Grading Plagiarism as a Moral Issue

At one time or another, all philosophy teachers must deal with the problem of plagiarism, or when a student presents the written work of others as his or her own. Some students too closely paraphrase without citing the source, while others take large chunks or full texts of others' work and turn them in as their own writing. While it is clear that plagiarism is a big problem, what is not so clear is how to grade assignments that have been plagiarized. Even the most comprehensive honor codes or policies cannot effectively answer the following questions. Is plagiarism a moral issue? If so, how should philosophy teachers treat this moral transgression through grading?

On the one hand, many, perhaps most, professors at the college level regard plagiarism as a moral wrong that is an affront to the discipline, the institution, and perhaps even to intellectual integrity itself. These teachers punish perpetrators, usually by giving a plagiarized paper a significantly lowered grade or a zero on either consequentialist or deontological grounds. Here, the grade is intended as a deterrent for future plagiarism, or it is presented as retribution to punish an unjust act.

On the other hand, some argue that giving students grades based on anything but course mastery is unethical. For example, in his essay entitled *Fair Grades*, Daryl Close claims, "Grading should be [solely] based on the student's competence in the academic content of the course."[1] Plagiarism is a failure of the student to demonstrate mastery of the course content, and the work should be graded according to this failure only. Also on this view, teachers who assign grades based on immoral conduct are themselves committing a moral wrong.

Perhaps there is some other way to regard plagiarism. The goal of this workshop is to examine arguments for and against treating plagiarism as a moral issue, where the grade is meant as punishment for immoral conduct rather than as an assessment of academic performance. In examining these arguments, we will advance and evaluate alternative responses to plagiarism that avoid using grading as punishment for immoral conduct.

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[1] Daryl Close, "Fair Grades," *Teaching Philosophy*, 32:4, December 2009.

Workshop participants will be placed into small groups and provided with examples of plagiarism and possible responses to these examples. After assessing the responses and determining the most appropriate response, participants will then present their chosen responses and give justifications for their choices.

Our workshop will be divided into four parts:

1. Analysis of the benefits and problems of viewing plagiarism/academic cheating as a moral wrong
2. Analysis of whether failing a student for a course or assignment on the basis of the student's having committed a *moral* wrong is congruent or incongruent with teaching objectives
3. Small group exercise
4. Discussion of possible alternative responses to morality-based grading for plagiarism

Selected References

Close, Daryl. "Fair Grades," *Teaching Philosophy*, 32:4, December 2009.

Wolff, Robert Paul. "A Discourse on Grading." *The Ideal of the University.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969.

Curren, Randall. "Coercion and the Ethics of Grading and Testing." *Educational Theory,* 45:4, Fall 1995.

Handouts

Plagiarism Examples and Potential Responses

Equipment Needed

Projector for multimedia presentation

Internet connection