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Coming to Terms with Contradictions:  
Online Materials, Plagiarism,  
and the Writing Center

_Sibylle Gruber_

Some Introductory Thoughts

Writing centers, in the most general terms, provide tutoring to help students develop and organize writing assignments. Certainly, a writing center also encompasses other roles and responsibilities. Students mostly see it as a “safe place,” a positive, supportive, and collaborative environment where tutors encourage and work with students on a one-on-one basis (see also Murphy; Harris; Fitzgerald). Most writing centers also make sure that tutors don’t judge student work and don’t put a grade on the paper. While policies differ from center to center, students, in most cases, are also promised that their visits are confidential, and that generally instructors do not have access to the information collected in the writing center.

However, from time to time, writing centers become immersed in conflicts between students and instructors. For instance, instructors call in and want to know whether a student visited the writing center, or they ask students to bring a signed form that acknowledges their visit. Students sometimes assume that their visits and the consultations assure them an A or at least a B, and they come back enraged if the paper that they worked on in the writing center does not get the expected high grade. These issues can be irritating to students, tutors, instructors, and the writing center administrator but usually do not pose insurmountable problems. They can often be solved by establishing writing center policies to create an equal playing field for all involved. Writing centers, however, also “have complex, often conflicting responsibilities to groups of people and administrative units that extend far beyond the walls of the center itself” (Pemberton 15). Because of these responsibilities, then, specific policies
might not always provide a clear solution to a controversial issue.

This article examines a serious dilemma involving a student’s blatant attempt at plagiarism of an online text. By analyzing the texts generated through an exchange between a writing center staff member and the student’s instructor, a number of concerns emerge concerning conflicting roles of the writing center in upholding itself as a safe place for students and/or as a place that takes it upon itself to uphold academic integrity and honesty. This essay doesn’t offer a simple answer, but it raises a number of concerns that can become the starting point for tutor training workshops and for further explorations of what we have to consider when making decisions about confidentiality and academic integrity in the writing center.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is taking the writings, ideas, or thoughts of others and passing them off as one’s own original work. Plagiarism is not restricted to published material: if you submit an old paper written by a roommate, if you buy a paper from a “service,” or even if you base a paper on a lecture you heard in a course without acknowledging that lecture, you are still guilty of plagiarism. Plagiarism is not restricted to long quotations; if you quote a sentence or even a memorable phrase without acknowledging it, you are plagiarizing. You can plagiarize without using the exact words of the original author; if you paraphrase a passage without crediting it, you are plagiarizing. (Millward 14)

Syllabi, course guides, and handbooks provide students with information on academic integrity and the problems associated with plagiarism. Still some students’ dishonesty might go undetected, while others might be confronted by the teacher, fail a class, or expelled from the academic institution. The penalty for the offense, in most cases, is left to the discretion of the instructor.

Often, when asked about their plagiarism, students either deny the accusations or claim to be unaware of any offense they committed. They don’t consider themselves guilty of violating university regulations, but instead accuse the instructor of being too narrow-minded and intolerant of their creative efforts. For them, it is incomprehensible that not acknowledging a source can lead to such severe actions as expulsion from the university.

This incomprehension, of course, is strengthened by the diverse
and often contradictory reactions of teachers themselves. Some see plagiarism as a result of student inexperience with academic discourse conventions. Others are less forgiving of students’ “forgetfulness” and want to see students held accountable for their actions. Brenda Bear, in an e-mail exchange about plagiarism on NCTE-Talk, for example, points out:

I don’t “gleefully” punish my students for wrongdoing, but my role as teacher is to teach more than British literature or sentence structure. I would be failing in my responsibility if I did not set guidelines for my students and give consequences when those guidelines are not met . . . . I think students already have the idea that it is not wrong to cheat; it is only wrong to get caught. If we continue to make excuses for students who blatantly cheat, we are teaching them that it isn’t even wrong to get caught if you have a compassionate teacher who is understanding and willing to give them a break . . . . (17 March 1998)

Bear sees it as the teacher’s responsibility to call students on their actions in order to avoid further encouragement of what she perceives as “blatant” wrongdoing.

Questions of plagiarism and dishonesty become even more complicated when students incorporate not only print sources but also online sources in their papers. Online texts, in many cases, are harder to trace than books and articles in the library. Since many sites are fluid, ever-changing, and less structured than an academic linear text, students assign different meaning to copying passages from a web page than from a published and printed source. Alan Purves points out that hypertext is often considered anarchic, and with it, the text “appears to cede authority to the reader” (ix). Such cessation of authority is then misconstrued by students as a freedom to appropriate the source for their own uses. Additionally, because the information is not “on paper,” students may seem to think they are not taking anything concrete, traceable, or with substance. Furthermore, the different medium and with it the different perceptions of what is considered “text” add to misunderstandings of what can be extracted from a particular site. For example, students are often unsure whether it is legitimate to make a copy of a picture integrated into the text.

**Enter: The Writing Center**

Trained Writing Tutors are ready to help you develop and organize your writing assignments. We can provide weekly tutoring, several sessions to help you with specific problems or
assignments, and/or one-time service. We encourage appoint-ments but gladly accommodate walk-in requests as quickly as possible. Call 523-8992 to make your appointment. (Northern Arizona University’s Writing Center Flyer)

Since writing centers focus on helping students through the various stages of writing tutors have many opportunities to engage in discussions about plagiarism. Various signs alert tutors to students use of other authors’ words: the incorporation of passages that tutors remember from teaching the same text in their classes, stylistic changes, or a student’s inability to explain in her own words what she meant to say in a paragraph. However, instead of penalizing the student, tutors point out the inconsistencies in voice, provide guidelines for correct citations, and help students avoid the consequences of plagiarism.1 The tutor, in this case, takes a confidential, non-threatening, positive, and encouraging approach to a student’s text, reinforcing the notion that the writing center is a “safe space.” The role of the tutor becomes more complicated, however, when the student refuses to listen to the comments and openly admits that she will not give credit to her source although she knows that appropriating somebody else’s words as her own is considered dishonest behavior.

In this latter case, does the meeting remain confidential, or does the tutor inform somebody (other tutors, the instructor, the writing center administrator) about this breach of academic integrity, knowing that the instructor would probably not suspect any wrongdoing? This is certainly not an easy and clear-cut decision. It is also not a decision that is usually based on precedent but, instead, the tutor has to take into consideration the context in which the interactions took place, and the consequences that will arise from disclosing the information or keeping it within the confines of the writing center. In the following pages, I will describe how the Writing Center staff at Northern Arizona University approached a clear case of plagiarism and breach of academic integrity.

1 Writing centers have to contend with an additional complication. The help that tutors provide, their collaboration with the student who comes in for advice, can and sometimes is interpreted as plagiarism. Various scholars have done excellent studies on this dilemma. See, for example, Irene Lurkis Clark’s work on “Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy” and “Maintaining Chaos in the Writing Center,” Richard Behm’s “Ethical Issues in Peer Tutoring: A Defense of Collaborative Learning,” and Jennifer Herek and Mark Niquette’s “Ethics in the Writing Lab: Tutoring under the Honor Code.”
Step 1: The Session

Jeff came into the Writing Center to ask for help with a paper for his upper-division Philosophy class. After signing in and filling out the paperwork, he was paired with Michael, a graduate tutor who was enrolled in a Master’s program in English and also taught English 105, the introductory composition course for NAU undergraduates. Michael sat down with Jeff, and together they went over some strategies that would improve the structure of his paper. They also worked on sentence level issues of the draft and the session went well; the exchange was lively, and Jeff was happy with the input he received. Before the session ended, Jeff wanted Michael’s comments on his introduction. He was quite proud of it and informed Michael that he had actually taken it from a text published on the World Wide Web. He even showed Michael a print-out of the page and then wanted to confirm that he didn’t need to cite this source since it was taken from a web site. Michael told him that not giving credit to his source would be dishonest and could get him into trouble. However, Jeff told Michael that his instructor never used the web and the likelihood of getting caught was basically non-existent. Michael was not able to convince him that this comprised a serious breach of academic honesty. Jeff left without changing his mind about documenting his source. Instead, he was annoyed that Michael gave him a lecture on academic integrity and plagiarism.

Step 2: Consulting with the Writing Center Administrator

Michael, who had been tutoring for almost a year, had never encountered a situation where a student not only knowingly plagiarized, but also shared his intent to hand in the plagiarized paper, even after being told what the consequences could be. Faced with such blatant contempt of academic integrity, Michael wasn’t sure what he should do. He decided to talk the situation over with me, the Writing Center administrator, to figure out what his, and the Writing Center’s, role in this unprecedented situation should be. For me, it brought up interesting and conflicting issues. The Writing Center, according to our policy, was a safe haven for students. They did not have to be afraid that we divulged information to their instructors, graded their work, or in any way judged their performance.

2 All names—except the author’s—have been changed to pseudonyms.
Taking action in Jeff’s case would mean that we no longer could pride ourselves on absolute confidentiality. Furthermore, it would be much easier not to get involved and to ignore the issue. It really wasn’t our role to turn on our flashing red lights and act as integrity police.

However, students that we see inevitably continue to be part of our academic lives. In the Writing Center, we might worry, for example, whether a student who has been in five times will get a good grade on her paper. We are delighted when she comes back and tells us that her instructor praised her for all the work she did. Jeff, certainly, did not cease to exist after he left the Writing Center. On the contrary, his comments and his intentions to hand in a plagiarized paper became the focal point of Michael’s and my discussions. Would it be ethical to remain silent and act under the assumption that we “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil”? Or, since we heard and saw potential dishonest behavior, would it be ethical to abandon Writing Center policies and speak to the instructor about what we saw and heard? In a sense, we considered ourselves to be in a no-win situation. We would either fall short of our self-imposed policies and the trust that students put into their interactions with Writing Center staff, or we could be blamed for encouraging and perpetuating unacceptable behavior. Furthermore, remaining silent about Jeff’s open contempt for academic integrity could prompt him to tell other students about the Center’s “policy” of non-intervention, endangering our own integrity as an academic organization which reports to the department chair, the dean, the provost, and the president of the university.

**Step 3: Taking Collective Action**

We did decide, finally, to inform the instructor—Professor Mortimer from the Philosophy Department—of Jeff’s interactions with Michael. Since Michael had worked with Jeff, and since he had a first-hand account of the interactions, I suggested that he send an e-mail to Professor Mortimer. The e-mail, we agreed, should be as specific as possible, while leaving any kind of action to the discretion of the professor. The ensuing online conversation took place mainly between Michael and Professor Mortimer. I received forwarded copies of the exchanges, but did not take an active role in them.

In his first e-mail, Michael tries to stay away from judging Jeff’s actions (See Appendix A for full text). Instead, he takes on an informative role. By telling Professor Mortimer of his interactions with Jeff—including specific details—he establishes his professional role as Jeff’s tutor. He then moves on to discuss the conversation about the online site Jeff used as his source for the introduction. The detailed information—providing the URL for the site from which Jeff took the information and a detailed
description as to where Professor Mortimer can find the plagiarized passage—shows that Michael is not only versed in providing one-on-one tutoring but that he is also an expert in computer-mediated communication tools.

Michael also makes sure that Professor Mortimer understands why he is writing this message. He acknowledges that he talked to his supervisor about Jeff before sending the e-mail, thus clarifying that he doesn’t work as an individual but under the supervision of the Writing Center Director. His specific focus on NAU’s policy on academic dishonesty also shows that Michael is aware of university policies; at the same time, he expresses his hope that Jeff changed his mind about using the web source without acknowledging it. However, he asserts that if Jeff did not cite the source, “he has plagiarized”—implying that action needs to be taken and that it is now in the hands of Professor Mortimer to confront Jeff.

Professor Mortimer responded to Michael’s message the following day, expressing his appreciation for being informed about Michael’s encounter with Jeff (Appendix B). Mortimer’s response provides some important information on the assignment and the course in general. As he points out, he did not encourage using outside sources. Instead, he wanted students to focus on material presented in class. Jeff’s use of an outside source, his intent to include additional information, is not necessarily a laudable effort; instead, it becomes an action that defies Professor Mortimer’s intent of making students grapple with issues already discussed. Although Jeff could not claim ignorance about citation requirements—Professor Mortimer explicitly states that any outside source would have to be cited—his reluctance to do so is not only a matter of contempt for academic integrity but also a dishonest response to the assignment’s intentions.

What is also interesting in this message is the course topic. Professor Mortimer expresses his disappointment with Jeff’s attitude, since much of the semester in this course was spent discussing ethics. Jeff’s incomprehension of his own dishonesty becomes an issue not only of his attitude toward giving credit to a source but also of his general understanding of Professor Mortimer’s course material.

This message not only focuses on Jeff, however. It also shows Professor Mortimer’s attempt to counteract any negative impressions Michael might have had and ensures his place as a web-savvy instructor. Furthermore, he takes control of the situation by promising to compare Jeff’s paper with the information provided on the web site and to talk to Jeff about it. Although he provides Michael with an opportunity to opt out of having his name associated with Professor Mortimer’s confrontation, he also makes it clear that the information provided by Michael will be the basis of his interactions with Jeff.
Mortimer's follow-up message, sent the same day, shows he is taking Jeff's breach of academic honesty seriously (Appendix C). In his opinion, Jeff's actions become less pardonable because he knows—from Michael's e-mail message—that Jeff believed Professor Mortimer would never notice or trace the plagiarized passage. Jeff's action, in this instance, is not only considered dishonest in terms of university policies, but Professor Mortimer's message shows that he considers it a personal and professional affront.

It is interesting to notice Professor Mortimer's continued willingness to take into consideration any comments Michael might have. The rapid pace of his e-mail messages, however, leaves little room for Michael's responses, and Mortimer moves ahead without receiving any input from Michael. Thus, before Michael responds to Professor Mortimer, he receives another message, this one written one day after the other two messages, and after Mortimer had a chance to talk to Jeff (Appendix D).

In this very detailed message, it becomes clear that Mortimer is taking control of the situation. He makes it clear that Jeff's explanation does not satisfy him. Interestingly, Mortimer points out to Michael that he is most concerned with Jeff's inability to grasp the notion of unethical behavior. Mortimer's comments that Jeff's offer to now give credit to his source is too late. Mortimer, like Brenda Bear, believes plagiarism is not the sole issue. Instead, he focuses on the more global problem of dishonesty, emphasizing the connections between the course content and Jeff's abuse of academic integrity as well as Jeff's apparent inability to comprehend these connections.

Professor Mortimer's initial solution includes several options, yet he is even more discouraged with Jeff's reaction that "ignoring the problem would be best." While Jeff's choice seems disconcerting, Professor Mortimer did include this option in his initial exchange with Jeff—an option which Jeff, not surprisingly, chooses as the most expedient and reasonable one.

Professor Mortimer's suggestion to go back to the Writing Center is met with resistance, showing that Jeff considers Michael's sharing of information with his professor as a breach of confidence. Jeff's anger is of course legitimate. He consulted with a Writing Center tutor to receive help, not to be "punished" for divulging his intent to ignore the tutor's comments.

Professor Mortimer ends this post in surprise and dismay that a student in his moral philosophy class does not understand the concept of dishonesty. In essence, Professor Mortimer's reputation as an instructor, his ability to "teach" students about the importance of ethical concepts, is partly under question here. His dismay can thus be seen not only in terms of Jeff's inability to understand and apply the course content but also in
terms of Professor Mortimer’s inability to encourage his students to comprehend and use the concepts studied in the course.

Professor Mortimer’s struggle with Jeff’s inability to understand dishonest behavior and his attempt to find the best way to deal with the situation show that he is not only concerned about “upholding academic integrity” but with providing a reasonable and useful solution for Jeff, personally, as a student learning about ethics. Looking closely at Professor Mortimer’s suggested “punishment,” however, uncovers a number of underlying assumptions. For one, Professor Mortimer asserts that his students should be able to apply their theoretical knowledge learned in the course to their own actions—a process that often takes years to complete. Secondly, writing—composing a 15-page essay—becomes a vehicle for disciplining and penalizing students. And furthermore, Professor Mortimer, although he initially provided Jeff with three options, strongly believes only one—his—is viable. The choice Jeff was allowed in the tutorial (to include or not include plagiarized passages) is removed from his control.

Step 4: Taking Individual Action

Michael, after reading the various e-mail messages, and after talking to his colleagues, responds to Professor Mortimer’s request for input (Appendix E). Initially, Michael is informative and non-judgmental, making sure that Professor Mortimer understands that “yours is the decision that holds the most weight in this situation.” He also makes explicit the Writing Center’s position in “normal” circumstances; in addition, he points out that because of the nature of the situation, “our reaction called for some improvisation.” His use of the plural (“we,” “our”) shows that he is not only providing his own opinions but that he is talking as a “collective voice,” which has the support of the Writing Center.

Michael shows his continued interest and engagement in the case when he actively looks for information and includes the Student Handbook’s quote on academic dishonesty to show possible ways of addressing Jeff’s actions. Michael’s continued interest and his obvious engagement move far beyond the call of duty. Apparently, Professor Mortimer’s request for comments prompts Michael to find as much information as he can, establishing some obvious ties—concern with student integrity, understanding of university rules, making Jeff accountable for his actions—between Professor Mortimer and himself. At the same time, he removes himself from his position as a non-judgmental tutor who has the best interest of his student in mind. This becomes especially clear in the second part of the message where Michael moves from providing information to giving his own opinion on the situation.
Most apparently, we can see the move from the collective “we” to the singular “I,” showing that Michael is focusing on his own opinions. His dismay and increasing anger at Jeff’s actions becomes more and more apparent as the message continues. He first points out that “this is not a minor violation.” He also argues that Jeff couldn’t have understood any of the course content and should fail just because of that. Jeff’s “lack of remorse” and his lack of understanding are further indications to Michael that Jeff should at least get a failing grade for the course. If it were his student, he says, “I would do everything in my power to have him dismissed.” Michael not only speaks of his perspective on plagiarism, he also seems to be offended that Jeff ignored his advice. Unlike Jeff’s professor, whose final decision will have a major impact on Jeff’s grade and possibly on his career, Michael has no other recourse than to let his opinion be heard and to suggest possible actions he would take. In the end, however, Michael knows that it will be the instructor’s decision and not his own.

In his last paragraph of this message, Michael admits that he has thought and talked about these issues with his own students. Furthermore, his comment, “I will discuss this matter further with . . . the Director of the Writing Center,” shows that he has not yet discussed his position with his supervisor but intends to bring it up in the near future.

Professor Mortimer continues the conversation, and, after doing some research himself, responds to Michael’s suggestions (Appendix F). In this message, Professor Mortimer lets Michael know what he and his department chair have decided to do. He points out that he does not consider expulsion—suggested by Michael in his previous message—as the best procedure. Once again, it is clear that Michael’s message, although acknowledged and appreciated, does not have the impact for which Michael might have wished. Professor Mortimer does acknowledge though that, although he has made a decision on this case, he is still worried about Jeff’s “apparent incomprehension”—and implicitly his own inability to teach Jeff about ethical behavior. For Professor Mortimer, it is not only a question of academic dishonesty, but a question of “dispositions of character.” The measures he has taken—public confrontation and time to think about it—are not only intended to “punish” Jeff, but are intended to help him think about his actions and give him time to reflect on his “character.” In this instance, Professor Mortimer puts complete responsibility on Jeff.

While Professor Mortimer made his decision to find an appropriate venue for penalizing Jeff’s breach of academic integrity, the last message in the exchange also shows that Michael had time to reflect on the suggestions he wrote three days prior to the final message. This final message in the exchange sheds light on Michael’s adamant reaction to
Jeff’s violation of honesty and integrity. As he points out, he had been expelled from school, not for dishonesty, but for lack of performance. For him, expulsion was a “good experience”; he admits though that his feelings are not shared by many of his colleagues. He emphasizes that he considers Professor Mortimer’s choice as “an appropriate way to handle his case,” again making sure that he does not want to interfere with Professor Mortimer’s decision in this event. However, Jeff did not “choose his fate”; instead, Professor Mortimer decided on what measures had to be taken, thus reinforcing his position within the academic institution while at the same time upholding the institution’s standard on academic integrity.

Some Concluding and Inconclusive Thoughts

The exchanges between Michael and Professor Mortimer are important on several levels and can be used for exploring specific writing center policies on confidentiality and academic integrity. First, they show the tentative role of the writing center and the conflicting positions that writing center staff can occupy. The decision to talk with Jeff’s instructor was by no means an easy one, and it is still difficult to say whether it was the right approach to take. Would a similar case occur, we would again have to question the various roles we occupy, the responsibilities we have to our students, to instructors, and to the administration. In some ways, we preserved the ethics of the Writing Center. We were able to prevent a student from successfully engaging in academic dishonesty. But we also circumvented Writing Center ethics in the sense that we divulged information that, as Jeff’s reaction to a suggested return to the Writing Center shows, was considered confidential by Jeff. It would be difficult, in this respect, to claim that we “did the right thing.” Instead, we did what we thought would probably be best for the student in the long run and what would be “right” from our perspective as employees of an academic institution who consider themselves responsible for student behavior.

The exchanges also provided important insights into the connections between course content, instructor perceptions, and student violations of ethical issues. A different instructor teaching a course unrelated to ethics might have approached the issue quite differently. Also, an instructor less concerned with the integrity of student behavior, and less concerned about the “character” of the student, might have considered more or less stringent measures. Professor Mortimer, as we can see from his e-mail messages, gave much thought to Jeff’s behavior. He drew connections between plagiarism and possible future dishonest actions, considering Jeff’s actions in context instead of in isolation. He didn’t just
want to punish Jeff for his behavior but wanted him to learn and to profit from the measures taken. It remains unclear, though, whether Professor Mortimer considered Jeff’s actions in light of his teaching practices and whether he used this experience to rethink the objectives and goals for the course—or whether he should.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that Michael’s engagement, and his initial consultation with me, was situated in his own experiences as a student who was expelled from college. Another tutor might never have mentioned the incident to his colleagues or to me. This shows, then, that his actions, as well as the actions of Jeff and Professor Mortimer, have to be contextualized and evaluated by looking at their own experiences. Jeff, for example, acted partly based on his belief that his instructor would never find the web page he used; Professor Mortimer’s actions are to some extent based on his training as a philosophy professor interested in ethical issues; and Michael used his own experiences with academic institutions to take a pro-active role in writing Professor Mortimer.

Considering the complexity of the issue and the contradictions involved in wanting to create “safe places” for students and also wanting to be responsible for promoting academic honesty, writing center staff can work toward establishing policies that explain the center’s position on plagiarism. It is difficult to determine for anyone else whether to act or to remain detached from situations similar to the one discussed. Instead, we need to find the way that justifies our actions to our students, the instructors, the administration, and to ourselves. However, we need to be aware that our position as writing center administrators and writing center staff is a precarious one, because, as Michael Pemberton puts it, “it almost guarantees that any policy decision . . . no matter how well-considered or well-intentioned it may be, will not please everybody” (15).
APPENDIX A

Dr. Mortimer:

Last Wednesday (April 30), Jeff, a student in PHI 325, came to the English Department’s Writing Workshop in LA-228 for assistance on a paper he was writing for your class. I worked with him for roughly half an hour, during which time we discussed several grammatical issues and the overall organization of his paper. At the end of the session, he asked me what I thought of his introduction. After I made some comments about it, he informed me that he had taken the idea for his introduction from a world wide web page. He showed me a printout of the page long enough for me to read the words “Justice as Fairness” in large letters across the top. He then wanted to confirm his impression that, because he had taken the information from the Internet, he did not need to list it as a work cited. I informed him that he did, indeed, need to include the web page in his bibliography. His response was that his instructor would never find it, so he wasn’t going to list it. At this point, I reiterated the fact that he needs to document any information he got from anywhere other than his own head. Once again, however, Jeff responded that he didn’t think his instructor ever “surfed” the net, and so there was no chance he could get caught. He then left.

I immediately went to a computer to find the web page he showed me, and located it: the URL, if you’re interested, is <http://truth.wofford.edu/~kaycd/justice.htm>. The page explicitly shows a copyright held by Charles D. Kay at the bottom, and deals primarily with some of the concepts developed by John Rawls.

The information used by Jeff in his paper is in the fourth paragraph on this web page, and involves the likening of the distribution of basic liberties to the cutting of a cake. This metaphor, I believe, is Kay’s.

I approached . . . the director of the Writing Workshop with Jeff’s expressed intent to plagiarize this material. We agreed that, in light of NAU’s policy regarding academic dishonesty, we had an obligation to inform you of this matter.

I sincerely hope that Jeff listened to me when I told him he had to cite this source. However, if he did not, he has plagiarized.
Should you have any questions regarding this matter, please feel free to e-mail me or call me.
APPENDIX B

Dear Michael,

Thank you for sharing the information. I did state on the assignment that I did not recommend turning to outside texts for the paper (I wanted them to grapple with those we discussed in class) but, if they did choose to rely on such material, then they would have to provide full citations. Because this is a class on ethics, and we have spent so much time reflecting on the nature of virtue (especially the virtue of honesty), I find it especially disheartening that Jeff would express such an attitude about the requirements for academic integrity.

As a matter of fact, I do surf the net—especially on philosophical topics. I haven’t come across the site on Rawls’ “Theory of Justice,” but I will take a look at it, and I will take a hard look at Jeff’s paper.

My first approach will be simply to confront Jeff with what you have said and with his paper. I hope that this does not put you in an awkward position. If it does, then please let me know ASAP. I’ll let you know how it goes.
Dear Michael,

I have compared Jeff's paper to the page on the net. Jeff does use the image of cutting the cake as a simple illustration of the problem of fair distribution in his paper. That, in itself, is worrisome, but not a terrible problem for the following reason. The image is a very common one—both to the literature on this particular subject and to our common understanding of the problem. Nevertheless, Jeff does take two clauses and a full sentence directly from the text without either quoting or providing a reference with a footnote.

In the ground rules for the papers (set out in the beginning of the semester), I explicitly state that this constitutes plagiarism. Normally, I would say that a student who steals a single clause is having trouble putting things in his or her own terms (and perhaps even forgetting that the author put it in exactly the same manner). However, in Jeff's case, the fact that you pointed it out and that he said he didn't think I would notice is pretty good evidence that he didn't have such pardonable intentions.

I will be meeting Jeff to discuss the problem tomorrow. I'll let you know what I'm thinking about doing then. Regardless of my decision, you are free (and perhaps responsible—depending upon how much you've worked with him on the papers) to bring the matter before him yourself. Let me know what you think. These are hard cases to deal with and I would appreciate your thoughts.
APPENDIX D

Dear Michael,

I talked to Jeff last night before leaving (he surprised me by stopping by without setting up an appointment) about the charge of plagiarism. I explained that there were three problems with the paper—the idea used, the two clauses, and the entire sentence—and asked for his comments. He said that he didn’t think that using the idea was a problem because it was such a common one and he didn’t rely on it in his argument. I told him that the use didn’t matter. He then stated that the only reason he did not give a reference is that he didn’t know how to cite the web page. I told him that this was no excuse—especially for the second and third problems. It is never permissible to use a clause that is lifted from someone else’s work—much less an entire sentence—without quoting and footnoting. He agreed that there was a problem and kindly offered to add the quotes and the reference to his paper. I explained that the paper was turned in and simply changing it at this point would not resolve the plagiarism (kind of like stealing, getting caught, and then offering to return the money).

In light of the difficult situation, I offered three options and asked him which he thought would be most reasonable: I could simply impose the standard penalty for plagiarism which is an F for the course, I could turn my head and ignore the problem, or we could try to find something in between these two extremes. Much to my surprise (and dismay) he suggested that ignoring the problem would be best (with a serious face, mind you). I explained that this was not a real option and was disappointed that he suggested it was reasonable.

I recommended that confronting the problem is always best and suggested the idea that he might talk to you. His response was that going to the Writing Center was a mistake and that he would never make the mistake again. Surprised (and dismayed) once again, I said that going to the Writing Center almost helped him to avoid the problem—if only he had taken your advice.
APPENDIX E

Professor Mortimer:

First, allow me to apologize for neglecting to respond to your previous e-mails. I have been operating from the premise that Jeff is your student, and yours is the decision that holds the most weight in this situation.

Second, let me express my gratitude for your support of the Writing Center. To elaborate on a point somewhat hidden in my original e-mail to you: This kind of intervention is not the Writing Center’s standard operating procedure. Under normal circumstances, we work very hard to maintain a level of confidentiality that we feel is dictated by common courtesy. However, the nature of this circumstance is far from normal, and so our reaction called for some improvisation.

Now, to your request for my input:

I’ve looked over what the Student Handbook has to say about Academic Dishonesty. On page 58, under the heading of “Academic Violations Guidelines,” is written:

“It is the responsibility of the individual faculty member to identify instances of academic dishonesty and recommend penalties to the department chair and/or dean in keeping with the severity of the violation. If it is determined that the violation is minor, the faculty member may decide the only necessary action is a conference with the student and/or verbal chastisement. Should it be determined that the violation merits a more severe penalty than verbal chastisement, the faculty member may decide that one of the following progressive penalties is appropriate:

1. Assign the student extra course work.
2. Require the assignment or examination be repeated.
3. Reduce the grade on the assignment or examination.
4. Award zero grade on the assignment or examination.
5. Require the student to drop the course.
6. Award a failing grade in the course.”

In light of the fact that I told Jeff, in response to his inquiry, that he would
need to cite the online source from which he took the information, and the fact that he expressed his intention to disregard my recommendation, I feel fairly confident in saying that this is not a minor violation. His conscious decision to commit plagiarism when he had been told that what he was contemplating was, indeed, just that demonstrates a thorough lack of awareness of and respect for academic integrity. The fact that this occurred as part of an assignment for a class dealing with ethics, in my opinion, increases the severity of his violation exponentially.

This breach of ethics clearly suggests that Jeff failed to engage any of the material covered in your course, . . . and on this fact alone, I am prone to suggest that he deserves to fail the course—academic dishonesty notwithstanding.

Jeff’s apparent lack of remorse is also problematic. His serious recommendation that you simply turn your head to the situation, and his placement of blame on me for bringing to light his infraction, as opposed to himself for (1) committing the infraction and (2) telling me about it, are truly discouraging, and indicate that he has no understanding of the nature of what he has done.

One of the things I tell my students every semester is that by committing plagiarism, they are effectively saying that they don’t have anything important to say. The act of stealing someone else’s words is a denial of their own voice. This is perhaps more significant in a composition course designed to help students develop a voice, but I think it is still largely applicable to any course.

Jeff has denied his own voice. Furthermore, he doesn’t seem to think there is anything wrong with this. This seems to go against everything that higher education represents.

Were Jeff my student, I would do everything in my power to have him dismissed from the University. His actions and attitude suggest that he has simply missed the point on several levels, and I think he would be well served by being given some time off to reconsider his own sense of ethical responsibility. At the very least, this would give him a more appropriate understanding of the severity of his violation.

At the very least, however, I would award him a failing grade.

I hope this diatribe proves to be somewhat helpful. My soapbox is well-worn from my discussions of academic dishonesty with my own students.
I will discuss this matter further with . . . the Director of the Writing Center to get her input on the matter. Should you wish to discuss this further, or need my assistance with anything, please let me know.
APPENDIX F

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your thoughts and suggestions. I have talked to the chair of the department, gone through the student handbook sections on academic dishonesty, and checked with the associate provost to see if Jeff has any previous violations. Because Jeff does not have a record of previous academic dishonesty, the chair and I have agreed that it would be appropriate to leave Jeff with a choice: he can either write a longer paper on the subject of virtue of honesty and the university policies of academic integrity and dishonesty, or he can receive an F for the course. I do not believe that the offense itself is sufficient to warrant expulsion from the university (a penalty which can be given only for extremely flagrant or repeat offenses, I believe).

Nevertheless, I am worried about Jeff’s apparent incomprehension of the nature of the offense. Normally, we say that a person should be punished only for their actions and not for their attitudes or for their dispositions of character. I tend to think there is something of substance in this old dictum of the criminal law. One of the points that I would like to draw is that the cultivation of virtue is a task which we must all accept for ourselves—no one can force someone else to pursue honesty, or courage, or patience. My hope is that the public confrontation over this offense, plus a sustained opportunity to think about it for himself, might at least give Jeff the chance to re-examine his own attitudes and dispositions of character.
APPENDIX G

Professor Mortimer:

It sounds to me like you’ve handled it well. After discussing the situation with some colleagues, I’ve come to the decision that my feelings about it might be somewhat . . . inflated. I, myself, was dismissed from college as an undergrad (for my lack of concern about my own performance, not for dishonesty), as has one of the other TAs here in the English department. Both of us have a somewhat different understanding of and appreciation for expulsion than most people I know: Both of us benefited greatly from our experiences, as they gave us the time we needed to get our acts together before making another go at it. In other words, I’ve always thought of expulsion as a strangely good experience. I suppose it’s not exactly reasonable for me to expect too many others to share my attitude.

I think allowing Jeff to choose his fate is an appropriate way to handle his case. Thanks for keeping me informed.
Works Cited

Bear, Brenda. “Plagiarism.” Personal e-mail (17 March 1998).


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