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## Essayistic Literacy in the age of the Internet

“Quod Scripsi Scripsi”  
- Pontius Pilate

The former Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate said, “I have written what I have written”. Pontius meant that in the future, he could not go and correct his previous dictations. I want to apply his quote differently. Take the following example: students frequently find themselves in a situation where a paper is due on ‘topic-x’ and the pupil has yet to summon the slightest energy to apply to the actual act of doing the research needed to start the writing. They’re occupied watching a great basketball game and at this time of day the library is too far of a distance away or has closed for the evening. One overtime later, the gears start turning that perhaps it’s time for the act of doing research. The topic was chosen thinking that the research would be easy, since students are known to come down with severe cases of homework apathy and procrastination. Within several mouse clicks and keyword searches, they pull up hundreds if not thousands of websites; each site looking for a potential reader. Place the website’s credibility aside; it’s simply a matter of browsing through the text and selecting the most valid points. After several keystrokes of hitting Ctrl-C (copy) and now Ctrl-V (paste), it has only been within minutes that the student has taken a wealth of information and assembled it into a paper they are proud to call their own. While this practice may seem innocent to many, there is a crime being committed.

The advent of the Internet has been a mixed blessing for society. With one wire and a computer, the entire world can be brought into your living space. Biographies about Paul Reubens, music from Mozambique, to pictures of your third aunt’s wedding can all be accessed readily. Everything that is available in the world can be accessed and downloaded into your house. It can be viewed as a global-bazaar where people gather to share their ideas, but not every idea is original. People leech others’ ideas and cast them as their own. Much like the student in the introduction paragraph, they simply logged on and found someone’s opinion on a topic without formulating anything cognitive on their own. In her article *Beyond “Gotcha!”: Situating Plagiarism in Policy and Pedagogy* Margaret Price argues that the definition of plagiarism “is difficult, if not impossible to define” since the word and its meaning can alter across time (88). Price also argues, “plagiarism is not only a phenomenon...it must be mastered” (89). Jonathan Hall says that “plagiarism is a sign that all is not well in a student’s overall relation to the educational environment”. Since the Internet has fueled the plagiarism fire, more and more students are taking a keen interest in mastering their thievery skills. It is within honing their mastery that the question is raised: with plagiarism and it’s aspects becoming more of a common practice that many students accept as a legitimate method of writing, what has happened to the art of writing the essay in the age of the Internet? Are English majors the ‘keepers of the proverbial essayistic grail’? It seems today that more and more students are using the Internet as a crutch when it comes to researching and writing papers.

It has been the case that over the years of their education career, students have come to loathe the presence of the word ‘essay’. The fear instilled into the bodies of pupils upon hearing this word is amazing. From my earliest recollections, even in fifth grade the word ‘essay’ made

our pre-pubescent bodies quiver in fear. That fear however is since the word essay has been a misappropriated misnomer on several occasions. Doug Hesse describes, “the term ‘essay’ has evolved into a generic term for all works of prose nonfiction short enough to be read in a single sitting” (35). All students, unless highly pretentious English majors, have labeled a paper an ‘essay’ when in reality it may have been nothing more than a journal entry responding to the class work of the previous week. Perhaps they label the paper an ‘essay’ to give a more grueling aspect to their workload than it actually may be. Hesse describes the essay as the “genre best suited to promote writing and thinking” (38). Though the essay is supposed to challenge the brain to work harder and be the pinnacle of anyone’s writing repertoire, many have chosen to cheat themselves and use other people’s work as their own. While currently living in the dawn of the Digital Age, cheating oneself of improving and developing as a writer has never been easier.

In the matter of plagiarizing, students have had the notion that ‘plagiarizing is bad’ drilled into their subconscious semester upon semester and year after year ever since their first out of class paper was assigned. Price says that plagiarism is “difficult to define” since the word keeps evolving about itself. With one teacher’s definition of plagiarism being only “not citing sources” and the next teacher's just “stealing other’s words” the pupils are ultimately the one’s who lose this battle since they are caught in the crossfire of conflicting viewpoints that can change from teacher to teacher or institution to institution. Hall supports this by saying, “policies fail to capture the full essence of plagiarism”. Far from being a word with a discrete definition, Rebecca Howard takes a bold step and calls for the removal of the term plagiarism since “plagiarism eludes definition because it does far more work than it admits to”. Howard wonders why educators “use it for the basis for serious legislation and adjudication” when it is “unwieldy, unstable and insidious” (473, 484). Plagiarism has emerged from once being taboo into the spotlight and is an enigma that has engulfed all aspects of English Literature into its mystique.

Treatment of plagiarizing varies since as aforementioned, one’s definition does not always match another’s since every reader and writer has his or her own interpretation of the context of plagiarism. Students do know that if the word ‘plagiarism’ arises regarding their paper, a debacle is most likely to spawn. That debacle can range from the student or the parents arguing with the teacher to challenging the administration, but can be as simple and is as easily resolved as a talk between the student and teacher. All these scenarios are something the student wants to avoid.

Essayist E.B. White established three categories for the plagiarists: thieves, dopes and the total recall. Thomas Mallon believes the ‘total recall’ plagiarist can also known as the “pathological” or the compulsive plagiarist (qtd. Howard 479). If we want to talk about intellectual theft it might be safe to label the thieves as committing misdemeanors, dopes as criminals and the total recallers as murderers. Yet there is no capital punishment system or English jail that we can place these criminals in. Though if such an institution did exist, the current state of affairs regarding the essay would be much improved. Or is an asylum more appropriate? Howard states, “Plagiarism is a disease; a disease of the body” (479). Should we exile those to an institution for the morally corrupt essayists? Currently, if a writer is exposed with this disease, it will follow them around for the rest of their lives making it a second shadow. There can be grave consequences that bring about shame regarding a previous plagiarism offense. If a student is expelled from a university and wants to apply elsewhere, questions are going to arise in the admissions process as to why the expulsion happened.

With the arrival of instant information via the Internet, it seems that the pathological plagiarist may be on the rise. Having such readily available writings online may make one

succumb to always using these sources and the writer will deny reports that their writing is unoriginal. In regards to the *New York Times* scandal, Marilyn Greenwald writes, “available sources (the Internet) are seductive because they can hide the fact that good reporting almost always requires some sweat” (Beware of ‘Techno-Journalism’). Hesse believes, “People’s lives are very busy. They get to a point they feel sort of desperate” (qtd. in Arthur). Are they desperate since they failed to do legitimate research, or are they desperate for ideas? Falling in love with a websites’ content is great, but the student should yield and take the time to examine exactly what the site is trying to say. It’s been well established that anyone can post whatever information on the Internet without a problem. Hence arises the credibility issue of the alleged ‘facts’ entering essays researched primarily online. Howard says that, “In hypertext, readers make additions and changes without necessarily leaving any trace of who contributed what... no longer do we have originators and plagiarists...but the collective, always unfinished text” (qtd. in Price 96). Howard issues a stern outlook on the Internet since it encourages the growth of bad morals which ultimately leaves “morality in precipitous decline” (Forget About Teaching).

How can students as writers function without morals? They fail to realize that when shaving off time by not performing proper research and original writing, which challenges the research, ultimately leaves them weaker mentally. Using another’s writing in lieu of one’s own is something that is almost taking on epidemic proportions in the field of essayistic literacy. Students believe this practice is acceptable, which tarts the legitimacy not only of their paper, but also of their morals. The current generation of students knows of no other way to write an essay. What they perceive as legitimate essay writing is nothing but a sham.

Joyce Kirk says that, “It is the development of the computer that is challenging the notion of the author as the individual creator of original works” (2). The lack of credibility of acknowledging the original author entering essays can be easily found through a simple search. Using the search engine Google, type "what happened to the fifty six men who signed"<sup>1</sup> (parentheses included) referring to the signers of the Declaration of Independence, coincidentally one of history’s greatest essays. Upon clicking on several of the returned sites, it can be found that each site contains the same text verbatim. Many sites don’t list an author. Several credit individuals while the next result has a different individual who claims to have written the text. This confusion as to who wrote this text originally is a prime example of the “morality in precipitous decline” (Howard, Forget about Teaching). How can a student decide whether the author is credible enough to use as a source in their paper? I find it hard to believe that the Brigade Leader of the Indiana Militia wrote the identical text as Dailyadultjoke.com and whomever Gary Hildreth is, among other authors challenging the prize of authorship.

And with morality in a tailspin there is no stopping the process of souring English. T.S. Eliot said, “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (qtd. in Kirk). The blatant copy and paste routine of students does not allow them to fall into the mature category. If the students are mature then why have they resorted to stealing? The teachers should be treating them as mature students, but the students fail to yield a mature essay by being foolish with resorting to a bastardized form of the essay. Mature students should at least be able to make their own arguments. Not just mature English students, but also mature students of every field whole should be able to make valid arguments. Some students may fail to realize that arguing through an essay is saying your opinion without opening your mouth – that of which is not too difficult to perform. As juveniles the students should be embarking down the correct literacy path via

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my mom, Judy Abderhalden, for bringing this to my attention

argumentation through the essay, but many have turned down the wrong path, which is where the Eliot's mature thieves reside. The good poets, or students who snag a piece of writing and turn it into something different, are practicing what is commonly referred to as patchwork.

Patchworking tends to be used by writers unfamiliar with the material and ideas in a source (Kirk). By weaving together snippets of other's thoughts mixed with their own without giving credit where credit is due, the student is essentially creating a quilt of various ideas and not an essay.

Once again we are at a crossroads; some teachers do not necessarily recognize where these patches start and end. If an idea seems too bright for a student and no citation is given the teacher may sound the plagiarism alarm. This alarm can be false too, if the teacher underestimates the student's thinking, which is often the case when the bond between the two isn't strong. There may be not enough citations given, but doubting a student's writing powers is a dangerous affair. If the patches of the essay's quilt are so well woven that the teacher fails to catch it, the student earns more faith in his or her thievery skills, and there is nothing to stop the student from committing the same act in the future. Yet while being a con-artist is well, an art, the student who takes the role of a literary-con is losing their writing touch. They're better thieves than they are essayists. Schools are supposed to produce scholars, not criminals.

One of the positives of the Internet is that there are sites that offer services to combat this epidemic form of toxic essay writing. TurnItIn.com asserts to the claim of being the leader in the fight against student plagiarism. By offering a subscription service in which a school or district pays a yearly fee to be a member, students submit their papers via TurnItIn to be cross examined for the slightest notion of plagiarism. The process consists of cross examining the student's own text with a library on file, then cross checking with the ProQuest article database, then other student papers on file. Ultimately the paper is cross-referenced to millions of archived papers, books and websites. TurnItIn is an authenticity checking machine. The teacher is then sent a report with words and or phrases that might be suspicious of plagiarism. The original article from which this suspicion is aroused is shown on the other half of the screen with the words that raise inquiry into the plagiarism highlighted so the instructor ultimately has the discretion if the student copied another's work (Turn It In Tour).

One website cannot stop this epidemic form of writing. The Internet is not a cure all source. I believe that the decline in the essayistic literacy cannot be cured by subscription services that live on the same superhighway that fosters such devious writing habits. Howard brings the point that "students are cheating because they don't value the opportunity of learning in our classes" (Forget about Teaching). Then the matter of cheating by writing an essay by plagiarizing sources is more an issue of pedagogy than of ethics. Subscribing to an online database that tells the teacher what may be plagiarism in a student's paper is a concept that works against the evolution of pedagogy.

What have the teachers done wrong in this matter? As aforementioned in this paper, while it is not a single teacher's fault, the ever shifting and elusive definition of plagiarism is probably the most pressing issue in terms of essayistic literacy. Like schools with dress codes for students, one cannot be expected to hold their own definition in their court of the classroom, while the student's have not had the same definition class after class, year after year. And what's more problematic is if a student has gotten away with plagiarism under one policy, they are more than likely to commit the act again, only under the watch of a new teacher who does not know the pupil's previous plagiarism track record. With plagiarism and all the current flaws in the system, all of what has been achieved through pedagogy dissolves and the classroom simply

becomes a game of cat and mouse. The cheese the mouse (the students) are trying to snatch is good grades, but the mouse has to tiptoe around the mousetraps laid out (plagiarism policies) to get to the cheese and avoid the cat (the teachers/administration) in the mean time. The upper hand clearly goes to the student for being sly with their assignments. Yet as the cat, the teacher has the final say: as they are the ones who hand out the grades.

Another misstep taken by teachers is assigning broad assignments. Giving a vast assignment due over an extended period of time may make the student feel lost in a sea of information, ultimately being clueless as where to start formulating their research ideas. This is where their confusion leads to pathworking. The assignments are given without a specific audience and purpose. A term that could apply to the assignments is 'lame duck' – they're powerless pieces since the student is oblivious as to who besides the teacher is going to read it. The student has no clue who to direct the piece to. The student should hope that their essay reigns true beyond the classroom. When writing the piece and the feeling of being lost in regards to the assignment hits the student, they then can resort to something that they know is there for them: the Internet. Hall concurs; "Students often don't have any idea of what the final product is supposed to look like, and they are often just flummoxed when it comes to trying to write from sources". The Internet can be compared to comfort food. In times of distress, the Internet is an all-night diner and welcomes lost students on an hourly basis.

When students make the choice to turn their eyes towards researching a paper solely on the Internet, it is here that the student is embarking down the wrong path. By feeling confused with the large assignment, they seek out the opinion of others to see what they have written about the subject. Price recognizes this practice saying, "some use the idea 'building block' but other idea use is 'a substitute for original thinking'" (97). I believe more students fall into the later category. While the building block may or may not turn into unintentional plagiarism, students forgo fresh cognitive reasons and place another's thoughts in lieu of their own and compile them into the assignment.

Hesse believes, "The essay allows the writer to incorporate other texts into her or his own, representing and discussing them in explicit relation to the writer's own ideas and experiences" (41). Bringing outside information into an essay is always encouraged. Modern essays are more or less composed of compiled thoughts by various authors, not the students. What the teacher may think is the 'writer's own ideas' is just some Google searched keyword. Teachers want argumentation written by the student, not a stranger. Hesse says, "Internet writers connect through juxtaposition, not commentary": how is one supposed to render their shape of thinking when commentary on a topic is not being provided (41). Patchworking a series of juxtapositions is not an essay. Patchworking juxtapositions is a failed attempt to correlate ideas. While I am not downplaying the cache of valuable information on the Internet, I am convinced that instead of incorporating texts and discussing them in their papers, the students are more or less simply taking their found text(s) and passing it off as their own. So now instead of an essay, we have a diluted opinion.

Believing that this information should cover their reasoning for the assigned paper, the student has effectively become a mute. By silencing their pen (or typing) and opting for one of the modus operandi of plagiarism, the student has lost their writing voice for the assignment. If this practice is more habitual than sporadic, then the student may have lost their writing voice permanently. Is a lost writing voice a concern? Of course, everyone should be able to express himself or herself through text, yet this practice of merely recycling another's thinking is

counter-productive to the progression of essayistic literacy. The English classroom may be intimidating to students, though it “is rich in other opportunities to discuss the complexities of plagiarism and authorship” (Price 109). It is rich in opportunities, though how often is this issue tackled? Plagiarism and authorship are tackled at seminars, not in the classroom. And little of what is said at seminars reciprocates into the classroom. That needs to be reversed so the students benefit the most.

As Hesse said, the essay is designed to promote thinking and writing. If the student chooses to stress views that aren’t his or her own in the paper, then what exactly are they trying to convey across through their paper? Hall writes, “If our students do not feel that they have to do their own writing voice, it may partly be because they do not believe that they will be asked to do their own thinking in the world beyond college”. I have never seen my parents sit down and crank out an essay for their careers, but that is not to say that my parents never make decisions in the work place. Essay writing is not a common practice in the professional workplace, yet the skills learned from writing essays are essential in the cutthroat workplace. There is the saying that “An idle mind is the Devil’s workshop”. Apparently this current generation of students with their form of non-mentally stimulating essay writing, raised thinking that all the knowledge is on the Internet, are making Lucifer most pleased.

Idle minds are not what teachers need. If pedagogy has evolved over centuries and has now come to a stall, then something has gone awry. So how can we salvage essayistic literacy in the age of the Internet? For starters, the word plagiarism should have limited use. While I am not a proponent of recalling the use of a word, the fact is that the word plagiarism is probably the biggest culprit to essayistic literacy. Though plagiarism affects more fields than essay writing, this one word and whatever chosen definition an individual assigns it, makes it nuisance to teachers and students today.

Would a broad policy established by the National Council of Teachers of English help? No. The meanings around this word must be curtailed. Teachers will still have to inform students of the term, yet go easy on the students. Don’t spend days of precious school time by giving one of its alleged definitions. No one should buy into hyping something. Hying a single word with no fixed definition to a classroom is a waste of precious class time. This will only bore the student. Starting at an earlier age, telling students that idea theft is not a substitute for original thinking and writing is a step in the right direction. Price calls for “removing the threatening tone of absolutism that surrounds statements about unintentional plagiarism” (104). We need to teach students that plagiarism is an on-going literary Holocaust. While the term Holocaust may (and should) instill fear to their toes, we cannot dance awkwardly with the word plagiarism much more.

Children are all taught at a tender young age that stealing is bad. Well is it too difficult to elaborate and explain that stealing non-material things is bad as well? As the students progress and become wiser, teachers should know that these students were raised through pedagogy believing that idea theft is as bad. Having a new generation of students with different morals than the current should bring a positive breath to the world of essayistic literacy and abroad. If we can bio-engineer, can we not literary-engineer? All it takes is one generation who will go and teach it to the next generation. If all goes well, by the end of their education career students nurtured under the essayistic literacy revival program will be refined thinking, essay producing machines. And in the next generation of essayistic literate students, the term plagiarism will have lost all of its potency and will nothing but a footnote in the history of the essay.

In addition to the above, if at all possible, teachers need to make the classroom more inviting. By more inviting I don't mean by smiling more or improving etiquette. Students are treating school as a chore. Cutting class size and reducing a teacher's workload are two viable options (Forget About Plagiarism; Howard). Is the decline in essayistic literacy related to the ballooning classroom size? With a more crowded classroom the student becomes aware that the teacher does not have the time to run through their paper with a fine tooth comb. Nurturing that concept in their head, the student effectively turns off all hope for attempting to learn something. By not knowing the teacher on an intimate basis, the student feels that the academic betrayal of stealing one's ideas will not harm whatever bond the pupil and teacher share. Howard believes "when teachers believe they have been given plagiarized work, they feel violated" (481). Within the bigger classroom the teacher cannot reach out to the students on a more frequent individual basis. If a teacher's workload is over-bearing between several classes and extracurricular activities, the time to go over a paper is limited. No one has ever said that teaching had to be easy, but if the student goes into the world without being able to think on their own power, that is a betrayal on behalf of the teacher's goals.

The biggest remedy to salvage essayistic literacy is something that is entirely voluntary. This remedy should be practiced by those who feel as though the current state of the essay is sour, and ideally with enough widespread use, it will expand. As I mentioned earlier, currently there is such a negative association among students with the word essay. The dread of actually writing something seems to create a mental roadblock in their minds and ultimately their fear of writing allows for plagiarism to occur. Thus, the current generation of students who are being raised in the digital age are not really sure what an essay actually entails.

Before the age of word processors and computers, an essay consisted of students meticulously crafting their writing by hand, or on the typewriter. No backspace buttons and copy and pastes. In essayistic literacy's heyday, it was common to have more than one single draft – seeing how the writer liked to make revisions to their drafts. These revisions were to add confidence that their writing had all the proper arguments that they wanted to establish, followed with proper examples and thorough analysis. Instead of gathering sources from a digital median, the world of microfilm and books was all students knew about. It is the image of sitting and writing out several pages by hand that gives students the notion that writing an essay is a painful experience. Within the past fifteen or so years, the image of laboring over an essay has become nothing but nostalgia. The word still holds the dread of yesteryear. Students now plop in front of the glow of a computer screen with access to the world at their fingertips while making an illicit attempt at writing their papers. The power that they harness at the control of their fingers (the internet) gives them the feeling of being invincible. That feeling only adds fuels their ego that their writing is masterful and well crafted. As mature students, they should know that the essay is an assignment like any other, but this is where their thinking caps must be turned on. The essay is the appropriate forum for a student to voice concern about the world at large. Simply allowing substituting other's reasons in a copy and paste affair works against mature students and what they've strived to become.

Students of all walks and ages will refer to most of the writing they do in their tenure in academia as an essay. Labeling a piece of art to a certain genre is difficult if not impossible, yet is it not so hard to understand that book reports are not essays? Essays should be exercises for the brain. Your mind can go flabby just as quick as your pectorals only if you choose not to think when writing. Mental-flab occurs when students allow others who have already done the thought to be the substitute for thinking in their paper. Plagiarism isn't steroids for your paper – if

anything they're carcinogens. The more and more you use/abuse plagiarism, the more critical skills are being killed off in the brain. The students and teachers need to understand that the essay should be the apex of their writing portfolio. The essay should be able to flex for the reader to showcase that the writer sculpted their paper with dedication to the topic.

The essay doesn't have to be complex. It can be as simple as five or fewer paragraphs, or it can even tackle an issue so large and complex that it occupies the bindings of a book. Lester Faigley and Susan Romano believe that in an essay, "the author is truthful and that what he or she writes may legitimately pass for knowledge" (qtd. in Hesse 35). All that is required of the students is to apply themselves to the essay. We all want to further ourselves intellectually. Since resorting to the Internet is much more lucrative than sitting down and flipping through books and articles, readers want the straight dope from the student's minds. All we need is fresh thinking: not ideas and arguments that were made by other people. The Internet cannot be turned off, but as essayists we cannot expect to improve our writing and ourselves by resorting to doing the lowest common denominator of research and writing, which is copying and pasting ideas.

Essayistic literacy isn't dead. Plagiarism is the most heinous buzzword ever created. It has brought essayistic literacy in the classroom to a halt since it perplexes and teases students and teachers simultaneously. Though if we take the steps I have outlined, these will be steps taken in the right direction in essayistic literacy's sake. I believe essayistic literacy will enjoy a long over-due revival in the foreseeable future. If we understand that the essay is a piece of writing written for thinkers by thinkers, then the essay may once again come to the forefront of English writing. Why allow someone else to do the writing when you can say, "I have written what I have written" with your own niche in essayistic literacy.

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