

Teaching Strategy: “Fostering Ethical Writing”

The news has been filled in recent years with stories about unethical writers, people who have been caught using other writers’ words and ideas without citing the source. In the academic world, such borrowing is a serious breach of ethics, with serious consequences. One university president, who borrowed too freely in a convocation speech without mentioning his source, was forced to resign his position. Recently, some history professors’ books were found to contain long passages taken verbatim from sources, the result—they claimed—of careless note taking. Whether deliberate or accidental, such mistakes can destroy a person’s career.

With the advent of the internet and the easy availability of materials and content, students can quickly rationalize academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, by using reasoning such as “They had the same idea as me—and they said it better!” Students may also plagiarize less deliberately, not realizing that material that is so easy to copy and paste from the Web must be treated as a quotation and cited as a source. Students need to know the consequences of plagiarizing are severe, ranging from failure on the writing project to failure in the course and even to suspension or expulsion from the university. Many universities will also indicate on a student’s transcript if there has been an honor violation, something potential employers will see.

A mini-lesson to discuss plagiarism, its effects, with authentic examples can be beneficial in showing the significance of the issue. Some well-known examples that your students can research can include:

Jayson Blair: plagiarized articles and manufactured quotations in stories for the New York Times. He and several editors from the Times were forced to resign.

Kaavya Viswanathan: first novel *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life* is reported to contain plagiarized passages from at least five other novels. All editions of the book were subsequently withdrawn, her publishing deal with Little, Brown and Co. was rescinded, and a film deal with DreamWorks SKG was cancelled.

Stephen Ambrose: incorporating passages from the works of other authors into many of his books. He was first accused in 2002 by two writers for copying portions about World War II bomber pilots from Thomas Childers’ *The Wings of Morning* in his book *The Wild Blue*. After Ambrose admitted to the errors, the New York Times found further unattributed passages, and “Mr. Ambrose again acknowledged his errors and promised to correct them in later editions.”



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Integrating Ethics:

From Thought to Action

Shia LaBeouf: released a short film “HowardCantour.com” online. However, almost immediately after posting it, allegations began to rise that it was a plagiarism of a 2007 graphic novel “Justin M. Damian,” written by Daniel Clowes. LaBeouf took down the film and apologized for the plagiarism, however, it was later revealed that that apology was lifted, in large part, from a response on Yahoo Answers. A further apology by LaBeouf plagiarized other apologies from Tiger Woods, Robert McNamara and Kanye West. Now, in addition to Clowes’ publisher considering legal action, another publisher is claiming that the actor’s mini-comic “Slate N Mate” borrowed heavily from a Benoit Duteurtre novel “The Little Girl and the Cigarette” and is considering legal action as well.



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