and to establish ethical, collegial relationships between teachers and students.

Myths About Writing, Originality, and Collaboration

As graduate student writers and teachers, how do we navigate the potentially dangerous waters that lie between “unauthorized” and “authorized” cooperation? Questions about what constitutes “authorized” and “unauthorized” cooperation in graduate-level writing arise from unrealistic and outdated notions

about the “individuality” and “originality” of researched writing and about writing in general. For example, consider the following:

1. If a graduate student is working on an article for publication or a dissertation chapter, and receives directions from a professional writing consultant or from a roommate on how to better organize an argument or craft a more persuasive presentation of data, is that student stepping over the line?
2. If a graduate student submits a paper to an editor or peer reviewer so that his or her written English more closely approaches Edited American English (EAE), is that student stepping over the line?

One unrealistic and outdated notion underlying these questions is: writing=thinking. Often, this assumption materializes during assessment: faulty writing=faulty thinking. As the historic body of literature on human thought and the growing body of literature on the complexities of writing and writing instruction have shown, we are far from understanding the nature of either enterprise—let alone the relationship between the two. The fear is that if someone shows us how to present our argument better, then it just may be that someone else has done not only our writing for us, but has also done our thinking for us and has thereby rendered the knowledge/product “unoriginal.” However, those of us who have struggled to find the best way to communicate what we know to others (in other words, all of us)

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understand that writing is an act of communication that aims at getting a *representation* of what we know into words on paper, and often times we miss the mark the first time around. A poorly organized text is not necessarily a window onto a poorly organized brain. By the same token, a revised draft that better presents an author’s ideas does not prove that, somehow, the author has miraculously become “a better thinker.” When we think about the relationship between writing, revision, and collaboration with a colleague or instructor, it is important to remember that working collaboratively to construct a better representation of a graduate student’s knowledge does not amount to tampering

with that student's data, interpretations, or conclusions, or with how that student situates his or her work in relation to other scholars in the field. It may simply mean that the writing has improved.

Another myth that gives rise to concerns about "unauthorized cooperation" takes the demand for originality in research a step further: writing is a solitary act. Our cultural imagination is filled with images of the lone, struggling, misunderstood artist burning the midnight oil and waiting for inspiration from the muse to make it possible for just the right words to be written on the page. Further underlying this myth is the American tradition of "rugged individuality," the modern day version of which is "do it yourself!" Thus, as graduate student researchers, we must somehow find unclaimed territory on which to stake an intellectual claim and then mine that claim with our own bare hands if we expect to reap the rewards.

Of course, researchers will never be able to find this unclaimed territory without the exploration and mapping that has been done by previous researchers. After all, how does one discover a gap in the research without first coming upon a body of established work? As researchers and writers, we work, as Rebecca Moore Howard (1999) would say, "in the shadow of giants." We build on what is already there; we work alongside the already existing research to situate our own work in relation to what has come before. Moreover, there is not a single word of published research that does not come under the knife of the editor's blue pencil. Nobody believes that Einstein's editors tainted the originality of his work, but everyone is glad they made his research easier to read. And if Albert shared his work in progress with a friend who helped him better match his verb forms with the subjects of his sentences, no one would consider that writing to be someone else's. A good editor, mentor, or reviewer provides help and advice, but does not do the writer's work for him or her.

Whose Responsibility?

Contemporary research in writing assessment explodes the myth that quality of thinking and originality of work can be determined in a transparent way through assessment of a written product, and it provides a framework for a complex understanding of writing. As Roberta Camp reminds us,

Writing [is] a rich, multifaceted, meaning-making activity that occurs over time and in a social context, an activity that varies with purpose, situation, and audience and is improved by reflection on the written product and on the strategies used to create it. This understanding ... is not well served by our traditional [assessment] formats (1996, 135).

If writing is a social activity, something done in relation with others, and if writing is improved through processes of revisiting, revising, and reflection, then who decides which others we are authorized to cooperate with, and who decides what kinds of cooperation are acceptable?

The responsibility for making these determinations lies with teachers, as is clearly indicated in the Syracuse University Academic Integrity Office's educational strategies, which state that Syracuse University instructors (professors, instructors, lecturers, and teaching assistants alike) will:

- f. Implement pedagogical strategies for creating an environment that promotes academic honesty and have access to resources for necessary assistance
- g. Direct students to resources for assistance in ensuring academic honesty in their writing and researching. (Syracuse University, 2005)

Teachers must remember that their teaching is much more than the delivery of course content. Especially for graduate students, who are tomorrow's professors-in-training, the educational experience is a process of acculturation into the conventions of knowledge production within and outside the academy. Much of this acculturation work happens during the writing process, beginning with a student's introduction to research practices and continuing through such writing assignments as summary and synthesis of required readings, seminar papers, qualifying examinations, dissertation proposals, and theses and dissertations. Each of these written products comes with a set of conventions that frame the relationship between the writer, her knowledge, and disciplinary knowledge, all of which ultimately shape the written product itself. Producing written products, then, is practically equivalent with "scholarship." Quite often, though, the assumptions about knowledge, disciplinarity, and written representation that underlie the conventions of graduate-level texts are left unexamined—or unmentioned. In the current "crisis" atmosphere, teachers could easily be more likely to expend more

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effort searching for textual “crimes” than educating themselves and their students.

Donald McCabe and Gary Pavela make a compelling argument for teacher responsibility in promoting academic integrity. They write, “faculty members have primary responsibility for designing the educational environment and experience.... [I]t is important that faculty model, as well as clarify, desired standards” (2004, 14). What does this mean in terms of graduate student writing? First and foremost, it means that we must recognize that it is not only the responsibility of writing teachers and professional writing consultants to do the kind of acculturation work I have described. What the so-called crisis in academic integrity tells us is that writing is central to academic work and it is, therefore, the responsibility of the entire academic and administrative community on campus to establish, maintain, and support courses and programs that meet the challenges faced by grad students as they develop into professionals. Faculty can, if given to proper administrative support (such as professional development opportunities), increase their efforts to incorporate writing—and discussions of writing—into their courses in order to: 1) familiarize students with acceptable writing and research practices; 2) familiarize themselves with their students’ writing; and 3) clearly establish the connections between the generic conventions and constraints of research writing and relevant disciplinary expectations and practices.

If, as John Thomas Farrell argues, writing consultants (and, likewise, teachers) are responsible for establishing and maintaining “ethical adult, professional relationships” (1996, 1) with graduate students, then teachers must offer instruction in graduate student writing *as colleagues* in whom graduate students can place their trust to acculturate them properly. Of course, graduate students are often teachers themselves, and thus they find themselves in a particular situation: they must learn from their professors and advisors at the same time they are in the position to model behaviors for their undergraduate students. Thus, what is ultimately at stake is the production of new generations of scholars whose research practices are firmly grounded in the principles of academic integrity, who are fully equipped with the knowledge and teaching skills required to train the next generation and understand the weight of the responsibility to do so.

As teachers, before we think “academic dishonesty” we should be thinking “teaching opportunity.” At the bottom of any effort to foster an atmosphere of academic integrity is the establishment of an ethical relationship between teacher and student. More so than in undergraduate education, the opportunity to forge collegial relationships with graduate students abounds for faculty, since at the graduate level teachers and students typically work closely together. Rather than being constantly on the lookout for the naughty child with a hand in the

cookie jar, teachers, writing consultants, students, and administrators can work together to ensure that students receive the education they need in order to succeed as ethically minded scholars and teachers. To pass that responsibility on to Turnitin.com or writing instructors alone is to abdicate the most basic responsibility we have in creating a community of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility: to be excellent teachers, mentors, and colleagues who care more about learning than policing.

Notes

1. “Fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation of data, results, sources for papers or reports; in clinical practice, as in reporting experiments, measurements, statistical analyses, tests, or other studies never performed; manipulating or altering data or other manifestations of research to achieve a desired result; selective reporting, including the deliberate suppression of conflicting or unwanted data.... Expropriation or abuse of ideas and preliminary data obtained during the process of editorial or peer review of work submitted to journals, or in proposals for funding by agency panels or by internal University committees” (Syracuse University, 2005).

2. The Center for Academic Integrity, formerly at Duke University’s Kenan Institute for Ethics, has moved during the publication of this volume. The Center is now hosted by the Rutland Institute for Ethics at Clemson University. The Center can still be found online at the same address: <http://www.academicintegrity.org>.

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