

An Open Letter to Faculty: Some Thoughts on Plagiarism from "Colonel Cheatbuster"

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During the summer term of 2008, some interesting and disturbing occurrences took place in two of my classes. Six of my students (that I am aware of) cheated on quizzes or examinations or plagiarized papers. Two of them wrote me e-mails admitting that they cheated either on the final exam or on quizzes, and both of them told me that they felt guilty, and this is why they ratted on themselves. Four other students plagiarized significant portions of essays/papers (these students didn't rat on themselves and apparently didn't feel guilty enough—or they didn't feel guilty at all—to self-report).

The reason I'm relating this story is that, after long experience teaching (27 years including graduate student teaching eons ago, serving as an adjunct for many years, and full time faculty appointments over the past 13+ years) and after dealing for the past seven years with cheaters, plagiarists, and others who are sent to the academic integrity seminar that I teach here at UCF, it is time for all of us to take a stand on the problem by providing appropriate instruction to our students and by following up on those who engage in dishonest actions.

I know that some of you don't use turnitin.com at all or on a regular basis. This is completely up to you. But all four of the plagiarism cases that I detected in the summer term were detected using it, and were not detected by my eagle-eye for such things, nor did I suspect it while reading. This is because plagiarism is becoming more and more sophisticated by being committed with less and less sophisticated sources. I'll explain, briefly.

One of the ways in which we commonly detect plagiarism is when a student's paper, riddled with errors otherwise, suddenly contains sections or paragraphs that are written with the beauty of Hobbesian style (and yes, for those nay-sayers about content, Hobbes' writing is still beautiful) or Shakespearean eloquence. When this happens, many will resort to a quick Google search for suspicious phrases and think that enough has been done when the search yields results (or fails to do so). We also may think we've done enough when we read a choppy, ill-structured paper and believe that even though this may not be an instance of work of stellar proportions, it is at

least the student's own work and writing. This, however, is not necessarily the case. Simply put, our belief that we have some intuitive means to detect plagiarism, or that a quick Google search will find what we need, are no longer effective in detecting plagiarism.

Students are now snatching entire sections of papers from blogs, news sources, personal web sites, and other online sources that are simply neither academically sound nor very well written. I would not have detected these particular instances of plagiarism without the use of turnitin.com because there were no red flags that came up in the process of reading papers that would have indicated something was amiss. Nor would I have put them in a Google search since they weren't all that well written and nothing in the content or structure of the papers indicated to me that it would be a good idea to submit the papers for electronic review. Further, Google searches are tedious and time-consuming when the number of student papers to be reviewed is large while an electronic detection system is not. I previously made use of turnitin.com only sporadically. Things have changed.

In the summer of '08, I decided on the spur of the moment simply to submit all student work from that term to Turnitin.com. The result of doing so was four papers showing a very significant percentage of the writing coming from a wide variety of very mediocre or simply badly written and non-academic Internet sources.

I am not surprised by finding that four of the papers were plagiarized. What surprised me was to find that these papers were plagiarized and I would have never expected under ordinary circumstances that those four papers were plagiarized at all. They were not eloquently written, there were no "red flags" that arose for me when reading them, and the students in question had done solid enough work in the courses earlier in the term. Because this is the case, I began wondering (again) why students who otherwise appeared to be solid academic citizens would resort to plagiarism. After reflecting on the academic integrity seminar and informal discussions with students who attend it, I think that some of the comments below will be of some interest to other faculty members.

The seminar that I created and teach, the Office of Student Conduct/Department of Philosophy Seminar in Academic Integrity, was created in 2001 at the request of Patricia MacKown from the Office of Student Conduct and Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities. Over the past several years, I have had some interesting discussions with students who attend the seminar. Some of the things they say and indicate are important for all of us to know. Below are some things they say when explaining or excusing themselves about academic dishonesty.

1. Of course I copied the information in that paper. I couldn't have said it any better myself. This was my position to begin with, and I simply found an author who agreed with me. So why write it all up myself? (I heard this one during

- a seminar in summer 2008.)
2. It is that professor's fault that my paper contained uncited material. The requirements shouldn't have been so hard. So the professor should have been taught to teach better, and then I wouldn't have plagiarized. (I heard this one in the spring term 2008 and many times in the past.)
 3. All professors have different requirements. How am I supposed to know what to do in this class (i.e., the one in which the student plagiarized)? (I've heard this one so many times I can't count them.)
 4. I don't know how to do research, so it's not my fault. Nobody told me. (This is very common.)
 5. I didn't have time to write down all the sources. It was all a big mistake. (This is standard.)
 6. My friend/roommate/spouse, etc. wrote the paper for me, so I didn't plagiarize, that person did. (Rare, but I've heard it more than once, and check out the irony in it.)
 7. It's not in my major. Who cares? (VERY common.)
 8. I would NEVER do anything like plagiarize. Prove to me that I did. (That's not hard to do.) (This I recently heard from a student from one of my own classes. I proved to him that he did by showing him content from his paper and from web sites that are identical. He apologized. Too little, too late.)
 9. I put all of it into my own words. (Very common, and generally not even true. Most students don't know that paraphrasing requires citations.)

And the list of really bad excuses and reasons goes on and on.

So, being that I deal with these issues both for the university on the whole with the seminars, and for myself in my own classes, I'm writing this simply as a reminder that turnitin.com is free for UCF faculty members to use. UCF pays for it. You can have your students submit their papers, or you can submit them yourself. My personal preference is the latter since it is possible for the student to submit one paper in hard copy to you that is plagiarized and one to the site that is not, in which case, unless you look at both versions, you won't necessarily know that the one you're reading is the plagiarized one. This rarely happens, but it is something to watch out for. The solution is to read only the version submitted online. Further, turnitin.com now comes with a "Grade mark" feature that lets you create your own rubric and grade papers online for students to pick up online at the site. I personally use my own macros in Word for online grading (it saves an amazing amount of time to be able to hit Alt-G to have "grammatical error" pop up right in the text, for example), but in any case, these things are there for you to use. I think it is a good idea to take advantage of its availability.

It is not perfect. It also picks up direct quotations and shows you the source from which they came. This is not plagiarism. So you can't just look at the report code and see that, for example, 29% of the paper is a match with sites and other papers submitted to turnitin.com and determine from there that the student plagiarized. You DO have to look at the paper and

compare the sites. But it is well worth the time and it is very little effort.

It is not an indication of poor teaching to detect and report instances of academic dishonesty. It is, in fact, the opposite. If you let these instances go, you are contributing to the problem. We are all REQUIRED at UCF to report them (as indicated in the UCF Golden Rule). But in any event, we should report them. Academic dishonesty is an insidious problem that, in many instances, can be seen as a symptom of our society's anti-intellectualism and the attendant and common attitude that academic requirements are "elitist." But that's for a paper that I'm currently writing, so I'll stop right here concerning that. I write this to all of you as a foot soldier in the war on academic dishonesty who has risen in the ranks, with battlefield commissions, to officer status. Just call me "Colonel Cheatabuster."

A New Way to Connect with Your Students Online

Donald Merritt



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Beginning this semester UCF has entered into a partnership with Adobe® to offer hosted licenses for Adobe® Connect to UCF faculty and staff. We would like to take a moment to answer some questions about Connect and how it is being used at UCF. These are by no means the only questions but they are some of the more common ones we have had so far. If you have others, feel free to contact me directly (dmerritt@mail.ucf.edu).

Q. What is Adobe Connect?

A. Adobe Connect is a program in Adobe's Acrobat line of software that allows you to collaborate over the Internet. You can share your computer screen, create whiteboards, text, audio and video chat, and several other functions all through your browser window. You can also easily upload Flash and PowerPoint files to share with others in your meeting. Adobe describes it as "high impact web conferencing." The idea is to bring web tools together in one place to allow you to do more work with less hassle.

Q. Is this a replacement for Webcourses?

A. Adobe Connect is not being offered as a replacement for any teaching modality currently in use at UCF. It is not the same kind of Learning Management System as is provided