

CUTTING AND PASTING: PLAGIARISM AT UNIVERSITY

A friend who teaches at a well-known American university told me recently that plagiarism was turning him into a cop. He begins the semester collecting evidence, in the form of an in-class essay that gives him a sense of how well students think and write. He looks back at the samples later when students turn in papers that feature their own, less-than-perfect prose alongside expertly written passages taken directly from the Web.

“I have to assume that in every class, someone will do it,” he said. “I have to tell them that plagiarism is a failing offence that could lead to probation or expulsion for them.”

Not everyone who gets caught knows enough about what they did to be remorseful. Recently, for example, a student who plagiarized a sizable chunk of a paper essentially told my friend that what he'd done was no big deal. Beyond that, the student said, he would be ashamed to go home to the family with an F. This represents a shift away from the view of education as the process of intellectual engagement through which we learn to think critically and toward the view of education as mere training. In training, you are trying to find the right answer at any cost, not trying to improve your mind.

Nationally, discussions about plagiarism tend to focus on questions of ethics. But as David Pritchard, a physics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told me recently: “The big sleeping dog here is not the moral issue. The problem is that kids don't learn if they don't do the work.”

Prof. Pritchard and his colleagues illustrated the point in a study of cheating behaviour by M.I.T. students who used an online system to complete homework. The students who were found to have copied the most answers from others started out with the same math and physics skills as their harder-working classmates. But by skipping the actual work in homework, they fell behind in understanding and became significantly more likely to fail.

This has ominous implications for a world in which even junior high school students cut and paste from the Internet instead of producing their own writing. When many young people think of writing, they don't think of fashioning original sentences into a sustained thought. They think of making something like a collage of found passages and ideas from the Internet.

This habit of mind is already pervasive in the culture and will be difficult to roll back. But parents, teachers and policy makers need to understand that this is not just a matter of personal style or generational expression. It's a question of whether we can preserve the methods through which education at its best teaches people to think critically and originally.

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