

## **Student Essays and Plagiarism**

One of the particular problems that has exercised me in teaching students over the years is how best to get them to write serious essays. When I first started teaching in the United States in 1984 I not unnaturally adopted the practice of my colleagues, which was to set an essay question and require the students to hand in, at a set date, a paper of the required length that was typed, double-spaced, properly annotated, and with full bibliographical citations.

It was thought to be important for students to know how to type and how to put together proper notes and citations. Indeed the latter were, I was told, among the matters stressed in freshman composition classes. It was also thought to be important, and perhaps much more important, that the instructor be able to read what his students had written. Typing was reliable in this regard, it was alleged, whereas handwriting was not.

I went along with this practice, and in two different universities, for some eight years before I was finally induced to change my mind more or less completely. I must confess that I found the double-spaced typing very comfortable. Reading papers was always easy and one could see very quickly which students knew what they were doing and which did not. But one problem I encountered in every class, despite all my warnings to the contrary, was plagiarism.

Of course I followed my colleagues in handing out to students a full set of instructions about how to write an essay, and in particular about what plagiarism was (many students seemed not to know), and that it would not be tolerated. Nevertheless, I would detect, on every occasion essays were handed in, at least one essay that I knew for certain was plagiarized, and I would find several others that I suspected of being so but could not prove. And what a crime it is, in this country at least, to accuse a student of plagiarism and not be able to prove it with exact, written evidence!

I still have vivid recollections of one essay I received. It was not a particularly good essay but it contained a curious bibliography. I recognized the names of all the authors mentioned and all the titles too, but I did not recognize these authors with these titles. I suspected deceit at once, of course, but, duty-bound, trundled off to the New York Public Research Library to make sure (searching by internet was, at the time, still a thing

of the future). I searched the computer catalogue and the card catalogue and the Library of Congress index and even queried the librarian for other sources. After several hours at this I had failed to turn up a single book on my student's bibliography.

Armed now with sufficient evidence to make my charges stick, I accused the student when next we met of inventing books by switching authors and titles. He took umbrage at this and, when I said I was failing him on the spot, threatened to go the dean (the student happened to be black, by the way, and I did not have tenure at the time). Sure of myself I called his bluff and told him to go ahead. He did not. Guilt or fear got the better of him.

You may say I need not have gone to so much trouble, and perhaps you are right. But what irked me most was that I was subject to such deceit in the first place. I knew enough of students to realize that there would be a cheat in every class I gave and that, as long as I continued giving assignments in the way I had, plagiarism would be inescapable. There had to be a better way.

There were two problems, it seemed to me, with the way I was assigning essays. The first was that every essay, indeed every assignment, counted towards the final grade in the class. There were no practice runs where, if a student did badly, it would not matter, and so where a student could, without penalty, learn by his mistakes. The pressure to cheat or to argue about grades was therefore on the student at every moment. Attention, the students' and mine, was diverted away from learning to grade-grubbing.

This problem is still with me. It is endemic to continuous assessment. To try and solve it by assigning practice essays during the semester but making everything depend on a final exam would, first, be out of all experience for the students, putting too much pressure on them during the exam, and, second, induce them not to take the practice essays seriously.

The second problem was the plagiarism, and I do, I think, have a way round this one. My practice is borrowed, with changes, from my own experience in schools in England (where students do write practice essays, and practice exams, and where everything is assessed by handwritten final exams at the end of the academic year). What I do is make the students write their essays on set days in class, and they write by hand.

They do not include notes or citations or bibliography in these essays. All those things I have simply dispensed with.

I do tell the students well in advance what they are to write about and I give them detailed instructions about how to do it. They are also required to do all their research and preparation beforehand and I provide them with a list of books to consult for the purpose. I also allow them to bring to class on the day one sheet of notes (written on both sides if they wish) containing the outline of their essay and brief summaries of the points they are going to make. They can, if they wish, include quotations and citations on these notes, but they do not have to. I tell them these notes must be notes and not the whole essay written out in minute script. I also check these notes and confiscate them if they do not conform, forcing the student to write entirely from memory. One student to whom I did this sulked for five minutes and then left having written nothing. He failed, of course.

My reward is that now I face no problems of plagiarism. Each student has to provide his own notes and has to write his own essay under conditions that I can control entirely. This practice will naturally prompt a number of questions. How valuable are the gains and do they outweigh any losses? Also what problems attend implementation?

Well, I would say that not being able to plagiarize and cheat is of very great value to students. They are supposed to be in college to learn and acquire important skills. Cheating is not one of these skills, prevents the acquisition of these skills, and is morally ugly besides.

But there is more. Independently of preventing plagiarism, the practice benefits students in many other ways. Being forced to write, and to write clearly and in an organized fashion, under set conditions and time-constraints is also of great value. It is easier, of course, to put together a clear, connected piece of writing if you have plenty of time, if you can rewrite at leisure, if you can go off and check the book. But to be able to do so under pressure, without being able to rewrite (or not much), and without being able to refresh your memory by consulting the book again—now that is a rare and worthwhile achievement.

It is also a more personal achievement. For the skills in question are more fully one's own. A well trained and well stocked memory goes with you wherever you go, and is not dependent on access to books or even the internet. The same goes for being able to

write, and write well, under pressure, at short notice, and by hand if need be. What employer would not be glad to find someone like this among his employees?

Admittedly the way I get my students to write essays is not going to give them these skills fully or quickly, but it will push them in that direction. Some students have complained, to be sure, but usually beforehand and not after they have tried it. Then they are often quite enthusiastic. They get their assignment done all at once in class and do not have paper deadlines hanging over them, and they sense the value of using or developing, however minimally, the skills that the exercise demands. Certainly the quality of essays I have received is not markedly different from what I received when I got students to hand in a typed, double-spaced essay on a set date. Some of the in-class essays have been first rate; others have been pretty mediocre or downright unacceptable. But most have fallen into the range of respectability.

I grade the essays in the same way as I graded take-home essays, *mutatis mutandis*. I require in particular three things: a clear order and structure; a thoughtful and informed presentation of the issue and the main arguments; and a critical assessment of these arguments. An outline of the structure and the title and description of the issue I give to the students well in advance. I have not so far required a bibliography or citations, though I could do so (students are allowed to include citations in the notes they bring to class). I do not grade down for poor English (except insofar as it betrays poor thought or argumentation), but I do correct it as much as possible. The grade I give is based entirely on structure, content, and argument of the essay. But there is nothing to prevent one grading on the basis of other criteria as well (such as quality of English).

There are problems, nevertheless. A first one is that students lose the benefits to be had from doing take-home essays or research papers—well, perhaps. But the benefits to be had from my alternative practice are, I contend, greater for the students both in the short and the long term. Besides, my practice is not exclusive; one could have some essays done one way and others the other, adjusting one's fears and expectations accordingly (one could also use essays done in class as a control to spot possible plagiarism in essays done at home).

Another problem is what to do about illegible handwriting. Actually I have never had to face this problem. Reading some students' essays has been hard on occasion, but

none was so bad as to be illegible. If ever this problem did arise, I think it could be solved readily enough by having the student read the essay into a tape recorder and then listening to the reading with the written essay to hand. One could then grade it in the usual way. An incidental benefit of this might be that students with illegible handwriting would be stimulated to improve. For handwriting too is a skill that one can take with one wherever one goes and is not dependent on typewriters, computers, and the like.

A third problem concerns student fear and anxiety when faced for the first time with writing an essay from notes in class and under time-constraints. Some students are indeed anxious and afraid, but most respond very well in fact when the occasion arrives. I encourage them beforehand, of course, by pointing out that it is not as hard as they fear, that it has many benefits for developing their skills, that other students of mine have done it and done it well, and so forth. I think it is true, nevertheless, that I have lost some students in this way. They drop out of class before the first essay is due to be written and do not return. I am not sure, however, that this loss is all that serious. Attrition is a fact of life in university teaching and I do not think my essay writing requirements make matters worse overall. Besides there are benefits to the exercise, as already mentioned, and these, I think, outweigh the cost.

A fourth problem is that writing essays in class takes away time from teaching, since a whole session is spent on it which could have been spent introducing new material. I do not think this a serious problem. First, there is time enough in other sessions for what one wants to teach, and besides students, especially nowadays, have a limited capacity to learn. Second, the students are learning during the exercise anyway, for they are learning the skills already referred to. Is it not worth devoting time to the acquisition of these skills?

A fifth problem is that students do not learn, from this exercise at least, how to use a computer or word-processor or how to make citations and build up a bibliography. My response is that this problem too is not serious. One could, to begin with, require students to include bibliography and citations in the notes brought to class. Secondly, most students are already learning these sorts of skills in other classes (as English composition classes in particular). But even were they not, I think the skills they are learning from my practice are superior to those they learn from the other practice. The

latter skills are also fairly easy to acquire on one's own outside class (they are of a fairly mechanical sort); the former are not.

A sixth problem concerns students with disabilities, who need, say, to use a computer and cannot write by hand or who are subject to severe anxiety attacks. Well, in their case I make, in consultation with the office for student disabilities, all the adjustments necessary. The exercise in their case might, therefore, turn out to be completely different. But let that be. The difficulties students with disabilities face are such that their very struggle to learn and get a degree at all requires the development of skills and qualities of character of a very high order. That is enough for me.

These, then, are some of the problems associated with my practice of getting students to write essays by hand in class. I do not think these problems are serious enough to make my practice clearly a bad one. On the contrary, I think my practice has much more going for it than against it. I certainly do not think my students suffer any harm as a result. I have detected none at any rate. The students themselves, or those who do actually go through with the exercise, seem to agree. I have had many favorable responses and hardly any unfavorable ones. I manage also to teach the same things and in the same way. My classes are not different, in other words, except in this one respect. So if I am at all a good teacher, I am no worse a teacher for following this practice. Indeed, if my students benefit in the ways I claim, I think I am probably a better one.