

## ON ORIGINAL WORK

Despite the many common objectives we have as teachers in higher education—such as the goal of teaching our students to write well—we all know that each of our disciplines has its own standards for thinking and writing and conducting scholarly work. If a student in my Creative Nonfiction course handed me a paper that was written in the passive-voiced prose typical of a piece of research in the sciences or social sciences, I would mark it all up and send it back for revision. A student in my Senior Seminar who turned in a research paper using APA formatting and citation would get the same treatment. To a certain extent, we can see similar distinctions between what defines academically honest and dishonest work within the disciplines. When I am asking students to write their original interpretations of works of literature we are studying, I assume that they will derive those interpretations on their own, without collaborating with their peers. Joe Hoyle, by contrast, expects and encourages his students to get together before class and discuss the questions and problems in his course, perhaps because he well knows how collaboration will play an important role in their careers as accountants.

No doubt many (if not most) of the standards of academic honesty are shared ones—shared among Joe Hoyle in accounting, you in chemistry, me in English, and the students in all three of our courses. We all know that you don't peer at your neighbor's exam and copy down the answers you see there, that

you don't cut and paste material from the internet without citing it, and that you don't hire someone else to write a paper or take a test for you. In response to a question about the difference between healthy and unhealthy foods, a diet guru I saw on public television late one night pointed out that if he loaded up a table with a bunch of healthy and unhealthy foods, a six-year-old would probably give you a pretty accurate estimation of which foods fell into which categories. The same is true of academic honesty across the disciplines: most of the behaviors we think about as academically dishonest would be dishonest in any class on campus, and would be recognized as such by your students. So I am not suggesting that we need to offer discipline-specific education to our students on how not to cheat on exams, or how not to plagiarize from Wikipedia. They know that stuff already.

Where matters become more complicated is in the fuzzy territory of what we mean when we ask our students, either individually or in collaboration, to produce "original" work—as I typically ask my students to do when they are writing interpretations of the works of literature we are studying, and as I suspect many of us do when we give out-of-class assessments (and even in-class assessments). "I don't want to hear what some hack writer for SparkNotes thinks about 'Goblin Market,'" I will say to them. "I want to hear what *you* think about it. So give me your own, original interpretation of the poem using the readings from class and the ideas we generated in our course discussion."

To which injunction I am quite certain many students might respond with two very pointed questions: First, "*How* on earth can I, a junior English major, be expected to come up with an original reading of such a complex poem when literary scholars with advanced degrees have been plumbing its depths for more than a hundred years?" And second, "*Why* on earth do you want

me to come up with an “original” interpretation of the poem when a hundred years of study have likely produced dozens of interpretations much better than mine?”

Phrased more generally, I think these two questions are ones that students might pose to faculty in any discipline: *how* do I produce my own work in this discipline, and *why* does it matter that I produce my own work? Those two general questions, it seems to me, are ones that each discipline—and perhaps even each faculty member and each course—has to answer distinctively. And those two questions, it also seems to me, can help form the basis for the more substantial conversation you have with your students about academic honesty and dishonesty in your courses, in addition to the general conversations they might be having through educational campaigns on campus. I can’t answer those two questions for you, since I don’t know what expectations an engineer or a scientist or a linguist or a psychologist might have for students to produce their own original work in those disciplines. So rather than trying to produce a laundry list of what academic honesty looks like in each discipline, and why we expect it of our students, I am simply going to walk through an analysis of what I mean when I ask my students for original work, and why I want them to do it. Afterward, we will consider what aspects of my answers to those two questions belong in my conversations with students. Like any good English professor, I prefer my lessons to come in the form of stories, so I will begin my answer to the two questions of my skeptical (and hypothetical) student above with a (real) tale of one student and two assignments.

Every year on or around January 25th, lovers of Scotland’s most famous bard, Robert Burns, celebrate the anniversary of his birth in 1759 with a traditional evening of poetry, music, drink, and food. Burns Suppers, as they are known, might include

readings of some of Burns’s poems, a dinner of traditional Scottish foods such as haggis or neeps and tatties (turnips and potatoes), performances of folk songs composed or collected by Burns, and plenty of ceremonial toasting and drinking of various forms of whiskey. At a pub near my home that hosts a Burns Supper every year, the evening kicks off with a bagpiper. The Burns Supper helps unite Scots at home and abroad, and lovers of all things Scottish, in a commemoration of the man who still stirs the national pride.

Not a Scot by birthland or ethnic heritage, I have nevertheless long been a lover of the poetry of Robert Burns. So when the opportunity came around for my turn to teach the British Literature Survey II course a couple of years ago (which covers literature from Great Britain and Ireland from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day), I naturally gravitated toward Robert Burns as the starting point for the semester. And when I immersed myself in Burns’s work while I was preparing for the course, I decided that we would end the semester with a traditional Burns Supper in which students in the course would offer performances or readings of the authors we had read in the course in the same way that Burns Supper participants celebrate the works of the famous bard. Then I quickly noted that I could not toast with or drink whiskey with my students, that I didn’t know any bagpipers, that I did not really want to prepare neeps and tatties for thirty students, and that the students would probably rather eat pages from their anthology than a plateful of haggis. So I scaled back my original plans somewhat, but still held onto the notion that we would finish the semester with an evening event in which groups of students would select an author or set of authors that we had read, put together some kind of performance or presentation on that person’s work and its continuing relevance for our lives today, and have some tea and deserts. Ah, as Burns would say, the best-laid schemes . . .

I called the event Burns and Beyond (to indicate that students could present on authors other than Burns) and have held it for the past two years I have taught the course. I count it as one of the most enjoyable evenings of the year, and the student evaluations tell me that the students enjoy it as well. Some students embrace the opportunity to engage in really creative endeavors—such as performing scenes from works we have read, or joining me in musical performances of songs by Burns—while others tend toward more traditional presentations. Nonetheless, they all do an excellent job of fulfilling the main purpose of the assignment: identifying and tracing out connections between the British literature we have read and contemporary cultural productions or political issues from their worlds today. Students have linked poems and stories and plays to obscure American television shows, to songs by rap and country musicians, to debates about the environment, and to popular films. Although I try to ensure that they do not simply collapse important differences between the past and the present, I do want them to see that the works of the writers we have read can still speak to us and help us think more deeply about the cultural and political issues that confront us today.<sup>1</sup>

In my second Burns and Beyond event, one of the best presentations came from a group of students who were English majors with concentrations in elementary or secondary education. The four women in this group decided to take a short story that we had read in class, James Joyce's "Eveline," and put together a lesson plan that could be used to teach this story to middle school students. They drew their inspiration for this from the methods courses they had taken in their education concentration, where they had learned how to construct such plans according to the state's curricular frameworks and objectives. During their presentation they reviewed the lesson plan in detail, which included comparing the story to a painting

by one of their friends that sounded one of the same themes explored in "Eveline." They also showed us the ways in which their lesson plan matched up with the various aspects of the state curriculum framework, interspersing quotations from those guidelines throughout their PowerPoint presentation. The presentation was one of the best ones I have seen in the course of two years of running this event, and they earned themselves a well-deserved A.

What made this all the more surprising and gratifying to me was the fact that one of the members of this group, whom we will call Mary, had been a student in my class three semesters prior to that one, and had cheated on the first assignment of the semester. That class was the gateway course for English majors, in which we run all new majors through a gauntlet of challenging assignments designed to prepare them to write and think effectively in their upper-level courses. In the first assignment of the semester, students were required to write a summary of the main argument of the first chapter of the textbook, on New Critical literary interpretation, and then apply that argument to a poem we had read. When I read Mary's paper, some of the sentences struck me as immediately familiar. After puzzling over them for a few minutes, I looked at the textbook chapter and saw that she had plagiarized those familiar sentences from the textbook. *Really?* I called her in, went through the standard procedures with her (about which I will say more in the next chapter), and we moved forward from there. She seemed genuinely chastised by the incident and became one of the hardest-working students in the class that semester. Even if I had never had her in class again, I would have counted her turnaround in that class as a success story; to see her play a role in the outstanding presentation by her group at the Burns and Beyond celebration made the whole story a doubly-satisfying one for me.

But let's pause here to think about the difference between the

two assignments she completed. In the presentation that she did with her group, the students relied essentially on the interpretation of "Eveline" that we put together in our class discussion of the story. They did not offer a revolutionary reading of Joyce's narrative techniques; it was a fairly conventional reading, citing some of the passages that I had highlighted and analyzed for them in our discussion. They relied on what they had learned in their education courses to construct the main framework for their presentation, and included quoted material from the state's curriculum frameworks. They put into the presentation a painting done by one of their friends, a student who was not in our course. In that sense, you might argue, very little of what the students presented to us could be considered as their own, original work. The same, of course, was true of the summary that Mary wrote for me in the gateway course; she was punished in that course, however, for not producing her own, original work.

Suppose an observer from outside our educational system pointed out to me that in both cases Mary relied on the work of other people to complete her assignment—but in one case was punished for it, and in another case rewarded for it. I could easily point out in response that one major distinction between the two cases was that, in the first instance, Mary did not provide proper credit for the work she had cited from the textbook; in the second instance, she and her groupmates did provide that credit for each of the works they cited. Suppose that observer were to push me a little further on this, however, and ask whether that one little fact—whether or not she named her source—was really all that made the difference between a failed assignment and an excellent one. To that objection I might respond that, no, even if Mary had put quotes around all of the material she had plagiarized from the textbook in the first assignment, that would not have been enough to earn her an A on that summary. What earned Mary and her classmates an A on

the later presentation was their ability to create new and interesting connections within a disparate set of materials that they pulled from multiple sources. This, I would argue, is what we actually refer to—at least in my discipline—when we talk about "original" or "creative" or "innovative" thinking. What Mary did in her summary assignment was simply repeat the words of someone else without making any substantial connections between those words and anything meaningful that she already knew or was able to discover from the assignment. And this, I would argue, is what we usually label as "rote" or "uninspired" or "unoriginal"—and even sometimes "dishonest"—thinking.

Suppose my hypothetical interlocutor (or skeptical student) were to push me even further now, reminding me that—like many of my colleagues—I frequently admonish students that I don't want them simply to repeat what I have told them, or what they have read in their textbooks, or what they read on SparkNotes or from other online sources. I tell them instead that I want them to give me their own "original" thinking on the works of literature we are studying in class. Do I really expect them to come up with "original" interpretations of a story like "Eveline," which has been pored over and analyzed by Joyce scholars and literature students for close to a hundred years now, and which would hardly seem to lend itself to original thinking by anyone these days? Of course I don't. In fact, what I really expect, although I do not always articulate this to them, is precisely what Mary and her group did in our Burns and Beyond presentation: take the material from the course and construct original *connections* between that material and other material from my course and previous courses. In the case of my presentations, which encouraged them to build connections to productions or issues outside of the course, the students did precisely that. But not all courses or assignments, including my own, come with that expectation. Sometimes we simply expect

students to make connections between what we taught them yesterday and what we are teaching today, or what will come tomorrow. Sometimes we expect connections between what they are learning in this course in their major and what they learned in the last course in their major. Sometimes we expect connections between the last assignment and the next one, between what we said at the beginning of class and what we say at the end, or between concept A and concept B.

So it turns out that when I tell my students I want them to express their own, original interpretations of the works of literature we are studying in class, instead of copying the interpretations they find on SparkNotes, with or without giving that source the proper credit, I don't actually expect them to develop "original" interpretations of works of literature that have been under the microscope for decades or even centuries—at least if you take "original" to mean "never been thought of or published by anyone in human history before." I expect them instead to create an original *network of connections*, using the different features of the work, the work and the author's biography, the historical contextual material to which I have introduced them, the critical approaches we have studied in class, their own personal experiences, and any other potential texts or ideas that they believe might help create a richer interpretive network. And if my observer were to push me even further and ask me why I want my students to do *that*, I might respond that, whenever we are talking about original or innovative or creative thinking, we are usually talking about precisely this: connecting in new ways with pre-existing concepts or facts or theories, and using these connections to experience productive new ways of thinking or acting or feeling. That's what the creation of knowledge usually means—the creation of new connections among pre-existing data or theories, which sometimes helps form new data or theories. The digital age has helped us see this more

clearly, since we are all more and more aware of the fact that the amount of pre-existing knowledge in the world is staggeringly large. We don't expect our students or even ourselves to create knowledge *ex nihilo*; we expect instead, to quote E. M. Forster, to "only connect."

If my questioner (who would by now be starting to annoy me) were to push me just one step further and ask me why I want my students to engage in the process of building such connections, as opposed to leaving that work to the advanced scholars in my field, I would point to the literature on human learning to suggest that such connection-building exercises do not merely help us push knowledge in new directions, but also help students learn what we are teaching them more deeply. As Susan Ambrose and her colleagues point out, one main difference between experts and novices in any given field will be "the number or density of connections among the concepts, facts, and skills they know."<sup>2</sup> So novice learners will tend to have facts or skills learned in isolation from one another, and separate from other things they have learned. Experts in a field, by contrast, have rich networks of connections among the various pieces of knowledge they have, and are able to absorb new knowledge by situating it within those richly developed contexts, associating it with other facts or theories. So by asking my students to engage in activities in which they are building their "original" interpretations of a work of literature by creating a unique set of connections within a work, between that work and other works we have studied in the course, and between the work and elements they have studied outside the course, I am helping them to build richer knowledge networks around my course material, which leads to and reflects deeper learning of that material. Because she now associates the story "Eveline" with material from her education courses, with a painting by a friend, and with my course, "Mary" will likely remember and reflect upon that story

much more frequently than she will on the theory of New Critical literary interpretation, which she was learning only for the sake of one assignment.

And so we have arrived once again at that happy juncture where more learning and less cheating meet and join hands. Students who have the opportunity to create their own “original” networks of connections between our course material and their previous or current knowledge learn the material more deeply than students who simply encounter and copy the networks established by others, whether that “copying” takes the form of authorized summaries of some great thinker or unauthorized reproductions of something they found on the internet. Hearing back to one of the guides we considered in the chapter on intrinsic motivation, we can see how Andy Kaufman’s students, for example, are compelled to create unique or original connections between the works of Russian literature they are studying and the human beings sitting in front of them in the juvenile detention center. So Kaufman’s journaling assignments not only eliminate any possibility for the students to cheat in that course—since they depend on the students’ specific experience with the juvenile offenders—and foster intrinsic motivation, but they also help the students create richer connections between the literature they are reading and the world around them, thus leading them (according to the theory of connected knowledge) to learn it more deeply.

This theorizing about the connection between originality and learning came about as a result of confronting and thinking hard about a very legitimate question that our students might pose to us: in the digital age, *how* and *why* do we expect them to come up with their own ideas and create their own work instead of simply relying on the vast amount of ideas that exist out there already? We expect them to come up with their own ideas about our course material because it helps them learn it more deeply,

and we expect them to do so by building connections between our course material and other material they have learned or are learning. As the example of both my Burns and Beyond students and Andy Kaufman’s students might suggest, I think the more we can push them to create connections that stretch outside of the boundaries of our specific classrooms, and even outside the boundaries of our disciplines or our campus, the more likely they are to build up the kind of really rich and interesting networks of connections that might inspire new knowledge and create learning that will last a lifetime.

That’s a statement that I am willing to make only from my limited perspective as a teacher of literature. It may be, after all, that the expectations of a professor in engineering or chemistry or accountancy do not quite look like this. And so I think the two questions with which we started this section are ones that have to be answered by every faculty member individually:

*What* does it mean for students to do their own work in my discipline?

*Why* does it matter?

It may be that many of our answers will look the same, just as many of our expectations for good writing—such as clarity and organization—will look the same. But we won’t know that until and unless we begin to think more explicitly about these questions and talk about how the answers to them manifest in each of our disciplines. First and foremost, I think those conversations are ones that we should hold with each other, in order to clarify the answers for ourselves. Once we have worked out our answers, we can then determine how much of this belongs in the conversations we have with our students about cheating.

Here again, I think that decisions about that can and will vary according to both discipline and individual faculty temperament. I tend to favor transparency in all things in my teaching; I

am constantly explaining to my students the reasons behind whatever we are doing or whatever I am asking them to do. I suspect that students sometimes are looking at me and thinking, "Just teach, dude; quit explaining everything." So I do hold conversations with my students in which I encourage them to draw in texts or theories from other classes they are taking, and I talk to them about how learning works, and I tell them why I tend to run class by discussion rather than lecturing. But that probably reflects my personality more than anything else—as my wife will happily tell you, I can't keep a secret to save my life, and I've written many hundreds of pages about my personal life in my books and essays. You may work and teach differently, and feel less compelled to review with your students the educational philosophies that animate your academic honesty policies.

But I would argue that, in the face of the continuous changes we are seeing both to the nature of information and to the shape of higher education, we are all compelled to ask ourselves these questions and formulate our own answers—and we are equally compelled to make the reasoning behind our academic integrity policies at least available to students, if not to speak with them directly about it. In Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do*, he cites the work of Donald Saari, a math professor from the University of California, who gives his students free rein, at any point in the course, to ask him "Who Gives a Damn?" about whatever they are doing in the course that day. In response to that question, Bain says, Saari will always "stop and explain to the students why the material under consideration at that moment—however abstruse and minuscule a piece of the big picture it may be—is important, and how it relates to the larger questions and issues of the course."<sup>3</sup> Likewise I think we have to remain open to the skeptical students who might ask "Why bother?" Why should they bother to memorize or learn or connect or do their own work when technology can often provide

them with the information they need (more) quickly and efficiently? Why should they bother to do their own work when others can do it better and more easily? Why should they bother to complete an assignment on their own when three of them working together may complete it more effectively?

Those are good questions, deserving of answers—first to ourselves, as fully as possible, and then to our students, in whatever form you believe will help them make a deeper and stronger commitment to academic honesty.

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*For my father*