

# In Your Own Words?

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and English and Film Studies  
Session 7: Plagiarism  
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FGSR Teaching Development Week

What I won't talk about--  
academic fraud, cheating  
(which can come two ways):

1. Easy to catch by  
online searches.

2. Nearly impossible to  
catch.

For many different reasons, some students will cheat and some of those who do will never be detected—and we all agree that this undermines academic integrity and is a bad thing.

What I will talk about—

some thoughtful research on  
plagiarism, raising questions  
about some of our underlying  
assumptions, and about  
**prevention.**

Or rather, what we do best--

# Teach

(Luckily, most of us are much better at teaching than we are at policing—and we enjoy teaching more).

**Basic premise** (based on an insight of Cheryl Glenn, Distinguished Visitor in Writing Studies, September 2010--Liberal Arts Research Professor of English and Women's Studies at The Pennsylvania State University)—

“If you haven't taught it, you can't mark down for it. . . .”

Or, as another scholar puts it, we need to teach our students the “hierarchy of skills involved in citation practices” and “if we are teaching them a skill, we cannot penalize them for not doing it correctly. Who would ever think that expulsion from school would be an appropriate response to incorrect punctuation?”

Eric Prochaska, “Western Rhetoric and Plagiarism: Gatekeeping for an English-Only International Academia.” *Writing on the Edge*. 12.2 (2001) 69.

Further, since every academic discipline has different conventions for working with sources, you can't expect instructors in English or Writing Studies to prepare *your* students for *your* field's expectations.

If certain practices in your subject area matter to you, *you* need to make the time to teach them in class.

For example,  
exact quotations are crucial in  
essays for English lit classes, but  
are usually inappropriate for  
papers in upper-level chemistry  
classes.

When we caution students (even in English lit classes) about excessive or clumsy use of exact quotation, we often encourage them to summarize or paraphrase sources “in their own words.”

But--what does the  
admonition to put  
something “in your own  
words” mean to a student  
for whom English is a 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>  
or 4<sup>th</sup> language?  
In *whose* words exactly?

A few perspectives to  
consider and discuss:

Rebecca Moore Howard, known for her research on plagiarism issues, emphasizes how closely our notions of intellectual property and intellectual theft are connected to capitalistic concerns—and how students from other cultures can find the notion of “owning” ideas quite puzzling.

*Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators* (Norwood: Ablex, 1999).

“Though Americans, in particular, are fortunate that English is the current world language, we have gone so far as to demand that when someone uses our linguistic features that they must also adopt our ideology, in the form of our rhetoric. . . . In the process of globalization and world dominance of one language, we eradicate not only native tongues, but also rhetorical patterns and ideologies.”

“How do we delineate what is or is not plagiarism? Is it copying a specified number of words in a row? . . . . ESL students are not qualified to judge what constitutes a unique or inspired expression in English. In some cases, they merely borrow lucid phraseology, unaware that someone had claimed exclusive rights to that association of words in that context.

# What does Prochaska suggest?

Like R. M. Howard, he would separate fraud from insufficient citation or a student's misunderstanding of citation conventions, proposing that we "address mistakes in citation as part of the learning process, not as a transgression" (76).

But he wants to go further—

“We must not punish students for anything less than a paper which is completely and directly copied from an identified source. . . . We should focus our efforts on inclusion, not gatekeeping. Do I mean to eradicate the Western tradition in favor of others? No. But . . . to relax our positions toward students writers’ employment of source texts through patchwriting is hardly likely to cause a surge in unoriginal papers. [Instead] it may just help us adjust our perspective so that instead of tracing where a student pilfered words, we can see where a student absorbed some knowledge.”

## Other thought-provoking sources:

Peter Elbow. "Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond 'Mistakes,' 'Bad English,' and 'Wrong Language'" *Journal of Advanced Composition* (1999). [http://works.bepress.com/peter\\_elbow/12](http://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/12)

Rebecca Moore Howard, "Sexuality and Textuality: The Cultural Work of Plagiarism." *College English* 62 (2000):473-91.

Russ Hunt, "Two Cheers for Plagiarism"  
<http://www.stu.ca/~hunt/2cheers.htm>

See also—

Robert Troyer, “In Your Own Words? Balancing at the Sharp End of Language” —forthcoming in the US edition of *Conversations about Writing* (based on a paper delivered at the Oregon Rhetoric and Composition Conference, April 2012)

Russ Hunt, “Two Cheers for Plagiarism,” 2003--  
available online at

<http://www.stu.ca/~hunt/2cheers.htm>

Troyer focuses on some of the complex linguistic moves that we expect students to make (without explicit instruction) when we ask them to put source material “into their own words”: information selection and changes in both word choice and sentence structure.

Russ Hunt (in “Two Cheers for Plagiarism”) emphasizes writing as a powerful mode of learning and raises an important question:

If a student really wants to learn something and if writing is one of the most effective ways to learn something, why would a student give a writing opportunity away?

Even more puzzling, why give away the opportunity to receive thoughtful feedback on one's own writing?--since a large part of what student tuition pays for is the attentive reading of and time-consuming responding to the writing students produce.

From Hunt's point of view, it's simple—if something important is going on in a classroom, students will want to participate. They'll want to learn and they'll want to use their writing to help them learn. Plagiarism is just not useful in such a scenario.

Peter Elbow's article is particularly interesting in contrast with the wording we have been asked to include in our course syllabi in the Faculty of Arts starting this term:

**Students in language courses** should be aware that, while seeking the advice of native or expert speakers is often helpful, excessive editorial and creative help in assignments is considered a form of “cheating” that violates the code of student conduct with dire consequences. An instructor or coordinator who is convinced that a student has handed in work that he or she could not possibly reproduce without outside assistance is obliged, out of consideration of fairness to other students, to report the case to the Associate Dean of the Faculty. Before unpleasantness occurs consult <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/TIE/>; also discuss this matter with any tutor(s) and with your instructor.

The use of the word “cheating” here and the inclusion of “editorial” along with “creative” help are problematic for those of us who teach the necessity of multiple drafts and revision based on feedback from a wide range of thoughtful readers, from the instructor to writing centre tutors to peers in class.

Part of what we hope to teach is that such feedback, drafting, and revision will help each student produce much stronger pieces of writing—indeed, “work that he or she could not possibly reproduce without outside assistance”—but work that is still very much the student’s own, resulting in intense learning throughout the revising and editing process.

In "Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond 'Mistakes,' 'Bad English,' and 'Wrong Language'" (next 3 slides), Peter Elbow challenges notions of "cheating" specifically in relation to copy-editing final drafts (where the research, the ideas, the organization, and the sentences are unquestionably the work of the student):

We don't object when professional writers are given free copy-editing by publishers. Why should we object if students also get help? As teachers of writing, we need to recognize that taking whatever steps are needed for successful copy-editing is an important and inherent part of *what it means to be a writer*. . . . The central thing here is a shift in what we require: not the impossible demand that all our students know enough about English grammar and conventions of usage to do it all without help, but rather the pragmatic and feasible demand that they know how to take charge of their writing process and do what is needed. I now simply make this a required part of my course. . . for the four or five most important essays of the semester.

“Help in copy-editing is not plagiarizing-- unless you want to say that all published authors are guilty of plagiarism. It makes me happy when students figure out how to get the help they need. This is feasible knowledge, and it is crucial for success in future courses and jobs. If I say they have to copy-edit successfully without help, I am setting them up for inevitable failure, no matter how hard I try to teach grammar and spelling.”

“And as for real or substantive plagiarism, this approach is actually a big help. It is much easier to know if students are really writing their own papers when I see early and middle and even late drafts . . . for it is inherent in this approach to use at least three drafts on major essays as we move towards an additional copy-edited, ‘publication draft.’ I also have them do plenty of informal writing in class and I see a certain amount of that.”

So--when we say to a student, “Put things in your own words,” we’re making a multitude of assumptions about language, about culture, about the writing process, about productive and necessary forms of collaboration. To steal the title of a recent Hollywood film, “It’s complicated.”