

Prompt Attention: What I Learned from the Plagiarists



Barry Gilmore

Just about every article, book, and website on plagiarism runs along similar lines: First come the depressing statistics about the prevalence of plagiarism in schools. These are followed by a discussion of student attitudes toward knowledge in today's Napster culture. Next comes a diatribe on (a) the variety of ways students find to cheat (from term-paper mills to cutting and pasting); (b) the value of or problems caused by online detection software (such as turnitin.com); (c) admonitions to deal with plagiarism forcefully; or (d) all of the above. Finally, and only in some cases, the discussion concludes with suggestions for preventing plagiarism by making students aware of the consequences and by changing the nature of the assignments we give.

I don't dismiss plagiarism, and I believe that all of the issues I describe above are an important part of our professional dialogue on the subject—even if I'm sometimes bothered that more time seems to be spent advising teachers how to play the role of source detective than preventative pedagogue. Yet after scouring the available literature on plagiarism prevention, I've become irked by some of the more popular suggestions for discouraging plagiarism, and especially by what is probably the most common piece of advice pundits have to offer: "Make your assignments specific."

Make your assignments specific? As opposed to making them ambiguous? Or as opposed to opening up student access to a broad array of topics?

Oh, I get it. "If assignments are embedded in the course curriculum and are limited to a few specific topics," writes Christine Timm of Westchester Community College, "then finding an exact match

for the assignment requirements will be that much more difficult" (par. 1). Margaret Proctor of the University of Toronto seconds the notion: "You may need to save very general and 'classic' topics for in-class writing or oral debates," she notes (par. 3). Such authors encourage us to believe that there's a world of difference—in terms of ease of plagiarism, at least—between the assignment to "write an essay about *Hamlet*" and the one to "compare and contrast Hamlet's use of language with that used by Holden Caulfield."

Why do I take issue with this commonly offered suggestion? It's not because the second prompt is a bad one, but rather because I don't entirely buy the premise that leads so many writers to extol such specificity. To begin with, it's not too hard to plagiarize the latter essay, and just to prove it I asked a tenth-grade student in my class to do exactly that. After five minutes online, Becky announced that she'd found one essay on Hamlet's language (no charge, 2,000 words, <http://123helpme.com>) and a second on Holden's language (no charge, 873 words, <http://free-essays-free-essays.com>). "I can cut and paste these and add a few transition lines in about ten minutes," Becky said. "How long do you want it to be?"

But the real problem isn't how easy it is, or isn't, for Becky to plagiarize. It's that simply changing a prompt probably won't have any particular effect on whether or not Becky decides to plagiarize in the first place. And while there's value to some of the other suggestions that frequently crop up in plagiarism prevention articles—it *is* important for students to know the definition of plagiarism and the consequences for plagiarizing—many of those

suggestions strike me as treating the symptoms, not the disease. Take, for instance, the recommendation that we make our assignments personal by having students write a letter, journal entry, or personal opinion piece. Certainly such writing has its place in our classrooms, but to turn to such assignments to *avoid* plagiarism rather than to *encourage* reading and writing skills seems to me like placing the cart before the horse, and certainly I don't want to concede that because it's easy to plagiarize, no student will ever again write a scholarly analytical essay on *Hamlet*.

From Origin to Originality

The answer to the problem of prompts and plagiarism lies in the way we view the prompts themselves. It's an imperfect analogy, but think for a moment of a writing prompt as if it were a recipe for, say, a cake. An uncertain cook will probably use the recipe as an absolute guideline early on (and the worst plagiarist will likely drive to the grocery store, buy a premade cake, and slip it onto a dish from the kitchen at home). As a chef develops certainty and command, however, the recipe might become a springboard rather than a crutch—add a few ingredients here, change some there, and eventually you've got a confection that carries a signature style and conveys personality, the equivalent of voice and individual argument in writing. At some point, one would hope, the recipe is no longer needed, because the chef creates his or her recipe from start to finish—a new take on an old idea.

The ultimate goal should not be to create a prompt that produces original writing but to create an environment that leads students to devise prompts and arguments of their own. Specificity stands precisely in opposition to that goal because it narrows student thinking about a text rather than broadening it—the student who focuses closely on Hamlet's language does *not* focus, for instance, on the many nuances of characterization, theme, imagery, or performance practice that may appear tangential but are important enhancements to Hamlet's lines in the play.

Imagine a class period in which the teacher asks students to brainstorm a broad list of topics—or even just analytical areas—for possible

essays about *Hamlet*. Such a list might range across many aspects of the play, from symbols such as the flowers Ophelia wears at her death to the role of blocking during the “To be or not to be” speech. After constructing the list, students work in groups to gather concrete evidence from the play related to individual topics. Then the teacher takes one example from the list—perhaps one that nobody in the class has paid much attention to—and demonstrates how to construct and organize an outline for an essay by teasing out nuances and asking questions: How do the flowers Ophelia wears relate to those Gertrude throws on her grave in act 5? What about Hamlet's description of life as an “unweeded garden” in act 1—any connections there? At last, students work in pairs to produce an argumentative thesis rooted in the textual examples they've found for various topics, maybe even an outline or introduction, and then the instructor makes an assignment: “Now, write an essay about *Hamlet*.”

What's been accomplished here? In a class period, or perhaps two or three, students have examined a wide range of textual possibilities, probably changing topics more than once, and have discussed other topics with their peers. They've completed enough of the heavy lifting involved in prewriting and research to get going on the essay independently, they've become attached to a topic, and they've developed their argument and approach to studying the text. They are, in other words, invested in their learning; they've come up with a new recipe, and all that's left is the actual baking.

The Ongoing Process

Is it possible, in the classroom scenario I describe above, that students will still plagiarize? Sure. But the alternative is to produce writers who are not scholars. If we train students to become mechanical engines capable of churning out a five-paragraph essay on a given topic but not of taking a text and teasing out connections on their own, we may have forced them not to plagiarize, but have we *taught* them not to plagiarize? This same argument holds true whether we're discussing a single paragraph or an eight-page research paper—the student who blindly points to an item on a list to choose a topic,

no matter how specific that topic may be, is not learning in the same way—and is at least as prone to see copying someone else’s work as the easy way out—as a student who develops and hones a topic of his or her choosing and design. And, above all, a process approach to writing models for students the kind of writing we want them to undertake. It’s just good practice.

There’s much to be discussed about plagiarism—we need to educate students about its effects, to enforce consequences, to consider honor codes, to reflect on student intentions—but ultimately, every educator faces a choice to ignore the problem, devote valuable time rooting it out and punishing offenders, or to take a lesson about classroom practice and writing instruction from the students who resort to plagiarizing under the pressure that dead-

lines, grades, shifting expectations, and confusion place on them daily.

Part of that lesson is that writing prompts and writing lessons, as hard as we work to develop them, should ultimately serve to render themselves unnecessary. If the opposite of plagiarism is originality, then we should consider that true originality starts not with the teacher creating the perfect prompt, but with students thinking for themselves before the need for plagiarism ever begins. 

Works Cited

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Announcement of the Paul and Kate Farmer *English Journal* Writing Awards

The Paul and Kate Farmer *English Journal* Writing Award winners have been named. **Tim Gillespie** received one of the two awards for “The List,” which appeared in the November 2007 issue of *English Journal*. **John Golden** received the other award for “Literature into Film (and Back Again): Another Look at an Old Dog” from the September 2007 issue. Honorable mention went to **Suzanne R. Kail** for “Vocabulary Instruction Goes ‘Old School’” (March 2008). Recipients will receive their awards in November at the Secondary Section Luncheon at the NCTE Annual Convention.

The Farmer Awards are given annually to the writers of the best articles published in *English Journal*. Secondary school teachers who wrote articles that were published from September 2007 through July 2008 were eligible for this award. The selection committee was chaired by Hilary Hughes and committee members included William Bass, Mary Ellen Dakin, Karen Mitcham, and Keith Younker.