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ADVICE

Cheating Inadvertently

Even faculty members disagree on when paraphrasing becomes plagiarism. How can we expect students to know?



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By James M. Lang | MAY 04, 2015

Last month I met with a group of students at another college to hear their views about cheating in higher education. These were some of the best students on the campus, smart leaders who had volunteered to sit with an outside speaker and talk about academic integrity and why it mattered. When the subject turned to

plagiarism, our conversation took an especially interesting turn.

A student raised her hand and said she worried constantly about being accused of cheating during her first year of college. She was always nervous that one of her papers, all of which she had written honestly and with every effort to cite her sources, would contain some inadvertent plagiarism. Every student in the room began nodding in agreement. Others noted how confused they still were about what types of information counted as common knowledge, and what types required a citation. And they all expressed the same fear at the prospect of cheating without knowing it.

Their comments reminded me of a fascinating 2001 article that illustrated nicely the challenge we face in helping students do their work with integrity. The article, published in the journal *Ethics & Behavior*, detailed the results of three experiments designed to test whether faculty members had shared understandings of what differentiated plagiarism from paraphrasing. The author, Miguel Roig, notes in his introduction that we have no

shared formal definition for how many consecutive words copied directly from an original source constitute a breach of academic integrity. His experiments were designed to test whether we share even an informal consensus on that front.

In the first experiment Roig showed a group of professors an original passage and then a variety of paraphrases. He asked them to evaluate whether the paraphrases were acceptable or crossed the border into plagiarism. Unsurprisingly, for anyone who has studied this issue, he found lots of disagreement. "Professors' conceptions of plagiarism and correct paraphrasing," he wrote, "can range widely from a very lax set of criteria for determining plagiarism to criteria that can be even more rigorous than those prescribed by traditional definitions. ... Even within groups of academic specialties, respondents appeared to have a fairly wide range of criteria for plagiarism."

But something even more interesting happened in the next two experiments. In the second one, Roig asked a group of professors to paraphrase a complex (but very brief) academic passage. A third of the faculty members lifted sequences of at least five words or more directly from the original passage. Academe doesn't have hard-and-fast criteria for what constitutes plagiarism, but I suspect most of us would throw that label on writing that contains phrases of five words or more taken directly, and without attribution, from a source.

Surprised by those results, Roig ran one final experiment. He asked a group of psychology professors to paraphrase one of two possible passages: a complex, technical one, or a more comprehensible passage on a general topic. A quarter of the professors who had been asked to paraphrase the complex passage once again relied on directly copied word sequences of at least five words. By contrast, only 3 percent of the professors who paraphrased the simpler passage lifted phrases of five words or more.

It's hard to argue with the author's conclusion: The results "suggest the existence of wide differences in paraphrasing practices of college professors, even within members of a single discipline." But that clear conclusion — which you can easily affirm by gathering a group of faculty members and seeing if they agree on any given borderline paraphrase as an instance of "plagiarism" — strikes me as understating an even more important point about the problem of academic dishonesty in higher education today.

We have a wide range of behaviors that all of us, both faculty and students, would define as cheating. Buying a term paper from someone and turning it in as your own work; looking at your neighbor's paper while you are taking an exam; lying to your teacher about an illness or family emergency to gain extra time on an assignment — all of those constitute obvious breaches of academic integrity.

Most college students, however, are not cheating in such obvious, egregious ways. As documented by the authors of *Cheating in School: What We Know and What We Can Do*, the nature of cheating changes as students move from high school to college. Most high-school cheating takes the form of copying homework and cheating on exams. Most college cheating, by contrast, takes the form of plagiarism. That trend continues into graduate school, where plagiarism remains, by far, the most common form of academic dishonesty.

Some instances of plagiarism announce themselves boldly — like full paragraphs cut and pasted without attribution, or entire papers ripped in toto from Internet sources. Again, I have little doubt that most professors would agree that those extreme cases are plagiarism. Likewise, most students would know they were violating academic-integrity standards by such behaviors.

But I can tell you — based on my own experiences teaching writing and literature for the past 20 years, as well as from my research into academic dishonesty in higher education — that most cases of plagiarism do not take such obvious forms. They occur in far messier and more subtle ways: three copied sentences in a paragraph of 10; scattered phrases throughout the literature review section of the essay; one great sentence plopped among a bunch of duds.

The business of responding to covert types of plagiarism can get exceedingly muddy. Students claim ignorance of the rules of paraphrase and citation; they call in parents to their defense and sometimes even lawyer up.

No doubt some students who claim ignorance of the rules are lying. But not all of them. And experiments like Miguel Roig's, as well as those comments I heard from some excellent students, should help us recognize this. When faculty members were asked to

paraphrase a complex piece of writing outside of their area of expertise, 25 to 30 percent of them engaged in what many of us would consider plagiarism.

Now consider the position of your students: Whenever you are asking them to engage in outside research and work with sources, especially in first- and second-year courses, they are almost always attempting to summarize or paraphrase complex pieces of writing outside of their familiar areas of knowledge.

Composition theorists tell us that before we can attempt to think and write in a new discipline, we have to absorb and internalize its vocabulary and syntax. That takes time and sustained effort. Until we have achieved mastery of that discourse, we borrow heavily from the thoughts and words of others.

We should not wonder, then, that so many students engage in what Rebecca Moore Howard, a professor of writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University, has called "patchwriting," or borrowing large sentence structures and vocabularies from a source and only swapping out the occasional word or phrase with language of their own. Patchwriting may constitute a necessary step for learners attempting to write and think in any new field. The faculty in Roig's experiments were engaging in a form of patchwriting, relying too heavily on the language of the source while attempting to summarize the original in their own words.

And yet in spite of experiments like Roig's, and the arguments of Howard and other authorship theorists, we continue to throw the blanket term of "plagiarism" over any instance of copying that is called to our attention — whole paragraphs, sentences, and even strings of five or four or three words. Frustrated with efforts to distinguish between deliberately deceptive students and genuinely confused ones, many institutions have given up on the effort, and simply call it all plagiarism but mitigate the punishment if the student lacked the intent to deceive.

Whatever the fairness of that approach, we should not let the debate over labels and punishment divert us from the deepest point here: Academic integrity is a subject matter that must be *learned*.

In fact, academic integrity represents an incredibly complex subject to master: It encompasses knowledge (What are the rules of academic integrity? How do they apply in this context?), skills (How do I summarize or paraphrase this passage without plagiarizing? How do I credit the work of others when I am collaborating with peers or using sources?), and values (Why does academic integrity matter? Why should I care about it?).

Considering academic integrity in that light leads us to the most difficult question of all: How should we be teaching it?

As far as I can tell, with some notable exceptions, we are mostly teaching it by finger-wagging and punishment. We tell students at orientation: Don't cheat. Here is a list of the rules. If you break them, here are the punishments. Good luck, and see you at graduation. Compounding the problem is the fact that many of us are working with teenagers, who don't take particularly well to finger-wagging.

All of the teaching and programming in the world, of course, won't help those students who come to college for the wrong reasons, and who will cheat no matter what we do. And we don't need extensive educational initiatives focused upon warning students not to use smartphones during exams or copy from each other's papers. But as Roig's experiments demonstrate, we do need to help students (and each other) better understand the boundaries of academic integrity in some of our most fundamental skill areas.

How? Some institutions might want to include integrity as part of their core values, and build programs around it. Others might choose to follow a more academic path, requiring core-course sequences that teach students how to work effectively with sources. Some might choose to establish or strengthen dedicated offices that can instill the values of academic integrity on the campus through multiple means.

But whatever separate paths we ultimately may follow, all of us have to begin in the same place by talking about it. We don't want students quaking in fear over the possibility that they will cheat without knowing it. We have to clarify for ourselves what integrity means,

and then help our students learn and internalize it. Don't just give stern lectures and warnings. Start a conversation about plagiarism and cheating, and make sure both faculty and students are sitting at the table.

James M. Lang is on sabbatical this year as director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and a professor of English at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. His most recent book is Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

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By David Gooblar

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