Creative Copying, or in Defense of Mimicry

A student question for which she doesn’t have an immediate answer leads teacher Rebecca Dierking on a quest for a better understanding. Although the question has to do with the difference between plagiarism and mimicry, the ensuing search leads her not only to an answer but also to a deeper understanding of her students’ need for the clarity.

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Plagiarism. The word sends chills down the backs of teachers and students alike. In particular, it is invariably a hot topic among teachers of language arts. As one of two teachers who introduce the research paper and Modern Language Association (MLA) style citation to sophomores at a small rural high school, I often hold the sword of plagiarism over students’ heads to emphasize that they do their own work. However, this year, I experienced a quandary of my own making. I managed to confuse my students and myself as we confronted the question, “What is the difference between mimicking and plagiarizing?” But first some background.

When my present sophomore students were freshmen in my English I class, I had asked them to rewrite “Casey at the Bat.” They were asked to update the poem, change the sport that Casey played, and change the names of characters. The only stipulation I placed upon them was that they were to stay as close to the original meter as possible and the poem had to be at least fourteen lines long. Most of the student writing was ho-hum. Students changed baseball to soccer or “Casey” to “Lacey” but little more. Like any other homework assignment, the poem was just another task to complete.

In contrast, one student’s poem stood out from the others. Keith took the assignment and figuratively ran and slam-dunked it. Having been raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles, Keith and his family moved to our rural Midwest community when he was about twelve years old. An African-American in our 95 percent or more Caucasian community, Keith revealed his “hipness”; he doled out rap, hip-hop, and LA slang with a cunning regularity. He dressed the part, walked the walk, and talked the talk. This assignment gave him an opportunity to shine and gave the rest of us a more intimate glimpse into his character and background.

He did all the required stuff: modified the game from baseball to basketball and changed “Casey” to “Cheeks.” But he also did what none of the others had managed to do. Though the meter falls away at a few points and Cheeks plays the role of hero not goat, outclassing his teammates, Glass and Mole, Keith provides us with a drama loaded with his imaginative voice and sly wit. Here is Keith’s poem:

Cheeks Done Blocked the Ball

The spirit was very lively for the hometown team that day;
The tally bore six to five, with only 120 seconds left in play.
When Roger done got checked, dropped the ball he done;
The other team recovered the sphere then blasted like a gun.

Every fan content upon the game,
Thinking Maraville would disown it’s fame.
They yelled and screamed and wailed and they call,
“We know Cheeks will done block that ball.”
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Glass and Mole were the defenders of their mighty goal,
But Glass dome paraphrases, and Mole was as big as a pole.
Not a person silent, everyone yelling obscene things;
It seemed that Cheeks had to shine like some bling bling.

The predictions were correct as Glass fell to a stick,
And so did Mole, he took quite a lick.

I was in need of some translation.

"Keith, what's a bling bling? Should it just be a bling?"

"No, see a bling bling is a really big and shiny piece of jewelry, like a rock, you know, a diamond or something. I don't think there's a bling; you know, like in 10 Things I Hate About You where the girl's talking about being overwhelmed and underwhelmed but there's no such thing as whelming."

"Okay. What does it mean he 'fell to a stick'?'" And so it went.

Keith shared his poem with the class. As a result of this reading, the students had a new connection to a poem they had not all enjoyed, but Keith also showed the class that writing, even mimicking a work written years before their birth, can be a reflection of self.

The next year, Keith was back in the front row of my classroom learning the research paper. In this class, I saw as one of my first tasks to drill the fear of plagiarism into these novice researchers. Plagiarism was not tolerated, would result in a failing grade on the paper, and consequently would result in a failing grade for the semester (a requirement by the department). Thus, I ranted that if a student were to use another's work and claim it as her own that I, the all-knowing teacher, would be able to tell that the paper was not original. I even cited an occurrence near where we live that made national headlines when a teacher failed several of her science students for plagiarism. Needless to say, they took me seriously. . . . I think. Papers were handed in with note cards, and (sigh of relief) the ordeal was finished. I thought they'd probably set aside every word of instruction on copying to avoid the ordeal. However, I was wrong.

I began a poetry writing unit studying various forms of formal and informal poetry and including a segment on modeling/mimicking. Among these modeling activities was a copy change of "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams. Students were to take the first six words, "So much depends upon a red" and continue on with their own completion, creating something with impact and yet retaining that imagist flavor. I had examples of other mimics of "The Red Wheelbarrow" garnered from a teaching resource for students to follow. One such example that I thought particularly evocative of what I thought students should do examined the threat of nuclear war by placing a red telephone by a white missile.

However, Keith was not happy. In fact, he was close to angry and clearly baffled at my choice of assignment.

"Miss Dierking, that's plagiarism."

"How so?"

"Well, you're copying word for word from that guy's poem. That's wrong; you said so yourself."

"But this is different."

"How?"

Blank. I drew an absolute blank. I tried telling him this was a fairly common practice, even among professional creative writers. Of course, I couldn't think of a single example to confirm the use of this "common practice." I asked him to trust me and my years of education and experience. After all, I told him, consider the delight we had all taken in his Cheeks/Casey piece. But, in fact, I knew this was different. Keith hadn't used the words of the poem. Now I was worried about losing credibility, not only with Keith, but with the rest of the students as well.

One student tried to help out. "Well, you could cite it, right?" she asked.

Yes, I said, but that's unnecessary for our purposes because we know we are mimicking and others who read the students' work will realize the poems were a mimicking exercise. I tried to explain we were "taking a walk in Williams' shoes," trying to absorb some of Williams' writing techniques in order to improve our own. Keith wasn't buying it.

The next day, Keith continued his disgruntlement with my assignment by pointing to an example from the movies, a known interest of mine. He raised the question of why, if mimicking a known author's work is okay, did the character Jamal get in trouble for using Forrester's first paragraph as his own first paragraph in the movie Finding Forrester. Jamal, an African-American high school basketball player, transfers to a predominantly Caucasian preparatory school because of test scores and athletic ability. Along the way, he strikes up a mentoring relationship with Forrester, a Salinger-type recluse and the author of the great
American novel of his generation. Through this example, Keith made it clear that he did not understand the difference between plagiarism and mimicry, and he wanted me to reconcile the two practices.

Hmm. I was sinking fast. And, frankly, I felt I was in somewhat of a dilemma. Did I myself have a clear understanding of the difference between plagiarism and mimicry? Why is it okay to mimic but not to copy?

Later, I wished I'd had Dina Sechio DeCristofaro's article "Author to Author: How Text Influences Young Writers" to share with Keith. According to DeCristofaro, mimicking an author's style is "an immersion in the work of accomplished writers that allows students to assimilate the skills, ideas, and creative direction of these authors either consciously or by osmosis" (2001, 8).

Why hadn't I said that?

Because that was not what Keith had asked. He wanted to know the difference between mimicry and plagiarism. He wanted to understand that difference enough to be comfortable in his writing, confident that no one would be sending the plagiarism police after him. And finally, he wanted to know why one is wrong and the other is right. This wasn't just about how to play by the academic rules; it was about right and wrong.

Given the weightiness of the issue, I had to think it through to find a reasonable answer. First, the difference between mimicry and plagiarism is intent. The student who takes information from a source and says, "Hey, this is my stuff. I am sole possessor of this knowledge" is plagiarizing. He has stolen the work of another—usually research, facts and figures—and has published that information as his own. Mimicking, on the other hand, is deliberate as well, but the intent is not to say, "Hey, this is my own work" but rather to say, "Hey, Williams is an awesome poet, so I'm going to try to write like him in a few poems and eventually maybe some of it will rub off on me and be a natural element of my writing style."

Yes, in a research paper students need to cite their sources, but a research paper is a long way from the type of writing I was attempting to stimulate with the Williams assignment. In this assignment, students were using the poet's form, technique, and a few of his words as a guide. And even professional writers subconsciously (or consciously) are guided by the writing of other professionals they admire. As DeCristofaro states, "Immersion in certain kinds of reading helps all writers assimilate the tone, flavor, structure, norms, and rhetorical strategies of particular genres of writing, a prewriting that's no less effective for being osmotic and unconscious" (12). I agree. Writers reflect (insert "mimic") their reading material. The class's deliberate use of the first five words of the poem is just a more conscious application of that inherent tendency.

So why is mimicry okay? It's acceptable because the writer is integrating into his

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**Editors’ note:**

"Fair Use" of Copyrighted Material—a Matter of Perspective

Rebecca Dierking's article, "Creative Copying, or in Defense of Mimicry," is one of those articles that ignites discussion... especially in an office of editors where working with other people's words is an everyday reality. The whole realm of working with other people's words—from proper citation and plagiarism to copyright infringement and permissions—is hot precisely for the reason Dierking exposes: it's gray. Copyright law isn't definitive around issues of "fair use."

And, oddly, as Dierking found, working within that realm every day doesn't mean it gets all that much easier. It's intriguing... and exacting. And in fact, the further you delve into the area, the grayer it can appear. "Often, legitimate scholarship is only a quotation mark, an in-text mention, or a footnote away from plagiarism," says colleague Russell Bennett, former editor in chief of RainTree Publishers.

And that, depending on whether you're a glass-half-full or half-empty kind of person, may strike you as good news or bad news. It's all a matter of perspective.

**Resources**

Despite the fact that the area of proper use can be gray, writers can put their hands on some good sources that may very well answer specific questions. The editors of The Quarterly recommend these:

*Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed.*

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own writing elements of the style of another writer that he admires. His goal is to make his writing better. He would not mimic a bad writer; he mimics those writers who are making an impact on him personally or who are achieving a style he finds worthy. Mimicking, unlike plagiarizing, is an approach by which the author tries to better himself, to become more skilled. Just as a student musician is influenced by the playing or composing style of those he admires, a student writer is also influenced by other writers.

Learning in this way has a long history. At schools of classical art, students are frequently asked to reproduce a painting by an old master for just the same reasons that I asked students to copy-change Williams. Students absorb the skills and techniques used to paint that work of art and will then be able to apply those skills and techniques to their own works. All parties realize that no matter how good the copy, it will never be of the same quality as the original; the difference in pieces of work will be immediately noticeable.

While my pre-research paper students may unintentionally plagiarize because they are not educated about the citation process or are somewhat hazy on what exactly paraphrasing means or just how to do it, my post-research paper students should be comfortable with knowing the difference. In Keith's class, their confusion on these matters may have been the product of my confusion.

In future lessons on mimicry, I plan to discuss more thoroughly the difference between mimicry and plagiarism now that I myself have a clearer notion of the distinction. I will pair Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Sympathy" with Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" and Gerard Manly Hopkins' "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child" with George Starbuck's "Margaret are you Drug" as a way of demonstrating how one poet makes use of another. I will alert students to the expressions "with nods to," "with apologies to," and "inspired by."

I think it is important that these young writers understand that writers have always drawn on the work of other writers. Shakespeare himself stole plots from mythology, history, and even his contemporaries. No one seems offended by these borrowings. Rather, we are awed by his ability to transform the mundane into the sublime.

I will also point to borrowings in popular music, an art form with which most of my students are intimately familiar. At this writing, I would be able to demonstrate how Sean "Puff Daddy/P. Diddy" Combs samples The Police's "Every Breath You Take" in his song "I'll be Missing You" or how Alicia Keyes makes use of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" in her song "Piano and I." In fact, Keyes's song might be the best example as an adjunct to the Williams poem since she used Beethoven as a jumping off place for her composition.

I will also share with students examples of ways one visual artist draws on the work of another. To cite a single example, I'll show them Robert Silvers' portrait of Lincoln in which he has taken hundreds of photographs of the Civil War to create a dynamic portrait of the martyred president. Clearly, Silvers is paying tribute to not only the man but also photographers like Matthew Brady who left a visual legacy and changed forever how people view war.

And there's no reason to stop there, I will be able to demonstrate how one work of art may influence another in a different medium by providing a theme, subject, or detail. Vincent Van Gogh's Starry Night influenced Don McLean's song "Vincent," and it's possible that Dunbar's "Sympathy," referred to earlier, may have influenced the song "White Bird" by It's a Beautiful Day.

Unfortunately, these adjustments are too late for Keith and his classmates, but next year, I'll be better prepared to make both the practical and moral distinctions between mimicking and plagiarism. In my "Twilight Zone" universe, when Keith says to me that the copy-change is plagiarism, I reply, "You know, that's a good perception. It looks as if we are plagiarizing, but in creative writing there are somewhat different rules. You can't take someone else's words and use them as your own; that'll still get you in trouble. However, if you use their idea or technique to improve your own, it's okay."

References


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