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OBSERVER

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By CAROLYN FOSTER SEGAL

Not all plagiarists achieve fame and in-depth coverage by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Chronicle*; most are students toiling in relative obscurity, cutting and pasting or lifting in its entirety the work of others. Intellectual-property rights in the 21st century may indeed be pre-empted by a return to the centuries-earlier, precopyright practice of "If I find a poem nailed to the church door, I can simply change the names and make it mine." In place of the church door, we have the global window of the computer. Technology has raised the crafty business of plagiarism and its detection to a whole new level.

My college has both an honor code and an ethics program. It also has an official but vague policy on plagiarism, which leaves the final determination of punitive measures up to the individual instructor; the college does ask instructors to file a report with the provost's office. In the first week of the semester, I hand out a syllabus with a description of and warning about plagiarism. I also spend time in that first week and throughout the semester describing ways to present secondary sources (direct quotation, paraphrase, summary); the categories of plagiarism (poor or lazy formatting of sources, unintentional, intentional); and the consequences of plagiarism (a grade of F for the paper, and, at my discretion, a grade of F for the course).

As I outline the categories of venal and mortal transgressions, I'm often reminded of Sister Mary Helen, my second-grade teacher, who drew an illustration of the soul on the blackboard: a chalk circle, which she then filled with a snowstorm of dots representing our sins. A colleague of mine has created a marvelous high-tech version of his lecture on the sin of plagiarism, a Web site with allusions to Dante and the eighth circle of hell. Neither threat of failure nor fear of everlasting damnation, however, seems to deter some students.

Even an emphasis on the process of writing — an earthly procedure more concrete than threats of divine retribution, involving drafts and peer-review sessions — does not stop some students, who will brazen their way through a barrage of probing questions in workshops. Their final papers usually feature blocks of silky-smooth contraband prose, interspersed with ungrammatical and unclear changes designed to cover up their theft.

For it is theft, plain and simple — or, more accurately, complex — as I tell my students. It is theft of another writer's ideas, work, and time; it is theft of their fellow students' time; it is theft of their own time, honor, and education; and it is theft of my time — minutes, hours, and days — that I'd rather spend reading, writing, or watching a softball game. And not only is it unethical, it's foolish. One of my husband's degrees is in library science — he once worked as a reference librarian — and I supported myself through most of graduate school by working in libraries. I teach research methods, for God's sake. I also have a tech wizard living in my basement — my 17-year-old daughter. "So just don't do it," I tell my students.

And most of them don't — not because of all my lectures, but because they are honest, love writing, and want to learn how to do it better. Over time, their hard work has made the plagiarism by the few all the more

appalling to me.

The most recent incident involved a student's submitting a retitled appropriation of the poem "When We Two Parted," complete with "thee" and "thy," for her final project in "Creative Writing: Poetry." Charmed by a blogger's use of the lines, the student had apparently traced them to another blog created by someone who is a big fan of a writer he calls "George Gordon" (the poet formerly known as Lord George Gordon Byron). In another incident, in a nonfiction class, a student presented as her own work the text of a 2004 online human-resources guide. In terms of detection, this was a personal best: It took me 30 seconds to find the site after typing in one of the subheadings.

On another occasion, I didn't have to search at all: After a creative-writing student ended her dramatic reading of her newest attempt, the student sitting next to her said, "Why am I thinking of 'The Last Unicorn'?" As a quick click verified, she was thinking of Jimmy Webb's theme song for the animated film because the student had appropriated the lyrics.

The most outstanding act of plagiarism by a student I have encountered — an act of theft surrounded by a virtual web of lies — occurred two years ago in a nonfiction class, "Writing for Publication," and involved a woman who should have known better. G. was in her 40s and in her senior year; her major was information technology. At the beginning of the semester, I gave my usual lecture on the need for both students and professional writers to cite or handle sources responsibly. For the first workshop, G. brought a piece called "Ten Ways for Working Students to Cope With Stress." It was of nearly publishable quality, but there was something strange about it. Polished and professional, it lacked only one thing — or, more precisely, one part of speech. It contained no articles — the omission apparently a clever attempt to disguise the act of plagiarism.

I found "10 Ways the Working Student Can Cope With Stress" online in 10 minutes. The eighth listing of a search, the piece was a publication of the Counseling Center at the University of Pittsburgh. (I simply typed in the key words "ten ways cope stress," conscious of the fact that now I too had been reduced to eliminating all articles. I e-mailed the student, asking her to meet with me before the next day's class; then I returned to the site, hoping to find some additional tips on stress.

The student had agreed to come in at 11 a.m. In preparation, I printed out the online article and typed up a report. I made duplicate copies — of the article, the student's paper, my report, my assignment sheet, my rubric, the course's syllabus with the sections on plagiarism highlighted — for the chairman of my department, the acting provost, the student's adviser, and the director of the advising center. The student arrived at 12:30 p.m., an hour and a half late and just half an hour before our class was scheduled to meet.

I asked G. to tell me about her process, and she began: She had to find a topic, make notes, and "get just the right words." I was tempted to jump up like Perry Mason, wave the printout of the original article, and say sternly, "And you got them right here, didn't you?" but I waited. "My only concern," she said, and then paused. I wanted her to tell me that she didn't "get" the assignment — really, both of our lives would have been simpler and happier, and I wouldn't have to send off all those packets of duplicates. "My only concern," she continued, "is that I didn't do the heading correctly, and so I won't get an A."

I explained that the format, while incorrect, was not my greatest worry, and that, in fact, I had a far more serious concern — plagiarism. And so began the stages of plagiarism grief:

Disbelief: How could I accuse her?

Denial: This was her own original work.

Astonishment: How could she and someone else have produced identical texts?

Confusion, Part 1: She forgot to acknowledge her source.

Confusion, Part 2: My assignment was not clear; she didn't realize that she actually had to produce her own original work.

Plea No. 1: No one could ever produce original work on her topic (which had been her choice).

Plea No. 2: Allow her to add a citation now.

Plea No. 3: Allow her to redo the assignment and remain in the course.

Plea No. 4: She didn't just cut and paste; she typed the entire essay herself.

Plea No. 5: Change the grade for the paper to C, on the grounds of the above.

Plea No. 6: All right, give the paper an F; just don't award a final grade of F.

Defense: I never mentioned plagiarism in class.

Accusation: I am mean and unfair.

My plagiarist tried — unsuccessfully — to withdraw from the course to avoid her F and, when that didn't work, appealed my charges. Despite the student's protests and appeals, both my chairman and acting provost supported my decision to award the student a final grade of F for the course (possibly the earliest-recorded final grade in the history of academe). The following semester, G. repeated the course with another instructor in order to, as her adviser said, "*reclaim* [emphasis mine] her good name."

I've had work of my own used without my permission. One of my essays appeared online both as part of a fundamentalist church's newsletter (the theme of the issue was honesty) and as required reading for a journalism course. In reply to my letter of complaint, the pastor of the church pointed out — uncharitably — that he knew of two other Web sites where my pirated work appeared and that "at least we included your name." The professor of the journalism course never answered my letter. According to her home-page bio, she had a degree in journalism ethics.

It's the brave/sad new world of the Internet, where every blogbaby can have his or her Warholian 15 minutes of fame; it's a global market with everything ripe for the picking; it's the new frontier with no law and no order. On one of the days that the grievance process with G. was tediously unwinding, my in-house information specialist, my technology-savvy daughter, sent me an e-mail message at work. She wanted me to check out a hit she had found on Google: A term-paper company was selling essays about an article of mine on student excuses.

Carolyn Foster Segal is an associate professor of English at Cedar Crest College.

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