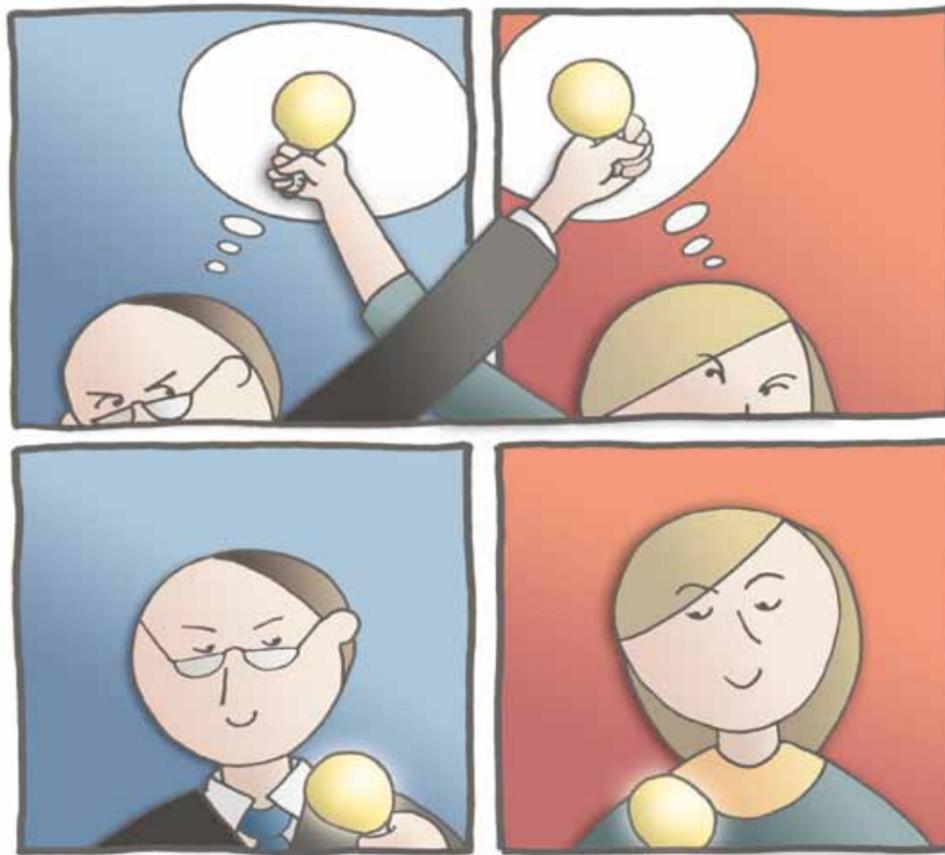


# All my own work?



**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.

SecEd

• Colin Foster teaches at a secondary school in Coventry.

## Notes and jottings

### Encouraging excellence

I'M IN Queen Elizabeth Hall on London's South Bank lost in a splendid performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* complete with four harps, double brass, and a dramatic line up of percussion. The playing is astonishing. But, no, this isn't the Philharmonia or any other top-flight professional orchestra.

Almost unbelievably, I'm listening to a school orchestra and almost all players are under 18, including the remarkable Joo Yeon Sir who is leading the orchestra and playing the solos. She has also won a composition competition and we've enjoyed hearing the world premiere of her compelling piece in the first half.

Purcell School, at Bushey in Hertfordshire, is one of the nine schools which operate through the government's Music and Dance Scheme (MDS). The scheme pays, or tops up, the fees for outstandingly talented youngsters needing a music-driven school with high level teaching – a form of SEN in my view.

And Purcell does a wonderful all round job. Last year 100 per cent of its pupils got five or more A\* to Cs at GCSE, and it also has five section finalists (a record apparently) in the forthcoming BBC Young Musician of the Year competition. When – it's no good pretending otherwise – dumbing down is the norm, gifted and talented agenda notwithstanding, it's heartening to find a school in which excellence and talent is uncompromisingly at the forefront.

How much do your young treasures know about money – apart from how to spend it? Probably not much given the alarming middle most people now seem to be in with soaring house prices and the average Briton's personal debt of £33,000. Enter GCSE and post-16 level courses in personal finance set by the ifs School of Finance.

Fulston Manor School at Sittingbourne, Kent, a specialist business and enterprise college, took part in a pilot. Now it offers courses to all students as from year 10.

They have been taken up by 60 key stage 4 students and 70 6th formers. Across the country the take-up stands at about 10,000.

Fulston Manor's deputy headteacher, Nigel Tiller, said: "The kids like it. The assessments are all multiple choice and they take the exams when we think they are ready throughout the course."

All the teaching material is available online so keen students can access it at home as well as in school.

I rather wish someone had taught me this stuff when I was 17 instead of leaving me to learn it as I went along – which has taken decades. The nearest we ever got was those incomprehensible stocks and shares problems in maths.

How many times a day do you snap – don't tip that chair please? Not only does it cause disciplinary mayhem when they fall off, but 7,000 school students a year end up in A&E departments with chair-tipping-related injuries.

So the untippable Max chair (see [www.dbltd.co.uk](http://www.dbltd.co.uk)) is a timely invention. It was featured in the news pages of this paper recently (*SecEd*, issue 168, February 28, 2008). I've tried it and it really works because of the angle of the metal legs.

The cohesive plastic seats minimise the sticking to the backs of your legs if you're wearing anything short. If I were in charge of a school's budget, I'd have these at the top of my shopping list.

You can wait for years for a really good children's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in London then they come along in a posse like number 11 buses.

A good one has just finished at Unicorn Theatre in London. The National Theatre is currently touring an abridged version of the play in London schools. The summer programme for the Open Air Theatre Regents Park has *A Midsummer Night's Dream* re-worked for children.

Or, if you want the full version of this deliciously sexy play, it's in the summer repertoire at Shakespeare's Globe too.

• Susan Elkin is an education journalist and former teacher.



## Independent thinking

### Rhythms of the world

IT WAS a chilly Friday night in February; a hush descended on the school theatre; two 6th formers moved to centre stage to welcome the audience; the music started and before too long a tear escaped and in the darkness trickled down my cheek. They had done it again!

Done what? Brought shame to the school community? Wrecked the theatre? No, far from it – they had shown that young people today are capable of great things, can work well together and display real altruism as well as amazing talents.

Each spring our year 12 students take it upon themselves to produce a wonderful evening of entertainment and food, reflecting and celebrating some of the many diverse cultures within our school. In March 2007, they staged an event entitled *Diaspora* and this February the current generation of year 12 students produced an evening called *Viva!* It began with the rhythms of Africa and some stunning dances choreographed and performed by a group of pupils of all ages.

The Asian sub-continent was well represented too: our weekly Bollywood club members danced in sinuous style, wearing traditional Indian costumes, although they were from many different backgrounds, including American, English, Japanese and Afro-Caribbean. They were followed by an energetic group of Bhangra performers, whose aggression contrasted strongly with that of our Indian Classical dancers delicately portraying the complex opening of a flower. Flamenco and Rock'n'Roll were interspersed by witty commentary and an audience participation "learn Japanese in five minutes" session, introduced by girls wearing full Japanese costume (irrespective of their own nationality). A Russian folk song greatly moved the audience and added to the variety. The complex harmonies sung unaccompanied by our Gospel choir were another high point of the evening.

Just before the interval a visiting representative from an African charity, the girls' chosen recipient of their fund-raising, spoke about what a difference their contribution would make and how stunned

she had been by their performances. We retired to the main school hall, to be entertained by our jazz band while we sampled food from many different countries lovingly cooked and donated by girls and their families. We stayed in the hall for the second half and were entertained by the blissfully melodic Gu Zhang (a traditional Chinese harp) skilfully played by a year 11 pupil and Irish folk tunes played by a 6th former on a more traditional harp. All that was left for us to get to our feet and enjoy some American style line dancing. A wonderful time was had by all and more than £1,400 was raised for the charity.

Just another school evening? Perhaps; but what is so heart-warming is the way in which girls of all ethnic backgrounds joined in and made a real effort to understand and excel in performing the music, songs and dances from different cultures, not to mention the almost totally hearing-impaired student who made her first stage appearance.

Schools now have a duty to promote "community cohesion", but our evenings have been staged for many years, as I am sure they are in many other schools.

Recently, I attended a workshop at a prestigious education conference where the head of a state school made a presentation about issues of equality and coping with the diversity of London's pupil population. She spoke of how inclusive her school was and made a number of quite disparaging remarks about how much easier it was for independent schools in London to be successful as they are mono-culturally white, describing the "kilt girls" whom she sees travelling to school each day with their well-brushed long blonde hair. Uncharacteristically, I felt quite intimidated by this presentation. I wanted to point out that not all independent school girls wear kilts (although I do threaten to introduce kilts occasionally when hemlines reach unseemly heights!) and some of us have pupils from a wide range of backgrounds. I wish she could have been at our school for *Viva!* – or even on the following Friday when our annual

• Marion Gibbs is headmistress of the independent James Allen's Girls' School in London.

