

# The Responsible PLAGIARIST

## UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS WHO MISUSE SOURCES



*When students turn in work without properly documenting their sources,  
teachers may conclude that they are outright dishonest,  
horribly careless, or wholly unprepared for college-level work.  
But are there other ways of understanding how students use—and misuse—sources?*

BY ABIGAIL LIPSON AND SHEILA M. REINDL

IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY, there may be no higher crime or baser act than plagiarism. The word *plagiarist* comes from the Latin word for “kidnapper”—to plagiarize is to steal someone’s brain-child. Most universities address the issue of academic integrity by providing students with thorough orientations, required writing courses, and clearly articulated honor codes. Indeed, there is a virtually uniform understanding among college students that plagiarism is wrong. Nevertheless, each year students are brought before their institutions’ disciplinary boards on charges that they have misused sources in their schoolwork. We have to wonder, *What were they thinking?*

Universities tend to rely on three explanations for academic conduct violations:

1. *Criminal plagiarism* describes the actions of students who knowingly and intentionally claim others' work as their own. Most universities handle incidents of criminal plagiarism on a case-by-case basis, taking care both to preserve the academic standards of the institution and to address the (often dire) circumstances of the student. A student found responsible for criminal plagiarism typically earns a failing grade, a notation on his or her record, and perhaps a required leave or expulsion.

2. *Sloppy scholarship* describes the actions of students who know the rules for proper citation and don't intend to deceive but nevertheless engage in scholarship of inexcusable carelessness (for example, when citations are unintentionally "lost" in a cut-and-paste or note-making process). The work of these students may look like criminal plagiarism, but they have committed a negligent act of omission rather than an intentional act of commission. Universities tend to treat sloppy scholarship as a serious breach of academic responsibility, despite the lack of criminal intent.

3. *Ignorance of the rules* is considered a weak explanation given the pains taken to ensure students' awareness of the importance and mechanisms of proper citation. Occasionally, though, it becomes clear that a student really is at a loss regarding the basic conventions of source use, perhaps because of poor precollege preparation or widely divergent cultural assumptions about the nature of knowledge or the role of a student. In such instances, students are generally still held accountable for their inappropriate use of sources while their knowledge gaps and cultural adjustments are addressed with remedial instruction or counseling.

In most cases, criminal plagiarism, sloppy scholarship, or ignorance of the rules provides an entirely satisfactory explanation for a student's conduct. Yet there remain students for whom these standard explanations just don't seem to suffice. We hear from these students that their intentions were straightforward and honest: they did not engage in criminal plagiarism. They were fully alert to the basic rules of citation: they did not act

out of ignorance. And they were being careful and deliberate: they were not being sloppy. These students claim, in fact, that as they did their work they were conducting themselves in a most responsible manner.

And we believe them. We believe that their actions made sense to them at the time—not good sense, but their own internal coherent sense. They were taking their academic responsibilities very seriously. It seems that the question to ask about these students is not, "Were they behaving responsibly?" but rather, "To *what* were they trying to be responsible?"

## MODELS OF RESPONSIBILITY

TO UNDERSTAND students' private logic, we must listen closely to their descriptions of how they went about their work. Following are outlines of three models of responsibility that stand out especially clearly in our students' self-descriptions. Each model embodies assumptions that students hold about their proper role in the educational process. Each implies a set of responsibilities that students are doing their best to honor. And each results in the unintentional yet sometimes egregious misuse of sources.

**The Responsible Apprentice.** Sometimes students cast themselves in the role of Responsible Apprentice. Their job is to model their products after those of the masters, so they learn the canon, "lip-synch" the voices of their teachers, and use their readings to reproduce as professional-looking a product as they can. They figure that someday they may produce original work of their own, but for now their task is merely to mimic expert examples. One could easily imagine Responsible Apprentices forgetting to sign their names to their essays. They feel no need to sign work that is not their own creation. The notion of academic learning as a form of apprenticeship has been explored by a number of scholars, including Allan Collins, John Brown, and Susan Newman in their work on the craft of teaching.

Responsible Apprentices are particularly susceptible to appropriating language, sans citation, in their written work. They feel that this is an entirely legitimate aspect of their job. So when they are accused of *misusing* sources, they feel tricked: "Wait a minute! I was being responsible! The teacher knows full well where my material came from! All I did was try to do the assignment!"

**The Responsible Truth Seeker.** Sometimes we hear in our students' voices a joy in searching for the truth and a delight in finding it; they have cast themselves in the noble role of Truth Seeker. In going about their studies, Responsible Truth Seekers are smitten by a particular idea. It rings so true! It is so compellingly

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# Proper documentation traces a family tree of intellectual kinship, in which we place our own ideas and text in context.

right! Responsible Truth Seekers adopt other scholars' material with the certainty that they are simply accepting the Truth—not Author X's truth, which they must attribute to Author X, but Truth itself.

Responsible Truth Seekers are likely to misuse sources in a slightly different way than Responsible Apprentices do. They are more likely to appropriate a whole argument or an entire line of reasoning. They freely use ideas from their reading in their writing, without citation. They assume that even when particular phrases need to be properly cited, the Truth to which the words refer doesn't belong to anybody—it is simply true.

When Responsible Truth Seekers find themselves accused of misusing sources, they are likely to react with dismay and disillusionment. They think, "Why should Author X's name be attached to this idea? Author X is just doing the same thing I'm doing—recognizing the Truth and embracing it for what it is." To the Responsible Truth Seeker, quibbling over who is cited as the author of the Truth is irrelevant to the student's primary responsibility: to be passionate and unflagging in the search for Truth itself.

**The Responsible Tax Preparer.** Sometimes students document a text as though it is a good-faith effort to prepare a tax return. In the role of Responsible Tax Preparer, students are trying to be fair: to credit others with what is rightfully theirs and themselves with what is rightfully their own. They do not claim to be professionals, merely well-meaning laypersons trying to follow the authorities' very complicated code. They get frustrated when there isn't a definitive rule for every possible circumstance, or when different authorities offer inconsistent advice on how to handle the very same citation. They have no basis on which to make judgment calls—they are guided only by their sense of responsibility to dutiful rule-following.

Responsible Tax Preparers' myopic focus on the rules leaves them in danger of *miscitation*, for example, by carefully citing a primary source for material actually found in a secondary source. Their rule-boundness can also result in *overcitation*—not a code violation but nevertheless a poor use of sources. When faced with what feel like risky judgments, Responsible Tax Prepar-

ers decide, "When in doubt, footnote!"

When Responsible Tax Preparers find themselves accused of misusing sources, they are likely to feel profoundly unappreciated. "Can't you see I was faithfully following the rules? The rules aren't always so clear, you know! I had, like, thirty footnotes in there—how much more responsible could I have been?!" To be accused of ignorance or neglect or dishonesty, given their extraordinary diligence, feels deeply unjust.

The students' responses to these accusations make some sense. They are all trying to be responsible to some value that they think the academic community holds. In fact, the academic community does share their values, to a degree. A willingness to apprentice oneself to the work of masters, a deep engagement in the quest for truth, a diligent effort to comply with the conventions of text preparation—all of these are indeed important values.

So let's grant that the students we have described here are not being entirely irresponsible, nor responsible to entirely unworthy aims. We can still conclude that they are misusing sources. These "responsible" plagiarists have failed to be responsible to a core value that the academic community holds even more dear.

## THE COMMUNITY OF THE MIND

THE RESPONSIBILITY that these students have failed to meet is the scholar's responsibility to a *set of relationships or connections* between the scholar's own ideas and the ideas of others. As scholars, we have a responsibility to our sources (to acknowledge our indebtedness to them), to our readers (to let them know what our sources were and how they informed us), and to ourselves (to declare our own contributions). Proper documentation traces a family tree of intellectual kinship, in which we place our own ideas and text in *context*. When students misuse sources, they violate not merely a set of rules but a set of relationships.

Richard Marius, a past director of Harvard's writing program, put it this way:

It is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual

dependence, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others; we give ideas to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to recognize our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, and definition, and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together [p. 12].

A scholar's primary responsibility is to this community of the mind to which every one of us belongs—whether student or professor, believer or heretic, expert or novice.

This notion that we all belong to one community of the mind is heartwarming, but problematic. What community? Does a modern-day Brazilian engineering professor belong to the same community of the mind as a Zhou dynasty Chinese poet? Sometimes it's hard enough to imagine that two faculty members in the same department of the same North American university belong to one community of mind, when they subscribe to different journals, attend different conferences, and use different theoretical frameworks and languages.

## A Case of Plagiarism ... Or Not?

THE VERY DAY this article was submitted to *About Campus*, a colleague passed me a handout from a recent teaching conference. "You'll like this, it sounds so much like you!" she said. The handout was a book excerpt and it began: "Derived from the Latin word for kidnapping, *plagiarism* is the theft of someone else's 'brainchild' . . ." Hmm, I thought, it certainly *does* sound like us: "The word plagiarist comes from the Latin word for 'kidnapper'—to plagiarize is to steal someone's brainchild." A glance through the handout revealed at least two additional instances of similarities between the excerpt and our manuscript.

My first reaction was horror. Could Sheila and I have unintentionally plagiarized from this author? But no, a call to Sheila established that neither she nor I recognized the excerpt or author. We noted that the excerpt was published in 2001, while drafts of our own manuscript go back to 1990. So we were quickly reassured that we had not unintentionally plagiarized.

My next reaction was a different horror. After having freely shared drafts of our manuscript with dozens of colleagues all over the country, had our generosity been betrayed? A Web search revealed that the author of the excerpt was Keith Hjortshoj, an entirely reputable senior scholar and director of a writing program at Cornell University. Perhaps he had encountered our manuscript somewhere years

ago and been subtly influenced by it, including our words and ideas in his piece without realizing that they weren't his own.

My third reaction was laughter at the wonderful irony of it. How rich that our article on plagiarism, of all things, might have been plagiarized! And what on Earth should we do about it?

Thus began several days of fascinating conversations. To start, Sheila and I took a closer look at the Hjortshoj excerpt and our original manuscript (a much-edited version of which appears here). Only the first idea, the plagiarism-kidnapping-brainchild link, came close to a word-for-word similarity. As we discussed the matter, however, Sheila and I recalled that she had developed this link for a class handout long before we wrote our first draft of the article, and sometime later had been surprised to see the same link made by Lance Morrow in a *Time* article. So, if Morrow and Reindl had independently made the link, why not Hjortshoj as well?

The two remaining similarities were less clear cut. Hjortshoj writes about "lazy citation" to characterize a student's "accidental" plagiarism, while we write about "sloppy scholarship" to characterize a student who commits "unintentional" plagiarism. The third similarity is the use of a particular analogy in the context of what Hjortshoj calls "loss of voice" and we call "voicelessness." Certainly these are similarities, but are they plagiarism?

Sheila and I concluded that we had probably encountered a case of great minds thinking alike rather than a case of plagiarism. To test this impression, we tapped the judgment of three colleagues at American University—one in student affairs, one in academic affairs, and one on the faculty. We pre-

In actuality, we each belong to many neighboring and nested communities of the mind. On a fairly local level, present-day North American academia is a community defined by some shared values and conventions regarding scholarly conduct. Even more locally, an academic discipline or an academic institution constitutes a community of the mind. On the most global level, the community of the mind consists of the constantly evolving network of relationships among all scholars, across time and place. The human activities of reading and writing, and listening and speaking, continue to hum along, even as the players change and despite sometimes impassable gulfs between languages, ideolo-

gies, eras, and cultures. As scholars, our academic integrity depends on honoring our intellectual interconnectedness on all levels, whether reckoning with the nitty-gritty of citation formats or orienting our intellectual constructions in their particular cultural and historical context.

The word *integrity* is particularly apt here because of its two equally important meanings. It refers in one sense to personal trustworthiness, good character, moral uprightness. It refers to individual scholars' professional conduct, the soundness of their scholarship, their intellectual honesty. Responsible scholars speak truthfully, fairly represent the work of fellow scholars, and claim

sented each of them with both pieces. Their responses were quite consistent with ours and with one another's, as exemplified by John Hyman, the director of our College Writing Program, who turned out to be the very person who had passed out the Hjortshoj piece at the teaching conference.

Hyman immediately found the similarity between the two pieces "troubling," particularly the close correspondence between the opening sentences. I asked what he would do if either paper had been submitted by a student in a class in which the other paper had been assigned. He reported that he would certainly have considered the possibility of plagiarism, initiated a teacher-student conference, and minimally required a rewrite with proper citations. All three colleagues, however, confirmed our sense that the similarities between these two pieces, produced by scholars in the same field who were unfamiliar with one another's work, should *not* be construed as plagiarism.

Sheila and I were still left with some very interesting questions. As scholars, how do we recognize instances of simultaneous discovery (albeit on a more modest scale than Leibnitz and Newton or Wallace and Darwin)? As colleagues, what is an appropriate response? Why would we respond differently depending on whether the possible plagiarist was a student or colleague? How could we use our experience with this paper as an opportunity for exploration of these issues?

It was time to contact Hjortshoj directly and present to him the similarities in our two pieces. Although we were motivated to make this call in a spirit of genuine curiosity and openness to discussion, we were not at all sure how he might *receive* such a call.

As it turned out, Hjortshoj's initial reactions echoed our own: a gasp at the possibility that plagiarism may have taken place, followed by a chuckle at the potential irony of the situation. We then engaged in a fruitless search for any hint of a shared history or past connection, resulting in our conclusion that we were indeed mutually ignorant of one another's work. An exchange of e-mails and letters followed. Hjortshoj was entirely gracious and open to exploring the specifics of the similarities in our work. Indeed, Hjortshoj reported to us that he had recently made a presentation to a group of colleagues following which a colleague identified one of the presented ideas as the colleague's own, only to find that Hjortshoj was able to produce a handout describing the idea dated years before the colleague and Hjortshoj had ever met. Hjortshoj wholeheartedly supported the decision to share our story with *About Campus*.

Some readers may yet believe that Reindl and I are either very sly or hopelessly naïve—that the evidence indicates that *someone* plagiarized *someone*. But we three authors are in agreement. To the extent that our work echoes one another's, it is because in our work can be heard echoes of the world around us. We are resonating to the same events, the same realities in our environment, rather than to one another's words or observations. This happens frequently among scholars immersed in the same field, and our experience with this paper is a reminder of how confusing it can be to sort out multiple echoes of uncertain origination. It is a reminder also to recognize how much more challenging this task is for our students, who are new to a field and untried as scholars.

—ABIGAIL LIPSON

their own work, and only their own work, as theirs.

The second meaning of the word *integrity* refers to a wholeness, an entirety. We can apply this meaning to the enterprise of human inquiry itself, the collective process and progress of human understanding. This process has its own intactness, its own enduring and continuing life. It is sustained and defined by its members-of-the-moment, but its existence predates the individual scholar and will continue afterward. The integrity of human inquiry in this broad and collective sense refers to the complex interconnectedness of all scholarship.

Integrity on both levels is represented in the efforts of a responsible scholar to document a text in such a way as to ensure the readers' ability to evaluate the scholar's work independently. Readers can reanalyze the writer's sources, see the larger body of data from which the writer selected material, and find in the original sources confirming or discrepant statements. By inviting readers to join in a mutual intellectual discourse, the writer helps preserve and promote the continuity of the conversation in the community of the mind.

Every scholar is, of course, both a reader and a writer. There is a wonderful recursiveness and simultaneity at work here as the human species constructs a collective if multiplistic conversation. The spirit of this conversation springs from the twin desires to learn and to create—to find inspiration in others and to make our own contributions. In practice, there is no choice between these priorities. Both the intellectual effort of the individual and the intellectual evolution of the community rely on the interplay between the two. This is how human knowledge, on the personal and the collective levels, is preserved and advanced: in the intricate dance between what we believe we already know and what we dare to speculate.

## VOICELESSNESS

EVERYONE who has ideas, reactions, beliefs, and musings—in short, everyone—belongs by definition to the community of the mind in its broadest sense. One need not apply for membership and one cannot be thrown out. Every scholar, reader, and student stands *somewhere* in relationship to the texts being read or the words being heard and has *some* response—whether inspiration or outrage, interest or boredom, agreement or disagreement, confusion or conversion. This response is the scholar's voice, the scholar's contribution to the larger conversation.

Some of the students who get into trouble for misusing sources clearly do not experience themselves as members of the community of the mind. It is not simply that they consider themselves to be novice thinkers, or

fear that their thinking is different or inadequate. Rather, they do not consider themselves to be thinkers at all; they feel they know only what they are told by others.

Because they experience themselves as voiceless, at least in the domain of their academic work, the voices of these students are missing from the papers they write. As Pat Hoy, at the time a writing teacher at Harvard University, remarked to one of us, it's not just that these students don't know how to *use* a source; it's that they don't know they *are* sources. This may explain in part why some students who have been thoroughly taught the conventions of source use have not learned them. They cannot make clear the relationship between their own ideas and the ideas of others because in their experience they do not have their own ideas, and therefore there is no relationship. They misappropriate their sources' ideas or words because, being voiceless themselves, they default to a master, a truth, or a (poorly understood) rule in performing what they see as their scholarly responsibilities.

One way we can understand the voicelessness of our students is in terms of their intellectual development. Many university educators are familiar with William G. Perry's longitudinal research with Harvard undergraduates, which demonstrated that students' assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the locus of authority change as they develop intellectually during the college years. Initially, students tend to see knowledge as discrete and indisputable facts and to see authorities as the possessors of those facts. As they develop, they come to regard knowledge as contextually determined and to regard themselves as constructors and authors of knowledge. Their focus as learners shifts from an effort to amass information to an effort to make meaning. Students in the midst of this developmental process, who have not yet come to regard themselves as makers of meaning, don't experience their own voices as voices of authority.

Another way to understand students' voicelessness is as a function of context and power. For all of us there are some contexts in which we feel confident of our voice and empowered to speak and other contexts in which we feel unsure, unsafe, or unwelcome, and in effect silenced. The less at home we feel in a given context—that is, the more foreign we feel—the more likely it is that we will experience intellectual voicelessness. Of course, *what* is foreign to *whom* is a matter of perspective.

The culture of North American academia can feel foreign to students in various ways. Students who come from a context of origin that does not place a premium on intellectual activity may be unpracticed in declaring their views and opinions on intellectual matters. Stu-



dents from a culture of origin that values community participation over individual expression may regard such declarations as arrogant or inappropriate. Students might feel that their own culturally based ideas or viewpoints will be discounted or dismissed by the dominant culture. Students whose home culture regards intellectual

material as publicly held (belonging to everyone or no one) may be disoriented in an academic community that regards such material as privately owned (and thus requiring attribution). Students might also feel foreign in a linguistic sense, whether the foreign tongue is English, the language of academic discourse in general,

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

### ***1. Emphasize the spirit as well as the letter of the law.***

Teach students to ask spirit-oriented questions about their use of sources (for example, Can my readers tell which ideas belong to whom? Am I clear about how I have used others' ideas in service to my own inquiry?) rather than rule-oriented questions (such as, Are my citations in the right format? Do I have enough footnotes?).

Help novice writers learn how to specify their sources clearly; for example, have students read one another's papers and respond sentence by sentence only to the question, Whose thoughts or words are these and why do I think so?

### ***2. Make explicit any assumptions about the various roles that students play as learners and scholars; serve as a guide and informant regarding the culture of scholarship.***

Help students identify the problematic assumptions they may hold about using sources. Explicitly introduce the concept of academic integrity and the notion that to use sources properly one must also recognize oneself as a source.

Show students both *by* and *with* examples what responsible documentation means. Review examples of proper and improper attribution, quotation choices, paraphrases, and judgment calls.

Be alert to the ways in which an assignment may elicit a particular metaphoric approach (for example, an essay assignment based on limited sources may elicit the Truth Seeker approach, or an assignment that calls for recitation of canon may elicit a Responsible Apprentice approach).

### ***3. Acknowledge the complexity of the task of documentation.***

Let students know how challenging it is to represent others' work fairly in the context of their own.

Summarizing and paraphrasing require translating another's language into one's own with minimal distortion of meaning; even the perfect gem of a quotation must be precisely set into one's own text. These basics are important skills, learned and developed through practice.

Introduce students to the different conventions employed in different fields and to the personal judgment exercised in every field. While there may be simple answers to hypothetical documentation questions, and uniform agreement about a few documentation decisions, in practice documentation is a complex task.

Illustrate for students the ways in which all writers struggle with such questions as *What is common knowledge? How do I know what is "enough" documentation? If a classmate or colleague and I have a generative discussion, to whom does our shared conversation belong?* Discuss your own real-world documentation dilemmas with your students.

### ***4. Treat students as the sources they are; demonstrate that the academic community includes them and values their contributions.***

Ask students questions that will help them find words for their unvoiced thoughts: What implicit thinking guided their selection of a quotation? What in those words moved them, or inspired them, or bothered them?

Help students identify instances of their own sense-making. When they point out a problematic assumption, reframe an issue, make an analogy, or note an oversight or counterexample, we need to point this out to them. By doing so we acknowledge their natural efforts at authority, help them recognize their own voices, and teach them how to identify various thinking tools and techniques.

Let students know that their sense-making contributes to our own. When we learn something new from our students, we need to tell them, so they can know that their voice is effective. When we help students experience their voice as having power, we help them recognize their role in the community of the mind.

or the jargon of a particular field. Imitation and parroting are essential to learning a new language, but these very activities can leave student writers vulnerable to overrelying on and misappropriating others' voices.

The experience of voicelessness and foreignness can leave students vulnerable to the intense desperation that contributes to sloppy scholarship or criminal plagiarism. Because difficult coursework is even more difficult when it is in a foreign language or context, students adjusting to such circumstances may feel especially overwhelmed and fearful of failing, and thus be at risk for panic and poor judgment regarding source use. Fear and panic are heightened if a student's personal or familial expectations make the prospect of academic failure—or anything short of perfection—intolerable, such as for students who feel trapped in the familial role of trailblazer, redeemer, or shining hope.

## TEACHING FOR AUTHORITY AND AUTHORSHIP

**M**OST POLICY and instruction regarding the use of sources focuses primarily on the legalities of making correct citations and the penalties for failing to do so. In the process, students learn a hidden lesson: the proper use of sources is a matter of avoiding plagiarism (and therefore punishment), which is in turn a matter of complying with specific rules of citation.

When this is the primary lesson we teach our students, we almost guarantee that they will fail to behave as responsible members of the community of the mind. Even if they learn and try to comply with every rule we teach them, they will not necessarily recognize, value, or honor their responsibility to the integrity of human inquiry. They will have learned nothing about their own authority as thinkers and writers and about their own interests in the shared conversation that defines the community of the mind.

For students to behave as truly responsible members of the community of the mind, they need to experience *themselves* as members of that community. They need to know that that community includes them and values their participation. They need to recognize themselves as contributing thinkers, as makers of meaning. They need to understand that what they violate when they plagiarize is not a rule but a relationship. Only then can they appropriately use others' thinking in the service of, not instead of, their own thinking, and appropriately honor the relationships between their own

work and the work of others. Recalling the words of Pat Hoy, we must teach our students not merely how to *use* sources but how to *be* sources.

Every time a scholar puts pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard, that scholar has to do the difficult work of documentation. We as teachers shouldn't misrepresent this work as a matter of simply avoiding plagiarism. We must teach our students the hows and whys of expressing their own voices, tracing their intellectual kinships, and honoring their intellectual debts. (See "What Can We Do?", p. 13.)

We can appreciate the attitude of Martin Price, who in the preface to his book *To the Palace of Wisdom* acknowledges the complexity and ambiguity inherent in documentation. He notes, "I have tried to specify particular sources from which I have drawn. I regret the omissions I have most certainly made, and I would ask in turn the charitable recognition that not all resemblances need represent indebtedness" (p. viii). A sampling of our office bookshelves reveals that many authors, both popular and academic, preface their work with similar statements—not to belittle the importance of proper documentation or to excuse themselves from their responsibilities, but rather to affirm their commitment to the community of the mind while openly acknowledging the difficulties of the task of thorough documentation. We can ask no more and no less of our students.

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