
The Observation Tower:

Publish and Perish—The Imperiled World of Academic Integrity

by Marianne Di Pierro, Ph.D.



Recently, in the midst of preparing to address a group of National Science Foundation (NSF) Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP) doctoral students about retention and overcoming the challenges of the dissertation, I reviewed a series of articles. One of the articles was co-authored by a full professor of educational leadership and the professor's doctoral advisee from an institution that will remain unnamed.

As I read the article, I was aware of a certain sense of *déjà vu* that characterized the text, the phraseology of the narrative appearing familiar, like a distant echo reverberating across time. The realization was reinforced by the turn of the phrases and the authors' word choices, which had an uncanny resemblance to my own writing style. My impression was that I had read this *before*, had seen it *somewhere*, but could not be certain. I also noticed a unique punctuation style, which I must confess I have striven in my own writing to avoid: yet, here too was that same distinctive style that occasionally employs the use of hyphens in place of commas, for emphasis. As I perused several of my publications in search of an answer, I recognized that the majority of the information contained in the article appeared to be taken verbatim, and without attribution, from the conference proceedings, actually, a complete paper, for a presentation that I gave in Las Vegas, NV, in May 2006.

General procedures in instances such as this require notification of the journal editor, which in this case also happens to be one of the authors. Thus it is that I established contact with the professor's college dean, upon whom I prevailed on February 3, 2012, to act as an intercessor and to investigate the matter via a formal review, which I have been assured will take place.

I prepared three documents for the dean's perusal: 1. the conference proceedings; 2. the journal article that reflected the alleged plagiarism; and 3. a crosswalk, evidence-based analysis, that I conducted between the conference proceedings and the article, for the purpose of identifying the exact areas of concern, as well as establishing the extent to which information that I wrote appeared without attribution to me. I also apprised the research integrity officer at my institution, as well as my dean, of the circumstances, thinking it best to keep them informed as I move through this process.

I experienced a good deal of discomfort in organizing these materials, especially in executing the crosswalk. It was painful to see the bastardization of my work, my research, my thought processes, conclusions, recommendations, my *Self*, and yes, even the use of those hyphens, in the comparison from the narrative text of the conference proceedings to the *adaptation*. I had been erased and was rendered invisible. Not once was I quoted or my name mentioned. The authors simply seized these data, interspersed a few new headings into the text, and absconded with my intellectual property, their own inferior writing skills unquestionably hemorrhaging through the few lines they did manage to write themselves.

Now, I can forgive a simple mistake or a citation error: many acts of *plagiarism* result due to lost or missing citations or poor paraphrasing. An inadvertent error is worthy of forgiveness—as long as it is rectified and we convert the occasion into a

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teachable moment. (See my article in the *Journal of Faculty Development*: “Personalizing Academic Misconduct: An Approach for the Graduate Classroom,” May 2011, Volume 25 (2).) However, it is not the case when over 90 percent of the material used in an article is not cited or is taken verbatim, without the use of quotation marks or without attribution to the author. Perhaps the two individuals who listed themselves as authors felt entitled because the genesis of their article was only a conference paper, not a published article in a peer-reviewed journal, which it now will become. I am laying claim to my bastardized child in the form of this column as well as in a published article that will bear *my* name, as author.

I cannot help but wonder at the provocation for the *authors’* actions. In the world of academe, we teach that information is available for the taking, as long as appropriate citation is in place. We give credit to and honor the intellectual property of others through the use of citations and through narrative references that recognize their contributions and the manner in which those individuals inform the scholarly dialogue by virtue of their research. In this instance, we have a full professor and the professor’s doctoral advisee ignoring ethical duties and responsibilities and transcending the code of scholarly conduct.

What *were* they thinking?

Leafing through the professor’s CV to discover page after page of journal articles only raises my cynicism to yet another level. Admittedly, my view is pejorative, and while I do not know the authors’ individual histories, I am a proponent of the Greek philosophic perspective that teaches us that a *man is known by his history*, which in this instance, and barring information to the contrary, may well be dubious. The professor promulgates the concept of research and publication for evolving scholars in a college newsletter and acknowledges that the university is a leader in publishing peer-reviewed journal articles by doctoral students in the field of educational leadership. After the title of the article, the professor ironically adds, “Written by Professor First Name, Middle Initial, Last Name, with honorific,” a statement that ensures absolute ownership of this piece. And yet, the professor ignored personal and professional accountability by generating the appearance of having co-authored an article obviously not written by either of the two individuals listed as *authors*. Such deceptions set up a series of oscillating contradictions and cause me to question the validity of the entire scholarly production proclaimed in that newsletter. In this instance, *leading (or following) by example* may exert a profoundly negative effect upon an entire generation of emerging scholars, all competing for entry into the ivory tower.

For my part, I have done my due diligence: carefully traced the evidence of alleged plagiarism and established the necessary contact in good faith that an investigation will be conducted and that the two individuals involved will retract their article, remove the article entries from their CVs and from the Web, and issue an apology to me. What more, if any, I can expect remains unknown.

Among my inner circle of associates, news of the transgression is met initially with *shock*. People are *shocked*, and they say so. Then, the responses become hushed, almost funereal, and people actually issue a kind of condolence and say they are sorry this happened. Indeed, we *are* at a funeral, because what I have observed in these reactions is a kind of recognized loss that moves well beyond the abduction of intellectual property and the kidnapping of someone’s words and ideas.

The loss goes to the heart of who we are or who we claim to be as human beings, as individuals, as educators. The loss goes to the rapid ideas of entitlement and privilege, without the discipline, commitment, dedication, and old-fashioned hard work that is the hallmark of the scholar. It goes to the heart of the example that we set through our actions, and when these actions fail to measure up, regret and loss are the logical outcomes. And so, yes, people are sorry.

The fact is clear that plagiarism has become a global issue with few, if any, consequences, unless cash profits are involved. When we train emerging scholars, are we teaching them the principles of accountability, social responsibility, continuous process improvement, and the *value* and *discipline* of the incremental steps that characterize the journey to the academic life, and that embody Kaizen? Are we instructing them that all of these quality initiatives are weighted in philosophical mores grounded in ethical frameworks? Are we teaching them that assessment begins with *honest* self-evaluation and commitment to higher principles that soar well beyond the ego? If the outcomes of our educational process lead students to privilege the number of ill-gotten publications over the value of scholarly research and the discipline of writing then we have not taught them well—and for this, *we* are accountable.

Continuous process improvement is not simply a technical activity—we don’t *do* quality, as if it were an item on a checklist. It is a lived philosophy through which we take stock of our actions and their impact, and we ask ourselves, in each step along the way, if these actions serve the greater good.

The actions of the professor and the doctoral advisee are not benign. They affect all of us who care about the quality of our work and who hold ourselves accountable to ourselves and to each other. Like it or not, we are all role models, tethered, if only with gossamer threads, to a standard of behavior that should be beyond reproach.

I do not want to imagine or live in a world other than that.

About the Author

Marianne Di Piero, Ph.D. is director of the Graduate Center for Research and Retention at Western Michigan University. She conducts research on graduate education and also participates in national research projects on doctoral education. She is a dissertation coach, as well as a conflict resolution strategist, working with graduate students and graduate advising faculty. Di Piero is also associate editor of the *ASQ Higher Education Brief*, as well as editor of the ASQ Education Division Newsletter. Contact her at marianne.dipierro@wmich.edu or at 269-387-8249.