

# All my own work?

**Colin Foster** wonders why it is such a problem when learners are accused of 'borrowing' if teachers are doing it all the time?

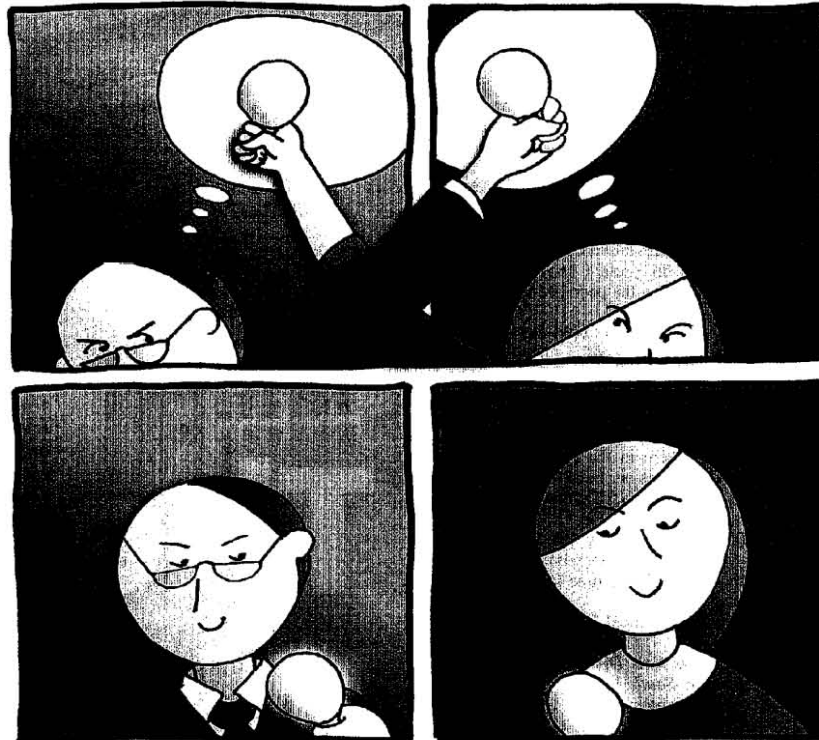
**D**ID YOU hear the one about the school which decided it needed a plagiarism policy? (Or rather, I hope, an anti-plagiarism policy!). Someone suggested that they download one from another school's website and change the name at the top.

I have always been fortunate enough to work in schools where sharing resources is seen as natural. Colleagues are more than happy to run off an extra copy for someone else – and sharing materials electronically should always be taken as a token of even greater trust, since it is so quick and easy to adapt other people's files.

For me, exchanging materials is more than just not wanting to re-invent the wheel: colleagues have ideas that I would never have and bring skills in to produce resources that make mine look feeble.

When using something with your class that was created by someone else, it is nice to give credit where credit is due, although this is not always viewed positively by pupils: "Oh no! Not another Mrs X test – somebody stop her writing these things."

If this is all fine and reflects the working of a harmonious community of busy industrious teachers, why is it such a problem when learners are accused of "borrowing"?



"It's okay to get help with your coursework, but your finished piece must be your own unaided work." Sorry? How is that supposed to make sense? Taking credit for something as your own unaided idea is a highly risky business.

As they say, originality is just undiscovered plagiarism. How can a pupil be expected to write

a completely original essay on, say, *Henry VIII* or *Macbeth*? What can they say that has not been said a million times before?

Even at university, it is probably not until doctoral level that students are writing about truly original ideas, and, even then, one person's research will be intimately connected to that of many others. The people at the top

are standing on many others' shoulders. How can a class of GCSE pupils solve their quadratic equations in 30 different ways? This is expecting too much.

I think we are much too hung up on the supposed current "plague" of "plagiarism" – it is the wrong thing to worry about.

There is no such thing as completely original thinking in a vacuum. Ideas provoke other ideas. We invent, borrow, adapt, refine – today at an enormous pace – and that is how thinking moves forwards. It cannot all be explicitly acknowledged – no list of references can ever be complete: it would be like trying to list all the influences on, say, your political or social views.

Plagiarism is more talked about today partly because of the communications revolution, but also as a symptom of the impoverished curriculum. A lack of imagination on the part of educators leads to repetitive, predictable questions with highly "reproducible" answers.

What is far more important than who happened to get to something first is what the rest of us are doing with it. With many hugely important ideas, no-one can be sure where they first originated.

For me, that is far less important than whether the rest of us know and understand about those things and can take them on to the next stage. Co-operation and support are much better than competition and argument.

If learners paste material from a website and reference this, that may be an entirely appropriate way to engage with some information or ideas. What matters is the extent to which those thoughts have become part of their thinking and how they have been integrated into other ideas.

Re-writing the paragraphs "in your own words" is nothing more than a literacy exercise. Copying out a diagram enables you to avoid the charge of plagiarism while remaining uncreative and indiscriminating.

So this is what I think about plagiarism – and I just hope that someone else has not had the same idea. It is funny how we hope that no-one has had the same idea as us, and yet we should be really encouraged when that happens: if someone else has thought of it too, it must be a good one.

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