CHAPTER 5
Getting Educated: What Have Others Taught Me?

CheatHouse.com homepage

What kinds of ethical obligations, boundaries, and compunctions are exposed in your classroom by sites like CheatHouse and the issues it raises? How do you and your colleagues prepare yourselves each term for the inevitable discussion with students about plagiarism and your institution’s policies? Do you use Google or a service such as TurnItIn.com to trace and identify potentially plagiarized sources, and how do you, personally, feel about the need for such sleuthing? What are some of the more inventive, inane, or pathetic reasons you’ve heard from students you’ve caught out in the act of plagiarism? Some in the field of rhetoric and composition have located plagiarism along a spectrum of borrowings, not necessarily ethically suspect but rather revealing a lack of familiarity with the conventions and expectations of academia.

1. Consider opening the floor to a broader discussion of the commodification of education and the increasingly transactional relationship between student and teacher.

2. First, though, see if the class can even come to consensus about what the ethical issues of this site and others like it are. Construct a kind of continuum of academic ethics, locating such activities as reading a draft of a friend’s paper and correcting some errors, and downloading test answers onto a PalmPilot to sell to students in the next period along a continuum from virtuous to suspect to inexcusable behaviors.

3. You could have a field day with this one. If there’s any one striking attribute that most of these sites share, it’s their uncanny ability to provide papers that sound like they were written by terminally confused and hung over young people. The New York Times published a very funny investigative report by Suzy Hansen in the August 22, 2004, Book Review entitled “Dear Plagiarists: You Get What You Pay For.” It ought to be required reading for incoming students.
**SETH STEVENSON**

**“Adventures in Cheating: A Guide to Buying Term Papers Online”**

Like Suzy Hansen’s report in the August 22, 2004, *New York Times Book Review* (cited above), Seth Stevenson’s humorous essay, as well as the email responses that follow, is an excellent exercise in *caveat emptor*. Consider using this reading as an entry point into a larger discussion of an honor code or any other published set of ethical guidelines to which students at your campus are expected to adhere. An issue of *Academe*, the journal of the American Association of University Professors, devoted to ethics on campus, including an article on honor codes, is available online at [http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2002/02JF/02jfmcc.htm](http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2002/02JF/02jfmcc.htm).

1. The humor should be obvious in the first paragraph. The ways in which he qualifies the “students” to whom he is addressing his advice should make it clear that Stevenson isn’t making a gross generalization about students. (The reference to Arizona State University might derive from a 2002 article in *Playboy* that listed ASU-Tempe as “the top party school in the country.”) As an example of service journalism, however, Stevenson’s article is a model of the genre. Indeed, some of your students might be grateful for the information; on the other hand, they’re now on notice that you’re in on the game.

2. Is Seth Stevenson under any particular obligation to point out the ethical dilemmas of using one of these services? The website postings in response to this article raise a whole host of provocative questions, not the least of which is the role of people, like “Aristos,” who profit by selling term papers and other academic services to all kinds of students. An extraordinarily thorough online bibliography of articles about academic cheating, plagiarism, and ethics originally compiled by Sharon Stoerger for the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is at [http://www.web-miner.com/plagiarism](http://www.web-miner.com/plagiarism).

3. Stevenson’s snarky tone—ask students to identify passages that they find particularly sarcastic—proves that he’s not really intending this article as a useful guide to cheating; rather, he’s pointing out just how stupid, and sometimes expensive, the papers provided by these websites can be. The larger issue of consumerism is certainly a provocative topic for an undergraduate classroom. Some students might quite candidly admit that they or their parents are paying a great deal of money for a necessary credential; the degree is what counts, not the joy of learning, or the pursuit of knowledge or whatever other romantic trope some still cling to. More-enterprising students might examine which departments on campus have the newest facilities, and how many structures on campus, from grand libraries to tiny dining rooms, have an individual or corporate sponsor’s name over the door.

4. These responses are also a useful exercise for examining the rhetoric of the Internet bulletin board as opposed to the print letter to the editor. How much editing and screening of responses to media web sites goes on, as opposed to the pages of a print newspaper?
JONATHAN SWIFT

“A Modest Proposal”


1. It isn’t entirely unheard of for students to read “A Modest Proposal” with complete credulity, coming to class absolutely appalled that anyone could actually propose such a thing and wondering if people actually did raise babies for food. Swift’s rhetoric is so certain, so in keeping with the conventions of logical argument, that such a reaction, especially on the part of younger readers, can’t be entirely dismissed. If you are fortunate enough to get this reaction from your students, use it to begin an inquiry into the skill of Swift’s rhetoric. What are other examples of such satire from contemporary culture? For example, the Comedy Channel’s Daily Show uses the conventions of a network news broadcast to skewer laughable politics and idiotic trends in pop culture, while making a pretty solid argument for people to become more critically aware of news media biases. You might consider assigning the biography of Swift on Bartleby.com after students have read “A Modest Proposal,” to see if that knowledge changes their perceptions of the speaker. Mark Twain’s “The Damned Human Race” is another example of perfectly balanced rhetoric and a well-structured argument in the service of the most-scathing satire, although here you might have students complaining about the cruelty of putting people in cages.

2. Although there are abundant resources online for studying the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century in Ireland, resources about early-eighteenth-century Ireland online are comparatively scant. Should students research Swift’s particular context, be sure that they are not examining the events of 130 years later that led to the great wave of Irish immigration to the United States.


STEVE LOPEZ

“Doin’ Time with a New Ticker” and 60 Minutes, “Change of Heart”

The specific Supreme Court ruling that is made reference to here is in Estelle v. Gamble; the complete text of the ruling can be found at http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=429&page=97&naoby=case&linkurl=http://www.prisonwall.org/cases.htm&graphurl=http://www.prisonwall.org/cases.jpg.

1. As it happens, there is an entire field of inquiry into and practice of transplant ethics, covering everything from the cost and availability of donor organs to xenotransplantation,
the use of organs from other species. An op-ed piece about this particular case by David Perry, director of ethics programs at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, is at http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/Perry/transplant.html.

2. Possible topic areas for research include health care proposals in a recent election; universal coverage; the cost of prescription drugs; coverage for reproductive medicine, elective procedures, or life-enhancement procedures and medication such as Viagra.

3. Use the link to the complete text of the Supreme Court ruling in Estelle v. Gamble given above. Since that 1976 ruling, Estelle v. Gamble has been cited frequently in cases having to do with HIV and AIDS among the incarcerated.

HERMAN MELVILLE

“Bartleby, the Scrivener”

For more about Herman Melville, see http://www.melville.org/. Ric Burns’s splendid PBS series about New York City, New York: A Documentary Film, provides historical and visual context to Bartleby’s world in “Episode Three: Sunshine and Shadow (1865–1898).” A broad contemporary adaptation of the story, Bartleby directed by Jonathan Parker and starring Crispin Glover, was released in 2001 and is available on DVD.

1. The narrator’s motives could be interestingly compared with those of Mrs. Simonds in “A Mistaken Charity” (Chapter 1) and the “friendly visitor” in “My Own People” (Chapter 4). The core of the narrator’s motives are in paragraph 55; see what students think about his assertion that “Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval.”

2. Bartleby’s motives—this is one of those marvelous literary ambiguities that young readers crack their heads against: there must be a “right answer”; there must be a motive in there somewhere! But, of course, there are any number of explanations for Bartleby’s behavior. This is a good lesson in keeping students focused on the evidence offered by the text, rather than placing a literary character on a hypothetical couch and applying all sorts of contemporary pop psychology interpretations, although that’s certainly one way to begin a discussion of Bartleby. Could Bartleby be a cipher? An allegorical abstraction? You could devote an entire class period just considering that word prefer; how often do we do things we would prefer not to, because we have to do them?

3. Why doesn’t the story end at line 251? What has the narrator learned at Bartleby’s death; what’s the purpose of this coda? (If you wish to call this ending a coda, be sure to give students a definition of the term.) However students interpret this ending, encourage them to back up their assumptions with direct reference to the text.
RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

“Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood”


1. In academic writing, students are often discouraged from using the first person in presenting an argument. Many writers in this book, however, do use the first person quite powerfully and authoritatively. As a class, locate other examples in the text of a writer using the first person and personal experience as evidence to support a claim and a way of establishing authority. What is it, in each writer’s case, that provides the justification for the use of the first person? The structure of “Aria” is complex, and the argument frequently ambivalent; for example, Rodriguez offers a stunning indictment of “middle-class ethnics who scorn assimilation” in the penultimate paragraph. This generally isn’t how students are taught to present an opposing viewpoint. Nor does Rodriguez offer an explicit rebuttal to his version of their argument. But once students appreciate the conventions of rhetoric, they will become more appreciative of the risks that writers like Rodriguez take.

2. Depending on your classroom demographics, students might have their own personal experiences to share about being the “other.”

3. As a class, think about other ways in which the public life of the classroom and the private life of the family intersect. If bilingual education is not an immediate or interesting topic for your students, other considerations might include the teaching of evolution versus creationism, the celebration of certain holidays, home schooling, and discipline and zero-tolerance policies.

HENRY DEMAREST LLOYD

“The Old Self-Interest”

For additional information on Henry Demarest Lloyd and other muckrakers, or journalists interested in social reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Jinvestigative.htm. A curriculum of U.S. labor history from the Illinois Labor History Society is at http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/curricul.html#6.
1. Lloyd’s central argument is that the tenet of “survival of the fittest” of “industrial government by the self-interest of the individual” is unjust and ultimately unsustainable. He offers many broad examples from private and public life in which the principle of self-determination and self-interest would make a man a “monster” or lead to “anarchy.”

2. Possible topics for research might be the raiding of corporate pension funds by senior management, scandals like Enron and Tyco, the pricing of a commodity like oil or a consumer good like prescription drugs, the outsourcing of service labor, and the use of third-world labor to produce goods for the first-world market—cheaper goods for consumers, fewer jobs for the working class.

3. How does Lloyd define barbarians, and what is the original etymology of the word?

4. Not just the biblical references but also the classical allusions and historical contexts that Lloyd uses suggest a much more broadly-educated “common reader” in his day. As a class, make a list of all unfamiliar allusions and research them together, creating a glossary for the essay. How does the extra work of defining these unfamiliar terms lead to a greater appreciation and understanding of Lloyd’s argument? (Students should, of course, be in the habit of looking up unfamiliar references in their reading; doing it as a class makes it slightly less of a chore and gives all students an opportunity to learn how to use and consult different sources of information beyond Google and the encyclopedia.)

5. Paragraph 22 seems especially pertinent to our own times; “we cannot make a change as long as our songs, customs, catchwords, and public opinion tell all to do the same thing if they can.” In what ways does popular culture today celebrate survival of the fittest, the triumph of the strong over the weak, the legitimacy of self-interest, and personal material gain?

CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS

“The War Against Boys”

For more information about Christina Hoff Sommers, including links to more of her writing, see her homepage at the American Enterprise Institute at http://www.aei.org/scholars/scholarID.56filter./scholar.asp. Her book The War Against Boys generated tremendous controversy; a good library research project to accompany discussion of this essay would be for students to locate and summarize two opposing reviews of her book for class discussion.

1. Students will want to share their own experiences as students, as well as perhaps as parents of school-aged boys and girls. That’s fine, but public policy arguments are made on the basis of empirical evidence. It’s empowering to locate evidence and context for your own personal experience; for example, athletic female students could research Title IX, while male students could examine the rate at which young boys are diagnosed with and medicated for various behavioral disorders.

2. If students begin an inquiry with the prompt 1, this second prompt could become a researched argument paper based on the specific problem or issue they identified from prompt 1.
3. The conservative think tank is the American Enterprise Institute; send students to their home page at www.aei.org, and ask students what in particular they notice about that organization that would classify it as conservative. Online or database research in response to Sommers’s article, especially following the 2001 release of her book The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men, will provide further information and context for responding to this question.

4. Students should read Sommers’s book for a full sense of the development of her argument.

“Books Are Weapons”

For more information about the Works Progress Administration, see Adams and Goldbard at http://www.wwcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html. The Schomburg Collection mentioned on this poster now has its own building in Harlem and houses one of the world’s preeminent collections of African American cultural history, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, with a homepage at http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html.