

CRITICAL ISSUES: DOUBLE  
DOWN ON CONFERENCE

# PATCHWORK PLAGIARISM

Janice Cooper  
cooper\_j@hvnet.org



In her poem, "A Time of Bold Action," Edna St. Vincent Millay evokes an image of the overwhelming amount of data to which we are exposed every day, "... facts ... lie unquestioned/Uncombined." Information is "... daily spun, but there exists no loom/To weave it into fabric" (Todd 2004). In this Information Age, students produce research projects by piecing together passages quoted verbatim and stitched together with a few introductory or transitional words. They assemble research as patchwork quilts rather than weaving a fabric of new knowledge. This common practice raises ethical issues and poses new challenges for library media specialists.

If plagiarism is the appropriation of another's words and ideas, students submitting patchwork research projects may be guilty of exemplifying that definition. The practice of patchwork research highlights the difference between information and knowledge. The students have not used thinking skills of an order higher than *application* on Bloom's taxonomy. They *recall* and *summarize* but do not *analyze*, *synthesize*, or *evaluate*. They have not paraphrased or extended the information. Many students are not information literate (Kuhlthau 2004).

Todd (2004) describes students who:

- amass facts without imposing any organizational or reflective structure;
- demonstrate little coherence;
- prove no interpretation of the facts or development of perspective; and
- display little evidence of understanding, as *transporters* of text, not *transformers* of text.

## If you are interested in the topics of plagiarism, ethics, and higher-order thinking skills, look for these programs in Reno:

"Authentic Research and Knowledge Construction: From the Caves of Lascaux to the Classrooms of Londonderry"—Carol Gordon, Ross Todd, and Susan Ballard

"Primary Sources Treasure Trove"—Sherrie Metzger-Galloway

"Copyright Dos and Don'ts for School Librarians"—George Pilling

"Are Your Students College-Ready? Start By Ensuring They're Research-Ready!"—Wendy Sellors and Shelor Smith

"Connecting with Parents: Tips, Tools, and Resources"—Connie Champlin

"Copyright and Plagiarism: Teaching Ethics to Tomorrow's Citizens" Preconference—Carol Simpson

They have not constructed new knowledge. Although they can create works-cited lists, these students have used other people's words and ideas to commit a conceptual, inadvertent form of plagiarism.

Why do students assemble patchwork research assignments? Some are overwhelmed by the amount of work required to maintain high rankings in competitive high schools. Some are disengaged. Some, simply, do not care. Many manage time too poorly to plan and produce a research project by the assigned date. Some lack confidence in their own thinking skills; they cannot coordinate conflicting information. Some lack confidence in their writing skills; the original text stated the information more clearly and succinctly. Some lack confidence in their own creativity; their ideas are inferior to those of published writers. Many, as Todd (2004) asserts, seem to believe that

the number of facts accumulated demonstrate the amount of knowledge or depth of understanding.

Information literacy skills are our best tool to help students learn how to avoid plagiarism, particularly inadvertent plagiarism. Information literacy may be both a spinning wheel and a shuttle, helping us teach students to spin raw information into threads of understanding, then weave the threads into a cloth of new knowledge. However, information literacy skills cannot be taught in a vacuum, as stand-alone lessons; they lose their purpose and meaning. Adopting constructivist approaches, like Kuhlthau's and Todd's Guided Inquiry, enable us to integrate these skills. Where schools or disciplines require students to produce traditional assignments, we might use them as looms upon which to operate the shuttle to weave the cloth. By deconstructing traditional



## Document-Based Questions

Document-based questions (DBQs) typically pose a broad question confined to a specific period in American history. Students are given between eight and ten supporting documents, such as photographs, maps, artwork, and political cartoons as well as passages from literature, speeches, periodical articles, and editorials. Their responses are required to add outside information from their own knowledge of the topic. DBQs require students to use a variety of sources, select relevant information, and construct a new understanding that will help them answer the question. DBQs ask essential questions. They are real world tasks, asking students to think in patterns unique to the discipline. History DBQs reflect what historians do: reassess the past based on primary source documents. Recent DBQs pose statements that reflect historical revision and ask students to assess the validity of those statements.

projects to identify where and how information skills can be infused, we can intervene at points of need.

Perhaps we can use document-based questions (DBQs) to help students learn how to weave new knowledge from a variety of sources. Teachers and library media specialists could collaboratively develop and teach DBQs and information literacy in an array of disciplines based on questions and documents, such as lab reports or literary criticism, essential to each.

High school juniors in James McGuire's United States History AP classes at Northern Valley Regional High School in Old Tappan, New Jersey, write brief papers in response to DBQs, which are prominent features of the advanced placement exams each May. "I tell my students to look for integration between the documents. How are events and people connected? Connect the dots. Which is the cause and what is the effect? What was the impact?" states McGuire (2007).

McGuire's recent DBQ on the 1920s posed the question, "What led to the tensions between old and new AND in what ways was the tension manifested?" Student responses ran the gamut from patchwork to sophisticated weaves, based primarily on their ability to coordinate and integrate concepts extracted from supporting documents. (Students refer to the documents simply with a letter; for example, G).

### Student 1

*Not observed as much as [Langston Hughes, Charles Lindberg, and Babe Ruth] the women also changed through individualism. They had a much stronger voice than before since they now had the power to vote and work. Maybe because of their newfound power and individualism the women's marriage and divorce rates went up. (H) They were more determined to express their love which resulted in more marriages and also their hatred which resulted in more divorces.*

### Student 2

*With the growth in technology and urbanization came conflict of how women*

*should play a part in society (whether they were in the home or grasping personal opportunities). This tension is manifested by women's groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who surprisingly supported the distribution of tobacco. (G) Their support goes along with the decade's idea of new thinking and opportunities for women. In addition, this same conflict revealed itself through a steady decline in marriages compared to divorces. By 1930 the ratio of divorces compared to marriages was 1 to 5, which is narrow next to the previous four decades. (H) The increase in divorce is due to the fact that women started to grow more independent, waited longer to marry, and continued to abandon their traditional roles as housewives during the 1920s.*

McGuire explains, "Making connections is what distinguishes grades of four or five on the AP exams from the threes or lower. However, even the better students have problems with incorporating different sources of information. Many of their essays don't flow. They are compartmentalized. That is a problem with their writing in general. They don't know how to make connections" (McGuire 2007).

Kuhlthau believes that technological advances have shifted the task of information seeking from locating sources to seeking meaning within sources. Students need to develop the abilities to "find meaning in numerous and diverse messages that do not fit together neatly in a predigested, prepared text [and] construct a personal understanding from incompatible and inconsistent information" (Kuhlthau 2003, 4).

DBQs require students to use a variety of sources, select relevant information, and construct a new



understanding that will help them answer the question. Stepping students through the DBQ process might center on the teacher and library media specialist modeling and providing guided practice with an abbreviated version in class. The teacher would teach as the subject expert and the media specialist as the information expert in a process that looks something like this:

**1. Evaluate DBQ question and identify information needs.** The teacher leads a discussion on the event, perspective, or national issues upon which the question hinges. Evaluate the question and what it means. The media specialist leads the brainstorming of evidence for which the students might search.

**2. Select information and identify patterns.** The media specialist projects the documents on an overhead, distributes individual copies to students, and reads aloud essential passages. The teacher models selecting essential information by highlighting significant passages. Students mimic the teacher by highlighting significant passages in color-coded markers for different topics: blue, red, and green for themes and images as they emerge. Students see the connections between documents through the colored highlights.

**3. Analyze and paraphrase.** The teacher and media specialist model paraphrasing by reworking and rewording passages highlighted in blue, demonstrating how different researchers might paraphrase a passage. Students mimic paraphrasing on paper, or in a word-processor in a text box, coordinated to match the color of the highlighted

information. All of the blue passages are paraphrased on a blue background. Students independently practice rewriting the red and green passages.

**4. Order and synthesize.** The media specialist and students discuss and identify the types of information represented by each blue paraphrased statement: evidence, supporting information, main idea, conflicting information, and redundancies. The teacher models criteria by which the information might be ordered and reordered: by importance, chronologically, or by cause and effect. Students practice ordering and making sense of information in the red and green paraphrased statements.

**5. Evaluate and write.** The teacher and media specialist model writing five paragraph essays in response to the DBQ question, assuming that students are familiar with the format, to demonstrate how different researchers select and apply information effectively. The first and final paragraphs would formulaically introduce and conclude the information in the three main body paragraphs, the first processed in a blue font, the second in red, and the third in green, using the information extracted from the documents, analyzed and paraphrased, and ordered and synthesized in their own words.

**6. Follow up.** Students might follow up the lesson by working through a second abbreviated DBQ independently. They might include one brief quote per theme, or they may compose lengthier essays and use more documents as they gain proficiency.

DBQs provide opportunities to address "patchwork plagiarism." The patchwork quilt, pieced together inadvertently, should be dismantled and unraveled before a smooth, tightly woven blanket of ethical behavior, good research, and original thinking can be created. By teaching students how to select information, spin it into threads of knowledge and, finally, weave it into the fabric of new understandings, we will provide them with the twenty-first-century information skills they need in school and in the workplace.



**Janice Cooper** is the Library Media Specialist at Northern Valley Regional High School at Old Tappan, New Jersey, an active

member of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, and developer of the Plagiarism Workshop at <<http://mail.nvnet.org/~cooper-j/Plagiarism>>. She met her husband at 398.2 in the library stacks, and they now have two active middle school sons who enjoy 796s in every season.

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