Why Demand Originality from Students in Online Discussion Forums?

As an online instructor, I require my students to engage in weekly discussion forums. In the online college environment, discussion forums are designed to simulate a professor and his or her students engaged in a traditional classroom discussion. Students respond to a question and then reply to the responses of their classmates. The point is to keep the discussion moving, keep students engaged in the topic for the week, and facilitate learning.

Anyone who has taught online for any length of time has dealt with the issue of plagiarism. The definition of plagiarism does not change because of the reason or rationale. Certainly, some students commit inadvertent plagiarism because of not properly acknowledging sources, or possibly out of an unawareness of the rules of academic integrity, yet some instances of plagiarism are intentional. Regardless of the reason, copying and pasting material into the discussion forum is not uncommon. We can combat plagiarism by using originality-verifying software, by increasing the students' knowledge of using proper citations, and by levying steep penalties (awarding a zero grade, submitting the issue to the university's academic integrity department, etc.). Assuming we have properly trained our students to avoid all forms of plagiarism, does that solve the issue of originality? The answer is no. I have past and present students that can string together a set of quotes, all properly cited, to create a discussion forum response or even a three-page paper.

Tell me in your own words
Why demand originality? In relating to a traditional classroom discussion, do students respond to the professor's question by opening up the textbook or searching for the answer on the Internet and then reading off the answer? Some might try, but by asking questions the professor is looking to see if the students grasp the discussed concept, not if they know how and where to find the answer.

Online students have the advantage of reflection time, along with having the textbook and Internet search engine open when responding to discussion questions. With a few simple clicks, virtually any question can be answered by searching the Internet. Once again, why demand originality? Classroom learning takes place when students are required to think; that's a few steps beyond clicking copy and paste. As instructors, we should encourage our students to be resourceful and to learn the skills of locating and incorporating scholarly literature into their work. But we also must instill the learning value of synthesizing sources in such a manner that produces evidence of gained knowledge.

In demanding originality, we must convey that we are not seeking baseless opinions. Quality responses reveal that the student has learned the material and can carry on an intelligent discussion regarding the topic. If properly used, incorporating scholarly sources into a discussion response strengthens

the student's work, yet a heavy reliance on the words of others dramatically lowers the academic quality of the student's answer. Is including a short quote in a discussion response an unpardonable offense? No, but I hold to the notion that a quote should be included only when there is no other viable wording to convey the original author's meaning or intent. I try to keep the quote doors closed because when we open them up, students rationally make the assumption that if one quote is fine, then 10 quotes fills up more word count.

Students must employ some cognitive skills to assemble a discussion response or write a paper. As instructors, we elevate the propensity of students engaging in critical thinking when we demand originality. Regurgitating the words of others without being required to grasp the meaning of the original author's theory or finding does little to build a student's ability to think. Although some students are only in pursuit of a passing grade, a good portion of our students are expecting us to prepare them for a professional career. I think we fall short of the mark when we allow students to wander through our course without instilling the virtue of integrity and promoting the ability to critically analyze a topic.

Reference: *Ronald Jones, associate faculty, Ashford University; president, Ronald C. Jones, Inc.*