

Our Common Pedagogical Dilemma: Designing Literary Essay Assignments Not Easily Bought or “Found”

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Abstract

Many of the small number of English majors at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) are ESL learners who say they do not like to read. Of this group, most are looking to finish the degree quickly and preferably without reading texts closely or the bother of using MLA citation style. Instead of writing essays, these students seek to “find” one on the Internet or to have their maids or a local business complete the work for them while they pursue other interests. Given this population, one of my biggest pedagogical challenges as a literature professor at AUK is designing essay assignments that do not lend themselves as readily to the common forms of cheating. Plagiarism is a dilemma that most professors will encounter. My work focuses on assignments I create to encourage this ESL population to engage in literary criticism using copying (or pastiche) and social media formats without cheating. Their creative undertakings must be accompanied by an argumentative essay that explains the intellectual underpinnings of their creations. After nearly four years of this textual intervention approach, many students have achieved desirable learning outcomes with these assignments.

Keywords

Textual intervention, plagiarism, creativity

As a professor who teaches medieval and nineteenth-century British and American literature courses at a private university in Kuwait, I have often listened sympathetically as my colleagues complained of student plagiarism. One colleague read a student paper that appeared very familiar to him, only to realize that his student had found one of his articles online and given it to him as her work. Another colleague had a mother accompany her son to his office hours to berate him about the “F” he had given her son because, in the mother’s words, “we paid good money for an “A” paper.”

That parent brought up a situation that may or may not be unique to Kuwait. Parents go to brick and mortar businesses to buy assignments for their children. Of course, every society has students who cheat, but until arriving in Kuwait I had no experience of parents that routinely buy homework assignments. This phenomenon starts in elementary school and continues through university, as my colleague discovered. (In addition to speaking about this issue with my university colleagues, I have had many discussions with a number of Americans who teach elementary students in various schools in Kuwait. It is from this wide

circle of educators that I have learned the extent of the issue of parental involvement in buying homework assignments.) While I have not been to one of those businesses, I know they exist because the businesses advertise. One afternoon our security guards caught workers putting flyers on the cars in the student-faculty parking lot that urged students to visit their business or, for the student who is both dishonest and lazy, send syllabi via their mobiles and have their homework delivered to them at school.

Literary essay assignments are particularly ripe for plagiarism because most undergraduates read from popular anthologies or critical editions. It is impossible to surf the Internet and not find a paper on canonical works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Wuthering Heights* or *The Scarlet Letter*. Moreover, with just a little effort, students can cobble together what they term as “smart” sounding essays using passages from *Spark Notes* or *Cliff Notes*. Students, as we know, are masters at navigating the Web. Some find it hard to resist global or incremental plagiarism in their mindless pursuit of an “A.”

This issue of plagiarism plagues educators worldwide. In opening a discussion on our common pedagogical problem, my purpose is not to criticize Kuwaiti students or their parents. Instead, my goal is to discuss a shift in my pedagogical approach to assignment creation, given the realities of the educational climate where I work. For this discussion I will explain how textual intervention forms the theoretical basis for my assignments, describe some of the assignments I have created using textual intervention, provide examples from the work that students submitted, and discuss how this approach enhances student learning outcomes by making old texts more relevant for twenty-first century students as well as preparing strong students for advanced studies. Before I discuss the areas outlined above, I will provide a general profile of my students.

The majority of the English majors I teach are privileged, Arab, second-language students. Women outnumber men by almost three to one. Some of them say that they hate to read and write essays. Many are English majors because their high-school grade point averages were not high enough to claim a government scholarship to study the more popular majors such as engineering or business. Given their antipathy for the demands of the discipline and their desire to have a different major, our students are conscripts to the English department much like the idlers from earlier centuries that awoke from merry-making and found themselves in the British navy.

When I gave my first standard literary essay assignment to this population, I failed six students for plagiarism after Turn-It-In demonstrated conclusively that those students were not the originators of the essays they gave me. The students could not argue with evidence, but they did produce plenty of tears and dramatics as they implored me not to fail their assignments. One even filed a

grade complaint against me for giving her an “F” after she had worked very hard “researching” that paper.

That semester forced me to think seriously about the nature of my assignments. I was not going to spend semester after semester hosting sobbing cheaters in my office. I could foresee an endless and futile uphill battle ahead with me trying to convince students whose parents may have bought their assignments for most of their academic careers that they should do their own work or fail the course. If my students would not change significantly, my assignments had to change. I had to create assignments that would both assess student learning in relationship to the stated course outcomes and cut the ease of plagiarism. Thus, like many instructors before me, I turned to textual intervention. A simple definition for this critical approach to criticism is offered by Buckton-Tucker (2012) who quotes Kimber as saying that textual interventions is “a way of challenging existing texts to create original work”, implying, as he says, that texts need to be regarded as dynamic and open-ended, rather than fixed and finished” (2012, p. 1).

In *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (1995), Pope states that the best way to understand how a text works “is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then try to account for the exact effect of what you have done” (1995, p. 1). His words describe my pastiche assignments perfectly. For example, when I teach Old English literature in my survey class I ask students to create a pastiche of *The Wife’s Lament* or *The Wanderer* that describes an event from their lives in Kuwait using the four major conventions of that period poetry – *ubi sunt*, the elegiac mood, the kenning, and alliteration. This pastiche allows students to express their own ideas as they demonstrate their comprehension of the conventions that made a good scop (= the Old English word for poet). Instead of plagiarism I received some impressive efforts such as *The Woe of a Word-Smith*. The first three paragraphs are:

A cornucopia of crass cross-cultural invective invites itself to inflict injury on my inventory of ideas. Pen to paper is sword to soul. This is the woe of a winded word-smith...

Two purposes predicate my printed-passages: my own and my grade-givers’. Ordered in chronology but not in priority, long gone are the days when they were at parity, longer still from when personal projects possessed primacy.

I wrote when I was sad, and I grew glad. The word broth in my thought-cauldron, agitated by anger and alienation, fused into cohesion, bonded together by strong emotion. I wrote on religion, irreligion,

Kierkegaard, suicide and God. I wrote about my first heartbreak. I kept an intricate, insightful thought-book (submitted by a student in ENGL 211 during the Fall 2013 semester).

Pastiche is not the only permutation of textual intervention I use. In periods more accessible to my students than the medieval period, I give essay assignments that stress the augmentation of canonical works instead of the rewriting of them. For example in my courses on nineteenth-century British or American literature, the majority of my essay assignments have two parts. Students submit a creative writing component accompanied by an essay that explains the analytical underpinnings for the choices made in their creative work. I ensure the creative assignments incorporate something familiar to my students. Most recently the familiar component has involved social media. However, in my assignments, unlike actual social media sites, English spelling, grammar, and usage must be correct. One recent assignment required students to create a *Facebook* page for a character from *Wuthering Heights* or *Emma*. After creating this supplementary text, they were asked to write an essay explaining the choices they made for the *Facebook* creation grounding their intervention with more traditional literary criticism.

One student created a *Facebook* page in which Heathcliff befriended only Catherine Earnshaw and Nelly Dean. His posts berated people, especially Isabella Linton, for trying to befriend him and railed against all gentle sentiments including life itself. She defended this invention in her essay using the quotation from the text when Heathcliff brags of his abuse of Isabella to Dean and says of his unhappy wife she “degenerates into a real slut! She is tired of trying to please me uncommonly early” (p. 117). Not only did the creative exercise and essay demonstrate the student’s understanding of character, plot, convention, culture, and the usual conversations that accompany Bronte’s text, it also allowed her to choose images that expressed her interventions in the text and display her linguistic savvy in realizing that the word slut as Bronte used it meant nothing more nefarious than an unkempt woman.

My students have not figured out an easy method of plagiarizing these two-component papers from the Internet. Thus my assignments have proven as cheat proof as work completed outside the classroom can be. Students have noticed this about my assignments. While conversing with a student about his idea for a *Facebook* page, I implored him not to procrastinate in starting his work because he could not complete my assignments with a paper found via Google. Much to my surprise, he admitted to discussing that issue with his peers before concluding, “I know, and we hate your assignments because of that.” Without trying to do so, that student gave me a compliment. He affirmed my pedagogical

approach to minimizing plagiarism and maximizing learning while assuring me that my evaluations of the assignments are accurate assessments of a student's ability to write, analyze, criticize, theorize, and comprehend rather than a reflection of the wonders of Internet search engines.

In developing essay assignments I am also careful to acknowledge the standardized needs of the students who excel at this university and wish to earn advanced degrees. They must understand close reading, theory, criticism, and how to hold traditional conversations about canonical texts since they will leave university hoping to be accepted into graduate programs in the UK or US. We must prepare them for advanced studies. Therefore, my assignments cannot become too esoteric or open-ended. The two-part assignment avoids that pitfall and encourages creativity as it caters to all of the diverse learning needs of my classroom in Kuwait.

My final assignment examples come from a Twitter assignment in my American literature class that uses *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Vol. B*. The students could choose from Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* or *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or the excerpts from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* or *The Last of the Mohicans* or Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*. I asked them to create a series of seven tweets between two characters from their chosen text. The tweets had to reflect cultural conventions of the period as well as be a plausible interaction between the characters given the parameters the author created. To accompany the tweets, students were asked to submit an essay that situated their tweets within the texts, developed an appropriate literary theory, and demonstrated an understanding of the cultural milieu of eighteenth-century America.

It is apparent immediately when students do not understand issues or procrastinate and rush through the assignments. I received two papers that did not pass. The first featured Natty Bumppo and his Native American friend, Chingachgook tweeting about going to the theater. Of course, there was no theater in the community where they lived. Bumppo, nicknamed Leatherstocking, for the Native American clothing that he always wore, had rejected cultivated existence to live as simply as Chingachgook. And, finally, a community still smarting over King Phillip's War would not be inclined to allow a Native American into their theater even if they had one. His essay consisted merely of a restating of tweets using more words than allowed by Twitter. The main point of the essay was that the two men were friends who did activities together. Unfortunately, that issue is not debatable because Cooper establishes their mutual good-will.

Another failing paper was also on Cooper. It involved tweets between Judge Marmaduke Temple and his daughter Elizabeth. She asked him why the early

settlers faced famine. This was an interesting conversation to imagine. However, the father told his daughter that the settlers went on vacation in the summer and their crops failed. Once again the student did not represent the cultural milieu of the text accurately. Settlers of the wilderness did not go on long vacations in the summer as modern-day Kuwaitis do. Once again the essay was a longer explanation of the tweets.

In each case, the students failed to understand the historical context of the novel and how to interpret the important issues in Cooper's work critically. All of the other submissions were considerably more astute. One student submitted the following tweet between the children of Rip Van Winkle. She chose two characters that Irving describes but does not allow them to speak as children. Irving tells us that Van Winkle's son is just like him and describes his daughter as the wife of a man who fulfills his duty to provide for his family as head of the household. That daughter, Judith Gardenier, has a well-maintained home where Van Winkle goes to live once he awakens from his 20-year slumber. Her tweets between siblings are situated a year before their father's return. She tweets:

Judith Gardenier@ JudithGardenier

Rip! Lazing away from your chores again? Has father's spirit bonded with you for you are his image in minding all business but your own!

Rip Van Winkle Jr.@lazyismymiddlename

And you, the voice of mother! During the 15 years since father disappeared, have you not wondered if he left to escape our mother's nagging?

Judith Gardenier@ JudithGardenier

I looked for him, as did mother. Since he disappeared I often wondered if he abandoned us for a life of leisure over duty to his family.

Rip Van Winkle Jr.@ lazyismymiddlename

Duty? Was he not the beloved of the town for helping those in need? They blame ma for driving him away when he did tasks no one else did!

Judith Gardenier@ JudithGardenier

I cannot fault mother. I understand the hardships she went through taking on father's duty in a world that allows women little freedom.

Rip Van Winkle Jr.@ lazyismymiddlename

Surely father did what he could. Did he not clothe and feed us?
 Did he not leave us the farm? Are you yet unsatisfied enough to
 blame him?

Judith Gardenier@ JudithGardenier

We starved, walked around in rags, had our land squandered
 away as our farm fell to despair. Charity begins at home and I
 pity him for never understanding this.

The essay that accompanied this tweet examines the sibling relationship and familial space of the Van Winkle household through a feminist critical approach. The student argues that the narrator's jocular tone and sympathetic description of Van Winkle's plight masks the seriousness of the domestic abandonment of the title character's wife and children who could not fend for themselves in eighteenth-century America. She may have nagged him but the condition of their farm and clothing certainly gave her cause for anger. In the tweet, Judith stops her brother from romanticizing their deadbeat father and makes him understand the reality of life that so bedeviled their mother.

Another student also chose to focus the assignment on *Rip Van Winkle* and submitted a tweet that gives another silenced character, Dame Van Winkle, voice. Irving's story bemoans her as a shrew. The student acknowledges the supposed shrillness of her manner in writing her tweets all in capital letters. And yet her demands are proper. As in the tweets of the first student, he focuses on the gender dynamics at work in eighteenth-century America. Van Winkle is neglectful and the student demonstrates his inattention to husbandly and paternal duty through the sloppiness – abbreviations and poor spelling – of his tweets. He writes:

Dam. Winkle: RIP!! GET HOME NOW!!! THE FARM HAS BEEN FALLOW
 FOR FAR TOO LONG! THE WEEDS HAVE BEGUN TO OUTGROW THE
 CROPS THAT ALREADY MANAGED TO SPROUT!!

Rvwin: why so loud, why the neighbours can hear u through the letters
 of ur every word u send

Dam.Winkle: NEIGHBOURS!? YOU MEAN THE WRETCHES AND
 DRUNKARDS AT THAT HORRID TAVERN!!

Rvwin: Ill have u know ive yet to drink a pint. Mrs roddenly needed a
 hand at home and I was passing by and there and then offered my help

Dam.Winkle: WOULD YOU BE AS DILLIGENT TO YOUR FAMILY AND
 CHILDREN AS YOU ARE TO STANGERS WITH THEIR MINOR NEEDS!!!

Rvwin: Ill be home in a bit and look after the garden and fields but i am
 thirsty. A quick stop at the pub and ill be back before lunch

Dam.Winkle: LUN-? RIP VAN WINKLE, IT'S PAST NOON AND NEARING TH- (Turned off, and tucked into a vest pocket, to a male chorus of "RIIIP!!!") (both Tweets were submitted by ENGL 310 students in the Spring 2014 semester)

In each of these papers the students were free to intervene in the text as they added to critical discussions of important questions raised by Irving's text.

One of the major outcomes I have stressed is the infrequency of plagiarism using textual intervention. However, that is only half of the success story of my use of textual intervention in Kuwait. The other major outcome, one that I hope that the examples of student writing demonstrate, is that this approach helps hard-working students gain access to texts that pose linguistic, historical, and cultural challenges to young people who speak Arabic as their native language and reside in twenty-first century Kuwait. High achieving students comment on how much they enjoy the assignments because it challenges them as they engage the readings. Or as John McRae writes in *Introduction to Literature Language and Culture*, language "awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness are now seen as empowering the learner. The authority of the text is now more open to discussion, rewriting, creative reading and interpretation, and indeed all aspects of creativity and re-creation, than it has ever been" (n.d., para 6). Another student sums up her approval of my assignments with a question, we "get creativity as well as critical literary skills. What else can a serious student want?"

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