

Why Plagiarism Matters

During the past several years, charges of plagiarism have been leveled against a number of prominent, and popular, scholars, including Doris Kearns Goodwin (*The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*), Stephen Ambrose (*Citizen Soldier* and four other works), and Alan Dershowitz (*The Case for Israel*) (Humber, 2004; Noah, 2002). More recently, two Harvard law professors, Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., and Laurence Tribe, admitted to using passages from others' works in their own books, without attribution to the original authors (Bombardieri & Mehegan, 2004; Hemel & Schuker, 2004).

As educators, we are committed to teaching our students about the importance of academic honesty in matters of writing, test-taking, and other ways of demonstrating one's own knowledge and work. Academic honesty has special relevance for those preparing to become professionals trusted with caring for and safeguarding the public. It also has special relevance for health professions educators who have the awesome responsibility of preparing competent, safe, and honest health care professionals.

Then, imagine my surprise, when, earlier this year, I came across an opinion piece in another journal with a title similar to that of a *Journal of Nursing Education* (JNE) editorial I had published in January 1999 titled, "Emotional Intelligence: A Missing Ingredient." After retrieving my original editorial and comparing it with the one recently published, my suspicions that my work had been borrowed without credit were, unfortunately, confirmed. With a sense of having been robbed, and with both amazement and dismay that a fellow academic would engage in such behavior, I reported this apparent violation of academic honesty and professional publishing standards to the editor of the other journal and to the publishers of JNE.

This was not a simple matter of the author borrowing a phrase or two from my editorial without citation. It was a wholesale borrowing of the very thesis of my editorial, and lifting, with clever reworking of the actual words, of large "chunks and patterns" (e.g., the Web site <http://www.turnitin.com>, a plagiarism prevention service,

did not detect the violation because there were not eight consecutive, exact words taken from my original piece). As Humber (2004) notes:

Plagiarism is not an inadvertent sentence or phrase here or there, not the coincidental similarities of numerous reports on the same subject, not "quoting" an obviously famous phrase for emphasis or humor or literary effect, not the occasional, isolated brain slip of writing something previously read and then stuck in the mind as one's own. Those things happen all the time, and most writers are chagrined even if they only privately realize they got too close to someone else's work. Plagiarism is measured in chunks and patterns, by detailed analysis. ¶6

To make a long story short, after his own investigation and "detailed analysis," the editor of the other journal concluded that there was indeed sufficient evidence to conclude that plagiarism had occurred, apologized on behalf of the journal, and imposed appropriate sanctions on the author, including a published notice of the offense and the author's removal from the journal's editorial board—that the author was a member of the journal's editorial board makes the violation, in my opinion, even more egregious.

Why does this matter? As nurse educators, we go to great lengths to instill in and role model for our students high standards of academic integrity and honesty, believing these standards to be important not only in our written work, but also as proxies for professional integrity and honesty. Colleges and universities vary in the sanctions they impose on students for plagiarism, ranging from expulsion under the one-penalty honor system to a failing grade on the plagiarized assignment. Why should faculty members be held less responsible for academic honesty than first-year college students? Faculty members, especially seasoned senior educators, as was the case with the individual who plagiarized my work, should be paragons of honesty and integrity in all matters, including, and perhaps especially, in their scholarly works, which purport to expand or add to what we know in a given area of inquiry. Why risk jeopardizing one's hard-won career advancement, not to mention

professional embarrassment, when doing so can be easily avoided?

This fall, I am teaching a section of a required first-year seminar, designed to help students master the transition from high school to college. One of the primary lessons is the importance of integrity—in writing, test-taking, and professional practice. As Ellis (2004) says in the course textbook:

Whether or not we are fully aware of it, cheating sends us the message that we are not smart enough or not responsible enough to make it on our own. We deny ourselves the celebration and satisfaction of authentic success. (p. 135)

The same goes for plagiarism, and this is why plagiarism matters, whether we are students, educators, or professional practitioners.

As members of the nursing education community, we are both bound and uplifted by a rigorous code of academic and professional integrity. We owe it to our academic colleagues across all disciplines, to our colleges and universities, to our chosen profession of nursing, and most importantly, to our students to practice what we preach, day in and day out. In the final analysis, as Humber (2004) so pointedly states, “Plagiarism is an act that, when exposed, may produce interesting explanations, but no acceptable excuse” (¶5). I plan to share this object lesson with my first-year students.

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