The Case of "The Borrowed Syllabus"

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I want to continue the discussion, initiated in the July 1984 issue of *Teaching Philosophy*, of the "Case of the Borrowed Syllabus." This is Case #2 in a series of academic ethics problems presented by Philip A. Pecorino.[1] It consists of a short description of the case written by Pecorino plus commentaries by Lisa Newton and Richard Wright.

First I ought to say that calling this a case of the "borrowed syllabus" is misleading; more has been "borrowed" in this case than a syllabus.

The job applicant in the case was interviewed once at a convention and was invited to a second interview. The applicant was asked to be prepared to make a presentation on a scholarly topic and on how to approach the teaching of a particular course. The applicant found a friend who had already taught the course in question, solicited course materials, and then presented these at the interview (we are unsure whether with or without the friend's permission).

Why is it relevant how much material was presented to the interviewers? Because some copying from others is permissible, even necessary, in teaching or research. Copying someone else's course title would not present problems of the kind that would be presented by copying someone else's whole course, right down to all the handouts (including, say, a chapter of the friend's thesis). Newton says that syllabi are "vague forecasts of probable teaching activity."[2] But the case-description says that the friend supplied copies of *all materials developed in connection with the course*[3] (italics mine).

According to the case-description, the job candidate felt that the interviewers were impressed by the presentation on their campus. Possibly, the teaching materials had been helpful. Pecorino's description of the case leaves us with the candidate wondering whether it might not be better to reveal the source of the materials, despite the possible damage this could do to the chances of being offered the job.

Both writers talk quite a bit about "plagiarism." Newton tries to show that this case is not like a more typical case of plagiarism (where what is "borrowed" is a research paper). But the attempt to show that there are differences between this act of borrowing and the borrowing of someone's research paper is off the point. What matters is not whether the applicant has committed plagiarism, but whether he or she has committed a moral error. Further, is it a professional error? That is, do the actions of the applicant demonstrate philosophical ineptitude or a lack of understanding of the goals of philosophical inquiry and teaching?

Wright is wrong to claim that if the act is not plagiarism it is not unethical.[4] There are other kinds of morally problematical actions besides plagiarism. His point may be correct on some definitions of plagiarism, yet definitions could be debated here. If I copy a dance step from someone else, am I plagiarizing it? Is it possible to plagiarize a picture? Can I plagiarize a title or a "vague outline"?

Answers here may have as much to do with interesting but distracting questions of semantics as they do with ethical essentials. I'd like to keep away from these problems and concentrate on other more central issues: *If the job seeker did not reveal that the course materials were the work of someone else, did the job seeker act unethically? I think that the answer is yes. Was the failure to reveal sources unprofessional? Of course.*

Professor Newton maintains that the applicant was under no obligation to reveal the source of the material.[5] She tries to justify this answer by maintaining that differences between teaching and research make it acceptable to present teaching materials without acknowledging their authors. She also implies that the committee was not and had no special reason to be interested in how well prepared the applicant was to teach the course.

In condemning the applicant's behavior, I want it understood that as I interpret the case, the interviewers had given clear signals that they were concerned about teaching and wanted some evidence that the applicant could handle responsibilities even in a course outside the area of specializations. The interviewers asked specifically for course materials to be brought to the second interview on their campus. Let us consider what they might have seen besides a sketchy outline of the course.

Properly, even the minimal material handed out in the first day of class should contain a lot more than a description of the topics to be covered or books to be read in the course. There are different ways to assign credit to students for their work. These assignments and methods of grading should be explained. Also, in a good course, the teacher won't just "cover the material," but will (say) give diagnostic tests, have interviews with individual students, have debates, invite a guest speaker or take a field trip. Students ought to know how far the teacher plans to go in providing them with these "extras." They ought to know something about the structure of the course, what kinds of preparation it presupposes, what work they will be required to perform, whether they are expected merely to remember the materials presented to them in the readings and the class sessions or to work creatively on their own.

Besides this *detailed* course prospectus, the interviewers may also have seen sample examination questions, handouts explaining assignments, bibliographies, or sets of study questions. These are important elements in courses. If the interviewers wanted to be sure that the candidate was a thoughtful teacher, they should have asked for these kinds of materials. It is even possible that the teacher has written something that could be assigned to the students in the class (say, the aforementioned thesis chapter). If the candidate allowed the interviewers to form the impression that these handouts were his or her own, then this would be a case of plagiarism in the narrowest sense.

As for "standard syllabi," mentioned with approval by Newton, perhaps there are such things. But some thought ought to be taken before using such a syllabus. Representing oneself as the author of a standard syllabus is not a legal offense (to mention the law just once) because, if standard, it is like other public domain materials, protected neither by copyright nor by patent. But still the thoughtless presentation of a standard syllabus would be a professional error, as it displays a failure to engage fully in the philosophical enterprise.

Standard syllabi have changed from one age to another. This means that serious philosophizing is required if a fully responsible choice is to be made among various possible syllabi. Really, teachers are the most important editors of philosophy. They do more than anyone else to decide which philosophers will continue to be read. Teaching casually from a standard syllabus would indicate that the interviewee was satisfied to allow traditional beliefs about what's worth reading to slip past without subjecting them to criticism.

Even worse, the use of a syllabus copied from another teacher (or from a standard textbook) could cause the interviewee later to be in the position of teaching without

proper preparation. Has the candidate *read* the materials listed in the syllabus? Will he or she read them well in advance of teaching the course, just ahead of the students, or not at all? An unprepared teacher teaches by example that reading the stuff isn't all that important. What if there is a "standard bibliography" attached to the syllabus? Has the candidate read the works listed there?[6] In a sense, a bibliography is a set of recommendations. It selects some titles rather than others, and presents these to the reader as worth consideration. Given the large number of published works it may be too much to expect that teachers will have read everything in a large bibliography, but a teacher has no business recommending a book of unknown quality. If unread books are on such a list, the teacher should have some good evidence that they are worth listing. If I copy a bibliography from a single source (even a highly respected one) I do not have the evidence needed to justify passing it out.

Newton makes some good points about the problems involved in plagiarism. For instance, saying that our published words are "private property" does not help to reveal the more fundamental problems created by plagiarized research.[7] She is correct to say that plagiarism makes it harder for truth-seekers to know where to look next for the answers to their questions. As searchers who recognize our finitude we look to others for help in recognizing the truth. How can our pursuit succeed when some of those around us misrepresent the genealogy of ideas?

Sharing Newton's horror of the borrowed research paper, I am distressed at her willingness to condone the unacknowledged use of teaching materials. Even to present a vague statement of objectives actually formulated by someone else as one's own damages the network of social relations that makes truths available to us. More damage is done if other works such as bibliographies or handouts are falsely represented as originating with the candidate. Despite Newton's arguments to the contrary, I find no morally or professionally relevant differences between plagiarizing research and failing to identify the source of teaching materials. In both instances, reproducing another's work is desirable so long as it is not excessive, and quite acceptable where authorship is properly acknowledged. It is improper for anyone to perpetrate false beliefs, or to be negligent in correcting them, hoping thereby to gain personal advantage. In both cases we rob others of due acknowledgment of their work. It is ironic that this result could be overlooked in a discussion in a journal devoted to improvement of teaching in philosophy.

Newton claims that there is an exact analogy between medical research and applied medicine, on the one hand, and philosophical research and the teaching of philosophy, on the other. This is part of her attempt to show that there are relevant differences between researching and teaching philosophy, differences which excuse the applicant's behavior. However, to view teaching philosophy as simply an application of philosophical research is incorrect. While teaching may in some cases be an application of research, that is not the full story. Actually, the relation between the two is more complicated. Philosophy teachers taught most of us (writers, teachers, editors, etc.) the basic vocabulary of the discipline, making the writings of philosophers accessible to us for the first time. Seen in this light teaching is one of the preconditions of research and not simply a use of it.

Further, I think that it is pragmatically inconsistent to value publication when one does not value readers. Who reads the scholarly works that philosophers produce? Mostly the teachers of philosophy and their students. Seen this way, teaching isn't the application of research so much as the completion of it. The writing of one generation is meaningless unless there is a new generation of readers who follow. Where will the next generation of scholars come from if there aren't any teachers of philosophy? True, a few philosophers (some great ones) learned how to write it on their own, but others (also some great figures) would not have tried to write it if they had never been

made to read it by a teacher. Teaching does not merely *use* philosophical research but nurtures and gives it meaning.

Thus, even if the job applicant had included no thesis chapters or other original prose of the friend in what was presented to the interviewers, but only more basic teaching materials of the kinds described above, to allow any impression to linger that these were original works would be damaging. To allow the false impression to go uncorrected stands in direct opposition to the values that teachers (especially philosophy teachers) have to support. The actions in question cannot rightly be excused by saying, as Newton seems to, that philosophical research is more basic than philosophy teaching. Research depends on teaching in so many ways that it makes little sense to view the one as more fundamental than the other. And because the relationship between teaching and research is an intimate one, the disclosure of sources is just as necessary in one of these areas as in the other. Unless the candidate acknowledges the source of the materials, the candidate's action was both unethical and unprofessional.

As for the committee, perhaps it has not made any moral error by allowing the candidate to get by without an admission of sources. Perhaps none of the members of the committee knew what questions to ask the candidate in order to bring a better account of the truth to light, and because the members did not know how to conduct their business, they cannot be blamed for the fact that it went awry. However, to excuse them this way from a moral mistake requires saying that they acted ineptly in the pursuit of their calling as philosophers. This calling requires that a critical and reflective attitude by taken towards teaching materials and activities as well as towards research. I conclude that the actions of the committee, while perhaps not unethical, were at least unprofessional.

Notes

1. "The Case of the Borrowed Syllabus," (Case #2 in "Ethical Case Studies in Teaching Philosophy," edited by Philip A. Pecorino, *Teaching Philosophy* 7:3, July 1984, pp. 235-41.) Commentary by Lisa Newton appears on pp. 236-39. Commentary by Richard Wright appears on pp. 239-41. In preparing this response, I have been helped by critical comments and suggestions from Mary Ann Carroll and Virginia van der Bogert.

2. Newton, p. 238.

3. Pecorino, p. 236.

4. Wright, p. 239.

5. Newton, p. 236.

6. I thank Arnold Wilson for bringing this problem to my attention.

7. Newton, p. 238.

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