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William McCarter MA
wmccarter@es.vccs.edu

Michael Murphy MA

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PLAGIARISM IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOM

MICHAEL MURPHY, M.A.
WILLIAM MCCARTER, M.A.

Plagiarism is an unfortunate but often inevitable byproduct of human discourse. It may have begun with one envious cave drawing being copied onto another

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cave wall—without attribution. Ironically, and probably just as inevitably, the modern classroom serves as a kind of breeding ground or incubator for this ancient, murky form of theft. A 2011 study by Pew Research confirms this regrettable truth and implies that the so-called digital revolution is only making things worse (Parker).

Our empirical observations from over three decades in the classroom suggest that students plagiarize for a variety of reasons. Some students, sadly, are simply dishonest and lazy, and they steal because it seems easy and painless. Some students are not initially present for an education; instead they want a piece of paper that will create opportunity in their lives. Other students do not understand the ramifications of misusing words or ideas because they have never produced intellectual property of their own. In addition, many students do not understand the potential consequences of plagiarism, nor do they understand how easily it can be detected and confirmed. Another significant factor is that students fear the actual documentation process and find it an unfamiliar, overly intricate burden. And a final, delicate issue is often the assignment itself: questionably long research paper assignments that are unconnected to a student's interests or knowledge base are sometimes a catalyst for intellectual thievery.

On our campus, anecdotal evidence suggests that the underlying cause for most plagiarism is the diminished value of ideas, information, or language. The most common example is the student who wants vocational training more than old-fashioned educational enlightenment, which is an understandable though shortsighted objective, and one that undermines the respect for the raw materials of intellectual property. Such plagiarism is seen as no more than borrowing a bucket of sand from the beach. One focus of instruction should be to turn that sand into something more substantial and valuable by consistently and tangibly making the case across academic and occupational disciplines that writing and research are a fundamental skill in the world of educated men and

women. That lesson should be accompanied by two refrains: first, technology has made writing indispensable and has made research ubiquitous; and second, any person whose future requires a college education will be in some form or another a professional writer and researcher.

Closely linked to the students who only want a better job or a new opportunity are the students who do not value words, ideas, or information because they have never produced intellectual property or at least have never recognized its production in themselves. Ideally, one component of a well-rounded college education is the creation of relevant, meaningful, and tangible intellectual property. For this reason, colleges and universities produce newspapers, magazines, journals, blogs, and so forth: people understand and respect what they have produced themselves. Not only do we learn by doing; we also learn to value by doing. That is an essential function of the institution and should be expanded in as many ways as possible. However, this larger institutional function does not absolve the individual classroom of responsibility. Students should write in all classes, and the best of that writing (with effectively integrated research and documentation) should be published and shared with as broad an audience as possible. Such a publication does not have to be an entire ten-page research essay; instead, a single, well-written sentence produced by a class member can be an excellent tool for creating intellectual property and an effective way to begin or end a discussion relevant to the subject matter.

A more practical consideration, and one that is generally more easily addressed, is the student who does not understand that plagiarism is easily detected and can carry dire, enduring consequences. In a technology-supported classroom it takes only minutes to present a paper with plagiarized content and then demonstrate that the electronic search of a phrase or sentence of suspect material will call up the purloined source document in a few seconds. Once an instructor establishes that plagiarism is often easy to identify and document, students then need to understand that the consequences can be severe. Most students know that plagiarism has academic consequences. However, they frequently do not understand that, outside the classroom, plagiarists are treated like thieves, just as if they have stolen another person's personal property. A quick search can find too many accounts of plagiarism in the larger world and examples of the embarrassment and loss that follows.

Finally, it is helpful to point out that any argument supported by a dependable, respected source is only made stronger. So the easy message for our students is that, if they plagiarize, they will be caught and will have to face the requisite academic consequences, but if they use and properly document credible sources, their argument is made stronger and more credible.

In conjunction with stressing the consequences of plagiarism, it is also important to dispel students' fears about the complexities of documentation and stress that a small error in citation format is insignificant compared to its complete omission. Instead of endless pages of possible variations, it might be advisable, especially with reluctant students, to begin with this simple formula for MLA-based documentation: author, title, source, and date. For APA-based instruction,

the date is simply moved: author, date, title, and source. When students have mastered that basic concept, then the subsequent introduction of source variations requires only building on an existing structure.

Finally, the writing and research assignment itself can be an important cog in this discussion. If the research paper is an essential instructional outcome, then an appropriate amount of instructional time and/or resources should be devoted to the project. Introducing model papers from previous, similar assignments can be a useful tool; even better is a shared evaluation of model papers (good and bad) using the instructor's actual rubric for evaluating final student papers. For faculty uncomfortable with the process, other faculty members can also be brought into a collaborative instructional context. Additionally, instead of a single, lengthy research paper, it might be more productive to require a series of short writing assignments, each with a research component, or at least precede the traditional research paper with a very short writing assignment based around a common source document. Unless students are planning an academic career, they will more likely find that professional writing and research will resemble the latter model and will be valued more for its brevity and accuracy than its ability to fill up an assigned number of pages. In addition, it is helpful if research assignments have some relevance and connection to the students' knowledge and/or interest or be relevant to the subject matter of the course. Long, disconnected research assignments are an invitation for students to plagiarize and, frankly, such assignments undermine the validity of the process itself.

Like so many other issues in education, the most effective remedy to plagiarism is quality, relevant instruction, and that quality and relevance should be grounded in the simple dichotomy of why and how. Any class or academic discipline that values or uses writing and research should repeatedly and consistently emphasize the importance of those skills to the individual and within the larger world. Secondly, having made the case for the viability of mastering documentation (or any other academic material or skill for that matter), it is equally important to demonstrate how that mastery can be reasonably accomplished.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

William McCarter is Assistant Professor of Developmental English at Eastern Shore Community College, located in Melfa, Virginia. McCarter holds an M.A. from The College of William and Mary.

Michael Murphy is Instructor of Psychology at Eastern Shore Community College, located in Melfa, Virginia. Murphy earned his M.A. from Stephen-Austin State University.