The Language Game

Plagiarism: The Unfun Game

Joyce Armstrong Carroll

At a party I attended, the host trailed out some games and the fun began. Groups formed to Probe, Scrabble, Spill 'n Spell. A few individuals tried to outsmart transistorized brains. We all played to win.

As I waited my turn (my opponent stared long and hard at her seven tiles), the idea happened. Why not invent a game called Plagiarism? I conjured the board, shaped and styled like Monopoly with alternating courts, jails, accused pilferers, legal cases, companies selling research papers, and pick-a-card squares. The cards would contain plagiarism charges, copyright rules, and apt quotations. Miniature typewriters, recorders, and photocopy machines would serve as markers while play money and dice would complete the equipment. Most important, the game would present a no-win situation. Players would spend much time and money, but no one would ever "pass Go and collect $200."

"Maybe that would help students understand," I thought as my opponent ironically attached P L A G I A R to a Y on the board.

"Fifty extra points," she announced smugly. (Everyone likes to win.)

Picture it. You begin play in The Public Domain, roll the dice, count the number of squares, and land on Alex Haley's Roots, for example, where you pay $100,000 lawyers' fees even though the 1977 suit brought by Margaret Walker Alexander was dismissed. Your next roll places you on Maurice Barrymore's Nadjezda. Here, despite the efforts of your shrewd New York lawyer, you lose again, this time to Victorien Sardou, creator of La Tosca. And so you move from Gail Sheehy's Passages to Norman Mailer's Marilyn, losing every time. Occasionally you land on The Quality Bullshit Co. or Academic Research Writing, Inc., where you pay $10 per page times whatever you roll. If you land on cases like John Gardner's The Life and Times of Chaucer, you go to court. There, after missing three turns, you roll the dice: odd number determines theft; even number, paraphrase. Landing on a pick-a-card square marks you a loser, too. You might be charged with copyright infringement or plagiarism, or you might be notified that copyright duration (life of the author plus fifty years) has not expired. In these cases you miss five turns. Other cards, those with quotations such as Emerson's Read Tasso, and you think of Virgil; read Virgil, and you think of Homer; and Milton forces you to reflect how narrow are the limits of human invention or Milton's For such kind of borrowing as this, if it be not bettered by the borrower, among good authors is accounted Plagiar consistently direct you to pay a fine, spend time in jail, or both.

Clearly there is one difference between the games played that night at the party and the game I created. While designed to make a point, mine wasn't for fun. With no winner, no one would want to play—or would they? Perhaps by imitating professionals, succumbing to advertisements, or taking what appears the easy way out, students play and replay the real life game of plagiarism. Since we all know that, I'd like to explore this unfun language game.

Exploration uncovers divergency. Definitions range from those found in dictionaries to single words signifying immoral intent—lying, cheating, stealing, dishonesty, deception. But no word in use quite works for O'Neill who coined paraphrase.

Speculations over the causes of this unfun game also vary. Brown (1975), after tapping student discussions, advances *misconceptions*. Saalbach (1970) contends the reason resides in immature psychology, a cause echoed by Irmscher who views “plagiarism more as a psychological problem than a moral issue” (1979). My students tell me that assignments beyond their abilities force plagiarism. Dabney mentions pressures, falsification of grades, and “the craze to field winning athletic teams” (1966). Harakas (1978) records other opinions, including Denis O’Donovan’s claim that “it’s a disillusionment with Nixon and the whole Watergate thing,” and “It’s the result of the general decline of education,” says Norman Kent. He offers as proof the response of one student charged with plagiarism, “I ain’t guilty of plagiarism. I don’t even know what it is.”

Deterrents also run the gamut. Some are casual, some cavalier, some rigid, some preventive, some penal. “The less preachment the better,” advises Irmscher (1979), whereas Waltman (1980) suggests a method admittedly prescriptive. Esch and Gladstein (1979) urge the adoption of their step-by-step checklist. And in her attempt to outfox fraud, Wagner (1977) notes four approaches: topic lists, oversight, rigid form, and the one she finds most successful, level of research quality. Others recommend expulsion, suspension, failure, reprimand, discussion, placing the offense on the student’s record, bettering assignments, instituting honor codes, and getting students to think critically. Brickman’s notion of assigning “a para-professional research assistant who would dig out the data for the student to ‘flesh out’” (1972) wins as the most idealistic idea.

That we’ve defined, speculated, and penalized, that we’ve cautioned, threatened, and cajoled about academic pillering (sometimes even peppering our warnings with horror stories) is fact. But another fact looms: plagiarism in and out of school continues.

Perhaps we’ve forgotten something important. Shipley reminds us “what we apply to literary property, the Romans applied to personal; *L. plagiare, plagiare*—to steal a free man” (1945). If the Romans were right, and if our belief that writing exists as an extension of self is correct, then plagiarism, in a classical and contemporary sense, is *personnapping*.

The idea of *personnapping* shocks most students because they rarely experience what Faulkner calls “the agony and sweat” of direct writing, so they rarely respect “the agony and sweat” of others’ writings. For most, writing exists *out there*—an abstraction bound in books and available for the taking. Thus, their ignoring of attribution, their failing to ascribe sources, their rearranging of words, rises as a habit bred from a lack.

So it appears we’re in the business of preventive *personnapping*, or, if you prefer, personalizing the writing and referencing processes. With that goal in mind, I’d like to invite you to minimize plagiarism by using synergetic writing activities coupled with multiple drafting activities. Allow students class writing time; let them see you writing. Encourage students to read their pieces aloud—often—in both large and small groups. You read too. Allot time for in-class teacher and student conferences. Require trial and rough drafts. These activities make students aware of everyone’s “agony and sweat,” and they often turn unfun into fun.

Another antidote for *personnapping* is a *personnoting* page. Affixed between the cover sheet and text, this page is the place where students can acknowledge everyone who helped with their paper in anyway—people in and out of books, in and out of class—teachers, friends, family, librarians, authors, lyricists, lecturers, and editors (even Webster and Roget). As for incentive, make it clear this page is stylistically open; it may be written in any form, tone, voice.

Shellie Forrest, for example, in “An Adventure through Story Reading,” noted that “Mrs. Dillard, my elementary school librarian, read stories to us in a manner I always loved. I wish to thank her for being such an inspiration.”

Lynn Garner credited “*The American Heritage*
Dictionary} which aided my poor spelling more than anyone will know." I knew. Her paper contained no spelling errors.

In "Come into My World," Dawn Matthews extended "Thomas O. Mathews II (my big brother) a very special thanks for sending me books on autism from Trinity University."

Kevin Brown unabashedly wrote, "I want to thank my father (Pops) for nagging me to get this paper done," while Joni Bishop panned to a peer (her paper was on dreams), "Mucho Gracias, for keeping this paper from becoming a nightmare."

Natalie Warren, in her "how to" make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich essay, humorously lauded the food producers, "We will forever lick our lips to you," and Annette Evers assumed a facetious tone in her Cajun crawfish piece when she thanked the crawfish "for not pinching me when I put them in to cook."

In a lyrical paper, "Dragons of the Sea," Daniel DeLos Santos simply acknowledged "the Jay-Rollins librarians for helping me locate the material I used in my paper," while Kyle Hunt formally thanked his roommate for his "contribution of grammatical guidance."

Quite informally, Steve Williamson awarded me "thirteen free skiing lessons and a bottle of Absorbine Jr. for helping with punctuation and clarity." You guessed it; his paper was on water skiing.

Golda Harris received a nod from daughter Vicki "for being a representative of the respected nursing profession." Vicki's persuasion paper was titled "A Battle for Respect."

Finally, I must include among this smattering of samples Teresa Seldon's terrific paper on the Atlanta child murders. Generally lackadaisical about writing, she punctuated her paper with an original five stanza poem, "Why Us?," on her personnoting page.

This constant crediting eventually becomes habitual; referencing easier, plagiarism harder, and students wait eagerly for their names when we read aloud. They admit, too, they are bothered if they forget someone, as I would be if I failed to note you who faithfully read this column. I value your notes, suggestions, contributions, and hard work. To you who teach in classrooms everywhere, know you are the persons most worth noting.

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*Education Digest* 38 (November 1972): 56-57.


