Teaching Students to Avoid Plagiarism

Given that the problem of plagiarism continues to grow on campuses around the country (thanks, in large measure to advances in information technology), we must not simply warn our students against plagiarizing by referring them to Tulane’s Honor Code somewhere in the front-matter of our syllabus, but instead we must devote time in our classes to teaching students exactly what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

Though the scale of the problem can sometimes tempt one toward cynicism and a shrugging off of the issue (“some of you may try to cheat – and sometimes I’ll catch you, sometimes I won’t”), the scale of the problem also invites us to treat it as a significant intellectual topic, one we can explore with students at great length and in relatively positive terms – that is, as extraordinarily rich conceptual territory that leads to still larger topics of intertextuality, individuality, private property, epistemology, and the very idea of the university and of “academic discourse.”

Of course, teachers can devote significant time in their classrooms to teaching the skills of quoting, paraphrasing, summarizing, alluding, imitating, satirizing and other ways of bringing someone else’s work into one’s own, and they can and should link these technical skills to the broader philosophic issues just noted. One can consider various models and, even better, certain particularly tricky cases in which an artist builds his or her work very obviously on the work of some other artist – and then use these cases to explore how and where one must draw the lines between legitimate and illegitimate use of the work of others. In fact, at some point in the semester, the teacher can assign a paper topic that asks students to delineate both technical and philosophic issues at work in some particularly tricky text’s use of other texts, or perhaps the teacher can ask students to compare three cases and determine which have “crossed the line” and which haven’t and why.