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The future of plagiarism

A play in one act for two characters

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The Future of Plagiarism

Emrys Westacott

It is the year 2030. Zack, a Professor of Business, and Chelsea, a Professor of Psychology, are drinking coffee in the faculty lounge of a distinguished New England University.

ZACK: Jeez! Can you believe it? Three students in my Electoral Marketing class turned in exactly the same paper. I mean, like, *exactly* the same! Like, even the slightly off footnotes--you know, the kind that make it look as if they're attributing sources but which can't be tracked down--even they were the same.

CHELSEA: That sucks--that really sucks. I bet I know how it happened, though. I bet they were all running the same plagiarizing software. There's loads of applications out there now. There's, like, Copycat, Lastminute, Feetup, Profscam, Majorist . . . They must have used a cheap one, though if the papers were identical. The better ones introduce random variations in, like, vocab, grammar, quotations--all that stuff.

ZACK: You mean they, like, buy a paper of the internet and then run it through a program to make enough changes so the plagiarism can't be detected?

CHELSEA: Nah, that'd be too much like hard work. All they do is sit on their fat butts and input the paper topic they've been assigned. The software does the search for them and gives them a list of papers they can download that fit the bill. Remember Bizrate and Epinions? It's basically like that. You can have the results sorted according to relevance, length, grade, price, risk, and so on. Like I said, the better programs have a Tinker function that lowers the risk of getting caught.

ZACK: Man, that's, like, so not the way to do things! I mean, like, I want to say to these kids: "Hellooooo! Can you please tell me again why you're paying two million yuan a semester to go to a top American university so you can have a computer program find your papers for you?"

CHELSEA: It's changing times, Zack, changing times. These kids'll just tell you that's the way it's done now. Live with it or get back to your parchment and typewriter.

ZACK: Sorry, dude, but I'm not there yet. I mean, I don't want to sound like some old guy remembering how hard he had it during the war, but when I was an undergrad, I did my own web search for everything I planned to plagiarize—you name it: short essays, term papers, lab reports, test questions we knew the prof was downloading, answer codes to multiple choice exams, maps, diagrams, the works. We didn't have smartass software telling us what to turn in. It was hard slog. Took hours sometimes.

CHELSEA: Tell me about it! I once pulled an all-nighter cobbling together a term paper on Moby Dick.

I used, like, half a dozen different sources, and I had to find every one of them myself. Did my own cut and paste, my own vocab tinkering, made up my own title--everything.

ZACK: And the way we did it--it took, like, real skill. You really had to know your stuff or you'd get caught out by those policing programs they used to have. What was that one called . . . ?

CHELSEA: Ohmigod! You mean, like, Turnitin. com?

ZACK: That's right, Turnitin.com. Wow, that was crazy the way the profs used to trust stuff like that.

CHELSEA: Well, it used to catch some people out.

ZACK: Yeah, but only total dubyas who didn't know a web site from their weenie. They deserved it, man. Anyone who'd done, like, programming 101 could get round those detectors. Me and my roommate once wrote an app that we were hoping might take off—we called it Turnitoff. It was cool. You ran your paper through Turnitoff and it would insert invisible jammers to make Turnitin jump to the next sentence whenever it came across a plagiarized passage.

CHELSEA: That's so awesome! Did you make anything from it?

ZACK: Nah, someone hacked in, copied, it, improved it and put it out there before we'd got it into shape. But you get my point. Back then, plagiarism took some knowledge and some know-how. If you didn't know what you were doing you'd be toast on the provost's carpet in no time.

CHELSEA: Right. Of course back then it was still treated like some sort of crime. So if you went the plagiarism track you were putting your ass on the line.

ZACK: That's my point. In our day there was really something at stake. Your plagiarist then was a sort of data-artist. But now . . . I mean, like, where's the skill in inputting the topic and choosing which product to turn in. It's about as pedagogically challenging as buying a pair of socks.

CHELSEA: What really worries me is how these kids are going to manage when they're, like, through with college and out in the workplace. OK, you can run some software to get you a paper on the Second Great Depression or the Iraqi Civil War. But that's just academic crap that no-one wants but us professors. Those programs aren't any good for creating real world outputs like business assessments, legal briefs, data tables, and the like.

ZACK: Absolutely. For that real world stuff you gotta do plagiarism the old fashioned way—you know, with, like, elbow grease and a real understanding of the tools available.

CHELSEA: And judgment. Don't forget judgment. I don't care how much we used to take from others, we, like, still had to exercise informed judgment at the end of the process. Is this paper relevant to the assigned topic? Is the prof really likely to use the same multiple choice test three years in a row? Is that

conclusion with the Whitman quotation a dead give away? That's the human element, and there's no substitute for it.

ZACK: Dude, you are so right. And it's that human element in the whole process that, like, makes it meaningful, something worth doing. And at the end of it you've got something you can be proud of. For me, *that's* what college is all about.

CHELSEA: So what you going to do about those three students?

ZACK: I guess I'll just follow standard procedure and give 'em all Bs. But I'm telling you, it sticks in my craw. Man, they've just done so little for that B.

CHELSEA: Still, a B's no joke. They're going to feel kind of bad at graduation, with their parents watching and everything, and they're, like, the only one's not graduating *summa cum laude*.

ZACK: I guess you're right. And at least they'll still graduate.

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