Duke Gifted Letter

Guiding the Gifted to Honest Work

Students will tell you that plagiarism is everywhere and, perhaps, even irrelevant. To make their case, they point to recent examples of high-profile authors, politicians, musicians, and even clergy who have used the work of others without acknowledgment. Although the penalties have sometimes been severe, students assert that these cases prove that intellectual property and copyright are unworkable and outmoded. Today's students define authorship quite differently from their parents and teachers as they construct, produce, and collaborate with peers online. They contrast traditional publishing to the wealth of networks in which small contributions by altruistic, semi-anonymous individuals aggregate into massive projects like Wikipedia. Participatory culture has muddled the ethical distinctions between the creative commons and the rights of publishers, authors, and artists. Students may well wonder what the difference is between open source reuse and source-code plagiarism, between speech ghostwriters and ghost-authored medical studies reported in journals, and between remixes of existing songs within a new work when it comes to being academically dishonest.

These issues have moved to the foreground in schools because digitized information has made it easy for students to find and copy material and for educators to identify copies. Schools are playing an increasingly sophisticated game of cat-and-mouse according to the Center for Academic Integrity; their large-scale surveys conducted over the last 18 years report that 50-85% of students say they cheat and plagiarize one or more times each year.

Although most teachers notice problems, they disagree about the seriousness of these offenses. Additionally, some educators are as confused as their students about the role of imitation in learning, what constitutes common knowledge and need not be cited, and whether careless work without attribution should be treated as deliberate plagiarism. Some school administrators have responded to academic dishonesty by instituting school-wide reviews of their ethics policies. Others blame, punish, and expel students for plagiarism, then count on fear as a future deterrent.

Gifted Students and Academic Dishonesty

In the discourse about honest work, gifted students have been largely ignored. They are perceived as capable, motivated learners who think independently and have little reason to plagiarize. Yet to gain a competitive advantage over their peers, especially under the pressure of applying to first-tier colleges, our best and brightest may tailor their academic performance to "doing school," (i.e., pursuing grades, recognition, and awards as résumé builders) as opposed to learning. Under these circumstances, some students come to believe that the odds are in their favor and that getting caught is only a momentary downside. As David Callahan argues in *The Cheating Culture*, "When cheating becomes so pervasive that the perception is that 'everybody does it,' a new ethical calculus emerges."

By noticing over time whether students avoid help, procrastinate, or bypass tasks, and by listening to the language they use to describe their abilities (e.g., "I've always been good at searching" vs. "I've learned how to use Google operators") educators and parents can help students identify academically honest decision making. However, ethics goes beyond having students recognize dishonest behavior—knowledge alone is insufficient. Without a

cultural shift to a climate of ethical behaviors in which there are opportunities to confront problems and examine their implications, students may not be able to incorporate honest decision-making into their actual work. There are many ways to accomplish this goal, some of which are more effective than others.

School Factors Contributing to Academic Dishonesty

One of the most important ways to combat academic dishonesty is to avoid assignments that lack critical thinking and inquiry learning. Library reports ostensibly are assigned to afford students practice doing research, writing in an academic voice, or building knowledge, but they fail in all of these objectives. Without cognitive processing and an authentic task to which learning skills or content are applied, students retain little and transfer less. Thus, a report on a country, a person, or a topic that asks for regurgitation of information is recognized as a "doing school" assignment by gifted students.

Those who are interested in their subject tend to do ethical work if they know how. Others may need explicit coaching directly related to the work they are assigned. For example, if students only practice summarizing generic passages or citing model sources in whole-class lessons once, they may not be able apply this to their specific research task. For most, one inoculation is insufficient; students will need multiple experiences wrestling with attribution and paraphrasing, including opportunities to construct their own understandings, before they can go beyond copying a source into a note card and using a note card in a paper consistently.

Another common practice that contributes to plagiarism is sending home certain parts of a research paper assignment, such as note-taking and writing, using the justification that there is not enough class time or computers. For older gifted students with shaky organizational skills, this is a recipe for failure; what they need is coaching and practice with a teacher or librarian frequently checking on their notes, rough drafts, and working bibliography. For the younger gifted student who has never done a research assignment, such homework invites anxious parents to hover, help, and contribute in varying degrees. The polished results give teachers an inflated sense of their students' capabilities and phony confirmation of their own effectiveness. The final product (which, at the very least, should include a citation for the hardworking parents) is a flawless game plan for future plagiarized essays in which help and ideas will be disguised and unattributed.

Any significant research assignment is always an opportunity to teach basic skills such as comprehension and writing. If students don't understand what they are reading, they cannot chunk the text, extract the essential ideas, and paraphrase it in their own words. The result is either a patchwork of unattributed quotes or thinly disguised passages of undigested reading material. Of course, all gifted students are not strategic readers, and some are second-language learners. Indeed, any reader might find it difficult to unpack a dense passage of prose on a new subject. Without modeling, coaching, and scaffolding on the actual reading material, even gifted students will grab a digital text, substitute words with a thesaurus, and rearrange phrases in order to fool the detection software that some schools employ to catch plagiarists.

Let's face it—even citation isn't easy. Many adults can remember discarding a source they had actually used for research because they were unable to figure out how to create the citation correctly. In order to create a citation for some of the trickier database sources one must understand and implement elements from several different sections of style manuals, a tedious and frustrating process. Nor do all style handbooks provide advice for citing the newer Web 2.0 formats like wikis, audioblogs, and podcasts.

Faced with these roadblocks, educators are reluctant to take the time to teach citation as a thinking process; for the sake of expediency, they treat a works cited list as a mechanical task and grade for punctuation and capitalization. Although asking students to evaluate the quality of their sources and write critical annotations takes longer, the process helps students acquire the analytical skills needed for independent academic research.

Strategies that Foster Academic Honesty

Parents and teachers need to frame plagiarism prevention as ethics education, considering inherently interesting dilemmas such as what is good or just, right or wrong. Every discipline wrestles with these issues: How do I judge expertise? Do evaluation metrics like tagging or voting on content on sites such as YouTube represent a new kind of social authority in a participatory culture? Why should I attribute an idea to its creator? Could scientific work flourish without replication? Is artistic creativity fundamentally an appropriating process? How might society balance an author's intellectual-property interests with the public good of a creative commons? By encouraging students to behave ethically out of a combination of enlightened self-interest, academic pride, and social responsibility, and by raising issues that society has not resolved, we prepare our children to take their place as thoughtful and informed citizens.

To foster academic honesty students can be involved in writing the school's Honor Code or, or if it already exists, revising both the language and the process. Students can be invited to reflect on their understanding of the goals of educa-

Debbie Abilock, a consultant, speaker and author, has over 25 years experience with gifted students as a school librarian, curriculum coordinator, and school administrator. She is the editor-in-chief of Knowledge Quest, *the print journal of the American Association of School Librarians, and co-founder of NoodleTools, Inc., which develops teaching software to assist students and support teachers and librarians throughout the process of library research.*

tion and to speak frankly about their challenges to succeed and to learn.

Discussion and practice set the stage for doing honest work, which ought to include opportunities for student autonomy. In a series of interviews I've conducted with students about their perceptions of the research process, both third- and twelfth-graders voiced frustration about extensive whole-class instructions and micromanagement, arguing that they should be "let loose" (given some independence) to engage with a topic and complete components of a project according to their own preferences. Research shows that even the smallest choices evoke a pleasurable response and increase students' motivation and investment in an activity, a precondition for honest work.

As your child works on a long-term school project, look for the pedagogical elements that create a climate of trust and support growth. Teachers who reinforce and value mastery-goals and honest behavior will:

- provide sufficient time for practice in assessing the value, accuracy, and readability of information;
- explicitly teach reading strategies on the material being used;
- anticipate confusion about citing and paraphrasing and conduct mini-lessons using difficult examples from students' actual work;
- model and scaffold the process of learning time-management skills and self-regulation strategies; and
- conference with each student on multiple drafts of a research essay.

Adults can model the behaviors they espouse. If a parent or tutor works with a child to do homework or write an essay, an appended statement could explain exactly what kind of help was given. If a teacher adapts a lesson, the handout should cite the educator who originally developed it. If you think that this is extreme, I have a vivid memory of the district-wide furor that resulted when a middle school teacher discovered that a colleague in another grade had included "borrowed" material in her professional portfolio with a copyright sign indicating it was her own work!

Researchers have shown that autonomy, rich products, and problem-based learning lessen the likelihood of plagiarism. In such inquiry-based research projects, students need time to find and define problems, read, take notes, and think. These are the building blocks of original thinking and new learning. When accompanied by thoughtfully conceived use of emerging interactive Web tools, our 21st century learners have ample reason to persevere, take pride in their work, and behave ethically.

—*Debbie Abilock, MLS*